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China's Modernization I

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Peter J. Peverelli

Abstract
Business is booming in China and so are Business Administration courses. However, these courses do not always seem to prepare their students for the job of managing Chinese organizations. In order to design better courses, we first need to look deeper into the nature of Chinese organizations. A number of Chinese scholars have realized this and started looking at Chinese intellectual traditions, in particular Confucian thought, to discern the differences between Western organizations (for which most globally used MBA courses have been designed) and their Chinese counterparts. This has already led to interesting new insights. However, predicates like 'Chinese' or 'Confucian' make it difficult to apply the new finding, more generally. This paper acknowledges the findings, but proposes an alternative organization theory that can not only find and explain the Chinese-ness of Chinese organizations, but can be applied globally, to determine local modes of organizing

Preamble

This is an exploratory paper. As someone who advises European companies in their long term relations with Chinese partners in practice, and is simultaneously involved in academic business administration programs in Europe and China, or more precisely, adapting such courses developed in Europe for a Chinese audience, I am regularly exposed to the differences between European and Chinese organizations and the consequences of those differences for academic research and teaching of business processes.

In Europe, we have been debating the existence of an indigenous European business administration, as opposed to the US dominated MBA type of courses, and seem still quite far from drawing conclusions (Calori & de Woot 1994, Boone & van den Bosch 1997, Pudelko & Harzing 2007).

In fact, on the global level, the divergence—convergence debate, i.e. the debate whether the trend in the global business world is towards the development of multiple local business models, or towards one unified global model, is still going on as well (see Ohmae (1990) and Whitley (1993) as proponents for the convergence and divergence points of view respectively, and Chan & Peverelli (2010) for an alternative point of view).

On one hand, this may make us less than ideal teachers for our Chinese colleagues in designing indigenous business studies, but on the other hand it enables us to share our own experience with seeking what it is that makes us different and what we share with others, and how those findings can be employed to define indigenous management studies.

Introduction

Only recently, Chinese researchers have started to look into what makes Chinese organizations 'Chinese.' The economic reforms that were launched in the 1980s created a huge need for managers trained to perform in the new economic environment. Such people were hardly available and to fill that gap, management studies started booming in China. The vast majority of management courses established in China at that time were not using academic business administration programs as their models, but were set up according to the relatively standard model of the MBA training programs popular all over the world. The contents were very practical, including the typical MBA program, with standard courses like: Organization Behaviour, Marketing, Management Accounting, etc. The objectives were also identical to the Western models: equipping people with a few years of practical work experience with the basic academic skills in 1 year (full time) or 2 years (part time).

Apart from being short and very practical, most of the programs were also very 'foreign' in nature. Textbooks were mainly of American and European origin, the more expensive courses were taught by foreign instructors. For a while, MBA, in Latin letters became the vernacular term for business studies in Chinese.

These initial efforts in developing instruction in business administration in China have been successful in their own terms. They have indeed created a pool of people better equipped to deal with the challenges of the economic reforms. A particularly interesting example is the story of Mr Niu Gensheng, the founder and CEO of one of China's top dairy companies, Mengniu. An orphan, he was adopted and raised by a farmer. He made a career in Yili, a state owned dairy company in Huhhot (the capital of Inner Mongolia), starting out as a bottle washer all the way to member of the board. In the course of the economic reforms, his fellow board members apparently deemed him too unpolished to be a member of their team. He was sent away with the strong advice to get an education on the company's expense. Mr Niu, probably unexpectedly, took that advice literally and signed on to an MBA course at Peking University's Guanghua School of Management. After returning to his hometown, with his fresh MBA diploma in his pocket, his old company did not take him back. He then set up his own dairy company, attracting a considerable number of his former colleagues. This company ranked among the top 3 dairy companies within only a few years (Peverelli, 2005, 111–137). Obviously, Mr Niu's success is also based on his experience, and other skills, but the MBA course enabled him to turn the experience and skills into business acumen.

Now that China has earned its place in the global market and has been pronounced the world's second largest economy, these Western style MBA-like courses are becoming less satisfactory for the Chinese academic world. Moreover, the freshly trained Chinese MBA graduates soon found out that putting everything they had learned into practice literally did not always do the trick. When a pre-reform era 'factory' is reorganized into a 'company.' and the leader has changed his title from 'Director' into 'General Manager,' as an organization it is still a Chinese organization, with employees doing things in a Chinese fashion.

Some Chinese scholars have started studying this Chinese-ness. A major objective for these efforts is to adapt the Western concept of business studies as taught in China and make it more 'Chinese,' thus more applicable to the management of Chinese organizations.

An important source for these Chinese researchers is traditional Chinese philosophy. Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, etc., have all been re-analysed for aspects useful for management, but Confucianism with its emphasis on hierarchy and knowing your place in it, is cited most frequently as a major influence on Chinese managerial behaviour. The website of the China International Management Science Association (also incorporating the symbolic term MBA in its URL: www.cn-mba.org) has a special page on the influence of traditional Chinese thinking. Visitors can choose between sections for: Daoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, the Legal School, The Master Sun School (the strategies of Master Sun), etc. There is even a special section for 'farmers' wisdom,' taking into account that China is traditionally an agricultural nation.

The development of Western business administration is embedded in the socio-cultural history of Europe and its main ex-colonies. It therefore makes sense that efforts to search for aspects of Chinese organizations and Chinese management in Chinese socio-cultural history as well. As this is a rather broad theme, I would like to restrict this introductory paper to one research question: what are the differences between Western and Chinese organizations. A derived question will be: do these difference mean that we need to let go of a global standard for business studies, or does it call for rethinking that standard?

I will begin with the emergence of the notion of 'organization' as an entity separate from the people that interact in it, in Western thinking, and how this was instrumental in the development of management science in the early 20th century. I will then proceed showing that a different socio-cultural development in China has resulted in different perception of the relationship between organizations and their actors in China, requiring a different view on management. I will continue introducing recent Chinese research trying to find aspects of an indigenous Chinese management by trying to find 'management' thinking in traditional Chinese philosophy. Finally, I will point at a major problem in following that indigenous route, and offer a research method that enables researchers to identify *local* modes of organizing, but which can be employed *globally*, without a need to 'go back to ones roots' for each region.

I thus hope that this preliminary study into the nature of Chinese organizations can facilitate the development of organization studies without cultural bias.

The Western Organization as Separate From the People

Looking back on the beginnings of human history using modern organization theory, we cannot but conclude that Homo sapiens has been organizing since the beginning of its existence. The ability to form groups of people to work jointly towards the completion on a specific task, thus accomplishing that goal in a more efficient way than all group members trying to do so individually may very well be one of the most important traits defining Homo sapiens. However, modern organization theory usually links the emergence of those groups of people that we are used to refer to with the term organizations to the rapid industrial development in Europe and North America in the 19th century. 'Organizations in the form that we know them emerged during the 19th century in Europe and America, during the period of economic expansion by the industrial revolution' (Scott, 2003: 4).

This development had a large impact on the role of the individual in the industrial process. Goods that were previously produced by individual artisans, who exercised total control over the production process, were now manufactured in factories, by a number of people specialised in a one particular step of that process. As a result, an individual worker became less involved with the final product. Jaffee, an organization theorist with a sociological background, even speaks of the subordination of labour (Jaffee, 2001, 43), a perception akin to Marx's notion of alienation, the uncoupling of workers from the product of their labour. The main difference between Jaffee's term subordination and

Marx's alienation is that the former also refers to the relationship between the workers and the factory owners. Jaffee continues his line of reasoning explaining that while this specialisation of labour considerably increased the efficiency of the production process, it also created the need for the factory owners to control this expanding workforce (op. cit, 45 ff).

The late 19th century and early 20th century then saw the appearance of a number of theories on managing people in large organizations. As this history can be found in most organization theory text books (see in particular Hatch & Cunliffe (2006)), I will only mention a couple that are most significant for the theme of this paper. French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1893) expanded the notion of division of labour as set forth by Adam Smith in 1776 by adding the concepts of hierarchy and the interrelatedness between various work tasks. He also distinguished between informal and formal organization, i.e. the workers' social needs versus their work related activities.

The second theory formative of modern Western organization theory was that of the German sociologist Max Weber (1924). Weber enriched our vocabulary with the notion of bureaucracy. However, Weber never intended this word to have the rather negative connotation it has in the current parlance. Major themes in Weber's theory of the bureaucracy were rationality and authority. He saw the bureaucracy with its formalised rules as a way to 'rationalize social order in a manner similar to technology's rationalizing of economic order' (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006, 31).

This is a good point in my discussion to summarise the emergence of the Western notions of organization and management. In the course of what is known as the Industrial Revolution, the manufacturing of many goods changed from production by a single artisan in charge of the entire process to production in factories in which goods were manufactured by a number of people specialised in one step of the process. From an economic point of view this division of labour increased efficiency, but from a social perspective also created a discrepancy between the workers and the owners of the factories. Those owners not only needed to control the technical process, but also became faced with controlling the workforce. These needs were addressed by a number of academics who introduced the notions of relationships between functions in organizations in terms of hierarchy, authority, formal and informal organization, etc. By the beginning of the 1930s, organizations and the people working in organizations were generally regarded as, linked, but different entities. The activities of a person employed by a certain organization were divided into actions related to that employment (formal organization) and other activities. The former activities needed to be dealt with by the owners of the organization, while the others were considered to be not of their concern, even though they sometimes could influence the former activities (informal organization). As a result, the function of the professional manager was created, a person specially trained in business administration.

The Chinese Organization as a Group of People

This section of my paper heavily draws from Sun Jinghua (2005). Sun observes that in China the separation of the organization and the people who are part of that organization has never really taken place. China developed factories and later modern corporations as well. However, the people in charge of the enterprises still regard them as 'groups of living people.' rather than as inanimate organizations (Sun, 2005, 3–5). As a result, managing an organization in China equals managing a group of people. Managers themselves are people and as such are people among their own people. A primary personal skill is appeasing people (*an ren*). A condition for developing this skill is the ability to cultivate oneself (*xiu ji*). Managers are first of all examples for their subordinates (Op. cit., 5; a similar view is held by Zeng Shiqiang (Zeng, 2005, 3)). This perspective on management is directly inspired on the Confucian belief in the beneficial effects of education. People are good by nature, but this good nature needs to be developed through education.

This by itself would not deviate principally from the Western definition of management. However, Chinese have a propensity to form small groups of people interacting around a specific topic, or a common property. Within the larger 'group of people', which is the organization, there will smaller groups of people. Whenever the interests of such a smaller group conflicts with the interests of the larger group, the members of the smaller group will be inclined to let those of the smaller group prevail. The bases for forming such smaller groups are manifold; the more popular include: kinship, place of birth, marital relationship, friendship, mutual benefits, etc. When a manager has a choice to promote a family member among his employees to a certain position, or a better qualified other person, who has no family relationship with the manager, the manager will be faced with a difficult choice. In a Western organization, the interests of the abstract organization will usually be given priority, but in a Chinese situation the choice of the manager will be more complicated. His family will pressure him to select the family member, but if the other candidate is a member of an influential small group, the members of that group will in turn pressure him to promote the non-family candidate. There is no convenient formula, or 'decision tree,' available to calculate the best choice. Small group affiliation often links employees of Chinese organizations to the outside world. A Chinese manager can be put under pressure from close relatives outside his organization to create a position for a family member (Sun, 2005, 13).

This difference has far reaching consequences for virtually all aspects of the operation of enterprises. In table 1, I have listed four aspects analysed by Sun. The table is divided into columns for the aspect, the Western (organization centred) view, the Chinese (person centred view) and the location in Sun for easy reference.

Table 1: major differences between Western and Chinese organizations.

Aspect	**Western/ organization centred**	**Chinese/ person centred**	**Sun**
Source of profit	Organizational ability to produce goods/services that satisfy customer needs	Personal ability to discern and use opportunities	45–47
Base for effectiveness	Division of labour; teamwork combined with competition between team members	Harmonious relationship between employees; everyone does his/her best; care for others	63–65
Continuity	CEO is a temporary position; the continuity of the organization prevails over that of the CEO	Organizational continuity is based on the continuity of the CEO; CEO as omniscient leader	81–83
Values	Organizational values and personal values are separated; organizational values prevail over personal values	Organizational values and personal values are intertwined; personal and small group values prevail over organizational values	105–110

These are not absolute discrepancies. Person centred processes take place in Western organizations as well, and vice versa. The difference between the organization centred and the people centred approaches is the that in the first perception the organization and its members are regarded as separate, while in the latter they are considered to be essentially identical; the members ARE the organization.

I have attempted to translate Sun's ideas to the external relations of organizations as well. Organizations are open systems. The are not systems operating independently from their ennvironment, but but 'collectives that depend on and are influenced by environmental factors' (Scott 2003, 23). We can expect that the differences between the organization centred and people centred perceptions of organizations will have repercussions for the external relations of organizations as well. To characterize the basic differences, I want to introduce the term 'legal person' that is closely linked with the Western concept of the organization as an entity separate from the people in it, and is also a product of the industrial revolution (Dewey 1926). This term reinforces the independent status of the organization in the Western perspective, and also points out legal relationships (like those laid down in sign contracts) prevail over personal relationships. I have placed my findings in table 2.

Table 2: main differences between the external relationships of Western and Chinese organization.

Aspect	**Western/ Law based**	**Chinese/ Relationship based**
Trust based on	Universally applied laws	Good personal relations between the managers
Nature of relations	Interorganizational relations based on agreements between organizations	Interorganizational relations based on personal relations between managers
Continuity	Managers have a temporary position; the continuity of a relation prevails over that of managers	The continuity of a relations is based on the continuity of the relevant manager
Primary value	Protecting the interests of the own organization	Maintaining relations with other organizations
Competition	Matter of life and death	Never let a competitor go down completely

Chinese Organizing in Practice

Although the core theme of this paper is establishing a model of Chinese organizations, it will be useful to apply them to a few examples. Westerners are often confused by the propensity for small group affiliation by their Chinese counterparts; as is witnessed by the following example (from my own consulting practice):

> A Belgian company started contacts with a company in Guangzhou to explore possibilities for setting up a joint venture. The Chinese team consisted of three people, one from the Finance and Production departments each, and one from the General Manager's Office, with the person from Production as the main contact. The first discussion in Guangzhou seemed very productive, but for some reason no progress was made afterwards. It was later found out that all three members of the Chinese negotiation team were from Hunan province. The Belgians were recommended to that company by a contact in Hunan. Their Hu-

> nan friend had introduced them to a Hunan group in the organization. Apparently this group was unable to win the interest of other people in their organization in cooperation with the Belgians. While the Belgians believed that they were negotiating with the company (the organization), they were in fact talking to a group within the organization.

Although Chinese are used to live and work in a society based on multiple small group membership, this does not preclude that they as well can be occasionally annoyed by the behaviour of groups of which they are not members themselves. The following example originates from a field study conducted in Shenzhen by researchers of the Hong Kong Baptist University (private communication):

> A Taiwanese company has set up a joint venture in Shenzhen for the production of electronic appliances. To ensure the quality of the products, the company tries to buy its components from the same Taiwanese suppliers as it does in its home region. The Purchasing Department of the joint venture is headed by a person from Taiwan. The Taiwanese suppliers directly contact him for all aspects of their business. The local employees of the Purchasing Department feel a little detached from their work. They regard the day-to-day operation of their department 'a matter that is handled between the Taiwanese.'

In the organization of this case, the joint venture, we can observe a small group of Taiwanese. They are expatriates sent to the venture for a number of years. They all have management functions. They use their continue inclusions originating from their work in the Taiwanese mother company in their work in the joint venture. Within the Purchasing Department, there is a small group of local employees who feel alienated from much of the typical purchasing activities, because the Taiwanese do not allow them access to their group.

In the first example, we can observe a small group formed on the basis of a shared home province. This group included members who were still living in that home province. The latter introduced a potential foreign partner to the organization using their Hunan group membership as channel. The introduction was successful, but the formation of a partnership between the foreign company and the organization failed, apparently because the Hunan group was unable to achieve a sufficient critical mass.

In the second example, the small group of Taiwanese managers is again based on a common descent. This group has considerable influence on the operation of the organization, as all group members hold management positions.

The problem in this case is that they exclude local employees from some of the basic processes in the company (this is the case in at least the Purchasing Department). This exclusion causes a feeling of alienation among the local employees. If this feeling is not contained in time, it can lead to a decrease in loyalty towards the organization and in turn strengthen the loyalty for the small group (local employees).

Rethinking Organization Theory

The above discussion of discrepancies between Western and Chinese organizing processes is not meant to prove that 'east is east and west is west and never the twain will meet.' Instead, we need to formulate an organization theory that can account for both (and possible other) types of organizing. Here I propose to use Social Integration (SI) theory as such an alternative model.

SI theory has been developed on the basis of Weick's organization theory (1979, 1995), enriched with concepts from postmodern philosophy and psycholinguistics (Peverelli, 2000; Peverelli & Verduyn, 2010). In this theory, organizing is defined as 'the reduction of equivocality in ongoing social interaction between actors to couple their behavior to perform a certain task more efficiently' (Peverelli & Verduyn, 2010, p. 5). One consequence of this process is the emergence of groups of actors who frequently interact around a specific theme and therefore make sense of that topic in a more or less similar way. Those actors are said to be 'included' in such groups. Each actor is involved in a large number of such groups, which is referred to as 'multiple inclusion.' Two or more groups are connected by actors with inclusions in each of the groups. As soon as two or more actors start interacting about a certain theme, they will create a configuration consisting of the actors and the cognitive matter they share (typical language, symbols, ways to do things, etc.).

We can tentatively formulate 'culture' as 'the way to cope with multiple inclusions'. People are always included in a large number of social groups and even when interacting about a specific issue, the key persons involved will make sense of that issue from the point of view of different inclusions. People can adopt different strategies to deal with this. One way is fixing oneself on the perspective of a specific inclusion; another is trying to act in accordance with (reconcile) the perspectives of at least a number of the most essential inclusions (the other extreme of the scale). Westerners (that is, people from Northwest Europe and Anglo-Saxon nations; people of different European regions seems to vary as well in this respect) seem to position themselves on the first extreme of the scale, while Chinese end up at the latter end (Peverelli (2000, 52–61, 83–85 and 123–126), Chan & Peverelli (2010, 221).

The above mentioned case of the Chinese manager faced with the task to promote a family member or a more qualified alternative candidate is a good example of a situation in which the average Western manager would find the task easy and promote the most qualified person. The Chinese counterpart would be facing a lengthy deliberation of the most relevant inclusions of the candidates, as well as his own group memberships. Even if the Chinese manager would select the relative, he would be inclined to make up to (the groups of) the other candidate as well, lest he would lose their support in future issues.

The case of the founding of Mengniu Dairy by Mr Niu Gensheng introduced in the beginning of this paper can also be better understood using the SI model. Mr Niu had formed a large configuration of friends when he was a manager at Yili. As soon as he registered Mengniu, that entire configuration moved from Yili to the new company, while more or less continuing there what they use to be doing at Yili. Moreover, according to SI theory, although the relationship between Niu's people an their former employer Yili changed, they still remained to be included in Yili. Inclusions are cognitive in nature, and the cognitive ties with former colleagues do not sever instantly after people change jobs. The shared inclusion of so many key people in Mengniu with Yili is still affecting the competition between these two companies (Peverelli, 2005, 111–137).

Applying SI theory to the Belgian mini-case, we can see that the Hunan people in the company formed a configuration of 'Hunan people in the company'. This configuration was part of a larger group that also included people still actually living in Hunan. The Belgian investor got first introduced (through another shared inclusion) to the person in Hunan, who further introduced him to his Hunan friends in the company. So far, that was a natural process of surfing through social networks using people with multiple inclusions as channels. However, the Belgian failed to assess the limited nature of the group of people he was talking to, even though the three introduced themselves as a group of people within the company sharing the same home region. The first discussion was conducted smoothly, forming a new configuration including the Belgian investor. However, for reasons unknown, the people in the Hunan configuration failed to attract other colleagues into the negotiation. That blocked further access to the company for the Belgian. The Belgian on the other hand, also failed to try to access the potential partner company through other channels. This can be explained by the fact that the Belgian, socialized in Western culture, focused too much on one single inclusion. From a Western point of view, e.g., it would have been deemed inappropriate to simultaneously contact other managers of the company.

In the second example we see that the Taiwanese investors are trying to continue an external configuration with a trusted supplier in their venture on the Mainland. This is in accordance with what has been hypothesized in table 2: trust with external parties is based on good relationships. This explains why the company prefers to let the Taiwanese manager of the Purchasing Department handle the contacts with Taiwanese suppliers, even those who are also producing on the Mainland. This is deemed to be the best guarantee that the good relationship with those suppliers is continued. What the management fails to see is that this practice de facto creates two purchasing departments, one for the Taiwanese suppliers and one for the local suppliers.

An interesting aspect of the point made in the previous paragraph is that the Taiwanese managers, while not Mainland Chinese, still born and raised in Chinese culture, were also unable to see all the consequences of their decisions. In the Belgian case, we can still attribute the mistakes made to cultural differences, but the cultural differences between Taiwan and Mainland Chinese are not large enough to use as an excuse for their management problems. It seems that there is a need to adapt the teaching of business administration, to train mangers better equipped to manage Chinese organizations.

However, there is also no need for a 'Chinese business administration', or a theory of 'Confucian management'. This would deny the possibility that we could formulate a general model of human organizing that can analyze organizing processing anywhere in the world. With a theory of Chinese management, we could do not much more in Brazil than investigate the Chinese-ness of Brazilian organization, etc.

What really seems to be needed is rethinking the standard business administration program taught all over the world today, in which most courses centre on the notion of 'management.' When we redesign such programs with 'organizing', the company as organization, as the core notion, we should be able to eliminate that need. The notion of management as currently used globally in Business Administration programs is based on the Western presumption of the separation of the organization and the people operating in its context. The concept of organizing as defined in SI theory deals with people, their social interaction and the consequences of that interacting. Management is but one of those consequences. We can start using organization theory to understand Chinese, or Brazilian, organizations and then formulate ways to manage organizations in those, and other, regions.

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Bookpublications of the Project (extract)

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Zur Aktualität von Shmuel N. Eisenstadt – *E*ine Einleitung in sein Werk. *Gerhard Preyer. VS Verlag 2011.*

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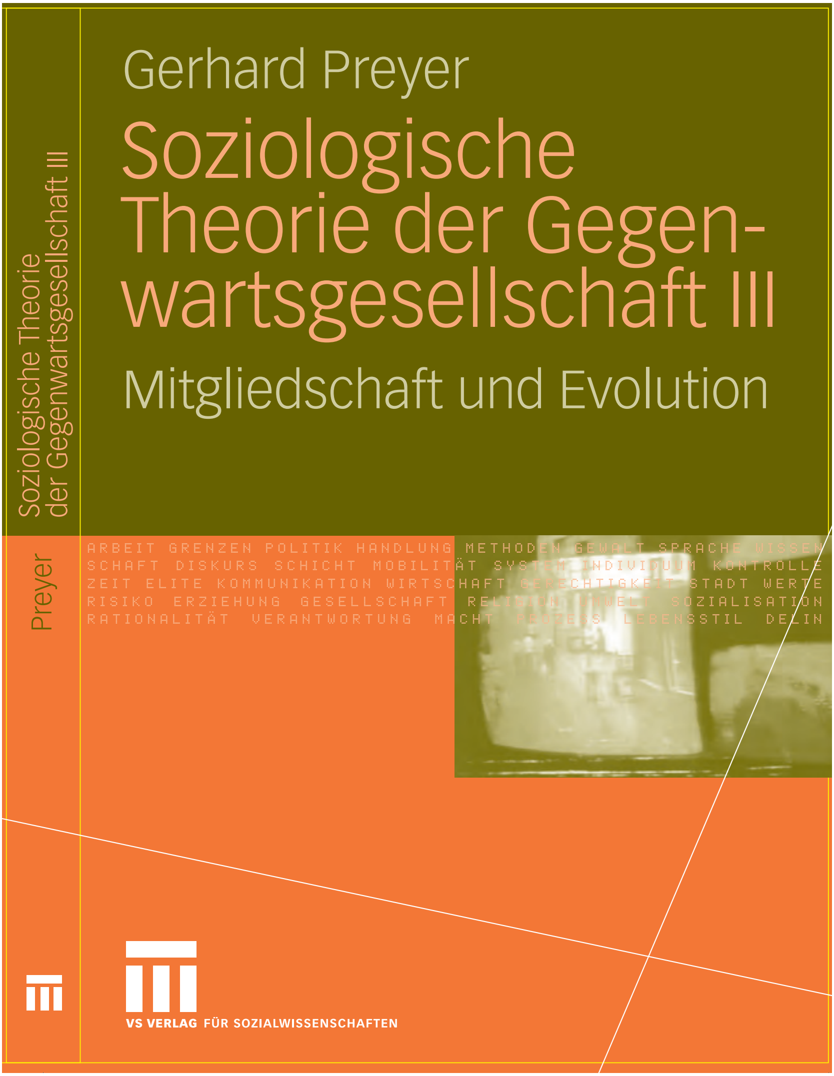
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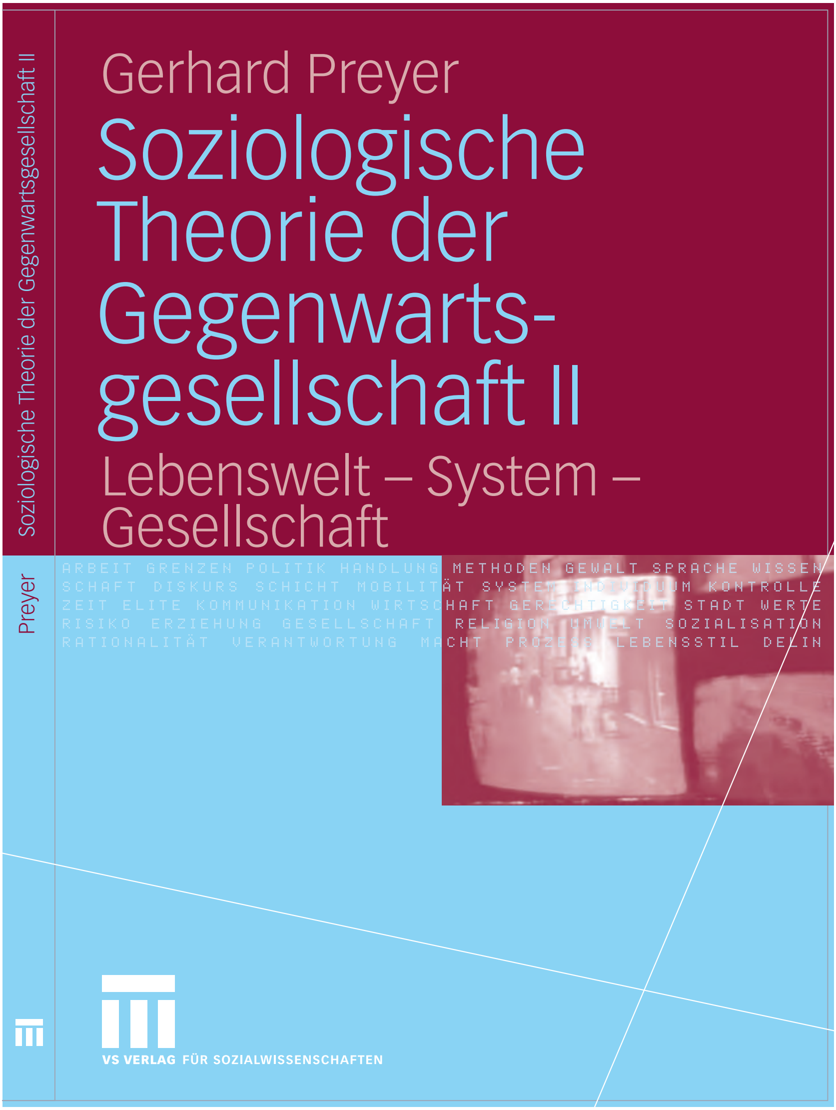
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Oxford University Press: Oxford 2005, 410 pages

Context-Sensitivity and Semantic Minimalism

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Oxford University Press: Oxford 2007