

THE ALBERTA SCHOOL

Michael Lounsbury
University of Alberta
ml37@ualberta.ca

Forthcoming in John Amis, Tom Lawrence & Trish Reay (Eds.)
*An institutional understanding of organizations and professions:
Essays in honour of the extraordinary academic partnership
of C.R. (Bob) Hinings and Royston Greenwood*
(Research in the Sociology of Organizations)

ABSTRACT

Given that higher education has experienced incredibly dramatic change over the first quarter of the 21st century, including growing corporatization, a decline in collegial governance, and fascist attacks on academic freedom, it is important to identify and celebrate alternative ways of organizing and being that provide beacons of light amidst the dystopia that has seemingly engulfed us. The Alberta School, carefully cultivated by Bob Hinings and Royston Greenwood over several decades, has become such a North Star for many scholars in the fields of organization studies and management. In this brief reflective essay, I discuss key intellectual and cultural features that define the Alberta School as a “School” as I have come to understand it over the past two decades. My intention is to not only celebrate and pay tribute, but to encourage folks across the field to work together to cultivate other points of light that offer refuge from contemporary assaults on higher education.

Keywords: Organization Studies, Organization Theory, Management, Collegiality, Collaboration

For much of my career, there have been growing pressures in higher education to be more practical and relevant (Berman & Paradeise, 2016). This has been accompanied by the corporatization of Universities, a decline in collegial governance, a focus on the treadmill of production, assaults on academic freedom, and a hollowing out of domains of knowledge that are judged to be non-instrumental (especially in the humanities), among other things (e.g., Sahlin & Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2023a, 2023b). Many of us have experienced tight and declining budgets, Deans and other administrators that do not appreciate the value of scholars and their scholarship, and more generally, a decline in the soulfulness of higher education. The Strategy, Entrepreneurship and Management department at the University of Alberta showcases how scholars can buffer themselves from these trends to a degree—and over many decades, has coalesced into a distinctive cultural and intellectual form—The Alberta School. I joined the Alberta School in 2005; it is not a perfect utopia, but for the right kind of organization studies scholar, it is as good as it gets—an oasis amidst a wider discontent, embracing an unabashedly scholarly morality that valorizes friendship and community. It is important to emphasize that the beliefs and practices around how to be a scholar and do scholarship are as profoundly central to the Alberta School as is the content of someone’s scholarship.

What is the Alberta School? A “School” conventionally refers to a collection of ideas, beliefs, or methods shared by a group of people, that has had durability and influence over a period of time. Schools typically emerge around key intellectual figures who cultivate a particular approach or perspective on a subject that distinguishes one group of thinkers from others, and involves the training of students who carry on the traditions of the School. Examples include March and Simon and the Carnegie School; Park, Blumer and Hughes and the “old” Chicago School; and, the Aston School led by Pugh and including Hickson, Hinings, Child, Donaldson and others.

Without a doubt, Bob Hinings and Royston Greenwood are the towering figures that constructed the Alberta School. Hinings (a sociologist) knew a bit about Schools of thought. Starting in the 1960s, Hinings was part of the Aston School that carried out a systematic program of research that produced a series of landmark studies on organizational structure from a contingency theoretic approach, playing a major role in the early development of organization studies and management science as a field. Greenwood (a political scientist) began a close working relationship with Hinings as his student in the 1970s, studying public administration and pushing forward contingency theory ideas related to organizing and power. Over time, they evolved their ideas through the study of professionals and professional service firms, organizational change, and embracing more cultural approaches rooted in the new institutionalism. While they are quite different individuals, they forged a virtuous relationship that over six decades has not only been extremely productive, but more importantly, laid the groundwork for other, particularly young, scholars.

Based on the stories that were told to me, Hinings was initially invited to Alberta in the late 1960s, and developed relationships with folks at the University of Alberta School of Business through the 1970s, ultimately deciding to join the school in the early 1980s; Greenwood joined soon thereafter. Together, Hinings and Greenwood cultivated a particular approach to organization theory that was supported by a strong set of commitments to scholarship and community. Their approach to organizations and organizing was catholic, embracing social constructivism and cultural-political approaches to scholarship, and encouraging the development of rich empirical studies that relied on systematic qualitative analysis and always had a more European flair. Their approach to organizational analysis was more pluralistic than conventional approaches in the U.S.

at the time, focusing on the quality and interestingness of scholarship, as opposed to imposing some sort of one best way, or the need to conform to a narrow scholarly prototype.

Given that Hinings and Greenwood were from England with strong connections to European scholarship and a strong commitment to the European Group for Organization Studies (EGOS), they have always been more open to scholarly eclecticism than most North Americans in business schools. For example, I have come to embrace an Alberta School approach to institutionalism that is better understood as more of a sensibility than a paradigm requiring surveillance and gatekeeping. Institutionalism for the Alberta School may be thought about as a kind of meta-theory that provides an important resource and orientation for engaging with various other perspectives and phenomena in organization studies more broadly. This is explicitly reflected in the two editions of the Sage handbooks on organizational institutionalism (Greenwood et. al., 2008, 2017) that presented the broadest vision possible for an approach to institutional analysis that connected to variegated topics and theories including those on social movements, networks, identity, organizational change, work, practice, power, emotions, entrepreneurship, inequality, race, diversity, and globalization.

These intellectual commitments of the Alberta School, embracing more pluralist forms of scholarship that bridge Europe and North America, were complemented by intentional efforts to shape the wider field of organization studies scholarship to realize this broader vision. For instance, I was lucky enough to overlap in the Organization and Management Theory (OMT) division leadership group at the Academy of Management with Greenwood as well as Alberta alumnus Nelson Phillips. During this time, the OMT division became increasingly more Europeanized, and more North American scholars began to attend EGOS. Greenwood led the charge in seeding the development of partnerships between OMT and EGOS that have since become institutionalized in

joint receptions and other initiatives at both EGOS and OMT. It is important to emphasize that before the turn of the millennium, these worlds were largely separate, and European scholarship was often denigrated in North America. The Alberta School played a key role in facilitating this bridging, both intellectually and practically.

Crucially, the Alberta School is defined around a form of collegiality that embraces collaboration as a core intellectual commitment. Many papers published by scholars from the Alberta school have multiple faculty and student co-authors from Alberta. Interestingly, as one looks through the publications of both Hinings and Greenwood from the very beginnings of the Aston School, many of their early papers also have multiple co-authors. I suspect that the collaborative underpinnings of the Aston School imprinted Alberta, and this is something unique and very special in academia today. Most folks trained in elite U.S. institutions valorize sole authored top tier publications. This kind of individuation was rationalized by emphasizing the need to demonstrate your worth as a scholar. In fact, this lack of focus on individual authorship was one of the biggest surprises to me when I came to Alberta.

While kindness and generosity are ample at Alberta, there is an edginess related to the drive to do high quality research that makes major contributions to knowledge. So, the valorization of collaborative scholarship is a core element of a professional community logic where scholars in the community are supported but also push each other. While many Alberta School faculty and students are highly productive scholars, that tail does not wag the dog. The logic does not value publications for the sake of publications. There is little bragging; outputs are expressions of the community. The focus is on doing important scholarship and having fun while doing it—it is assumed that the appropriate outcomes will result if scholarship is done the right way. Hierarchy is eschewed; students are treated as peers, not as research assistants to exploit.

Mentorship seems to flow naturally as part of the goodwill and altruism that underlies collective scholarly production. Alberta School workshops have more of the flavour of safe spaces for collective brainstorming than opportunities to score points with tough questions. This logic cannot be created overnight. It required a great deal of work over many decades by Hinings, Greenwood and many others to get the Alberta School to be a more enduring institution where demographic diversity and change can occur without undermining the institution. While my experience is only over the last couple of decades, my sense is that there has always been close attention paid to the hiring of scholars that are a good cultural fit—ensuring that folks are not only good colleagues, but more cosmopolitan and curious individuals who valorize community over self-interested outcomes. It is a strong culture of meanings and practices that not only provide support and mentorship for early career scholars, setting high standards of scholarly excellence and the conditions for everyone to succeed, but also in rare cases, guide those who are not a good fit towards exit. While it requires mindful and ongoing custodianship, the Alberta School remains vibrant.

One crucial aspect of this custodianship is the organizing of the triennial Alberta Institutions Conferences, initially spearheaded by Hinings and Greenwood. In addition to several conferences on professional service firms in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Alberta School has now hosted seven major field configuring event conferences on institutional theory, the latest one in Banff in 2025. Since “institutional theory” for the Alberta School has become more of a meta-theoretical commitment that operates in the background, the scholarly content at these conferences is fairly wide-ranging, highlighting the extent to which institutional theory, while still prominent as a theoretical domain, has itself become a taken-for-granted set of theoretical resources that organization studies scholars employ in variegated ways.

Two of these conferences dovetailed with the development of the two *Sage Handbooks on Organizational Institutionalism*, while others have seeded impactful *Research in the Sociology of Organizations* volumes. These conferences and outputs have not only been important ways in which the Alberta School has shaped intellectual conversations in the field, but they have also attracted colleagues from all over the world, including many former students. It has always been a priority and a privilege to have many early career scholars contributing to these conferences with many having paper development workshops for doctoral students, recently sponsored by the journals *Organization Studies* and *Organization Theory* (core EGOS journals published by Sage). These conferences are special events that are inflected by the professional community logic of the Alberta School, and have become an important mechanism by which the spirit of the Alberta School can be transmitted to other schools.

While Edmonton is pretty far North, and gets pretty cold in a winter that lasts a long time, the Alberta School has little difficulty recruiting very strong faculty at all levels. It is a testament to Hinings and Greenwood that the institution they built—the Alberta School—is a place where people want to be despite the weather. While not everyone can be here, you are always welcome to visit, especially if you are a broad minded organization studies scholar who thinks institutionally. The Alberta School has had an open door policy for years—particularly for early career scholars (especially from Europe), many of whom stay for a semester to take courses, make friends, and develop their research.

My own recruitment story is a testament to the skillful work that Hinings and Greenwood put into building and crafting the School over time - and the attractiveness of the culture they built. I vividly recall the first time I met Hinings and Greenwood, as well as a couple of their students, Lawrence and Phillips, in 1995 at the Academy of Management in Vancouver. Greenwood,

Lawrence and Phillips surprised me with their gregariousness, while I recall Hinings laughing and being amused. They were all quite friendly and welcoming, but seemed to be having more fun than many of the other business school faculty and students I had come to know as a graduate student from an elite U.S. school. I was not sure what to make of these exotic Canadians at the time. And to be honest, I really did not know about their scholarship; it was not included as part of my training. I kept my head down and moved on.

However, it would not be long before my connections with Alberta began to grow. Given my research on the recycling movement, I began to connect with Dev Jennings at conferences, before he came to Alberta in 2003. When I was a young Assistant Professor, one of my mentors, Huseyin Leblebici, reconnected me to Alberta as we were working on a paper on money management professionals stemming from my thesis. I presented this at the 4th Biennial Workshop on Professional Service Firms in 2002 organized by Hinings and Greenwood along with David Cooper at the University of Alberta—my first time in Edmonton. And while I did not really know Greenwood, I recall him reaching out on more than one occasion, insisting that I make the trip even though it was right after the Academy of Management annual meetings in Denver. I really had a wonderful time, and recall Greenwood, with a glimmer in his eye, walking with me down Whyte Avenue telling me about the famous Edmonton Fringe Festival that was about to kick off. Greenwood has always been a compelling salesman. Of course, I also became more attuned to the insightful and amazing scholarship of Hinings, Greenwood and their students and colleagues. At the time, they were already big figures in the field, doing pioneering work on professional service firms, yet quite down to earth, and very warm and encouraging to me as an insecure early career scholar.

From here, the pull to Alberta kept getting stronger. David Deephouse, who joined the Alberta School in 2001, and I connected at the 2003 Workshop on Institutions, Conflict and Change organized by Matt Kraatz and Marc Ventresca at Northwestern University. I recall Deephouse telling me how thrilled he was to be in Edmonton. Around the same time, Nelson Phillips and I wrote point-counterpoint essays published in a volume by Stewart Clegg—right before that famous “Free Willy” paper was published (Lawrence & Phillips, 2004). And in the summer of 2003 and 2004, I found myself at professional service firm conferences at Oxford, where I recall going to a pub with Hinings and Greenwood, and sitting with them at a cricket match as they tried to explain the rules to me. While this Canadian group was indeed quite exotic, I ultimately decided that there was no other place I’d rather be.

Fast forwarding to the present, I have had the privilege of playing a small role in helping to maintain the vitality of The Alberta School as an institution. I currently serve as the Chair of the department that aims to carry forward the Hinings and Greenwood legacy in the form of the Alberta School. Of course, they both served in various administrative capacities over the years including as department Chair. Many years ago, Greenwood convinced me to follow in his footsteps as the School’s Associate Dean of Research, and more recently twisted my arm to become Chair. He said to me, “Mike, Bob did it, I did it, and now it’s your turn.” Anyone that has known Greenwood well understands the difficulty of trying to say “no” to him.

True to the sensibilities of the Alberta School, I view my role as Chair as a component of an ongoing collective concern where I am a more of a custodian. I view this opportunity as mainly about ensuring that the cultural values and practices of the Alberta School endure. Intellectual focal points may shift—like the focus on professional services shifted to institutional theory in the 1990s. Thus, the future of the Alberta School today is less tied to the centrality of institutional

theory than to a more general approach to organizational studies that embraces intellectual cosmopolitanism and curiosity, as well as scholarly excellence. It is a testament to the legacy of the Alberta School and the amazing scholarly community that continues to thrive here, that so many great people want to join our family, and that early career scholars from all over the world continue to make the trek North for extended visits. In keeping with the traditions established by Hinings and Greenwood, our aim is to ensure that the Alberta School will continue to be a North Star for the field of organization studies—not only by helping to shape scholarly agendas for the field, but by providing an exemplar for how embracing collegiality and generosity as central components of being a scholar and doing scholarship is profoundly meaningful and vital.

REFERENCES

- Berman, E.P. & Paradeise, C. (Eds.) 2016. The University Under Pressure. Research in the Sociology of Organizations, Volume 46. Bingley, UK: Emerald.
- Greenwood, R., T. Lawrence, R. Meyer & C. Oliver, (Eds.) 2017. Sage Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism. London: Sage.
- Greenwood, R., C. Oliver, S. Sahlin-Andersson & R. Suddaby (Eds.) 2008. Sage Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism. London: Sage.
- Lawrence, T. B., & Phillips, N. 2004. From Moby Dick to Free Willy: Macro-Cultural Discourse and Institutional Entrepreneurship in Emerging Institutional Fields. Organization, 11: 689-711.
- Sahlin, K. & Eriksson-Zetterquist, U. (Eds.) 2023a. University Collegiality and the Erosion of Faculty Authority. Research in the Sociology of Organizations, Volume 86. Bingley, UK: Emerald.
- Sahlin, K. & Eriksson-Zetterquist, U. (Eds.) 2023b. Revitalizing Collegiality: Restoring Faculty Authority in Universities. Research in the Sociology of Organizations, Volume 87. Bingley, UK: Emerald.