ORGANIZATION THEORY AND POLITICAL THEORY*

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If two men of similar talents, identical training, shared values, and common interests were to study the same phenomena it would not be at all remarkable if they approached the phenomena in the same way, described them in the same terms, employed the same logic in analyzing them, drew the same conclusions from them, and formulated the same theories about their causes.

If, however, two men of similar talents but of rather divergent training, professing differing objectives, and displaying varied (perhaps even conflicting) concerns were to pursue studies of phenomena each believed to be quite distinct from the other’s field of inquiry, it would be most astounding if their findings and inferences should turn out to be closely parallel in many important respects, particularly if there were little evidence of communication between them.

That is why the parallels between political theory, probably the oldest of the social sciences, and organization theory, perhaps the newest such discipline, are so totally unexpected. If there is any conscious agreement between the two fields, it is on their separateness from each other: political theorists and organization theorists alike seem to take for granted the impossibility of encompassing within a single theoretical framework propositions about states—that is, the relation of governments to subjects, and the relations of governments to each other—and propositions about other forms of human association. In the literature on organization theory, one rarely finds references even to contemporary political theorists and almost never to those who wrote in the past. By the same token, political theorists rarely seem to find anything relevant to their interests in the work of students of organization. Measured by the acknowledged exchange of information between the disciplines, the gulf between them is wide and seldom bridged.

Perhaps such a gulf is inescapable. Political theorists draw heavily upon history, philosophy, and personal experience for their ideas and evidence; organization theorists rely heavily upon sociology, social psychology, economics, and, when possible, on controlled experimentation. Political theorists are frankly normative; organization theorists generally believe their work is value-free. Political theorists deal willingly with the intangible aspects of human associations, for it is difficult to measure the outputs of governments and governmental agencies; organization theorists are more at home with organizations producing tangible products and measuring their performance ultimately in terms of profit. The fields do seem to have quite different traditions, methods, goals, and subject-matters.

But all this merely makes the similarities in in the problems they investigate and in their findings more surprising and intriguing.

I

For example, both organization theorists and political theorists encountered the same enigma: In order that the human systems may come into being and continue, men often have to do, at the behest of others, tasks that are unpleasant or even hazardous (such as working on assembly lines or going to war), and must refrain from doing what they would greatly en-
joy (such as helping themselves to the property of others or saying whatever they please wherever and whenever the spirit moves them). What accounts for obedience and docility entailing such self-sacrifice, self-restraint, self-denial, without which neither states nor other associations could long survive?

Political philosophers and organization theorists have offered essentially the same range of explanations: the rationality of men and the conditioning of men’s minds.1

Because men are rational, they can calculate what they would lose if everyone were to follow his own impulses and preferences without restraint. They can also see that collective action will be taken against individuals who disobey. Out of fear of the consequences, they submit. They can calculate, too, the advantages they may gain from organized life and activity. They can see that the gains usually outweigh the costs. Out of hope for the benefits, then, as well as out of fear, rational men yield to the wills of others.2

1 A third explanation, offered initially by political philosophers of classical antiquity, was that some men are by nature followers and others are by nature rulers. The followers obey because it is their nature to do so, just as leaders command because that is their nature. This argument has few defenders among contemporary political theorists, and it is seldom articulated by organization theorists. But one may wonder whether the batteries of personality and aptitude and intelligence tests used for selecting executives do not rest ultimately on the assumption that there are “natural” leaders who should be identified, separated from the “naturally” subservient mass, and elevated to their “natural” managerial roles.

2 This reasoning underlies most social-contract philosophies of the origins of civil and political society. The emphasis was placed in some cases on escape from the risks and uncertainties of anarchy (as in Hobbes and Locke), in others on ascension to a higher, richer, distinctively human and civilized life (as in Rousseau, whose logic, in turn, parallels that of classical political theory). The hypothesized reasoning in men’s decisions to form or join groups in which they must then submit to others is not far removed from the analysis by J. G. March and H. A. Simon, Organizations (New York, 1957), of individual calculations regarding “the decision to participate” in organizations (ch. 4). See also Simon’s assertion that a distinctive feature of organization theory is its treatment of joining an organization as an “all-or-none choice of participation or non-participation,” in Models of Man (New York, 1957), p. 74 and chs. 10 and 11.

At the same time, according to many political and organization theorists, men obey because obedience to certain commands from certain sources is a conditioned reflex. Even in infancy, every individual is introduced to the exercise of authority; maturation is in many ways a process of learning when to obey, whom to command, and under what circumstances to do either. That is, from his social environment generally, and also by virtue of the deliberate drill and indoctrination to which he is subject, every man is prepared for his social roles. He comes to yield to others because he learns it is right and proper to do so, and he may even come to cherish his submission. The will to obey is implanted in him; depending on the discipline one draws upon for appropriate language, he is educated, indoctrinated, trained, socialized, acculturated, programed, or brainwashed.3

Organization theorists and most political philosophers exhibit little confidence in fear as a long-range mode of eliciting obedience. But for a few political theorists (Hobbes, for example), and for more than a few rulers and managers, it is the cornerstone of theory and practice.

3 Many political theorists recognized this. For example, according to H. V. Jaffa (“Aristotle,” in L. Strauss and J. Cropsey, eds., History of Political Philosophy (Chicago, 1963), p. 75, Aristotle held that “Trained obedience, as distinct from brute direction, is the characteristic of being ruled politically or royally.” Hume, says R. S. Hill (“David Hume,” ibid., pp. 511–12), considered that “The main support of the rule of the few over the many... is the opinion that those in authority have a right to that authority. This opinion is usually the fruit of time and habit. Custom is the great guide of human life; most men never think of inquiring into the reasons for the authority of the form of government to which they have become habituated.” Rousseau (see A. Bloom, “Jean-Jacques Rousseau,” ibid., pp. 527, 531) believed “the manners of society are of as much or more concern than the institutions of government because manners underlie institutions and give them their force,” and he saw an advantage in the ancient city “because it is small enough... for citizens to share a common heritage and a common way, because the particular wills can more easily be submerged in custom, and because the statesman can control the entirety.” Burke (see F. Canavan, “Edmund Burke,” ibid., p. 603) also ascribed obedience to governments and laws to “opinion, habit, and acquired sentiment,” and to the fact that “men think it right to submit to them,” and Bentham (see H. M. Magid, “Jeremy Bentham,” ibid., p. 623) ex-
Interestingly enough, political theorists have from the very beginning made more strenuous efforts to incorporate the non-rational (i.e., the conditioned) elements of men's behavior into their hypotheses than have the organization theorists. For men are born into political systems, and the possibilities of withdrawal are much more limited. It is not clear that joining or remaining in a political system is really a matter of rational choice at all, except in isolated instances. Organization theorists, on the other hand, deal more extensively with associations that men presumably choose to enter and may leave at any time. To explain membership and all it entails, students of organization lean toward a rather literal application of social-contract theory and utilitarianism; many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political philosophers, who employed these concepts as metaphors to aid in understanding the rational component of behavior, would find little in most modern organization theory with which to quarrel. And some organization theorists would doubtless be surprised to discover how many political philosophers in ancient and medieval times were aware there were social norms and group loyalties that a ruler dared not violate without risking extensive disobedience.

At any rate, more or less independently of each other, drawing in different ways on different bodies of experience, political theorists and organization theorists have dealt in very similar fashion with the obedience of man to man.

II

They have also dealt similarly with organizational structures for the achievement of coordination. For purposes of this discussion, coordination means ordering the direction, volume, and timing of flows of activities, goods, and services so that the functioning of one element in a system at least does not prevent or negate or hamper the functioning of other elements, and at best facilitates and assists the functioning of other elements. Coordination is not always a goal of system designers; the separation of powers, for example, encourages some contradictions and deadlocks in order to protect other values. But it is often among the principal values, and practically never is a matter of total indifference. And when political theorists and organization theorists discuss methods of promoting coordination, they end up in much the same positions.

Fundamentally, coordination is accomplished by two processes: central direction, which means that the activities of the elements of a system respond chiefly to cues and signals from some common source, and reciprocal relations, which means that the elements respond to cues and signals from each other. Every system employs some blend of the two processes. Moreover, the systems are not mutually exclusive; an increase in reliance on one does not necessarily produce a decrease in the other. On the contrary, effective central direction often permits a higher degree of reciprocal cueing, as in a well-trained platoon, and vice versa. Whatever the blend of modes of coordination and whatever the general level of coordination in any system, these may be explained in terms of the relative weight assigned to each of the two underlying processes.

Political theorists who believe men are inclined to take advantage of one another tend to stress central direction as the best means of coordinating them. Without an overriding central figure, according to them, any system breaks down in disorder, confusion, and internal warfare. Hobbes, of course, presented this argument in its purest, most logical form. On the other side, philosophers who assume the interests and tendencies of men are harmonious emphasize the possibility and desirability of coordination through reciprocity, and regard central direction as an exploitative or disturbing factor in what would otherwise be a highly coordinated system distributing maximum satisfaction to all its members. The anarchists, both Marxist and non-Marxist, pushed this reason-

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ing to its logical extreme. It matters little for this discussion whether the extremists on both sides meant their doctrines to be taken literally or as analogies for the sake of clarity and vigor of statement. They bracketed the range of possibilities. In the history of political thought, not only the extremes, but virtually all conceivable intermediate positions, have at some time or other been advanced or defended.

During most of the short history of organization theory, few theorists seriously questioned the premise that central direction (expressed structurally as a hierarchy of authority because of the need of leaders to delegate formal powers and because of the assumed inability of men to supervise directly more than a small number of colleagues) is the primary method of achieving coordination; indeed, hierarchy and organization were sometimes treated as almost synonymous. Yet very early some questioning voices were heard, particularly after experimental studies in the sociology of industry drew attention to the responsiveness of workers to cues and signals emanating from sources other than (and sometimes hostile to) the designated managers of the firms examined. Mary Parker Follett, a political scientist of Pluralist persuasion, became well known to students of organization for her advocacy of "power with rather than power over" and for her criticism of "the illusion of final responsibility." Later on, Argyris and Thompson and others would search explicitly for a pattern of organization that is non-hierarchical. An electronics firm on the West Coast recently reorganized itself on what are alleged to be non-hierarchical lines. It would be grossly inaccurate to equate these organizational analysts with the anarchists, but there can be no question that organization theory has begun to display an awareness of a range of positions on the central-reciprocal scale that political philosophers have explored extensively for centuries.

I do not intend to imply that political philosophy is somehow superior to organization theory, or that organization theory is a mere branch of the history of political thought. My object in pointing out similarities between their treatments of coordination is simply to demonstrate that these seemingly unrelated disciplines confront common problems in common ways.

III

Another such problem is the reconciliation of individual or other narrow objectives with the objectives of the collectivity. Political theorists discuss it in terms of special interests as against the general or public interest. Organization theorists speak of personal or sub-group goals

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5 For an outline of recent anarchist thought (which is an updated version of anarchist philosophies of ancient times), see F. W. Coker, Recent Political Thought (New York, 1934), ch. VII. Also relevant are chs. VIII (on syndicalism), IX (on guild socialism), and XVIII (on pluralism).

6 E. g., J. O. Mooney, The Principles of Organization (New York, 1947), pp. 14–15: "The scalar principle is the same form in organization that is sometimes called hierarchical. . . . The common impression regards this scale or chain merely as a 'type' of organization, characteristic only of the vaster institutions of government, army, church, and industry. This impression is erroneous. It is like misledding, for it seems to imply that the scalar chain in organization lacks universality. These great organizations differ from others only in that the chain is longer. The truth is that wherever we find an organization even of two people, related as superior and subordinate, we have the scalar principle. This chain constitutes the universal process of coordination, through which the supreme coordinating authority becomes effective throughout the entire structure." See also, M. G. Weiner, "Observations on the Growth of Information-Processing Centers," in A. H. Rubenstein and C. J. Haberstroh, eds., Some Theories of Organization (Homewood: Dorsey and Irwin, 1960), p. 150: "The transition from individuality to division of labor and the acceptance of hierarchy in the form of a leadership structure . . . represents the point at which an 'organization' can be said to exist."

7 H. C. Metcalf and L. Urwick, eds., Dynamic Administration: The Collected Papers of Mary Parker Follett (New York, 1941), especially pp. 101 ff. and ch. VII.

8 C. Argyris, Personality and Organization (New York, 1957).


ris-à-ris organizational goals. But the issues are the same.

In both fields, the dominant opinion seems to be that every collectivity is in some sense goal-seeking, or purposive. That is, there is some general interest or organizational goal shared or at least acknowledged by nearly all the participants in the system, and although the overarching purpose is accomplished by the labor of individuals, it is distinct from the goals or interests of individuals; rather, it is viewed as an attribute of the system as a whole. There is little agreement on the specifics of the general interest, and even a given commentator may switch from one to another interpretation as conditions change. (Implicitly, however, one goal can be discerned in every interpretation: the survival of the system.) Yet, although students of state and of organizations may never arrive at a consensus on exactly what the shared interests of human associations are, many of them tend to take it for granted that one exists for every human association.11

Plato and Aristotle, for example, saw as the purpose of the city-state the promotion of the highest moral development of its citizens. For Hobbes, the end of government was the preservation of order. For Locke, it was the protection of “natural rights,” such as the right to private property. For the Utilitarians, it was to produce the greatest good for the greatest number. For the early liberal economists, it was to furnish just enough service and regulation to permit the reciprocal processes of the market place to operate effectively. In all these instances, selected haphazardly from the broad array of goals postulated in political thought, the existence of a common purpose and interest is axiomatic.

The same is true of most contemporary organization theory, although the specification of common interests is rarely articulated as explicitly as in political philosophy. Rather, it is assumed that every human association has some goals shared by all its members, and can be understood only in terms of those common purposes. E. g., in H. S. Simon, D. W. Smithburg, and V. A. Thompson, op. cit., at p. 3, purpose and cooperative action are described as the “two basic processes of what has come to be called administration... Administration can be defined as the activities of groups cooperating to accomplish common goals.” Similarly, P. M. Blau and W. R. Scott, op. cit., at p. 1, declare that what organizations “all have in common is that a number of men have become organized into a social unit—an organization—that has been established for the explicit purpose of achieving certain goals.” And C. Argyris, Understanding Organizational Behavior

A substantial number of political theorists, on the other hand, have taken the view that virtually every definition of the public interest is but a reflection of the personal interests of the definer, and consequently, the only realistic way to understand the performance of a system is to construe its output (or its policies) as nothing more than the resultant of the interplay of many special interests. The representatives of each interest may invoke the symbol of the public interest as an honorific, perhaps even with sincere conviction that the actions they espouse are better for the system and all the members of the system, but what is actually decided and done is the product of negotiations and understandings among specialized groups and individuals.12

Among organization theorists, the counterpart to this point of view is seldom advanced even tacitly, let alone explicitly; it is distinctly a minority position. Barnard, however, comes close to it. Although he discusses organizational purposes at length, and attributes great importance to them, they are not central to his analysis. He defines formal organizations without referring to goals, and he describes them largely in terms of individual motivations and objectives coordinated with each other through an “economy of incentives.” The “absolute test” of efficiency is survival of the organization. An organization is thus portrayed as a kind of marketplace in which each man pursues his own goals by offering a contribution in return for those inducements (selected from the range of inducements provided, consciously or

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12 Bentham, for instance, defined the interest of any community as the sum of the interests of those who compose it (H. M. Magid, op. cit., p. 622). A. F. Bentley, in The Process of Government (Bloomington: Principia, 1935), said (at p. 269), “All phenomena of government are phenomena of groups pressing one another, forming one another, and pushing out new groups and group representatives (the organs and agencies of government) to mediate the adjustments.” D. B. Truman, using a similar framework of analysis in The Governmental Process (New York, 1953), added (at p. 51), “In developing a group interpretation of politics, . . . we do not need to account for a totally inclusive interest, because one does not exist.” See also, E. P. Herring, The Politics of Democracy (New York, 1940), ch. 30.
unwittingly, by the system) that appeal to him. The enterprise is an arena in which each participant offers his wares and services in exchange for what he can get. From the elaborate network of agreements, accommodations, and behaviors come products, wages, salaries, profits, prices, dividends, interest, taxes, working conditions, and all the other outputs of a complex system. Managers, workers, suppliers, customers, stockholders, creditors, competitors, government regulators, consultants, academicians, and others may all see different transcendent purposes in the undertaking, so that its ends are in a sense the sum of all the special purposes. To this extent, this view resembles in many respects the view of the state espoused by the political theorists mentioned above. What is sometimes referred to as a collective purpose is merely the resultant of a constantly shifting adjustment among individual and subgroup purposes.

Over the relationship of private interests to the general interest, organization theorists and political theorists have divided into similar camps. Again, the resemblances between the fields are impressive.

IV

The foregoing illustrations do not exhaust the parallels between organization theory and political theory. But they are probably sufficient to establish the point of departure for this discussion, namely, that striking similarities have developed in two disciplines that seem to be quite different in their interests and methods.

Why should this occur? Why should two fields of study with such discrepant premises and perspectives converge?

Perhaps it is because the discrepancies are, after all, merely the distinctions between different species of the same genus. When all is said and done, they both treat of phenomena that encompass vast areas, if not all, of human life. We are all members of at least several organizations, and organizations give characteristic content and general form to our lives. Moreover, states, governments, the branches and agencies of governments, political parties, and interest groups are organizations like other organizations even though they have their unique attributes. What aspect of civilized existence then lies outside the scope of organization theory?

At the same time, every organization is sometimes construed as a political system, with all the problems of leadership, policy formation, succession, strategy, rivalry, resistance, revolution, and influence that this implies. If organizations are an all-embracing subject of inquiry, politics is an equally comprehensive theme. To be sure, organization theorists tend to avoid political institutions in searching for data, and political philosophers tend to concentrate on those institutions immediately associated with public governments. But they may end with strong similarities because they are both addressed to phenomena permeating the whole of human affairs. Fields that take so much for their province must have far more overlap than is immediately obvious.

Furthermore, they both start from normative bases. Political theorists were historically engaged in a quest for the ideal political system; organization theorists began by seeking "the one best way"—i.e., the most efficient way—to organize production and distribution. There are probably some in both disciplines who still believe such ideal arrangements, superior to all alternatives under any conditions and at any time, are attainable; most contemporary theorists, I believe, now adopt a relativist position, holding that the definition of the ideal changes as circumstances change, and perhaps even that a wide variety of organizational and political patterns may satisfy equally well the requirements of any particular definition. At any rate, men in both fields set out to discover the "laws" or "principles" governing social behavior so as to formulate proposals for improvement consonant with the constraints imposed by reality. Sometimes they try to sharpen their thinking by reasoning from admittedly oversimplified hypotheses, such as man in a state of nature or completely rational man. Eventually, however, they complicate their models by add-

13 C. I. Barnard, The Functions of the Executive (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938), pp. 73 ("a formal organization . . . [is] a system of consciously coordinated activities or forces of two or more persons"), 93, 137 ("The individual is always the basic strategic factor in organization."); ch. XI, and pp. 161–75. See also, H. A. Simon, Administrative Behavior (New York, 1947), pp. 103–07; Simon describes coordination in terms of adjustments among individuals' behaviors. But he does observe that the individuals must find one plan agreeable to all participants if they are to cooperate, thus introducing the equivalent of common purpose.

14 For an exploration of the political theory implicit in the writings of organization theorists, see D. Waldo, The Administrative State (New York, 1948).

ing variables that render the hypotheses better approximations of the real world. (Such variables are more often discovered by non-normative research of an historical or experimental kind than by intuition.) Conceivably, the fields may come to resemble each other because they have parallel normative underpinnings.

But the explanation of the resemblances may not lie in the character of the disciplines at all; perhaps it is to be found rather in the nature of the world the disciplines purport to describe. The convergence could result from the existence of such pronounced and persistent regularities in large-scale human associations that no matter which such associations one examines and what approach one adopts, the sum of the findings of each set of observers will inevitably be much the same as those of any other set. When all the blind men compare their notes, they do end up with a description of an elephant, and the description by each team of blind men will not differ materially from the description produced by any other team, because, after all, it is an elephant they are studying. The consensus of two relatively insulated fields, when the whole range of their content is reviewed, lends corroboration to the impression that our ideas about organizations and politics have a substantial degree of validity.

V

Whatever the explanation of the similarities between organization theory and political theory, one obvious implication of the similarities is that the two fields can probably learn a great deal from each other. In the literature on organizations, political theorists will find reports on experiments and rigorous logical analyses bearing heavily on the concerns of political philosophy. In the history of political thought, which may be regarded as a collection of descriptive models of social behavior or a series of tentative propositions about the ways men act in organized groups, organization theorists will find a rich store of ideas they seem to be toiling to reproduce independently.

But my purpose in writing this piece is not merely to labor the obvious point that scholars in two disciplines stand to gain by sharing their materials more extensively in the future than they have in the past. More important are the indications that theory in both areas is to a large extent imprisoned by the premises and perspectives and reasoning of an earlier day, trapped into recapitulating and refining familiar concepts instead of developing new approaches and assumptions that might free theory from the cycling loop into which it has fallen. Although there are important exceptions, it appears that much modern writing in both fields tends to retrace established paths instead of finding new ones. Those who are not conversant with the history of thought often devote their energies to rediscovering triumphantly old and even ancient ideas, and to reviving traditional controversies. Those who have mastered the history of thought often apply themselves to proving there is nothing new under the sun. Each for his own reasons ends up operating within confines identified with prior generations. Each for his own reasons fetters his imagination.

To be sure, the exceptions are notable. Some strikingly original recent approaches to the study of human behavior, such as computer simulation of individual thought processes and social situations, may well have dramatic consequences for the viewpoints and findings of the social sciences. By and large, however, it is the scarcity of unconventional ideas rather than the problems of choosing among them that impresses the observer. Even sophisticated methods of research and analysis, bound by the outlooks and assumptions of earlier times, add only a little to our knowledge and insight.

This is hardly surprising; we are all products of our heritage, and it is not easy to conceive of altogether new ways of looking at things, however urgent may be the need for novel ideas. That is why it is important to try not only to invent new concepts, but also to seek them out in our current environment by borrowing from seemingly unrelated disciplines, and by picking up the threads of inquiry previously explored and prematurely dropped. One such concept seems to me to hold particularly great promise of putting organization behavior in a perspective quite unlike the one from which we seem unable to escape, and thus to provide stimuli and generate perceptions which apparently lie beyond the scope of our ordinary frame of reference. I refer to what in its broadest terms may be described as the treatment of human organizations as a form of life rather than as an artifact designed, created, and directed exclusively by the human intellect.

Such a biological analogy in political theory was drawn in classical antiquity and occasionally in later periods of Western history,16 and it

16 Plato, for instance, drew a parallel between the body and the city, and Hegel also turned to the metaphor of the organism. Cf. L. Strauss and J. Cropsey, op. cit., pp. 16, 25, 630. And after Darwin, comparisons between social and biological evolution were commonly employed, though usually in a fashion that did violence to the biological theory.
has even appeared in the writings of one or two contemporary organization theorists. But the logic of it has never been rigorously followed out in the light of modern knowledge and, perhaps even more pertinently, in the light of the growth and evolution of organizational forms in recent times. Currently out of fashion in political science, and in the social sciences generally, this now neglected tradition strikes me as more likely to improve our understanding of human associations than it ever could before. And it probably requires a discipline as boldly inclusive, as young and therefore as flexible and open-minded, and as vigorous as organization theory, to dare to reopen this approach and to employ it successfully.

VI

Seen from this angle, what would the world of organizations look like? Probably crowded, continually changing, difficult to analyze, viscous. For compared to an individual organism, organizations do not display a notably high level of integration most of the time; the responsiveness of their components to each other is relatively slow and uncertain. Their boundaries are often loosely defined, easily changed, and permeable. Most organizations contain, are contained by, and overlap other organizations; they are unusual among the forms of life in that they can share constituent elements with each other. They interact with their surroundings, usually exchanging something (either acquired or produced) from inside their boundaries for something beyond their boundaries. Generally, there are subsets of elements within them that exercise greater influence over the other elements with respect to certain processes than the other elements exercise over these subsets; and some subsets interact extensively with the environment beyond the boundaries as well as with elements within the boundaries. There are reasons to suspect that organizations have a high rate of mortality, and though one can point to many individual cases of long-lived organizations, the number that disappear every year is probably staggering.

Yet the number of human organizations in the world at any given moment is also probably enormous. Virtually every individual is a member of at least several organizations, and while this does not mean there are necessarily more organizations in the world than there are people, it indicates that the ratio of organizations to people is quite substantial. Consequently, with so many organizational claims on the resources at the disposal of human beings, including time and obedience, some organizations lose out in the competition for these resources. (In part, the shortage results from a highly unbalanced distribution of claims and resources. But it is also plausible that the number of organizations making claims on resources increases more rapidly than the volume of available resources—by a kind of Malthusian law—so that the possible ways of allocating resources are likely always to exceed the reservoir of resources available.) That is, as is true with other forms of life, organizations make upon the resources essential to their survival demands that tend to press beyond the limit of supply, and the demands are kept more or less in check by the demise of organizations or declines in the rate at which new ones form. It should be noted, incidentally, that from this standpoint, an employer, a veterans association, a trade union, a political party, a neighborhood civic group, a bowling club, a church, and a government agency, and other groups, though superficially unconnected, may all be in competition with one another, for they may all...


18 The impression that large numbers of organizational fatalities occur is suggested in part by the frequency of business failures. Barnard, for example (op. cit., p. 5), comments, "successful cooperation in or by formal organizations is the abnormal, not the normal, condition. What are observed from day to day are the successful survivors among innumerable failures. . . . Failure to cooperate, failure of cooperation, failure of organization, disorganization, disintegration, destruction of organization—and reorganization—are characteristic facts of human history."
be rivals for the resources (again including the
time and obedience) of the same persons.20

Under these circumstances, what determines
which organizations will survive? One possible
determinant is the deliberate strategy of organi-
izations to adapt to conditions; those making
the appropriate choices will continue. Much of
organization theory, economic theory, and
political theory is devoted to the analysis of
this sort of rationality.

But it is also conceivable that the biologist's
approach could be useful here. When conditions
prove fatal to some members of a population
while other members survive and even flourish,
bioologists tend to ascribe the good fortune of
the survivors to chance variations in their
make-up that protect or even favor them under
prevailing conditions. May we not also postu-
late that in the world population of organiza-
tions—those comparatively poorly integrated,
sluggish, fragile entities—random variations
occur which may make no difference under one
set of circumstances, but which may favor or
impede some organizations when circumstances
change? Admittedly, the calculated strategies
may in the end turn out to be the critical factor;
the biological analogy does not preclude this
possibility. But it directs attention also to other
factors that may be important, factors easily
neglected if we concentrate exclusively on
rationality.

For example, size may be more important in
survival than anything an organization does in
response to a challenge; all organizations of a
greater than given size may endure even
though they all respond differently, while
smaller organizations may disappear no matter
what they do. (By the same token, of course, a
change of conditions may wipe out the giants
and multiply the pygmies.) Or a substantial
measure of self-containment may characterize
all the organizations that persist after a drastic
modification of the environment (though an-
other environmental shift may favor organiza-
tions highly dependent on outside sources).
Or in one context, all surviving organizations
may exhibit extreme centralization; in an-
other, only the decentralized ones may remain.
Sometimes, highly specialized organizations
may be the only ones to come through; at other
times, only diversified ones may weather a new
situation. Those attributes an organization
happens to have when changes occur may be
more significant than the course of action its
leaders elect to pursue; indeed, the paths of

20 In this connection see P. M. Blau and W. R.
words, an evolutionary process going on continuously.

Even if this could be demonstrated, what difference would it make? What contribution could it make to the development of organizational theory? Where does it lead?

Since we have hardly explored the process, it would be rash to venture a prediction. We can only hope it may prove as useful to the study of organizations as it did to the study of biology. And we can only speculate on what the nature of its utility might be. For example, it might stimulate comparisons of long-lived organizations that give us a better understanding of their longevity. It might facilitate evaluation of allegedly consistent and widespread trends toward specific patterns of organization, and explanation of those trends that do in fact occur. It could encourage a more sophisticated typology of organizations than any we now have, and a better catalogue of relevant environmental conditions and their effects on each category. It might even improve our assessment of organizational survival strategies. But while no one can say exactly what will be uncovered by research based on a theory of organizational evolution, it is a line of inquiry, not well investigated up to now, that has a potential for illuminating regularities hitherto unperceived, or at least unarticulated, in the social sciences. And organization theorists are in the best position to conduct the inquiry because they do not limit themselves to any particular type or aspect of organization.

VI

I am not here proposing a simple return to Social Darwinism—which, in fact, is an egregious misnomer, since the doctrines thus alluded to have little to do with the principles of natural selection described by Darwin and other biologists. Nor do I intend to suggest that organizations should be regarded as identical with organisms; on the contrary, it is their unique character as life-forms that I would emphasize. Nor, finally, do I consider this approach a substitute for others; if it has any value, it will be as an addition to our other instruments of analysis, not as a replacement for them. I am arguing only that the possibilities of employing this method rigorously have not been fully realized, and that it seems especially applicable to the study of organizational behavior.

The biological analogy is disturbing to many modern political theorists and organization theorists because it appears to many of them to downgrade human beings, to deny the importance of the gift of thought, to reduce persons to the level of social insects or of cells in a living system. Even if this were the case, it would not justify refusal to consider this frame of reference. When the people of the Western world were compelled by the findings of modern astronomers to abandon the belief that they were at the center of the universe (and thus to recognize what many of the ancients knew), when they were taught by modern biology that they are part of nature (which was also the ancient view), and when they were reminded by modern psychologists that they are something less than wholly rational creatures, the demotions were painful and met with resistance. Yet they added to man's intellectual stature by giving him a fuller and more accurate picture of the world in which he lives, and liberated him from flattering myths and misconceptions, in many ways more degrading than the truth. Men may conceivably become more godlike by accepting their own limitations than by refusing to envisage them at all. There can be excesses in individual-centered philosophies as well as in community-centered doctrines.

But the lesson from early political philosophy is that it is by no means necessary to deny the distinctively human qualities of mankind in order to treat human associations as natural phenomena. On the contrary, the classical opinion was that men fulfilled their potentialities as human beings only in the associations as natural to them as the air they breathe. For organization theorists to regard organizations as living forms, then, is not to equate human society with an anthill and people with ants. It may simply be a path to observations and to speculative and empirical inquiries to which our prevailing biases and preoccupations now blind us.

21 For illustrations of the impression that there is a secular trend toward increasing centralization in modern life, see H. A. Simon, D. W. Smithburg, and V. A. Thompson, op. cit., pp. 272 ff.; R. Redfield, op. cit.; R. Seidenberg, Post-Historic Man (Boston: Beacon, 1957).