

MARY PARKER FOLLETT: RETROSPECT & PROSPECT

Paper submitted for presentation at:

CMS5 2007 Conference – Management & Organisation History Stream

July 11-13, Manchester Business School

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Abstract

Beginning first with a survey of the major themes Mary Parker Follett (1868-1933) explored and wrote upon, this paper gives account of early twentieth century mainstream management theory assimilation of Follett's work, the resurgence of interest in Follett near end of Twentieth Century, and how partial assignation of her work to "systems theory" has obscured the usability of social science for subjecting to measurement and systematic analysis the kinds of interactions Follett found vital and sustaining of organizational life.

Man [sic] is the measure of all things: of things which are, that they are so, and of things which are not, that they are not. (Plato, *Theatetus*, section 152a.)

The importance of the new psychology is that it acknowledges man [sic] as the centre [sic] and shaper of his universe. In his nature all institutions are latent and perforce must be adapted to this nature. Man [sic] not things must be the starting point of the future. (Mary Parker Follett, *The New State*)

Introduction: Retrospect

Fulsome scholarly praise for the intellectual contribution and influence of management theorist and "prophet" Mary Parker Follett (1868-1933) is not hard to find these days, including panegyric ranging as far as feminist authors (Kantor, 1994) to more mainstream leadership and organization theorists (Drucker, 1994), and spanning disciplines from organizational management and leadership theory to ethics, political science and public administration (Morse, 2006; Graham, 1997). Enjoying substantial popularity during her

career in England and then later Japan, Follett's notoriety was largely eclipsed by the American management zeitgeist dominant through the first half the 20th Century, still; Follett's acclaim has surged periodically over the last half-century. Urging the importance of "horizontal authority", the uses of "constructive conflict", the limited usefulness of "power conferred" versus the far more productive "power with" and the importance cooperation among market competitors plays for the integration of complex transaction systems, Follett was far ahead of her times, if not outright heretical. Management doctrine through the 1930s was mostly absorbed with applications of "Scientific Management" apparently better suited to militarized competition, where strict lines of authority were vested within hierarchic and bureaucratic organizations founded upon management principles held, for the most part, to be sacrosanct—as with those shibboleths developed by Max Weber, Henri Fayol and Frederick Taylor. As Peter Drucker (1994, p. 6) summarizes:

Those decades saw a good deal of work on management, but it was work on procedures, techniques, methods, and practices. It was work on organizational rules such as span of control, on specific behavior, on problems of personnel management such as compensation and so forth. No one asked *what* they were doing, let alone *why* they were doing it. The question was always, "How do we do it?"

According to Drucker, preoccupation with "How do we do it?" was flanked, prior to the Depression era, with concerns about how best to order "industrial society" around efficiency and profit. War time economy and imperatives superseded what popularity Follett's ideas had garnered the previous generation. Organizational command and control edicts—declared by Max Weber and like minded scholars as being integral to organizational function—were the order of the day, rendering the "constructive conflict" extolled by Follett anathema to an era bent mostly on winner-take-all global conquest. The mass production, one-size fits all ethos that characterized war-time industrial zeitgeist would eventually yield some intellectual ground as post-industrial modes of production propelled by new information technologies emerged beginning in the 1960s. Now well into a "post-Fordist" age, we find the organic,

fractal unity of Follett's thought compelling again. Her claim that constructs operative within work dyads are scalable upwards to groups, onward to larger organizational and social settings now seems startling for its suitability to a searching, *post-modern* or *post-traditional* epoch in full retreat from unqualified faith in traditional forms of organization and management, and the fractured and disjunctive ontology these forms of process control have tended to propagate.

In order to re-discover this displaced "prophet of management" requires again mapping how Follett's ideas have, in fact, permeated all facets of management theory for decades. As Nitin Nohria (1995) of Harvard Business School has pointed out, Douglas MacGregor's (1960) distinction between Theory X and Theory Y—and, by extension, the modern human relations movement—essentially restates the antagonism Follett's management theory poses for doctrinal Scientific Management. Beginning in the 1970s, according to Nohria (1995), Follett's ideas achieved vogue status when job enrichment, employee involvement, job redesign, workplace democracy, and quality of work life all became shibboleths touted across management schools and allied academic journals. Now again in vogue as management theory contends with the "network organization" and allied management heuristics, Nohria (1994) finds that Follett's lasting influence begs the question: Why haven't her ideas been more actualized than venerated?

But can we be sanguine that this time we will finally be able to create organizations that enduringly embody the principles laid down by Follett? Will our new organizations last any longer than [have] some of the earlier experiments [applying Follett's principles]?...There are, no doubt, enabling information technologies that offer unprecedented organizing possibilities. And there are many experiments that might point the way. But, frankly, I think that contemporary efforts to create new organizations that reflect Follett's ideas are no more likely to endure than they did yesterday. (Nohria, 1995, p. 160)

Kantor (1995) believes Follett's cyclical acclaim always stalls because of the feminism implicit in her work; a praxis that is anathema to projections of male dominance into all social systems. Parker (1995) finds that Follett's élan wears thin because of her intellectual

eclecticism: no academic discipline has been entirely comfortable claiming Follett as its own. Feldheim (2006) claims Follett's cyclical popularity inversely corresponds with geo-political militarism: when confronting crisis, nation-states move towards greater centralization of decision making and hierarchic organizational control.

Others find utopian qualities in Follett's praxis that render her more idealistic than applicable. Organizations, Nohria (1995) reminds us, will forever contend with members for whom "power-over" is irresistible. "Trust, as others wiser than I have noted, is a fragile thing. It is hard to build and easy to destroy. All it takes to destroy trust is a few people who are driven to acquire power-over as opposed to power-with" (Nohria, 1995, pp. 160-161). As the philosopher Nietzsche observed, there is a tragic asymmetry between the good and evil that a single person can achieve in this world. The first casualty of evil is usually trust.

Shakespearean tragedy is largely built upon this rueful human dilemma, as in the damage achieved by Iago, acting entirely alone, to bring down a gullible, tragically flawed Prince Othello. Power-over, as even Follett made clear, will be an impulse forever with us. In accord with Feldheim (2006) and Parker (1995), Nohria (1995, p. 161) finds the allure of power-over particularly active during times of organizational change and leadership transition: human beings forever jockey for "top-dog" status in times of leadership flux. Can even the most ardently "story-telling" organization, for which trust is deliberately and repeatedly enacted and affirmed through organizational ritual and affirmation of founding myth, escape being ravaged in times of great flux and doubt? With Shakespeare in mind, the author and essayist, Ralph Ellison (1953), conjured a prescience as relevant to organizations as to society in general, writing on the eve of mid-20th Century civil rights reform in the United States: "And as always when the belief which nurtures a great social myth declines, large sections of society become prey to superstition. For man without myth is Othello with Desdemona gone: chaos descends, faith vanishes and superstitions prowl the mind" (Ellison 1953/2003, p. 96).

Nohria (1995) further reasons that Follett's ideas will persist mostly only as ephemera so long as constantly encroaching system complexity and ambiguity obscure "the law of the situation"; encroachment that may well intensify as information-based technologies continue to bombard work processes and destabilize organizational cultures and structures. Follett's dictum that "power-with" begins with assigning job *function* the super-ordinate determination of "what must be done" presumes a capacity for information processing that beguiles more heads than one, as it were. According to Nohria (1995), Robert Michel's (1915) "Iron Law of Oligarchy" has felled more organizations than have ever discovered "the law of the situation." (Nohria's reading of organizational history in this regard has been noted by McSwite (2006), who claim that "master and slave" mentality etched deep into human consciousness will always militate against permitting the "law of the situation" to supersede hierarchical command structures.)

The final factor militating against Follett's better ideas, according to Nohria (1995), is that some situations are, essentially and for all practicable purposes, "zero-sum," as in the case of massive force reductions. "In situations where distributive considerations become paramount, someone has to make a tough decision, a decision that inevitably will be contested by those who lost out. It is not clear how an organization built on Follett's principles can either make such decisions on a timely basis or survive once such a decision has to be made" (Nohria, 1995, p. 162). Nohria (1995) concludes his cautionary tale with noting that Follett's pertinence to our time—if not all time—will be mostly rhetorical, as "a beacon for change that we can keep striving for and at times—albeit imperfectly and, alas, fleetingly—achieve" (p. 162).

This guarded optimism and cautionary pessimism notwithstanding; enthusiasm for Follett is not likely attributable only to naive hopefulness or the fleeting need for this or that beacon in dark times. If that were so, Follett's ideas—along with those of her contemporary "Progressives" like Jane Addams, John Dewey, William James and others—would most

likely not have retained concordance with the appellation “pragmatism.” Follett’s admirers sense that her ideas are not merely “best practices,” but enduring insight cutting to essential and lasting organizational dilemmas and conditions. Perhaps the ephemeral quality of Follett’s ideas originates not in the ideas, themselves, but in what we, *ourselves*, have *brought to* those ideas.

Apparent even from a cursory reading of Follett’s writings is her predilection for functionalism, a doctrine for social processes that is both ideological and epistemological, both *descriptive* and *prescriptive*. Though not promulgated as such at the time Follett wrote (originating first in anthropology, Functionalism would eventually permeate and absorb sociology and allied intellectual inquiry at mid-20th Century), a functionalist predilection permeates all of Follett’s writing, as in her recurring emphasis that organizational operations must be understood from the standpoint of *the work to be done*, not inherited from unexamined tradition or opaque, abstract theory. Yet equally important, Follett interwove pragmatic, hermeneutic critique with her functionalist analysis; doing so, Follett (most likely, very deliberately) kept her detractors off-balance. Just when it seems certain she will veer towards institutionalist doctrine by which to canonize the “law of the situation,” Follett instead tacks a rhetorical course back towards the social construction of meaning, vesting the “law of the situation” a resilient *telos* that resists a purely functionalist analysis. Follett sought to rebuild faith in democratic institutions from the ground up, beginning with the cooperative intellectual predilection of the “every(wo)man” on the shop floor. It was this recurring emphasis on the social construction of a *useable* reality that lends Follett’s work its “fractal” quality: emphasis on discovery of the recurrent pattern vested all social conditions. As Follett once wrote: “Our own part is not a fraction of the whole, it is in a sense the whole...”

Were Follett easily reducible to a functionalist, or even structural-functionalist, analysis, her popularity would not have surpassed that of other social “prophets,” like Ayn Rand (1905-1982), whose radical libertarian doctrine also claimed delivery of society to the promised land

from the shoals of tradition at one extreme, or the vortex of revolution at the other. Follett's awareness and conscious cultivation of a fresh form of inquiry and epistemology most likely contributed substantially to the international élan and appeal she garnered briefly during the 1920s, before her reputation was eclipsed. Most of industrializing society was then, still, routing vestiges of 19th Century aristocratic and class privilege from organizational ranks. Similarly, there was tremendous interest at the time for mounting a coherent intellectual challenge to the dialectical materialism that Marxist analysis had so forcefully conveyed. Vesting the "situation" an immutable *telos* promised a solution to malingering elite presumptions on the one hand, and radical upheaval of social conditions on the other hand.

Follett's élan, as is the case for all "prophets," very likely derives from her style of persuasion as much as from the content and object of her analysis. She managed, quite seamlessly, to combine sermon with hard nosed fact-finding, peppering both with bits of personal, anecdotal observation that made vivid, salient, intimate and immediate the managerial praxis she advocated. No two generations hear sermon precisely the same way—a truism Follett would very likely validate given how she insisted that all situations were unique.¹ The appeal Follett had for open-systems theorists of the 1970s was not of the same quality as what originally distinguished her ideas. What inspiration the human relations movement at mid-20th Century could attribute to Follett differs substantively from that which entralls those claiming Follett as prophet of management today. What the "law of the situation" could be attributed in 1925 may have been of the same *essence* as what currently attracts notice, but its derivation was unique; yet, we continue to read Follett *as if* timeless ideas imply timeless conditions. The next section of this paper examines more closely how "the law of the situation" relevant for management praxis today requires of us to more fully interrogate just what "situation" confronts us and what tools we have adapted to the purposes of our inquiry and understanding.

Between Ought, Is, and Inevitability

Never far from the praise Follett has garnered, there can be heard (or at least imagined) the other shoe dropping. In a review of her book, *Creative Experience*, first published in 1924, sociologist Russell Gordon Smith (1925, pp. 541-542) of Columbia University wrote:

Where is this “creative experience”? We turn back the pages of culture [sic] history. Where has this creative experience been hiding in all the wary years that have passed since Neanderthal man chipped flint? Evidently there is something in the group process of which Miss Follett is ignorant or which she elects to ignore. That something is sometimes called cultural inertia, sometimes the persistence of the past and sometimes human stupidity. To many students of society, this counter-process [sic] which usually makes experience anything but creative, is of great interest. And this recalls the point noted before, that Miss Follett is not describing the social process as it is, but as it ought to be. [...] But can we transform what is into what ought to be? [...] Miss Follett seems to rely upon the mysterious alchemy whereby the interweaving desires of fools can produce activities that are not foolish. And she vehemently denies that she is glorifying “the people,” and clamorously protests against the anticipated accusation of mysticism. [...] But to those who study human society from the comparative viewpoint, who postpone psychological explanations and interpretations until they know what it is they want to explain and interpret, who are reluctant to believe that the Millenium [sic] is imminent because the human nervous system is integrative in its action, *Creative Experience* will be just another illustration of what the Freudians mean by “wishful thinking.”

Douglas MacGregor (1960) would codify Smith’s reasoned pessimism with his dichotomous, Theory Y and Theory X; the heuristic still given prominence by organizational behavior textbooks. Moreover, in a collection of papers and lecture notes, published posthumously, we glean a different sense of the phlegmatic R.G. Smith:

No one believes more firmly than I do in the power of science to transform human life; and no one clings more tenaciously to the faith that east of the rising sun and west of the evening star lie flowered fields in which our fancy still may play....The sadness that dwells in the heart of beauty becomes articulate only in the bitter sweetness of a Chopin Nocturne. And I have never seen the microscope that could fathom the unclouded life-dawn in the eyes of children. [...] Science has not robbed life of its mystery or its terms, definitely [sic] state its postulates, arbitrarily selected its standards of truth. Farther than this it does not seek to go. (Cited in Ogburn, 1931, p. 826)

Smith’s mercurial mien captures well the double-edged quality of scientific hubris against which Follett would forge her intellectual contretemps; Smith the pedagogue also echoes

much more recent reservations Nohria (1995) articulates. On the one hand, Professor Smith humbly exhorts that science must not venture beyond that which its methodology can assure. On the other hand, this same pedagogue petulantly dismisses how the thing observed might—just might—co-vary with ascribed causes in a recursive fashion, thus defying reductive, cause-and-effect deductions. On the one hand we have insistence on intellectual humility; on the other hand we encounter anything but modest dismissal of that which defies deductive reasoning.

Characteristically, Follett anticipated the skepticism Smith exemplifies. Writing in *The Creative Experience*, Follett notes:

Suppose a school-boy should say to his instructor in calculus: “You are making my head swim; I cannot compare unless you give me something stationary to compare with.” The only thing his instructor could reply would be: “You will have then to leave this universe; in this one we so often have variations in relation to other variations that we are obliged to learn to think in the terms of those conditions. [...]But psychology sometimes abstracts from life. For instance, a behaviorist tells us that if a man disregards the red flag at a railroad crossing and crosses in front of the train, he will be fined or imprisoned, and the red flag will thus acquire that much more “meaning” for him. If he suffers from loss of limb or kills the occupants of his care, the red flag acquires still more “meaning” for him. True as an abstraction, true on supposition that this is all that happens. What is forgotten in this illustration is that the railroad company is not slumbering meanwhile, and the second time the man may not meet red-flag-plus-meaning, but gates, at the railroad crossing. (Follett, 1924/1995, pp. 47-48).

Such rhetorical flourish was evident among many of Follett’s contemporaries: this was a time, prior to experimental psychology, where limited observational technology placed a premium upon communicative arts among social theorists. (Had Thomas Kuhn written about the revolution of ideas in social science generally, he would probably have accounted for the shift in rhetorical means from linguistic to mathematical symbols.) The difficulty Follett encountered—one which has forever defined the double-edged quality of her hagiography—derived from her attempt to place claims upon “reality” that could withstand the kind of rhetorical challenge those like Smith (1925) would pose of her ideas: the more salutary and optimistic was her writing, the more easily criticized as unrealistic, utopian, and the like.

After having spent more than a half-century immersed in behavioral measurement placing a premium on experimental control, wandering management theorists from 1980 forward have refreshed their hopes for a revived functionalism in the clear and deep wells of Follett's work.

As Robert Freed Bales (2001)—a key figure among latter 20th Century scholars of group and social psychology—makes clear, “social interaction,” as a unit of research analysis, was evident in protean form as early as 1920 in the work of theorists W.I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki (1918-1920/1958), who had begun theoretic treatment of “the situation”, “attitudes” and “values” examining the documentary evidence (through letters) of the Polish peasant immigrant experience in urban America. Other early work in the area of social interaction included that of Emory Bogardus (1925), Herbert Thrasher (1927), Dorothy Swain Thomas (1929), George Herbert Mead (1934), J.L. Moreno (1934), Kurt Lewin (1936) and Talcott Parsons (1937) (with whom Bales himself worked directly at Harvard University). According to Bales (2001), most of this work resisted a fully inductive approach to ascertaining what *telos*, if any, governed social interaction processes.² But theoretic work of this era labored under a priori assumptions in lieu of a systematic technique to govern real time observations. As Bales (2001, p. 195) comments:

Direct observation of human interactive behavior was not popular in those days. In fact, it never has been, and it is not now. Unfortunately the direct observational approach of more or less free social interaction is contrary to the methodological ethos of experimental control that has dominated social psychology for most of the past century. If, as an experimenter, one controls all the variables one can, the tendencies of those same variables to form an interdependent and often unruly system of behavior and values will be kept mostly out of sight.

Epistemologically and politically, Follett's era was steeped in the “Invisible Guiding Hand” doctrine of laissez faire liberalism; adulation that would be ascendant again under the Reagan/Thatcher Neo-liberal “Revolution.” Frederick Taylor's (1911) massively influential *Principles of Scientific Management* defined how “the law of the situation” relevant to an industrializing world was governed fundamentally by machine processes; a praxis that would

become enormously appealing to the manufacturing elite of that era. Taylor's doctrine was double edged and met initially with mixed enthusiasm from both labor and management: labor resented how Taylor's praxis for standardized procedures rested control of work processes from the shop floor; management was dubious itself of being displaced to the science of expertise that Taylor was promulgating. Like other idealists of his time, Taylor had hoped that the principles he, himself, had discovered, would quell rising social unrest as well as recurring and increasingly violent labor riots. Assiduous application of his principles, Taylor inveighed (from many venues), would guarantee greater returns to production and, hence, also to labor; a claim that eventually made Taylor as popular with Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky as he would become with captains of American industry, if for very different reasons. The notion that work processes could be made more coherent through the application of "scientific" principles bestowed legitimacy and inevitability to workplace regimentation, and thus made more "visible" the otherwise invisible "guiding hand" of laissez faire liberalism. The sway Taylor's doctrine held over the times culminated in the United States with the industrial and labor relations reforms carried out under the aegis of New Deal liberalism: the promise of increasing productivity provided both sides of the labor-management divide a basis for routinized, ongoing negotiation. The eclipse of Follett's humanistic, enigmatic praxis makes sense within the historic context of industrialized capitalism after 1929. Any law lacking the gloss of "inevitability", however otherwise compelling, would not likely prevail against the juggernaut unfolding of 20th Century capitalism, rigidly poised as it was against doctrinaire communism. The romantic fervor R.G. Smith (1925) had articulated would likewise become more and more quaint. That which "ought" to be was increasingly made subordinate to "inevitability" even those like R.G. Smith most likely found daunting and ominous.

Disputation on the Inevitable

In a series of lectures given in 1926 (eventually published in 1927 under title, *The Public & Its Problems*), the renowned American philosopher John Dewey challenged vigorously the vestigial doctrines of which laissez faire liberalism was progeny. Politics must be made rid of presumptions smuggled as fact into the realm of policy making, Dewey reasoned. The public, Dewey spoke and wrote in the rhetorical style of the era, must be divested of its mythic origins, for such false attributions fetter and befuddle the emergence of “the Great Community”; the basis, in Dewey’s praxis, for the “Great Society” Graham Wallas (1920) had a few years earlier called for. Dewey rendered through allegory how to properly distinguish truly *public* from truly *private* affairs. For Dewey, all epistemological doctrine vestigial of the era, including continental rationalism and English empiricism and moral theory, blurred what Dewey believed marked the otherwise bright line distinction between individual liberty and public “problems”. No amount of guiding hand, visible or invisible, could address the “public and its problems”, properly understood. The solution, according to Dewey, was the wholesale replacement of *a priori* reasoning with *a posteriori* praxis:

We take then our point of departure from the objective fact that human acts have consequences upon others, that some of these consequences are perceived, and that their perception leads to subsequent effort to control action so as to secure some consequences and avoid others. Following this clew [sic], we are led to remark that the consequences are of two kinds, those which affect the persons directly engaged in a transaction, and those which affect others beyond those immediately concerned. In this distinction we find the germ of the distinction between the private and the public. [...]The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for. (Dewey, 1954, pp. 14, 17).

Dewey continues, directly taking on shibboleths of enlightenment presumptions about “rational man”:

The plurality of states is such a universal and notorious phenomenon that it is taken for granted. [...]But it sets up, as we have noted, a test difficult for some theories to meet. Except on the basis of a freakish limitation in the common will and reason which is alleged to be the foundation of the state, the difficulty is insuperable. It is peculiar, to say the least, that universal reason should be unable to cross a mountain range and objective will be balked by a

river current. The difficulty is not so great for many other theories. But only the theory which makes recognition of consequences the critical factor can find in the fact of many states a corroborating trait. Whatever is a barrier to the spread of the consequences of associated behavior by that very fact operates to set up political boundaries. (Dewey, 1954, pp. 18-19).

Dewey's promotion of an ontologically viable, third entity within the scheme of private transactions was deceptively subversive of laissez faire liberalism, which then held fast to the presumption that contract negotiations encumbered only two valid parties. Judicial courts served as final arbiter of two-party interactions, but then mostly as a referee confined to very narrow interpretation with regards to the consequences of private enterprise upon a putative third party. A third party could of course sue either of the first two parties to a transaction, but typically only through bi-lateral legal challenge, not multilateral settlement. Such myopic legal and civic doctrine caused the "eclipse of the public" as Dewey coined, which warranted a new ontology of the state, especially under conditions of industrial capitalism that had so quickened and increased the magnitude of consequences accruing to third parties, and beyond.

The eclipse of third party relevance in the order of things is mostly tacit in Follett's writing. While it is clear that she appreciated with great sophistication the complexity and recursive quality of all social interaction, Follett's emphasis upon "integration" of competing perspectives (as preferable to *domination* or *compromise*) into a revised, encompassing, dialectical third perspective, does not make clear the relevance of mediation to the process of integration, or the pertinence of consequences accruing from two party activity to broader society. As Follett reasoned: "The conception of circular behaviour throws much light on conflict, for I now realize that I can never fight you, I am always fighting you plus me. I have put it this way: that response is always to a relation. I respond, not only to you, but to the relation between you and me" (Follett, 1925/1995, p. 81). Follett offers a commonsensical account of why integration between competing viewpoints is difficult to achieve: "It requires a high order of intelligence, keen perception and discrimination, more than all, a brilliant inventiveness; it is easier for the trade than to suggest a better way of running the factory"

(Follett, 1995, p. 82). Striking a feminist note, she continues: “Another obstacle to integration is that our way of life has habituated many of us to enjoy domination. Integration seems to many a tamer affair; it leaves no ‘thrills’ of conquest” (p. 82).

Taking up the matter of “invisible hand” doctrine, and the need for a third party viewpoint upon nominally bi-lateral interaction, Bales (2001) writes from a different disciplinary tradition.

[T]here was a ‘smoking gun’ which the social psychological detectives working in the confines of the early conceptual framework of the ‘self’ and ‘situation’ did not clearly discover. The critical missing element of the solution to the theoretical puzzle was what might be called the ‘third-party perspective,’ that is, the perceptions and possible reactions of third and additional persons who are present as witnesses and subsequent reactors to all dyadic interchanges in groups of more than two in size. (p. 185)

Moreover:

Third party reactions to single dyadic episodes can change small parts of the evaluative conceptions of some of the participants as to how things “ought to go” in social relationships of that kind. Participants probably have the best opportunity from the third-person perspective to conceptualize and reevaluate dyadic occurrences, to modify their own values of the “ideal”. (p. 186)

It would be to this matter of third party relevance and presence within all social situations that social psychologist Bales would devote his life’s work, to which the next section turns.

From the Inevitable Towards the Possible: From Systems Towards the Systematic

Central features of critical organizational research include 1) grappling with issues of power asymmetry within organizational settings and 2) what to do with the smuggling of a priori, epistemologically privileged perspectivism and dominance agendas. Post-positivist theorists render powerful critique of social science models of empirical causation, posing formidable ontological challenges to any praxis purporting to provide “valid” empiricism. A related and seemingly indissoluble dilemma for critical organizational theorists is how to make actionable the liberatory praxis such scholarship has produced. By what vehicle is critical theory to be made useful for working women and men at the shop floor of gargantuan

corporate organizations? What intellectual idiom is transferable to workplace settings where matters of power and privilege loom constantly over wage earners world wide? How can management reconcile its place in the chain of organizational hierarchies that distort communication flows and undermine human well-being, achievement and productivity? No singular “praxis” is likely up to such a daunting set of challenges. And any praxis produced by scholarship must come to terms with dilemmas posed by technocratic predilections for “the one best way.”

A related dilemma, articulated over a century ago by Jane Addams, continues to beguile the most critical scholarship and best intellectual intentions. Here writing with respect to the institutional context of industrial life and times, Addams avers:

There is no doubt that the rapid growth of the Socialist party in all crowded centers is largely due to their recognition of those primary needs and experiences which the well-established governments so stupidly ignore, and also to the fact that they are preaching industrial government to an industrial age which recognizes it as vital and adapted to its needs. All of that devotion, all of that speculative philosophy concerning the real issues of life, could, of course, easily be turned into a passion for self-government and the development of the national life, if we were really democratic from the modern evolutionary standpoint, and did we but hold our town-meetings upon topics that most concern us.[...] In point of fact, government ignores industrial questions as the traditional ostrich hides his head in the sand, for no great strike is without political [cache].[...] It is merely a question as to whether industry in relation to government is to be discussed as a matter of popular interest and concern *at the moment when the relation might be modified and controlled*, or whether we prefer to wait a decade and to read about it later in magazines, horrified that such interference of business with government should have taken place [italics added] (Addams, 1905, pp. 438-439).

The task of making manifest pertinent situational imperatives “at the moment when the relations [between interests] might be modified or controlled” has posed daunting challenges for organizational scholarship. Where to begin?

First starting with a pool of 872 value statements culled from extant social research at mid-Twentieth Century, Robert Freed Bales, in partnership with many colleagues over the next

few decades, would eventually cull to 26 a set of extensively factor-rotated value indicators that would array across three bi-polar, orthogonal value dimensions spanning 1) friendly to unfriendly, 2) dominant to submissive, and 3) acceptance or rejection of task orientation (emotionality v. rationality). The history of this research venture cannot be even partially relayed here. Of significance for our purposes is that Bales' intention was to adduce, through both repeated empirical verification and theoretical refinement, a "system for the multilevel observation of groups" (eventually coined with the acronym, SYMLOG). The driving goal of this quest was to produce a method for group self-study that would permit assimilation of the fullest reasonable spectrum of total values that human beings bring to any given multilateral communication setting. Through the creation and recording of repeated cross sectional data acquisition developed of, by and for group participants themselves (with methodology scalable to upwards to larger organizational units), Bales envisioned a systematic means for rendering "the law of the situation" immediately transparent and accessible to the organizational every(wo)man.

Originating with early examination of Alcoholics Anonymous self-help groups, Bales' quest for a method by which inter-subjective reality could be adduced in staggered real time by group participants, themselves, eventually led to his realization that all human interaction stages a contest of competing value claims (Bales, 2001). But under the sway of a priori presumptions upon social reality, as with Douglass MacGregor's binary construction of Theory X and Theory Y, doctrinaire organizational theory across the Twentieth Century did not permit assimilation of, much less a means to inventory the multi-dimensional quality of value contests within group and organizational settings. As a result, most organizational research would find only two orthogonal value orientation vectors to be considered pertinent: 1) the quest for authoritarian legitimacy, and 2) the need to accommodate social interaction and group solidarity (Koenigs, 2006). Bales found that this emphasis on two value vectors distorted their relevance and eclipsed the factor loading upon four other otherwise eclipsed

and unaccounted for value vectors, and that it also begged the question for how polarization within group settings could be accounted for with a scant two, orthogonal value vectors (Bales, 2001). Assimilating (from among a massive intellectual corpus of other social theory) Kurt Lewin's (1951) social field theory, Bales and others subjected a massive empirical data base to factor analytic studies, finding that authoritarianism within organizations had as its counterpart the need and tendency for emotional expressivity, and that the quest for group solidarity can trigger oppositional expression through individual negativity and unfriendliness. Similarly, the prevalence and constant jockeying for dominance and position authority within organizations has as its shadow accommodation the expression of submissiveness and behavioral retreat. In total, six value vectors arrayed across three orthogonal dimensions could be parsed through step by step inter-correlation to adduce salient variable intervals. The resulting combination of variables creates 26 total vector combinations spiraling through this interactive value space. (See figure 1.)

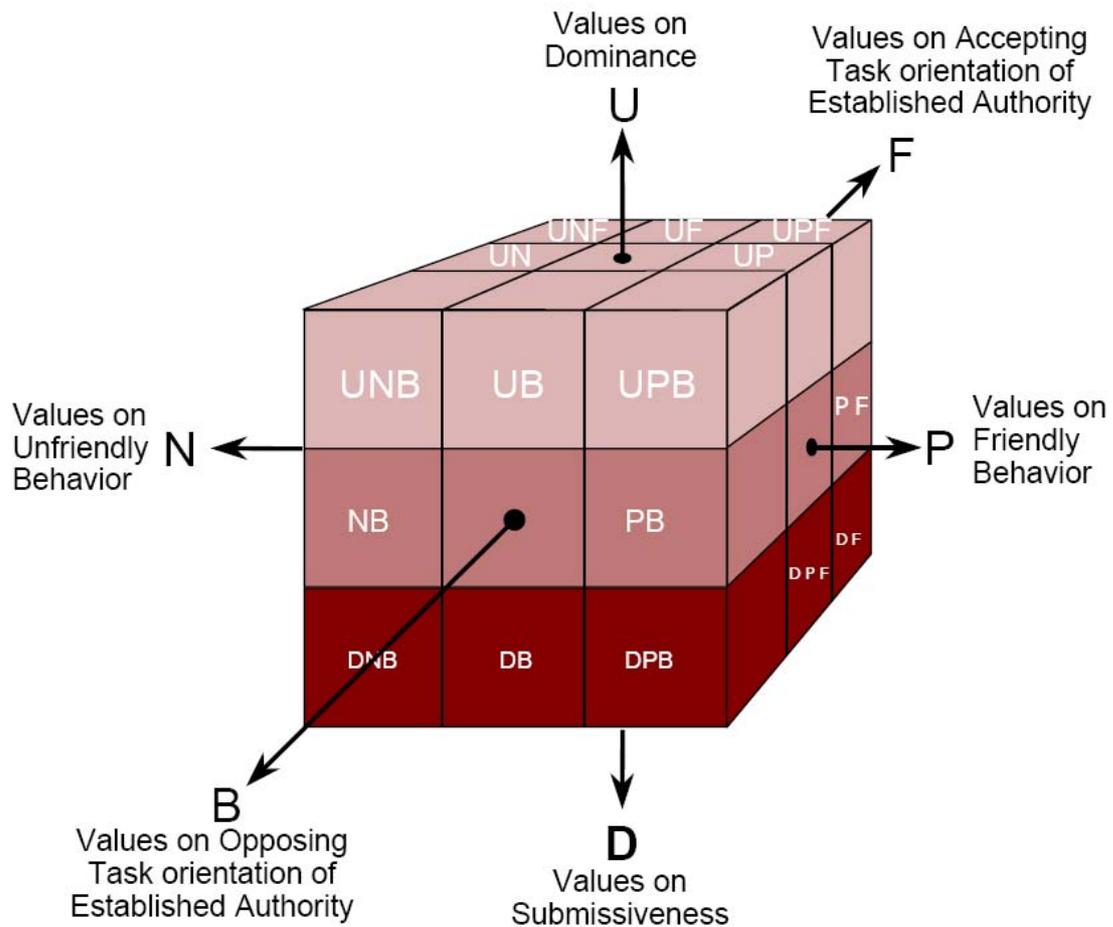


Figure 1. SYMLOG Values “Cube” (Source: SYMLOG Consulting Group)

Further research by Bales and his associates, spanning more than a dozen countries and research sample over 104,000, has permitted refining vector descriptions that have been vetted across several languages and scores of tests for validity and reliability. In total, the six orthogonal and polar vectors have been found to produce 26 robust value intervals, depicted in Figure 2.

1	U	Individual financial success, personal prominence and power
2	UP	Popularity and social success, being liked and admired
3	UPF	Active teamwork toward common goals, organizational unity
4	UF	Efficiency, strong impartial management
5	UNF	Active reinforcement of authority, rules, and regulations
6	UN	Tough-minded, self-oriented assertiveness
7	UNB	Rugged, self-oriented individualism, resistance to authority
8	UB	Having a good time, releasing tension, relaxing control
9	UPB	Protecting less able members, providing help when needed
10	P	Equality, democratic participation in decision making
11	PF	Responsible idealism, collaborative work
12	F	Conservative, established, "correct" ways of doing things
13	NF	Restraining individual desires for organizational goals
14	N	Self-protection, self-interest first, self-sufficiency
15	NB	Rejection of established procedures, rejection of conformity
16	B	Change to new procedures, different values, creativity
17	PB	Friendship, mutual pleasure, recreation
18	DP	Trust in the goodness of others
19	DPF	Dedication, faithfulness, loyalty to the organization
20	DF	Obedience to the chain of command, complying with authority
21	DNF	Self-sacrifice if necessary to reach organizational goals
22	DN	Passive rejection of popularity, going it alone
23	DNB	Admission of failure, withdrawal of effort
24	DB	Passive non-co-operation with authority
25	DPB	Quiet contentment, taking it easy
26	D	Giving up personal needs and desires, passivity

Figure 2: Individual and Organizational Values (Source: SYMLOG Consulting Group)

Figure 3 depicts in histogram the frequency for each value vector that cross-cultural research across thousands of organizational settings has found to be the highly consistent, “wished” for distribution believed optimal for ideal organizational performance.

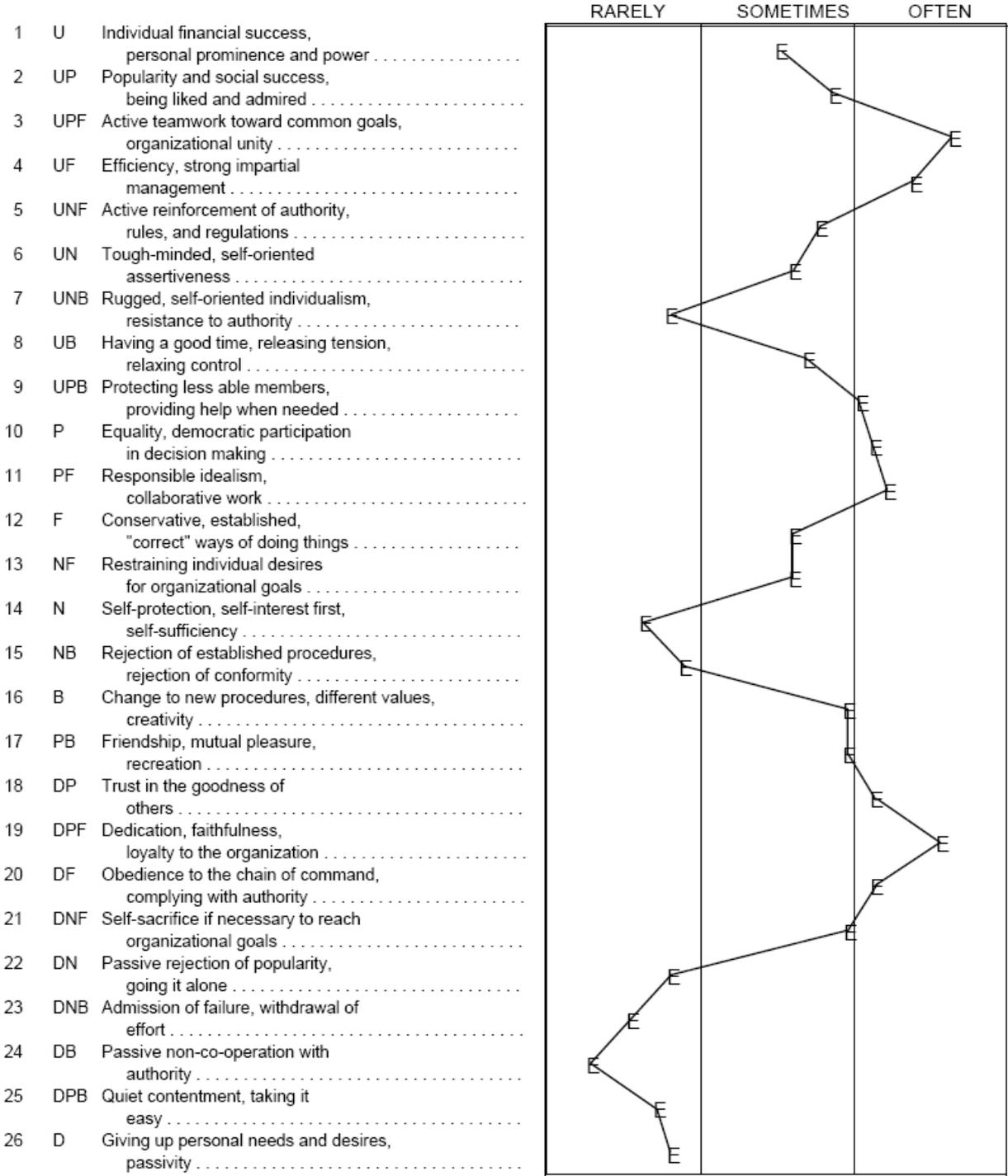


Figure 3: Histogram Barchart with E-Line. (Source: SYMLOG Consulting Group)

Conclusion

It can of course be argued that the empiricism upon which SYMLOG is based suffers from the same positivist distortion, conceits, etc. as does any other “data” based empiricism. The pertinent differences in this regard are that 1) SYMLOG does not claim a putative empirical high ground above and beyond its usefulness *to organizational members themselves*; and 2) all data collected through the SYMLOG process is transmitted in raw form by certified consultants for review by those originating the data themselves (not detained by management gatekeepers collusive with consulting “experts”): SYMLOG is therefore “valid and reliable” only to the extent it generates discussion, reframing, mutualistic assessment, problem definition and the like among and between group and organizational members *at the moment when the relation might be modified and controlled*. This action orientation integral to SYMLOG praxis serves as prophylaxis against the reifying tendency inherent to doctrinaire social science methodology, wherein “data” is extracted (purloined) from its origination, shelved as if preservable in perpetuity, and assumed continent for further parsing and re-combination (as with meta-analytic research).

The value-added by SYMLOG to action research praxis is that SYMLOG permits a frame by frame inventory of the streaming reality of organizational life, made possible through a graphic display idiom subversive of expert control over the group consultation process (Koenigs & Cowen, 1988). Not dissimilar to the original precept upon which the moving picture is based (rapid sequencing of individual film stills), SYMLOG renders visible an inter-subjectively derived, cross sectional “reality” (as with bar-chart histograms and group polarization field diagrams). Perhaps relevant in this regard, SYMLOG cross-sectional research finds that, regardless of ethnic/regional/historic/cultural attributes, people the world over mostly prefer democratic work environments characterized by active teamwork towards common goals within a context of organizational unity: the very attributes believed by Follett herself, as also many critical organizational theorists, to be essential to an enduring, democratic organizational ethos. Though situations are innumerable, the “laws” and etiology governing those situations may well originate from a common, “fractal” logic, as which Follett herself glimpsed decades ago and that R.F. Bales subjected to systematic measurement in the decades following.

Persuading those with organizational position authority to view their “leadership” as itself integral to “the situation”, is a matter closely related to the sanctity of group authority over work process, for which SYMLOG praxis offers substantial insight and relevance to any critical organizational scholarship (Koenigs, 1996).

Notes

1. In one of scores of passages revealing Follett’s startling alacrity, she writes: “Every friendship which is not treated in this way will surely suffer; no human relation should serve an anticipatory purpose. Every relation should be a freeing relation with the ‘purpose’ evolving. This is the truth underneath the admonition that we should not pray for specific things” (Follett, 1924/1994, p. 57).
2. The massive social dislocations of the previous generation—including the movement between 1890 and 1920 to the United States of millions of eastern and southern European peoples—contributed substantially to research interest in group interaction. Nativist predilections in Canada and the United States surged during this era. The Klu Klux Klan re-emerged as a major cultural force in the 1920s, staging the backdrop of immigration “reform” movements and legislation, culminating with the Canadian Chinese Immigration Act of 1923, then the U.S. Immigration Act of 1924, which dramatically restricted Southern and Eastern European, and also Asian immigration to North America.

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