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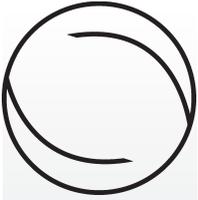
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# The Study of Organizations and Organizing Since 1945\*

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## Abstract

The history of organization studies is embedded in its times and the ways those times affect different regions differently. In particular, significant features of the field were molded by the moods and prejudices associated with academia after three critical events in 20th-century history: (1) the Second World War, (2) the social and political protest movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, (3) the collapse of the Soviet Empire and the triumph of markets. Speculating about the unfolding of the events of the future that will have similar impacts is discouraged by an awareness that neither their timing nor the severity of their impacts can be specified with any precision. In any event, our task is not to join any particular wave of the future, but to make small pieces of scholarship beautiful.

**Keywords:** intellectual history, organization studies

My status as an honorary member of EGOS is a status that I treasure, as I do the invitation to speak on this occasion and to pose as a European. I am especially grateful for your tolerance of me since the last March of my family to have been born in Europe came to America almost 400 years ago. My intention is to take advantage of your invitation and your tolerance to provide one man's impressions of the last 60 years of organization studies. They are the impressions of an affectionate enthusiast who has the advantages and disadvantages of having lived through those years. I would not want to underestimate the disadvantages. I learned early to be skeptical about the words of aged scholars. Now that I have become one of them, I am even more skeptical. Age generates self-indulgence more reliably than it generates wisdom.

## Introduction

The field of organization studies is a large, heterogeneous field involving numerous enclaves having distinct styles, orientations and beliefs. It is integrated neither by a shared theory, nor by a shared perspective, nor even by a shared

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tolerance for multiple perspectives. It retains substantial intellectual, geographic and linguistic parochialism, with separate enclaves persisting in their own worlds of discourse and forming a common field only by a definition that overlooks the diversity.

### **The Myth of Organization Studies**

And, yet, EGOS exists. EGOS was originally conceived, I believe, as a kind of intellectual social movement within organizations scholarship, defending, developing and extending a particular scholarly point of view and producing, augmenting and proclaiming European resistance both to the hegemony of North American scholars and to the glorification of quantitative analysis and other symptoms of scholarly testosterone. It has, however, increasingly positioned itself as a broad association of scholars brought together by the myth of organization studies, by the idea that such a thing exists (or might exist), and by the idea that we are, however uncomfortably, united in a common endeavor. This myth of a distinct field of organization studies cannot easily be sustained by a contemplation of either our teachings, our writings, or our research. It is sustained by our hopes.

In the spirit of those hopes and that myth, I ask what the history of organization studies since the Second World War can tell us about the processes by which the field of organization studies refines old ideas and introduces new ones. Given the variety of our commitments, it is a hopeless task, made only somewhat manageable by gross simplification.

### **A Simple Model**

The story I will tell neglects those aspects of intellectual history that involve ideas competing for acceptance on the basis of evidence or other forms of gradual scholarly winnowing. Such things certainly exist and are important, but they are subordinated here to a simple story of diffusion. I imagine that ideas, frameworks and worldviews invade a scholarly field and, if successful, reproduce from scholar to future scholar and so on through generations with reliability that declines over generations. Ideas, frameworks and worldviews also migrate from one part of a field to another and from one enclave to another and are modified in the course of migration. The observed distribution of scholarly commitments over time and over geographic and linguistic regions is generated by this interaction of invasion, reproduction, migration and transformation.

To explore such a model of the history of a field thoroughly would require a more precise specification of the enclaves and the parameters of invasion, reproduction, migration and transformation, as well as their interaction. I do not propose to provide such a specification today. I want, however, to call attention to one aspect of such a process — the way the history of a scholarly field is embedded in its times and the way those times affect different regions differently. In particular, significant features of the field of organization studies were molded by three critical events in 20th-century history: (1) the Second World War, (2) the social and political protest movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and (3) the collapse of the Soviet Empire and the triumph of markets. The invasions of ideas associated with the aftermaths

of these three events have produced a community of scholars with strong generational imprints.

The story is obviously considerably complicated by the reproduction of world-views through the education of new scholars by old ones. Each generation reproduces scholars at a rate dependent on the number of old scholars still active and the opportunities for employment of new scholars. These new scholars and their own progeny extend the impact of earlier invasions. In addition, ideas travel, leading to their spread and modification within the field. These complications are important, but generational imprinting is a striking feature of the intellectual history of organization studies. Moreover, since the three waves of ideas arose during times of different rates of growth in universities in different parts of the worlds, the temporal imprints of ideas have tended to become geographic imprints.

### **Three Invasions**

Although it is possible to point to precursors of organization studies in Asia and Africa, written contributions to organizational scholarship had their Western origins in the writings of Aristotle and developed in Europe after the Renaissance and Reformation and up through the 1930s, primarily as elements of the fledgling disciplines of social science and human engineering. The early contributors to the field were few, scattered among the disciplines, and primarily European.

The easily recognizable ancestors of modern organizations scholarship include such notable European social scientists as Emile Durkheim, Alfred Marshall, Robert Michels, Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, Adam Smith and Max Weber. They were supplemented by early European organizations engineers such as Henri Fayol and Lyndall Urwick.

Some North American writers, such as Luther Gulick, Elton Mayo (actually an Australian for most of his life), John Dewey, Mary Parker Follett and Frederick Taylor were pioneers, but the field's pre-Second World War origins were primarily European.

### **The Second World War**

The Second World War changed things. The massive material, intellectual and economic devastation of Europe, including the decimation of the German, Austrian, Italian and Eastern European scholarly communities, made the reconstruction of European scholarly strength a relatively slow process. Although there were significant European scholars working on studies of organizations earlier in the postwar period, it was not until well into the 1970s that European studies of organizations achieved a scale adequate to reassert itself as an important force.

In contrast, economic recovery in North America was relatively fast and contributed to the postwar economic and political expansion of North American institutions. A significant factor both in the recovery of North American scholarship and in the directions that recovery took was the extraordinary immigration of scholars to North America from Germany, Austria and the rest of Central Europe during the 1930s. These scholars, who were born as Jews in Central Europe and came to the United States to escape persecution, included some of the more

distinguished subsequent contributors to North American academic concern about organizing. Peter Blau, Fritz Heider, Kurt Lewin, Fritz Machlup, Jakob Marschak, Leo Hurwicz, Oskar Morgenstern, Anatol Rappoport, Joseph Schumpeter, Alfred Schütz, Friedrich A. von Hayek, Ludwig von Mises and John von Neumann, among others. In many ways, the greatest single benefactor of North American social science and organization studies in the mid-20th century was Adolf Hitler.

Because of the rapid peacetime recovery and the massive growth of American higher education in the years immediately after 1945, the most obvious feature of the history of organization studies in North America after the Second World War, and a major factor in the invasion and reproduction of post-Second World War ideas, was growth in the size of the scholarly community. Although the magnitude of that growth in North America is difficult to assess precisely, it seems to have been on the order of at least 100-fold.

The field did not grow as a response to exciting new discoveries, findings, or theories, nor as a response to a clear, overwhelming demand for knowledge on the part of society. It grew as a function of the rapidly increasing supply of scholars. The demand that led to the increase in scholars was not a demand for scholarship, but a demand for teachers to teach the increasing numbers of university students. As the number of scholars increased, so also did the number of papers produced. As the number of papers increased, so also did the number of journals to publish them.

In 1965, Rand McNally published a *Handbook of Organizations*. The field that that handbook described was focused on a variety of institutions as much as it was on general principles. Nine of the chapters dealt with specific institutional spheres (e.g. unions, public bureaucracies, political parties, military units, hospitals, schools). The field was also based in the disciplines. Of the contributors to the handbook, 60 percent held appointments in disciplinary departments when the handbook appeared. They had different degrees and lived in different scholarly communities, but they shared a diffuse worldview and a vision of scholarship. They were a postwar North American generation of social scientists. They were — every one of the 30 contributors to the 1965 handbook — American, white, male and young. About two-thirds of them were less than 40 years old in 1965.

The generation represented by the handbook contributors was a postwar generation and was profoundly influenced by, indeed intertwined with, the development of a scientific behavioral science in North America. The postwar era in the United States was one that saw the election of the first social scientists to the National Academy of Science, and the inclusion of social science as a division of the National Science Foundation. It saw the conversion of economic theory into a workable mathematical form. It saw the development of mathematical models in psychology, sociology, economics, geography, political science and anthropology. It saw an extensive elaboration of techniques for the gathering and multivariate analysis of quantitative data in economics, psychology, political science and sociology.

The postwar North American contributors to the study of organizations included a long list of scholars, not only refugees from Central Europe but also such other academics as Alex Bavelas, Richard M. Cyert, Robert Dubin, Alvin W. Gouldner, Mason Haire, Harold H. Kelley, Charles E. Lindblom, Seymour

M. Lipset, Robert Merton, John Meyer, Roy Radner, Leonard R. Sayles, W. Richard Scott, Philip Selznick, Martin Shubik, Herbert A. Simon, William H. Starbuck, Arthur L. Stinchcombe, James Thompson, Karl E. Weick, Harrison White and William F. Whyte. For the most part, they identified with, and were viewed as part of, the effort to make postwar studies of human behavior and institutions more scientific. The attitudes of this generation of scholars were strengthened by, and gave strength to, the simultaneous effort to make North American business schools more explicitly academic, to increase the role of academic knowledge and methods and reduce the role of experiential knowledge and methods in management education.

### **The Protests of the 1960s and 1970s**

The European story is similar in many respects to the North American. In the first two decades after the Second World War, a number of distinguished European scholars interested in organizations established themselves: for example, Sune Carlsson, Michel Crozier, Walter Goldberg, David Hickson, Knut Dahl Jacobsen, Edith Penrose, Derek Pugh, Claude Riveline. The Aston Group and the Tavistock Institute produced both research and new scholars. However, the European story differed from the North American in one important respect. Because the negative economic and political impact of the war was much greater in Europe than it was in North America, postwar economic recovery, and consequently scholarly recovery, was slower. As a result, the major European expansion of organization studies was delayed. It not only occurred in a different place; it occurred at a different time.

By 1970, European universities had largely recovered from the ravages of the Second World War and had started to experience the same kind of exceptional growth that had profoundly affected North American universities 20 years earlier. During the 1970s and 1980s, numerous vigorous research centers emerged, and numerous scholars interested in organizations became visible: for example, Mats Alvesson, Nils Brunsson, John Child, Stewart Clegg, Barbara Czarniawska, Lars Engwall, Erhard Friedberg, Anthony Hopwood, Håkon Håkonsson, Alfred Kieser, Cornelius J. Lammers, Bruno Latour, Nikolas Luhmann, Renate Mayntz, Johan P. Olsen, Andrew Pettigrew, Jean-Claude Thoenig.

The re-emergence of European organizations scholarship followed different paths in different countries, particularly across different linguistic groups. Like their North American colleagues, many European organization scholars found homes in business schools at a time when business schools were increasing in size, importance and research emphasis. There were other patterns, however. For example, the early prominence of political scientists in the development of organization studies in North America was replicated in Norway and Sweden where Johan P. Olsen and Nils Brunsson created substantial communities of scholars dedicated to research on public organizations and to an institutional perspective. Michel Crozier and his associates in France created a tradition that was based in political sociology and focused particularly on issues of bureaucracy and power.

European organization studies, like North American organizations studies, developed a scholarly identity and canon; but there was a striking difference between the intellectual mood of the 1970s and 1980s, when organization studies

expanded rapidly in Europe, and the intellectual mood of the 1950s and 1960s, when organization studies — along with other social and behavioral sciences — expanded rapidly in North America. European organization studies were influenced deeply by the fact that expansion occurred in the decades following the protest and counterculture movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

These movements created a distinctive intellectual setting in universities throughout Europe. The setting combined:

- opposition to American involvement in Vietnam and more generally to American hegemony
- support for a feminist sensibility, rhetoric, and historical perspective
- a radical (primarily Marxist) critique of society and social science
- a post-structuralist, post-modern, social constructivist worldview
- a romantic enthusiasm for ‘flower power’ and other accoutrements of countercultures.

In contrast to the mood of the 1950s, which was optimistic about social science and its possibilities for becoming a science that served an enlightened society through rational analysis and social engineering based on systematic quantitative research, the later mood was pessimistic. It was likely to portray the apparatus of social science as an instrument of white, male, capitalist oppression. Adam Smith and Max Weber were displaced by Michel Foucault and Anthony Giddens.

Although important parts of European organization studies developed and retained the commitments that were characteristic of the earlier period, the timing of European growth in higher education produced an intelligentsia that had, compared to the immediate postwar group, substantially less positive attitudes about the academic establishment, about business, about science, about mathematics and numbers, about males and the intellectual prejudices attributed to them, about the older generation, about progress, and about things associated with North America, but most of all about the quantitative methods and the mathematical theoretical forms that were hallmarks of the earlier period.

Most strikingly perhaps, this era in organizations studies produced a major change in the gender composition of the community of scholars. From being an almost exclusively male domain, the field of organization studies was transformed into a field with a substantial female presence. The change was unmistakable in North America but it was — because of the timing of growth in Europe — even more visible there. By the end of the period, women scholars represented at least 25 percent and in some areas more than 50 percent of the community.

Both the Second World War and the protest movements are, of course, fading from memory now and are hardly recognized by scholars who have entered the field in the last 25 years; but their intellectual progeny and artifacts still litter the field and form barriers to subsequent invasions both in North America and in Europe. The first period’s effects are found particularly in such things as quantitative research on institutional diffusion in populations of organizations, organizational demography, decision making, information processing, networks, learning, evolution and comparative structures. The second period’s effects are seen particularly in such things as qualitative research on culture, gender, sense-making, social construction and power.

### The Triumph of Markets

When the Soviet Empire collapsed in 1991 after almost a decade of gradual disintegration, it signaled the triumph of capitalism both as an economic system and as an intellectual basis for social thought. That event reverberated through North American and European universities because of the special importance of oppositional and particularly Marxist positions in social science. A central traditional feature of university culture, more conspicuous in schools of humanities and social science than in schools of business or engineering, was the oppositional role of the university. For most of the 20th century, the conventional basis for opposition in university cultures — both in North America and in Europe — was Marxism. This relatively stable ideational and acculturation system in universities fell apart when the Soviet Empire collapsed. Marxism as an instrument and a symbol of opposition to the establishment lost appeal. Insofar as Marxism was replaced in university oppositional enthusiasms, it tended to be replaced by a new program of social reform that emphasized competitive markets and a much reduced role for government. The economic ideas of the Austrian School became fashionable among young students.

In Europe and North America, the result in organization studies, as in many other domains of social science, was twofold. The first was an effect on the cohort of organization scholars recruited to organization studies during the 1970s and 1980s and the scholarly commitments they had reproduced in their students. Assertions that what was believed was not what was true, which had been buttressed by a Marxist portrayal of the real truth, were transformed into assertions that nothing was true, that scholarship could not involve the pursuit of truth because truth in the sense intended by most traditional scholars did not exist.

The second result of the triumphs of markets in Europe and North America was an effect on young radical scholars. The new radicals were libertarian liberals, and markets became the preferred revolutionary mode of organizing, in the public sector as well as the private. The preeminence of markets was taken for granted, and discovering the factors contributing to individual or organizational success within a market system, or discovering new uses of markets as instruments of organizing, became prototypic forms of research in organization studies. Just as young scholars entering the field in the 1950s had been drawn to science and young scholars in the 1970s had been drawn to the humanities, young scholars in the 1990s were drawn to markets. They became fascinated by the excitements and rewards of market competition. Leadership, mergers and acquisitions, outsourcing and entrepreneurship became major topics of research.

These third-wave invaders faced a situation that, on the one hand, was made more difficult by the fact that the scholarly world was no longer growing rapidly in either North America or Europe. Organization studies had become less vulnerable to invasion by virtue of its location in relatively stable institutions both in North America and in Europe. On the other hand, the situation was made more favorable for the third wave both by the gradual dissipation of the reproduced scholarly residue of the postwar and post-protest invasions, and by the way the third wave resonated with a business school emphasis on immediate relevance.

The revolution in business schools that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s in North America and later in Europe had made the schools more academic and

research-oriented. This contributed to, and was promoted by, the first two invasions into organization studies. In the 1980s and 1990s, this revolution was challenged by a counter-revolution, led by the business press. This counter-revolution threatened to alienate and isolate the scholars of the revolution and their heirs but opened the schools to the post-1985 invasion.

Although it clearly exists and is important in North America and Europe, the third wave seems likely to be even more prominent in Asia. The rapid expansion in the number of scholars that was experienced in North America in the decades after the Second World War and in Europe in the decades after the protest movements of the 1960s characterized most Asian countries in the decades after the fall of the Soviet Empire.

This growth is likely to move China, India and other Asian countries to leading positions not only in terms of their educated work forces, economies and political power but also in terms of their research. Because of the timing of Asian expansion, the kinds of organization studies that will be carried out and the kinds of scholarship that will be reproduced are likely to reflect a greater degree of concern for understanding and fostering the success of enterprises in a market-based world than is currently found in North America and Europe with their legacies of earlier invasions and expansions.

## **The Future**

Forecasting the future is a fool's conceit. There is no reason to expect the next 60 years of organization studies to unfold in a way that is any more predictable from the perspective of today than the last 60 years would have been from the perspective of the end of the Second World War.

## **The Sources of Novelty**

There are, however, elements of the post-Second World War history that seem to cast light on the generation and persistence of novelty in organization studies. First, a primary source of novelty in organization studies has been importation from outside. Both after the Second World War and after the protests of the 1960s and 1970s, new ideas entered the field from other fields, particularly from the behavioral sciences and natural sciences in the former and from the humanities and feminist studies in the latter.

Second, novelty is facilitated by growth. When a scholarly community is growing rapidly, the instruments of socialization that are essential to exploitation and resistance to novelty are less effective. Turnover facilitates the entry of new ideas. Scholarly communities that grow at different times are likely to be invaded by different ideas.

Third, novelty and variety are sustained by parochialism. The mutual isolation of European scholars and North American scholars has been extensively documented. This isolation has allowed separate scholarly communities to thrive and to develop different ideas and prejudices. The mutual isolation of Asian and Western communities is likely to produce a similar situation in which

Asian ideas are protected from socialization into the conventions of dominant groups in North America and Europe.

Does this demonstrate that by some magic we have discovered the optimal mix of exploitation and exploration? Not at all. The fact that there appear to be as many voices describing the level of novelty and diversity in organization studies as too high as there are describing it as too low does not demonstrate that it is exactly right. What the present story suggests is not that history is efficient in locating optimal paths but that some features of the history of organizations studies have affected the mix of exploitation and exploration in the field without any conscious intent to do so, and that the future mix as well as the level of diversity in organization studies that it fosters are likely to be similarly affected.

### **The Future of the Present**

There are many conspicuous features of the present that may have implications for the future:

- The movement toward global economic, political, and cultural linkages
- The continuing elaboration of information and biological technologies
- The reduced economic, political and cultural centrality of Europe and North America
- The changing distribution of wealth
- The rising tide of fundamentalist religious belief in Judaism, Christianity and Islam
- The earth's declining tolerance for the human species.

In one form or other, each of these seems inexorable; and each of them will affect organization studies in ways that, although they are not easy to predict precisely now, are likely to be substantial. Future invasions of the field will reflect critical events of the future, just as past invasions have reflected critical events of the past. Speculating about the unfolding of these trends is, however, discouraged by an awareness that neither their timing nor their magnitudes can be specified with any precision.

### **The Business School Locale**

There is, however, one feature of the context within which the future of organization studies apparently will be realized that may be worth noting — the business school location of much of the research. For the last few decades, business schools have provided stable financial and occupational bases for organization studies and many of the scholars who consider themselves students of organizations have secured both their training and their employment in business schools. The business school context is not a neutral one:

- It encourages the mutual isolation of business school scholars of organizations and disciplinary scholars.
- Insofar as it encourages contact with the disciplines, it makes contact with ideas from economics more likely, and contact with ideas from the sciences, psychology, sociology, or political science less likely.

- It focuses research on the private sector, reducing the attention to institutions of the public sector that characterized much early work in the field.
- It brings an emphasis on the audience of practitioners, on finding the correlates of organizational performance rather than other organizational phenomena.
- It brings an orientation to the problems and possibilities of individual organizations (firms) and less attention to populations of organizations or to 'organizing'.
- It stimulates an emphasis on organizational strategies, rather than societal strategies.

The implications of the business school context for research are not so clear that they can be asserted with enormous confidence, but they appear to cast doubt on the long-term future of some programs of research congenial to scholars of the first two waves and their progeny. Most of the time in the history of business schools, business school locales have been less welcoming to fundamental research than to applied research, less welcoming to critiques of the market/hierarchical orders than to research that accepts or extols them. A business school culture is not normally supportive of excursions into such things as philosophies of science, mathematical social science, interpretive social science, complexity theory, post-modern sensibilities, organizational demography, or critical theory. Those excursions often maintain postures of intellectual disdain for discourse comprehensible to others and typically provide little immediate, demonstrable utility. The pressures in business schools toward immediate relevance and practical comprehension seem to point in different directions. It may be seen as ironical that programs of organizations scholarship rooted in science and programs of organizations scholarship rooted in antipathy for science are not only out of step with each other; they are both out of step with important elements of the modern mood and with business schools.

Unless organization studies can re-create the academic ambitions that permeated North American business schools in the 1950s and 1960s and European business schools in the 1970s and 1980s, those parts of organization studies that trace their origins to either the aftermath of the Second World War or to the aftermath of the protests of the 1960s are likely to become less welcome in business schools.

### **A Scholar's Job**

The future, like the past, is destined to be shaped by invasions of ideas and by growth in the numbers of scholars. In a real sense, however, the fact that the intellectual future will be at the mercy of historical happenings over which we have little control is not relevant to those of us who are practicing scholars. Our task is not to discern the future in order to join it; nor even to shape it. Our task is to make small pieces of scholarship beautiful through rigor, persistence, competence, elegance and grace, so as to avoid the plague of mediocrity that threatens often to overcome us. If we do that, we may not protect scholarship from future historical waves of renewed enthusiasms; but neither will we disgrace it.

**Note**

I am grateful for the comments of Mie Augier and Johan P. Olsen.

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James G. March is Professor (Emeritus) at Stanford University. He graduated from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and received his PhD from Yale University. He holds honorary doctorates from various North American and European universities. He has been a faculty member at Carnegie Institute of Technology, University of California, Irvine, and Stanford University, holding Professorships in psychology, political science, sociology, management and education. He is best known professionally for his work on organizations and decision making. He has also written seven books of poetry and one film. In the United States, he has been elected to the National Academy of Sciences, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the National Academy of Education, the National Academy of Public Administration, and the American Philosophical Society. In Europe, he has been elected to the Societas Scientiarum Fennica (Finland), Accademia Italiana di Economia Aziendale (Italy), Kungliga Vetenskapsakademien (Sweden) and Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi (Norway).

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