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Introduction

Special Symposium “Carnegie School and Organization studies”

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Introduction

Special Symposium “Carnegie School and Organization studies”

Olivier Germain¹ and Laure Cabantous²

“The history of economic thought has been woefully neglected by the profession [economics] in the last decades. This has been one of the major mistakes of the profession. One of the earliest reminders that we are going in the wrong direction has come from Kenneth Arrow about 30 years ago when he said: These days, I get surprised when I find the students don’t seem to know any economics that was written 25 or 30 years ago.” Interview with Amartya Sen, April 2012.³

In their note on the evolution of the organization studies research community in North America, Augier, March and Sullivan (2005) compared the citations by discipline – e.g., organization studies, economics, sociology, anthropology – in three handbooks of organization studies (Baum, 2002; March, 1965; Nystrom & Starbuck, 1981). They found that the fraction of references to organization studies journals and books has increased between the mid 1960s and the years 2000. They conclude in saying that:

“Over time, it [the organization studies field] became stronger. By the year 2000, it had become socially meaningful for a scholar to identify with the organization studies field, to publish in journals of that field, to cite other scholars of that field who published in journals of that field, to belong to professional associations connected to that field, to attend professional conferences for that field, and to have a professorial title that identified that field. At the same time, the disciplinary identification of organizations scholars appears to have weakened, as has the importance of the field as a source of ideas and concepts in the various disciplines” (p. 88).

This conclusion raises the question of the relevance – and need – of a history of thoughts in the newly established organization studies field. As the field has institutionalised, organization scholars might wish to reflect on the development of

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³ <http://economicsintelligence.com/2012/04/12/an-interview-with-amartya-sen-there-is-a-democratic-failure-in-europe/>

major ideas and theories in their field in order to ensure a cumulated growth of knowledge about organizations. Otherwise, in losing contact with their founding fathers, they might get lost, as Adler (2009a) suggests.

The historical approach in the fields of organization studies and management is not new. For instance, the pioneering journal in its field – *Business History Review* – began publication in 1926 as the *Bulletin of the Business Historical Society*.⁴ More recent initiatives – such as the launch in 2006 of *Management and Organization History*, the special issue of *Organization Studies* in 2007 (March, 2007; McKinley, 2007), or the publication of a very stimulating Oxford Handbook on the “Classical foundations” of sociology and organization studies (Adler, 2009b) – confirm the vitality of the historical perspective in the field.

Such works are invaluable in charting the development of the discipline. They show how the past has formed the present, how ideas – such as power, rationality or structure – first emerged and how they have evolved to their present form. They also reveal some of the controversies that occurred in the past around some ideas that are now well established or taken for granted. In many instances however, these works offer more a chronological perspective on the long series of schools of thought that populate the field than they attempt to understand how the key concepts and theories of the field have emerged and developed. For instance, they seldom attempt to situate the emergence and development of their ideas within the lives of their contributors. And yet, as William Starbuck puts it “Our life, our career, our families, organization and societies closely interrelate. To abstract my career from its context would violate my scientific standards” (Starbuck, 1993).

⁴ <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayJournal?jid=BHR>

As a result, and despite the existence of a stream of research on business history, the history of management thought remains a neglected topic (McKinley, 2007) to the extent that one can wonder whether organization scholars actually suffer from a relative amnesia.

1 –Is the organizational studies field amnesic?

The quest for originality and utility.

As time goes by, research scholars in management and organization studies seem to forget or disregard their theoretical roots. Beyond the repeated argument about the youth of the organization studies field – the field has not actually “lost memory”, it simply has no history and therefore cannot have a memory – at least three arguments have been advanced to explain – and sometimes justify – the relative amnesia of organization studies scholars.

The first argument points to the “publish or perish” principle that could trigger an “avalanche of low-quality research” (Bauerlein, Gad-el-Hak, Grody, McKelvey, & Trimble, 2010) and considers that the quest for the production of – so-called – “theoretical contributions”, might explain organization scholars’ amnesia. Despite the fact that organization scholars seem to struggle to define what constitute a “theoretical contribution”, one accepted idea is that – as Corley and Gioia (2011) argue – “theorizing should (...) be anticipating coming conceptual domains in need for theory and research” (Corley & Gioia 2011, p. 28). These authors further argue that organization scholars’ “prescient” attitude derives from the fact that they “self-define as ‘borrowers’ from many other scientific fields (...) but also claim to speak to both academics and practitioners” (p. 12). As a result, they consider that theoretical contributions have to be both *original* – i.e., with “incremental” or “original” insights – and that have some *utility* – i.e., “practically” or “scientifically” useful.

Arguably, this conception of what constitutes “good” research in organization studies is inherently prospective, and looking forward. It aims at “stimulating future research that will substantially alter managerial theory and/or practice?” (Hambrick, 2007, p. 1350) and puts the emphasis on the future rather than the past (McKinley, 2007). This conception has the merit to incite researchers to develop new concepts and develop further existing theories. On the other hand, this permanent headlong rush can lead organization scholars to neglect the historical roots of the theories and concepts that they built on. As a matter of fact, some readers – when reading some supposedly “new” research contributions – might sometimes have the feeling that our discipline has become amnesiac and that organization scholars keep rediscovering what they used to know. The relative amnesia of the field thus, would derive from a specific conception of what constitutes a contribution, which undermines the importance of knowledge of how theories and concepts have developed and evolved.

Some very situated objects

The relative amnesia from which organizations scholars would suffer could also be related to the very situated nature of the phenomenon that they study. The argument goes as follows: students of organizations could only produce a very situated knowledge because their object of study – organisational actors and life – is unsettled and by nature in constant evolution. It could be argued however, that the more situated the knowledge we produce is, the greater the need to understand the local (and situated) conditions of its productions, in order for instance, to find some kind of regularities. An historical perspective – focused on the lives of the founding fathers, and the context of production of their theories and contributions – could help understand how knowledge has been produced and therefore delineate the boundaries of such knowledge. Such a historical perspective would complement sociological

studies of scientific knowledge, which show that science is a social activity (Latour & Woolgar, 1986), and demonstrate that it is valuable to locate scientific theories and concepts within their social and historical context.

A-paradigmatic organization studies

The third argument that is sometime advanced to explain the lack of historical perspective in the organization studies field is that the field would be stuck in a pre-paradigmatic – or an a-paradigmatic – state. The lack of a clear unifying paradigm would make a history of thought(s) too complex, and unbearable, to write. For instance, Augier et al. (2005) write:

“The Kuhnian emphasis on the struggle between new ideas and established ideas is obviously relevant to the development of organization studies during the last half of the twentieth century, but insofar as organizations studies can be described as a field, it has a paradigm only at a level of abstraction that makes it indistinguishable from the rest of nineteenth and twentieth century social science” (Augier et al., 2005, p. 87).

Some scholars point out that diverse and competitive perspectives within organization studies remain in play and this might be an indication of its a-paradigmatic state:

“(…) the potential inapplicability of the notion of “paradigm” to the field. There has been no discernible point in the history of the field where a paradigm has attained sufficient dominance that it has a status approximating that of a “normal” science. Nor has there been a revolutionary period in which an opposing and previously marginal paradigm has supplanted the functions of a normal science. The contemporary topography of the OS discourse has no more consensus or coherence than it ever had: if anything it is more polyphonous” (Westwood & Stewart, 2003, p. 11).

It seems obvious that if an History – with a capital H – of thought is to be associated to the existence of a unifying paradigm, then the lack of such paradigm in the organization studies field implies that the project of a History of thought is not possible in this field. This argument however, seems to dismiss the possibility of writing a history – with a little h – of thought. Yet, such a humble practice of micro-history could aim, *per contra*, to reconstruct schools of thought and to offer an

archaeology of ideas, which would allow in fine to understand the “topography of the discourse of organization studies” (Westwood & Stewart, 2003).

2. From amnesia to fantasy: or how we fantasize our readings

Limits and interests of fantasy

As time goes by, another syndrome can affect scholars in organization studies: their unusual and unconscious ability to fantasize their readings. Some research may inflict to classics amazing or unlikely extensions and distortions to the extent that other academics eventually come to wonder if they read the “same” thing. Actually, each individual and intimate processes of scientific knowledge creating, involves serendipity, imagination and *bricolage*. For instance, the semiotician Umberto Eco considers that an activity, such as translating, is a work of interpretation that consists more in finding the intention of the translated text and its internal consistency (*intentio operis*) than in seeking what the author “who does not necessarily know that he knows” meant (*intentio auctoris*) (Eco, Rorty, & Culler, 1992). Reading turns out to be a free exercise mobilizing the sensitivity and the sensemaking system of the recipient (*intentio lectoris*). Indeed each unique reading consists in and may require a desecration of “the monarchy of the author” (Foucault, 1972) in order to focus on ideas behind the “fiction of the author” (Jones & Munro, 2005). The author becomes a fiction in that it is the “conceptual character” that embodies it more than his/her writings state (Jones & Munro, 2005). Thus, the uniqueness of readings leads to various interpretations of the “same” thing.

However, extending the range of shared and “taken for granted” concepts and ideas prove the maturity of a research community in which one is able to take part to the scientific conversation (Huff, 1998). Beyond an individual *sensemaking* of ideas and thoughts borrowed, an agreement on a common understanding of the foundations

is even a prerequisite to enable a polyphonic discourse. Here again, a history of thought in organization and management studies may contribute to set up the boundaries and terms of this conversation. This should not be confused with a very positivist way of considering the History of thought; our view would aim at confronting viewpoints so as to expose a kind of arrangement.

What could a history of thought offer to organization scholars

From our perspective, a history of thought in organization studies could first aim at tracing and providing the research community with *a contextual analysis of the manufacture of ideas* in the field. Ideas and concepts are imbued with theoretical trends, wars and fashions (Abrahamson, 1996). The state of practical concerns and political issues when concepts emerge or disappear may also explain some theoretical breakdowns or unsolved persistence in a research field. In sum, an historical approach of thoughts in organization studies would help scholars to understand the co evolution of frameworks, research communities, political factors and practice. The work of an historian of thought in organization studies would thus relate to what (Foucault, 1991) called “eventalization”:

“rediscovering the connections, encounters, supports, blockages, plays of force, [also] strategies ... which at a given moment establish what subsequently counts as being self-evident, universal and necessary. In one sense one is indeed effecting a sort of multiplication or pluralization of causes’ (Foucault, 1991, p. 76).

That is, the work of historians of thought would consist in resisting to the ascription of a new theory or a new scientific discourse “to the most unitary, necessary ... mechanism or structure available” (Foucault, 1991, p. 78).

A second objective of an historical narrative of this manufacture could be to *encompass a history of people, groups and communities* through which history is embodied and written. The work of Bruno Latour for instance, has demonstrated how the making of science is inherently linked to these mundane elements, and the day-to-

day life of researchers (Latour, 1987; Latour & Woolgar, 1986). By promoting a history of thought in our field, we therefore argue that a history of ideas, concepts and theories matters as much as a history of people.

Last, such a history of thought would be focused on *the work of duration on ideas*. For instance, handbooks are some essential snapshots of knowledge in a subfield of organization studies at a given time. They provide a fairly complete state of art – or topography of the field – which contributes to legitimate a body of knowledge. But handbooks and their viewpoint, language, narrative and organizing principle, also constitute an object of history. Historians of thought may compare those snapshots in order to understand evolutions in thoughts. Their mission could consist in observing movements in the evolution of a research field's topography.

3- The Carnegie School

Building on these insights about what could be a history of thought in organization studies, we offer a symposium on the Carnegie School. The primary aim of the symposium is to situate this school of thought – one of the pioneering schools in Management Science and Organization Studies (Argote & Greve, 2007) – within the historical context of its emergence, and above all, within the academic lives of its founding fathers. The symposium therefore focuses on the lives and contribution of the founders of the Carnegie School.

3.1. The Carnegie School as a pioneering school of thought in management

Organization scholars are used to considering that their discipline was born with the publication of *Organizations* (1958) more than 50 years ago (March & Simon, 1958), and that the group of scholars who developed, around Simon and March, a behavioural perspective on organizations have actually “created” the field of organization studies. One of the pillars of the Carnegie School is its focus on firms,

and more generally organizations. Founders of the Carnegie School indeed consider that organizations – which were so far neglected by students of economic life – are one of most fundamental dimensions of market economies, as (Simon, 1991) writes:

Imagine a mythical visitor from Mars ... approaches the Earth from space, equipped with a telescope that reveals social structures. The firms reveal themselves, say, as solid green areas ... Market transactions show as red lines connecting firms ... A message sent back home, describing the scene would speak of large green areas interconnected by red lines. It would not likely speak of a network of red lines connecting green spots ... our visitor might be surprised to hear the structure called a market economy. “Wouldn’t organizational economy be the more appropriate term?” it might ask ... (Simon, 1991, p. 27)

In the immediate post-war period, this shared interest in organizations helped to build a common home for scholars who worked in different academic homes (Augier et al., 2005). Herbert Simon and James March for instance, were political scientists. More generally, careers, publications and research interests of Carnegie School members clearly demonstrate a deep habit to welcome bodies of knowledge (informatics, cognitive sciences, mathematics, arts, economics, etc.) in order to digest them in a unique view of organizations. This focus on organizations had therefore constituted one of the unifying dimensions of the Carnegie School, which was otherwise quite diverse, as it was deeply rooted in an interdisciplinary perspective.

As Gavetti, Levinthal and Ocasio (2007) explain the unique view of organization that emerged from this interdisciplinary work is embodied in a constellation of pillars. These pillars – bounded rationality, routine-based behaviour and learning – reflect another characteristic of the Carnegie School: the principle of “conceptual blending”. This term – which is borrowed from cognitive linguistics, refers to the operationalization and extension of the correspondence so that constructs of the two fields are merged to generate a new synthetic and fruitful perspective (Oswick, Fleming, & Hanlon, 2011). For instance, bounded rationality – a concept initially imported from economics – was reinvented through ideas borrowed from

cognitive sciences, and eventually rooted in organization studies thanks to sound empirical work. Funded by the *Ford Foundation* – as was the (Festinger, 1957) piece about cognitive dissonance – the major goal of *Organizations* was to make a “propositional inventory” about organization theory in order to list generalizations and to assess empirical evidence to support them (March & Herbert, 1993, p. 1).

3.2. Four testimonies on the lives and contributions of the founder of the Carnegie School

This symposium on the Carnegie School offers four biographical testimonies on the lives and contributions of the founders of the Carnegie School. The authors of the four papers of this symposium are highly familiar with the founders of the Carnegie School, whom they have known personally. The idea of the symposium is indeed to promote of view of a history of management science thought that locates the birth and developments of ideas and concepts, and theories, within stories of individuals’ life. In telling the story of these outstanding scholars, we better understand the way management thought has developed, and enter into the fabric of management theories.

Dr. Mie Augier – who has authored the first article of this symposium – is a social science Research Associate at Stanford University and Research Associate Professor at the Naval Postgraduate School. Her work contributes to maintain and renew the legacy of Herbert Simon. In this paper – which title is “The early evolution of the foundation for behavioural organization theory and strategy” – Mie Augier traces the genealogy and development of the Carnegie School. In addition to presenting some of the central ideas of the school, the paper tells the story and lives’ of two of its founding fathers, Herbert Simon and James March. In so doing, Mie Augier highlights the interdisciplinary origins of the school, and shows how its development is intimately linked to the personal lives of the researchers who founded

it. Her paper admirably illustrates the idea that research is intrinsically linked to institution, and individuals.

The second paper of this forum –titled “Mazes without Minotaurs: Herbert Simon and the Sciences of the Artificial” – is authored by **Dr. Sara Sarasvathy**. Dr Sara Sarasvathy is Associate Professor of Business Administration at Darden University. She completed her PhD in Information System and Entrepreneurship at Carnegie Mellon University in the mid 1990s, under the supervision of Herbert Simon and Lester Lave. Her theory of effectuation (Sarasvathy, 2008) is rooted in Simon and March’s work. In this paper, Saras Sarasvathy provides a lively and personal biography of Herbert Simon. She argues that it is “Simon’s instinctive irreverence for any kind of disciplinary orthodoxy” that allowed the birth of organization studies. Saras Sarasvathy also suggests that one might “cast him [Simon] as an organisation scientist with a particular interest in how *new* – i.e. entrepreneurial – organizations come to be” in that he promoted an artifactual view of how firms emerge. Besides, she considers that Herbert Simon’s oeuvre encompasses an organization-centric perspective of markets that is highly relevant to help organization scientists and entrepreneurs to rethink financial markets.

The third paper of the symposium by Professor Bill Starbuck offers a biography of James G. March. In this paper – titled “James Gardner March: Founder of Organization Theory, Decision Theorist, and Advocate of Sensible Foolishness”, Bill Starbuck highlights the key role of James G. March in the first stages of the organization science institutionalisation. Bill Starbuck started his academic career in the early 1960s, when he was studying at Carnegie Institute of Technology. There, he met – and worked for – James March and Richard Cyert, and completed a PhD in

1964. Carnegie had a lasting impact on Bill Starbuck's life and research, as he explains in his 1993 autobiographical paper:

“Carnegie made an incredible environment for doctoral students in those years. (...) The professors had revolutionary missions to make management scientific, to promote organization theory, to simulate human thought and they pursued these missions seriously. (...) For me, the main educational experience was coffee hour. All the professors and students assembled in the lounge every afternoon at 3:00, and several professors invariably arrived with topics for discussion. The master's students returned to class at 3:30, and many professors went with them. But, there were almost always small groups of professors and doctoral students who debated for another hour or so”.
(Starbuck, 1993).

The last paper, by **Dr. Ellen O'Connor**, is titled “New contributions from old sources: Recovering Barnard's science and revitalizing the Carnegie School”. Dr. Ellen O'Connor completed a PhD in Romance Languages and Literature at the University of Chicago and a MBA in Finance at the University of Chicago. In her work, she relentlessly dissects and interprets thoughts and writing of forward-thinking authors Chester Barnard and Mary Parker Follett in order to disclose their contemporaneity and their hidden potential for research communities (O'Connor, 2011). In this paper, Dr. Ellen O'Connor points out on the one hand the insufficient recognition of the Carnegie School's ties to Chester Barnard and on the other, Herbert Simon's translation of Barnard at the expense of the original Barnard. Thereby, this conversation between two seminal perspectives of organization sciences gives the opportunity to rediscover Chester Barnard's legacy founded on a subjective relationship to scientific knowledge and ordinary action that Barnard called “personal responsibility”.

The four papers of this special Symposium offer a journey in the past of organization studies in presenting personal viewpoints on the legacy and the history of what is considered as a seminal school of the discipline: the Carnegie School. They show that organization studies may constantly learn new things from the past by

creating uninterrupted and virtual conversations and by generating novelty from the past.

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