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The Failure of Organizational and Administrative Theory

Questioning whether twenty-five years of theoretical discussion have advanced our understanding or our practice of administration, Hodgkinson inspects in turn the various views that have prevailed in the field and offers a humanist's verdict on each. Finding some promise in the phenomenological approach, he suggests the adoption of a "triplex reality" as a framework for experience which will permit the application, each in its place and in due proportion, of predictive science, probabilistic hypothesis, and individualistic interpretation. An as yet unestablished philosophy of administration must clarify the language games being played in each of these three dimensions, and must adopt a wide new range of methodology that would include the modes of the arts.

"*L'étude centrale de l'administration doit être la condition humaine.*"

After much study, many books, and much weariness of the flesh it does not seem over-provocative to declare that when it comes to administrative and organization theory we have too little of the former and too much of the latter. And with both, the term theory is more honorific than scientific. Moreover, while both have provided fulsome employment for academics, including myself, it would be hard to make the case that life, behaviour, and experience in human complex organizations is much more fully understood and enlightened now than it was decades ago.

These assertions may appear arrogant or erroneous, so let me try to marshall some support. First, the easy one — administrative theory. It is now nearly a quarter of a century since the *Administrative Science Quarterly* was launched. (What an impressive and misleading title!) In its first issue there appeared an article by Litchfield entitled "Notes Towards a General Theory of Administration."[1] For those unfamiliar with this classic — I do not use the word ironically — the gist can be

stated as an analysis of administration into a cyclical decision-making process. This led the author to certain general propositions, and of course to the sentiment that they would be validated, fleshed out, and structured into substantive theory with the passage of time. The then new journal was to play a significant part in this latter process. So it was hoped. With all due respect I submit that these pious hopes have not been fulfilled and that administrative theory is still subject to Simon's castigation as "a set of mutually contradictory proverbs."[2] As Sigmund Koch has concluded in a different context, after reviewing a half-century's empirical efforts in the study of the problem of learning, we have improved our theoretical grasp not one jot.[3]

Why? Perhaps for the basic and stupefyingly simple reason that the central questions of administration are not scientific at all. They are philosophical. They have to do with the nature of man, in particular, *administrative* man. And administration I would insist is, as Ohm and Monahan have said elsewhere, "philosophy-in-action."[4] Let us take the most sparkling facet of administrative theory, namely leadership theory, and examine it in this context. Where has it led us after years of empirical effort? From the LBDQ and the OCDQ* through Fiedler's pretzel-shaped hypotheses to House's maxims.[5,6,7] Maxims! That is where the military are at also, although strangely they seem to have no problem in accepting philosophy as a rightful ingredient of administrative theory.[8] Not that there is anything necessarily wrong with maxims. In the face of intractable complexity, and where scientific propositions fall short, maxims as distillations of wisdom may be very helpful; may be, in fact, the best we can do. But still this is not theory, it is not predictive, it is not even heuristic — it is only one step away from magic and mystique.

What can be said for the leadership studies can also be said with greater or lesser testimony for the domains of policy science, decision-making, and whatever other subsets of administrative theory we can tease out.[9] *En passant,* for example, Arrow's General Impossibility Theorem,[10] which would seem to deny the rational aggregation of preferences and which, if properly pressed home, would certainly blow a lot of administrative battleships out of the water.** Arrow's dilemma may be expressed as follows: Either we must accept the Fascistic notion of some kind of group mind, or else the group leader must himself impose his own will by force or guile — both of which are alternatives

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* LBDQ, OCDQ refer to the Leader Behaviour and Organizational Climate Description Questionnaires, which were the chief tools for so much empirical study in leadership theory.

**The paradox whereby a group whose preferences are ordered A>B>C is forced to decide so that C>A greatly intrigued the Oxford logician Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (Lewis Carroll); see also the writer's "Why Democracy won't Work," *Phi Delta Kappan* (Jan. 1975), p. 316.

thoroughly distasteful to adherents of the contemporary rhetoric in administrative theory.

The question in mind, then, is this. Given the present state of administrative theory, why do we not redirect our thrust for theory from the behavioural sciences, where it has become stuck, towards the humanities and the social sciences in their more philosophical, insightful, and prescriptive reaches? If there is to be a theory of administration it must be a theory of administered and administrative *man*. And we do not have enough of this.

If administrative theory is jejune, organization theory provides us with a surfeit. The possibilities for classification and taxonomy are unending. A contemporary text distinguishes at least eight perspectives.[11] Let me, however, discriminate just a few of the schools of thought from amongst those presently contending for the high ground. In educational administration, of course, that high ground still seems to be held by Griffiths and his allies, who cling firmly to their beliefs in the discoverability of predictive laws about men in organizations and who remain addicted to the magic of quantitative methodology. (As a philosopher I feel justified in talking about number magic since I have never yet been able to actually find such a thing as a *number* in the empirical world. Nor, in the non-empirical realm have I been able to comprehend a "bit" of information theory. Has an *eigen*-value ever made a significant change in one's personal theory of organizational man? Or to life in schools?)

First, then, the "Scientific" view. The tradition runs from Frederick W. Taylor and his descendants all the way to OR, MBO, PERT, and CPA.* In our own field perhaps Hamburger University is its ultimate (and successful) quintessence. The norms of productivity, technology, and effectiveness are implicit in the approach. Product can be specified and workflow can be analyzed. If a problem can be specified it must be capable of a solution. This view fails in education because education is a humanism. We cannot specify with clarity and precision either our problems or our goals, and again and again our irrationality has triumphed over the technologies and technological panaceas that have been thrust upon us. So next let us consider the "Rational" view. Max Weber can here be taken as the archetype. As the German nation represented for Hegel the apogee of historical dialectic, so Prussian bureaucracy was once considered the epitome of man's organizational advance. And, for that matter, if I had to choose between Karl Marx and Max Weber as to retrospective success as prophets of social evolution, it would be easy to pick the latter over the former. Bureaucracy rampantly flourishes as an organizational form in both the private and public sector. It dominates education. Some understanding of its theory is essential to the student of organizational

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* Operations Research, Management by Objectives, Program Evaluation Review Technique, Critical Path Analysis.

life. Yet, in the end this view disappoints us because the Weberian ideal type is so rarely approximated in practice. Like Christianity it is a good idea, and it's too bad that no one has ever really tried it.*

Third, and not unrelated to the first two perspectives, the "Systems" view. Whether it be the natural systems approach which commits the biological fallacy or the open systems approach immortalized in Katz and Kahn's *magnum opus*,[12] we still seem to have only a metaphor. Provocative, insightful, heuristic even, but still as Homans would say, "a language without sentences."[13] Its critique must lie with its lack of empiricization and predictiveness. Its statement that "Changes in internal organizational structures are a direct function of changes in external or environmental elements" is suggestive, and confirms our intuitions, but we need more.

Now consider two contrasting perspectives which seem to be rooted in divergent views about the nature of man. First, the "Human Relations" view, that fascinating train of ideas from Mary Parker Follett through the Hawthorne Plant to Likert, McGregor, and Argyris. The studies and the findings are voluminous. Argyris painstakingly reviews them every seven years or so in order to confirm his essential finding that organizations and humans are fundamentally incompatible.[14] I oversimplify, of course, but the upshot of human relations work does seem to lead in the direction of advancing knowledge about our frustrations, or, and this is much more sinister, empowering us with new skills in the manipulation of each other.

On the other side of this coin we have what can be called the "Political Science" view. *Homo politicus* is the underlying model of man: man in the interwoven realms of power, violence, and decision.[15] In this view organizations are forums for conflict and for the exchange of motives, incentives, and values. Simmel, Coser, Dahrendorf, Barnard, and Victor Thompson are some of the great names.[16] (In passing it can be noted that *educational* administration is singularly unrepresented in this school — almost as if we were too nice to be included.) The problem with this view is that it accentuates the negative and tends to denigrate formal structure. It is, in a sense, very much Theory X as opposed to the foregoing Theory Y. On the other hand, it allows for and confirms beyond a shadow of a doubt that most pervasive of all value factors, the norm of reciprocity.**

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* I believe that a contemporary Archbishop of Canterbury is to be credited with this notion, his point being that true Christianity has never in fact been fully *practised,* although its theory, of course, has long been well entrenched and espoused.

**Administrators and politicians are well acquainted with the "reciprocity index," an informal calculus (though often highly refined) of the balance of trade in favours done for and received from their colleagues. Likewise, the layman understands the norm of reciprocity in the form of the principle *quid pro quo.*

Such are some of the contending schools of thought in organization theory. Mao's hundred flowers a-blossoming. Where does it leave us in our speciality of educational administration? One is tempted to answer, Nowhere! Certainly it leaves us both confused and sophisticated, where "sophistication" has its original meaning of "loss of innocence." Our task, of course, is to seek that line of theory which may prove most helpful to us as we struggle to understand complex human organizations, especially those called schools and school systems. Is there a more fruitful line of exploration? I think so, and I think it has already been well argued for by Tom Greenfield.[17] This last we can call the "Phenomenological" view.

It would make an interesting case study in the sociology of knowledge to investigate the reasons why Greenfield hath little honour in his own country, but is applauded and acclaimed on the other side of the Atlantic.[18] Unfortunately, we cannot go into that question here. Nor does space permit me to expound the essentials of this view, although I suspect we are by now familiar with its emphasis on the singular, the qualitative, the subjective, and the meaningful, as against the aggregative, the quantitative, the "objective," and the probabilistic. Let me just give one illustration of the difference, again at the expense of my favourite whipping boy, *Administrative Science Quarterly*. Consider this not atypical abstract of an article from that authoritative source:

> The attitudes of 340 Israeli government employees toward their work and the introduction of the computer are investigated. Three behaviour modalities — affective, cognitive, and instrumental — of 5 referents — computer staff, management, supervisors, colleagues, and the employees themselves — generate 15 varieties of items for both work and computer introduction. Each 15 x 15 correlation matrix is found to be portrayable in a three-dimensional space by smallest space analysis. In each case, a type of lawfulness called cylindrex is found that relates the definitional system with the empirical stucture. The rationale for this lawfulness is based on consideration of order elements of the facets considered. In each cylindrex, the order of the referents is based on their administrative distance to the computer. The computer staff and management are nearest to the computer and others are ordered according to their distance from management. The behaviour modalities have no simple ordering here; they are polarizing.
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> The two cylindrexes are related to each other in a larger space, being closest at the instrumental modality.[19]

The essence of this finding seems to be, if one can penetrate the jargon, that "Those who are most involved in an activity are likely to be the most interested in it." Similar tautological observations could perhaps be derived *a priori* from common sense, but presumably there is some merit to having them confirmed empirically through rarified

exercises in advanced number-crunching. And now, in contrast, consider:

> The error most theorists make in thinking about organizations is
> to conceive them as somehow separate from life, love, sex, growth,
> conflict, accomplishment, decay, death, and chance. If we seek
> to understand the world as people experience it, we come to see
> that they take the world very much as they find it. Each lives in
> his own world, but he must deal in that world with others and
> with the worlds they live in. Organizations come into existence
> when we talk and act with others. We strive to communicate with
> these others, to touch them, to understand them, and often to
> control them.[20]

It would be unfair on the basis of these illustrations to ask to choose between them, and severe constraints of time and space prohibit more just elaboration of the contrast, but I, for one, am convinced that the latter type of approach opens new fields of exploration which promise insight and help towards both theory and development and the advance of humane administrative praxis.

The difficulty with the phenomenological view is that both its canons of investigation and the levels of reality with which it deals are unclear. And on these counts, as the main substance of this paper, I would like to make some suggestions:

First, the question of "reality." Let us accept that we live in at least a multi-dimensional framework of experience which, for the sake of analytic simplicity, I shall call a triplex reality. In this scheme reality III would be the empirical domain of science, the deterministic world of cause and effect, the world of hard edges, tangibilities, and the stuff and furniture of experience. Here propositions can be predictive and verifiable, taking the form of "laws" perhaps, such as $I = E/R$, or $e = mc^2$. It is a reality we all have to live in, and generally, the more science can tell us about it the better.

The second reality, reality II, would be the appropriate province of social science. Here propositions are less rigorously shaped, more probabilistic, cast in such forms as "Organizations which have a high degree of goal specificity will have a greater degree of effectiveness than organizations which have a low degree of goal specificity." Or "$B = f (P,E)$": "Behaviour is a function of personality and environment," or, "If I fail to pay my workers they will cease to contribute to the goals of my enterprise." In this reality there are degrees of freedom; its realm is only partly determined. It is in part imponderable and the propositions of its "language" may be called hypothetical. Again, and in general, the more propositions, verified or unfalsified, that social science can deliver about this reality the better.

Finally we must acknowledge and construe reality I, the phenomenological realm of individual experience which, at least in potential, is

voluntaristic or free. Its commergence with the shared realities of II and III will produce quite different *mise-en-scène* for the psychotic or for the normal adult, for a child, indeed for any two persons. Propositions touching upon this realm, therefore, while constrained by the "lower" or "harder" realities and falsifiable by them, are more evocative or philosophical: they function only through the eye of the beholder and the mind of the reader and are dependent for their ultimate worth and validity upon the value orientation, life experience, and phenomenological status of the recipient. They are, as it were, raw material for philosophy, and their function is as much affective as cognitive.[21] We need more propositions and more ordering of propositions at this level. There is at present no philosophy of administration, at best only crude philosophies of success and power; what humanism there is is both inchoate and impotent. And we need to get clear about the language games of the three realities so that, as Wittgenstein would say, our intelligence is not bewitched by language.[22]

Lastly, with regard to methodology of investigation, we must admit and encourage case study, clinical observation and practice, introspection and introspective reporting, biography, mini-biography, and journalism, the modes of art, theatre, cinema, and literature. These, and more, must be endorsed by our scientific community, and all classes of propositions must be embraced if we seek to do justice to, and find truth in, the complex manifold of reality which we have chosen as our special field of study and expertise. A manifold which is saturated with values, attitudes, ends, means, purposes, aims, goals, motives, meaning, and the stuff of ethics, morality, and philosophy. And I cannot but concur and endorse, over and over, the best definition of scientific method that I know, by a great philosopher of science, as the most appropriate method for coping with this problem:

> The scientific method, as far as it is a method, is nothing more than doing one's damndest with one's mind, no holds barred.[23]

We have not yet done our damndest and, at the moment, too many holds are barred.

NOTES

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9. Cf. especially Laurence H. Tribe, "Policy Science: Analysis or Ideology," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (Fall 1972), pp. 66-110.

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