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Decisions Without Hierarchy: Feminist Interventions in Organization Theory and Practice

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Abstract

Whether public or private, government or family, school or church, organizations have a significant influence on everything we do. "The development of organizations is the principle mechanism by which, in a highly differentiated society, it is possible to 'get things done,' to achieve goals beyond the reach of the individual." Because of this, the study of organizations in society has received much attention. From the philosophers of ancient Greece to the corporate heads of the twentieth century, the question of how to organize in order to achieve specific goals and purposes has provoked interest.

Within the body of modern literature that has come to be known as organization theory, many studies have had great impact on our views of the organizations around us. Theorists such as Frederick Taylor, Elton Mayo, Chester Barnard, and Robert Merton, to name a few, conducted the early studies, which tended to focus on the structure and function of organizations. Perhaps none had so great an impact as the German sociologist Robert Michels, who was among the first to focus on the growth of public bureaucracy. [*excerpt*]

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Comments
This is the first chapter of Kathleen Iannello's complete book, *Decisions Without Hierarchy: Feminist Interventions in Organization Theory and Practice.*

ONE

The Starting Point of
Organization Theory

Whether public or private, government or family, school or church, organizations have a significant influence on everything we do. "The development of organizations is the principle mechanism by which, in a highly differentiated society, it is possible to 'get things done,' to achieve goals beyond the reach of the individual."[1] Because of this, the study of organizations in society has received much attention. From the philosophers of ancient Greece to the corporate heads of the twentieth century, the question of how to organize in order to achieve specific goals and purposes has provoked interest.

Within the body of modern literature that has come to be known as organization theory, many studies have had great impact on our views of the organizations around us. Theorists such as Frederick Taylor, Elton Mayo, Chester Barnard, and Robert Merton, to name a few, conducted the early studies, which tended to focus on the structure and function of organizations. Perhaps none had so great an impact as the German sociologist Robert Michels, who was among the first to focus on the growth of public bureaucracy.

Michels in particular dealt specifically with the problems of democratic theory, in 1911 publishing *Political Parties*, an intensive study of the German Social Democratic Party. That seminal work altered the landscape of organization theory in a way that today's political scientists and sociologists often fail to recognize. Michels's now famous "iron law of oligarchy"—that oligarchy is inherent in or synonymous with organization—is seen as a statement not just about the nature of

a political party in pre–World War I Germany, but about the nature of all organizations, whether party, trade union, or church. His formulation excludes, in no uncertain terms, possibilities for egalitarian organization, even among the most ideologically committed:

> Democracy leads to oligarchy, and necessarily contains an oligarchical nucleus. In making this assertation it is far from the author's intention to pass moral judgment upon any political party or any system of government, to level an accusation of hypocrisy. The law that it is an essential characteristic of all human aggregates to constitute cliques and sub-classes is like every other sociological law, beyond good and evil.[2]

For Michels, oligarchy seemed simply to be a result of human nature. He was not alone in this conclusion; the work of his contemporaries, Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto, provided evidence to support his claims.[3]

Through empirical research Michels observed that while egalitarian organizations were often a goal, that goal became displaced by other organizational concerns. According to Michels, the German Socialist party had every reason to succeed in its attempts toward a more participatory form of organization. It was a party that fought for adult suffrage, free speech, and popular participation. Yet it could not avoid the internal development of a self-interested ruling class. Michels calls it "a universally applicable social law" that every organization has a need for division of labor, and that as soon as these divisions are created, so too are special interests.[4] These interests develop conflicts with the interests of the collectivity and "undergo transformation" into distinct classes. A "ruling class" then emerges, holding the advantages of superior knowledge and information. It can secure its position by controlling the formal means of communication, as in organizing group activities.[5]

In addition, Michels explains that the other classes frequently display incompetence by not participating, attending meetings, or voting as much as they might, thus reinforcing the position of the elite. As the organization develops, the elite becomes more interested in maintaining its own position than in achieving the original goals of the organization. External challenges from other organizations help to solidify this position, causing the original goals of the organization to become displaced and making survival into an end in itself. Maintaining the organization, and one's elite position within it, becomes a goal of great personal importance. "The party is created as a means

to secure an end. Having, however, become an end in itself, endowed with aims and interests of its own, it undergoes detachment, from the teleological point of view, from the class it represents."[6]

Citing historical evidence for his claims, Michels developed a pessimistic attitude toward the possibilities for success of any democratic experiment.[7] He began to consider the role of charismatic leadership in organizing the masses behind a political cause. This is what eventually led to his fascination with the Italian fascist leader Benito Mussolini.

While Michels's work has not gone uncriticized, little evidence has been provided to challenge his theory. Seymour Lipset, Martin Trow, and James Coleman's work, *Union Democracy,* provides the one notable exception to the "iron law" in the example of the democratically run International Typographical Union (ITU). However, even these authors hold a dim view of the chances for democracy in other organizations.

We have shown that there is much more variation in the internal organization of associations than the notion of an iron law of oligarchy would imply, but nevertheless, the implications of our analysis for democratic organizational politics are almost as pessimistic as those postulated by Robert Michels.[8]

Many of the conditions that enable the ITU to be democratic in nature are difficult to duplicate. Certain factors were present when the international union was organized: for example, strong local union organizations already existed, which were able to resist the efforts toward a highly centralized structure. The organization was created from the bottom up, not from the top down. In addition, the printers had a strong identification and pride in their craft, which made them more likely to want to participate in the organization. These patterns persisted after the ITU developed, safeguarding against the oligarchic tendencies of bureaucratic structure.[9]

Perhaps the greatest criticism of Michels's work has come from socialists and Marxists. They argue that Michels's theory is based on a society in which economic class divisions already exist; the organization Michels studied simply mirrored the rest of society. The Marxist argument suggests that in a society where economic status is held constant, egalitarian organization has a much greater chance for success. This viewpoint will be discussed below within the context of critical perspectives in organization theory.

Another criticism of Michels's work focuses on his argument regarding the divergence in interests between the ruling classes and the ruled. The evidence suggests that Michels may have misread the Social Democratic party's shift to the right prior to World War I as an initiative of the ruling class. In fact, this shift appears to have come from the party members first, implying that the ruling class had not "deflected" the organization from the "goals and the beliefs of the members."[10] This information offers at least some reason to believe that the link between the rulers and the ruled was not as weak as Michels believed.

Despite suggestions that Michels's study may be overly pessimistic with respect to possibilities for democracy, the "iron law" has become what can be called the "dominant" perspective of organizational theory.[11] Other "critical" perspectives have not been as widely recognized. For both the rational or scientific management model of organization theory and the natural or human relations model, hierarchy is an unquestioned structural characteristic of organizations.

Frederick Taylor was one of the earliest proponents of *rational* theory, publishing *The Principles of Scientific Management* in 1911, which emphasized routine methods, logic in planning, and suppression of the "irrational" tendencies of workers. Rational planning was viewed as the task of a managerial class, which would establish the direction of the organization and design and operate the administrative machinery necessary to accomplish the job. Later theorists such as Chester Barnard and Herbert Simon began to stress information and communication within the administrative structure, but still supported the basic view of rational planning.

The *natural* or human relations model of organization theory, led by Elton Mayo, began to explore the more "human" side of organizations, focusing on what had been considered irrational elements of human behavior. Through this kind of exploration a theory of "informal" as well as "formal" organization developed. The informal organization was the social network formed among workers or organization members—the unwritten rules, attitudes, or behaviors that influenced the productivity and environment of workers.

This distinction led to attempts to mediate hierarchy by developing more participatory types of management or by eliminating levels of management, in order to get more worker/member input. This style of management is associated with the work of Chris Argyris, Rensis Likert, and Douglas McGregor, to name a few.[12] However, the discovery of the informal aspects of organizations did not alter the dis-

tinction between the managerial/rational class and the worker/irrational class. It did not alter the view that hierarchy was needed to accomplish organization goals.

Despite this dominant view, others continue to study hierarchy as a less desirable structure, one that fosters conflict among organization members and promotes domination and control of members by organization leaders. Supporters of this view argue that hierarchy often impedes the attainment of organization goals, because it promotes competition to the extent that competition becomes a goal in itself. This "critical" perspective does not view hierarchy as inevitable. Instead, it argues that alternatives to hierarchy are possible if we study it as the outcome of the values, norms, and ideologies of the host society.

This critical view is the product of yet another strain of organization theory, known as the *open systems* model. This model focuses on the relationship between organizations and their environment.

> That a system is open means not simply that it engages in interchanges with the environment, but that this interchange is an essential factor underlying the system's viability.[13]

Theorists such as Victor Thompson and Charles Perrow, Paul R. Lawrence, and Gay W. Lorsch developed the structural contingency model, which "treated organizations as open systems subject to uncertainty arising from both environment and technology."[14] Working from this view of organizations, others such as Graeme Salaman, J. Kenneth Benson, and John W. Myer and Brian Rowan have been able to consider the impact of societal values on the structure and operation of organizations, focusing particularly on power relationships.

One significant aspect of the critical perspective has been the attention given to economic systems and their effect on organization structure. In the case of capitalism, it is argued that values underlying the market system support and promote hierarchy in other types of organizations. Capitalism creates class distinctions, introducing the notion of a ruling class or elite and the perception of a need to maintain power at the top of an organization. As Mary Zey-Ferrell and Michael Aiken explain: "Bureaucratic control techniques of hierarchy and division of labor result as much from the need to impose labor discipline as from abstract notions of rational work efficiency."[15] This need to impose discipline, it is argued, comes from values related to the market system.

Before these perspectives can be considered in relation to feminist theory and practice, however, it is important to gain an understanding of the terms *organization, hierarchy,* and *bureaucracy.*

ORGANIZATIONS

While the literature of organization theory provides much discussion of types of organizations, it is sometimes vague regarding the meaning of this basic term. Bureaucracy, hierarchy, and oligarchy are examples of terms used in defining certain types of organizations, but the term *organization* must first be considered on its own.

Max Weber defined an organization as a system of continuous purposive activity "with specialization of function, administrative staff devoted to such . . . activity and intent to maintain the existence of the specialized activities."[16] The use of the word "administrative" has often been taken to imply that hierarchy or bureaucracy is necessary for an organization to survive and achieve goals. While evidence suggests that this is true for many organizations, a definition of the concept of organization should allow for as many variations as possible. Administration brings to mind formal structure that may not be present in some organizations that take care of leadership responsibilities in a much more informal manner.

For example, the women's consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s were often said to lack structure. Instead, informal leadership often developed through the personal strength of individual members. While this could result in "tyranny," or unaccountable leadership, as Jo Freeman points out,[17] such leadership does not constitute "formal" administration as defined by Weber. Yet these groups were certainly "organizations." Weber's definition thus excludes from study structures that offer important contributions to an understanding of how organizations can and do function. As an alternative, one might define organizations as systems of continuous, purposive, goal-oriented activity involving two or more people.

W. Richard Scott, in his book *Organizations,* takes a comprehensive approach to the concept. He offers three different definitions compatible with the three different approaches to the study of organizations discussed earlier. The first definition recalls the rational systems approach, viewing the organization as "a collectivity oriented to the pursuit of relatively specific goals and exhibiting a relatively highly formalized social structure."[18] By contrast, the natural systems perspective views organizations as "organic" systems attempting to main-

tain themselves as a system. The emphasis here is on informal structure. Thus the organization is defined as "a collectivity whose
participants are little affected by the formal structure or official goals
but who share a common interest in the survival of the system and
who engage in collective activities, informally structured, to secure this
end."[19]

Both the rational and natural systems approaches fail to account
for environmental influences on organizations; or in other words, they
are closed systems. Thus, Scott's third category, the open systems approach, focuses on such influences viewing organizations as variable
in nature. The organization thus becomes "a coalition of shifting interest groups that developed goals by negotiation; the structure of the
coalition, its activities, and its outcomes are strongly influenced by environmental factors."[20]

In consideration of these three perspectives it is now generally agreed
that, as Marshall Meyer aptly puts it, the argument is "closed, on the
side of openness."[21] Theorists have widely accepted the open systems
definition, viewing organizations as coalitions not rigidly linked in a
unitary hierarchy.[22] Instead, the organization subgroups are seen as
"loosely coupled," in the sense that each can respond to changes in
other groups. Yet degrees of autonomy among the groups may vary
a great deal.

In addition, as the natural systems perspective points out, "the normative structure of an organization is only loosely coupled with its
behavioral structure," meaning that formal rules and informal actions
may not constitute a perfect fit. In other words, "rules do not always
govern actions: each exhibits a capacity for autonomous action."[23]
Theorists differ on the implications for efficiency. For rational systems theorists, "loose coupling" tends to mean bad management, an
inefficient means of attaining organizational goals. Open system theorists disagree, arguing that loosely coupled systems may increase efficiency in certain situations because of their highly adaptive nature.
Further, by continually obtaining resources from the environment,
open systems are capable of "self-maintenance." Closed systems are
more likely to become static because they do not derive a constant
flow of energy and resources from the environment.

The open systems approach argues that different environments can
place different demands on organizations, especially in the case of
rapidly changing technologies and market conditions. Thus "organizations whose internal features best match the demands of their environments will achieve the best adaptation"[24]: an argument labeled

contingency theory. Within this open-systems theory, the *natural selection* model argues that "environments differentially select certain types of organizations for survival on the basis of fit between organizational forms and environmental characteristics."[25] In contrast, the *resource dependence* model stresses adaptation: "subunits of the organization . . . scan the relevant environment for opportunities and threats, formulate strategic responses and adjust organizational structure accordingly."[26] Thus, managers attempt to maximize control over the organization by maximizing the opportunities that present themselves in the environment. According to the open systems perspective, the organization within the environment undergoes an ongoing process of adaptation: the environment influences the organization and the organization can attempt to take advantage of the environment. This *interdependence is the major focus of the open systems perspective.*

While this definition of organizations provides a broad base for organizational study, it still fails to consider the environment as an entire *society* in which prevailing values, ideologies, or political ideals have important and pervasive influences on organizations. The critical perspective discussed earlier provides this view, by focusing on "the relationship between internal organizational structures, processes and ideologies and the society in which they exist."[27] For example, rather than examining the impact on organizations of fluctuating market conditions, the critical perspective considers the nature of the market itself—capitalist or socialist—and the impact on organizations of the value systems underlying them.

In addition, the critical perspective considers a history of organizations within the larger society. The tendency of the open systems as well as the rational and natural systems perspectives is to ignore the historical development of organizations. The example provided by Lipset, Trow, and Coleman in *Union Democracy* underscores the importance of looking at historical roots. As mentioned earlier, historical developments offered the key to understanding how the trade union could operate in a democratic fashion. Yet one must recognize that historical approaches have tended to study organizations primarily from an administrative or "top-down" view, when consideration of how the organization looks from the bottom up is at the very least of equal importance.

The critical perspective thus focuses on the significance of what have been termed the "nonrational human, institutional, and societal elements."[28] As Zey-Ferrell and Aiken point out:

We should not merely acknowledge the nonrational and irrational aspects of organizations and then rush to analyze the rational aspects but ... our analysis should center on these nonrational and irrational aspects, because these are the ways organizations operate in the real world.[29]

The critical perspective thus contributes significantly to the development of a definition of organizations that is able to incorporate a feminist perspective. First, by focusing on the environment as a whole, the critical perspective allows for the study of the impact of societal values on organization structure. Patriarchy may be analyzed as one such condition under which organizations exist. While theorists within the critical perspective have considered the impact of domination as it is fostered by capitalism, the question of domination as it is fostered by patriarchy has only begun to be explored.

Secondly, the critical perspective, in considering variables in organizational analysis that were previously considered "irrational," offers a more inclusive approach. By focusing on the historical development of organizations, one may begin to move away from a "universalistic" approach toward what is unique.[30] This allows for the serious consideration of power relations within organizations, not just from the viewpoint of administration, but from that of all organization members.

From a feminist standpoint one might begin to address the connection between patriarchy and power. Does power always mean domination in organizations? Are there other understandings of power? In one analysis of power, the critical perspective put forth the following questions:

How did the existing relationship originate? Which classes and groups are benefited by the existing relationship? How does the dominant coalition maintain and perpetuate its control? What are the consequences of the present distribution of power in the organization for present society and for future generations?[31]

It is clear that the critical perspective adds another dimension to the meaning of "organization." This does not discount the wealth of information provided by the rational, natural systems, and open systems perspectives. However, what is learned from these perspectives is only part of the organizational picture; it lacks the information provided by the critical perspective with respect to historical development and societal values. By considering all four perspectives, one may de-

fine organizations as follows: organizations are systems of continuous, purposive, goal-oriented activity, involving two or more people, which exist within, and to some extent are affected by, a value system provided by the larger societal environment.

HIERARCHY AND BUREAUCRACY

Like many of the concepts related to organizations, hierarchy is often undefined or confused with other concepts in the literature. The term is often used as synonymous with organization,[32] yet it is also often confused with bureaucracy. Previous discussion regarding the definition of the term "organization" provides some clarification on this point. However, the concept of bureaucracy requires further discussion.

Bureaucracy is most simply defined as "the existence of some kind of specialized administrative staff."[33] One of the best known definitions is that of Max Weber, who defines bureaucracy through the use of a list of characteristics:

> A fixed division of labor among participants, a hierarchy of offices, a set of general rules which govern performance, a separation of personal from official property and rights, selection of personnel on the basis of technical qualifications and employment viewed as a career by participants.[34]

As Weber indicates, bureaucracy is a concept that encompasses many organizational characteristics, of which hierarchy is one. However, it can be argued that hierarchy is the key component of bureaucracy, around which channels of authority, systems of communication, and performance guidelines have developed. Evidence of this is provided through the discussion of hierarchy within the dominant perspective of organizations. For instance, Michels argues that in any organization division of labor comes first; then the mechanisms necessary to support and sustain such division develop to such an extent that their maintenance becomes the overriding goal in itself. Within this discussion it is important to consider the possibility that organizations may develop rules and operating procedures without developing hierarchy. If hierarchy is considered to be the defining element of bureaucracy, then such organizations do not constitute bureaucracies.

Certainly, Weber considered non-bureaucratic organizations in his discussion of administrative forms, but only in contrasting the development of modern administrative organizations with the patrimonial

systems from which they developed. A patrimonial system is defined as "an estate or production organization governed by a ruler-owner who relies for assistance on a variety of dependents, ranging from slaves to sons, in managing the enterprise."[35] This was obviously an authoritarian, patriarchical arrangement. Yet Weber's discussion serves to point out that the patrimonial system, however rigid in its actual operation, was an informal one, in which the rules were not written and roles within the system could change at any time according to the whims of the ruler-owner. Modern bureaucratic structure, on the other hand, is formalized: jurisdictional areas are clearly specified within a hierarchy, whereas in patrimonial systems authority relations were based more on personal loyalties.

Weber's discussion thus suggests that formalized hierarchy is the key defining element of bureaucracy. In considering more egalitarian organizational forms, hierarchy must become an important focus. The question arises as to whether organizations can develop in non-hierarchical and therefore non-bureaucratic ways without imitating the informal structures of patrimonial systems. This is a question of importance to this study.

NOTES

1. W. Richard Scott, *Organizations* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1981), p. 4.

2. Robert Michels, *Political Parties* (New York: The Free Press, 1962), p. 6.

3. Ibid., pp. 342–356. See also, Gaetano Mosca, *The Ruling Class,* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939), and Vilfredo Pareto, *The Ruling Class in Italy Before 1900* (New York: H. Fertig, 1974).

4. Ibid., p. 153.

5. Ibid., p. 16.

6. Ibid., p. 353.

7. Ibid., p. 355.

8. Seymour Martin Lipset, Martin A. Trow, and James S. Coleman, *Union Democracy* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1956), p. 405.

9. Ibid., p. 394.

10. Ibid., p. 30.

11. The terms *critical perspective* and *dominant perspective* are derived from the work of Mary Zey-Ferrell and Michael Aiken in their book *Complex Organizations: Critical Perspectives* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, and Co.).

12. See Chris Argyris, *Personality and Organization* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957); Rensis Likert, *New Patterns of Management* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961); and Douglas McGregor, *The Human Side of Enterprise* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960).

13. Scott, p. 102.

14. Zey-Ferrell and Aiken, p. 2.

15. Ibid., p. 4.
16. Scott, p. 57.
17. See Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation* (New York: Longman, 1975).
18. Scott, p. 21.
19. Ibid., p. 22.
20. Ibid., p. 23.
21. Marshall W. Meyer, *Environments and Organizations* (London: Jossey-Bass, 1987), p. 18.
22. Scott, p. 108.
23. Ibid., p. 108.
24. Ibid., p. 114.
25. Ibid., p. 115.
26. Ibid., p. 116.
27. Zey-Ferrell and Aiken, p. 3.
28. Ibid., p. 9.
29. Ibid., p. 10.
30. Ibid., p. 16.
31. Ibid., p. 17.
32. Larry D. Spence, "Prolegomena to a Communications Theory of Human Organizations" (Unpublished manuscript, Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley, January 1969), p. 8.
33. Scott, p. 24.
34. Ibid., p. 68.
35. Ibid.