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Organizational rationality beyond the mechanistic framework

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Organizational rationality beyond the mechanistic framework^{*}

Abstract

In this paper it is argued that the mechanistic framework allows only a very limited understanding of organizational rationality and that the concept of organizational rationality needs serious reconsideration, based on the assumption that theoretical understanding and articulation are the corner-stones of rationality. After a brief discussion about the fundamental importance of rationality for modern society, the attention turns to the mechanistic view on rationality. Its basic assumptions and some of the critique against them are presented. Then, the idea of rationality as theoretical understanding, inspired by Charles Taylor, is discussed and three major arguments for why organization theorists should be interested in this idea are presented.

Key words: Organizational rationality, mechanistic organization, theoretical understanding, articulation

1. Introduction

The present paper is about organizational rationality. This is without any doubt a classic subject of contention among organization theorists. The over-confidence in rationality that is very evident in early management thinking as well as in classical economic theory and in the cybernetics approaches to social planning and control, has been subjected to a very considerable amount of criticism for several decades. The critique has been aiming at the basically mechanistic view on organizational rationality that has been prevalent in modern organizations.

In many respects, the mechanistic view is still on top of the hill, at least in management thinking and practice. Nevertheless, the massive amount of criticism has considerably undermined the theoretical foundation of the mechanistic view. Unfortunately, while it actually is the mechanistic view on rationality that has been the aim of the critics, the critique has also been detrimental to the belief in rationality in a more general sense. Since organizational rationality has usually been discussed in mechanistic terms, this should not be surprising. Consequently, to many organization theorists organizational rationality has become rather synonymous with backwardness and naïveté.

From this author's point of view it is important to distinguish the very concept of rationality from its particular meaning within the mechanistic framework. In this paper, I intend to elaborate two main points. First, I argue that the mechanistic framework allows only a very limited understanding of organizational rationality. Second, I argue that the concept of organizational rationality merits some serious reconsideration, based on the assumption that theoretical understanding and articulation are the very corner-stones of rationality.

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In the next section, I shall briefly focus on the idea of rationality as a foundation for modern society. Then, in the third section, the main characteristics of the mechanistic view on organizational rationality are discussed. In the fourth section, my attention is turning to the attack on the mechanistic view on rationality. Then, in the fifth section, the idea of rationality as theoretical understanding is introduced. The argument here is based on an essay by the philosopher and political scientist Charles Taylor (1982). Finally, in the sixth section, it is discussed why the idea of rationality as theoretical understanding should be considered by organization theorists.

2. Rationality and modernity

The concept of rationality is deeply rooted in the philosophical tradition inherited from ancient Greece. Through the ages, the idea of a human rationality has remained one of the seminal ideas in Western philosophy. In the 17th and 18th centuries, rationalist philosophers, like René Descartes and Immanuel Kant, based their philosophies on this idea. In this respect, their philosophies can be connected to broader trends and movements, very significant for the development of our modern society.

In particular, this is referring to the natural science and the Enlightenment. In both cases the belief in rationality is fundamental. The aim of natural science is to systematically accumulate knowledge about nature on a basis of human reason and empirical observation. By stressing reason and experience as the basis of knowledge, natural science was in opposition to religious authorities and to much of the beliefs and knowledge inherited from the Middle Ages.

The stream of thought known as the Enlightenment even surpassed the natural science in terms of rationalistic optimism. While the rationalist project of natural science was focusing on the rational basis of our knowledge of nature, the Enlightenment included the existential, moral and political conditions of man and society in the rationalistic prospects. Knowledge of man and society should also be built on a foundation of reason and experience. Ultimately, this knowledge was expected to improve the conditions for human happiness, well-being and personal development. Thus, the ultimate purpose of the Enlightenment was to build society on reason (Habermas, 1981).

To some extent this vision has come true. As classic social thinkers, particularly in the late nineteenth and in the early twentieth century, like Max Weber, have shown, rationalization is a main characteristic of the modern society that has developed after the Enlightenment. This rationalization encompasses a wide range of social institutions, including e. g. legal, democratic and economic institutions (Weber, 1968). A vital part of this was the rationalization of management, administration and organization.

Weber found that modern organizations are bureaucracies, characterized by rather strict rules and routines for administrative behaviour, hierarchy, specialization, emphasis on education and qualifications, documentation of decisions etc. (ibid, pp. 956-958). This bureaucratic rationalization was complemented by the very engineering-orientated rationalization of industrial labour, usually labelled as "scientific management" or "taylorism". Although the bureaucratic rationalization and the scientific management movement are quite different in many respects, they are both very modern approaches to organization, strongly emphasizing rationalization.

The rationalization of modern society is mainly instrumental. "Rationality" really means means-end rationality, i. e. rationality in achieving objectives, goals, purposes etc. (Weber, 1964, p.115). This kind of rationality is confined to finding the efficient means. It is not applicable to the choice of the purposes to

be achieved by those means. Thus, the prevalence of the instrumental kind of rationality has led to an imbalanced development of rationality in modern society, leaving the issues of objectives, aims, values etc. beyond the domain of rationalization.

The interest in instrumental rationality is also very evident in rationalist organization and management theory. On the basis of this interest a mechanistic view on organization and organizational rationality has been founded.

3. The mechanistic view on organizational rationality

The most basic and seminal assumptions of the mechanistic view on organization and organizational rationality can be found in the philosophy of René Descartes (1642). He was by no means an organization theorist, but the mechanistic world-view appearing in his philosophy can also be recognized in major approaches to organization and management.

Descartes was a rationalist philosopher. For our purpose here, it is his conception of human reason that is interesting. In his philosophy, human reason is appearing in a clearly mechanistic mould. For understanding this mechanistic conception of reason, it is of fundamental importance to understand the dualism inherent in Cartesian philosophy. Basically, this dualism is making a distinction between mind or consciousness (*res cogitans*) and matter (*res extensa*). This is the basic Cartesian dualism, from which some other conceptual divisions can be traced. For science, not least social science, a distinction between the *subject*, who is inquiring or acting, and the *object* of the inquiry or action, is very relevant.

The subject may be the Cartesian philosopher, a military strategist or an engineer. The dualism means that they, as subjects, are separated from the objects they are conceiving, constructing, manipulating etc. In other words, in the mechanistic conception of reason, this is supposed to be applicable from a position outside and, at least metaphorically speaking, above the system it is supposed to be applicable to. More specifically, some of the most salient features of the relationship between the rational subject and the object are:

Model building. The subject is creating a model of the object he (or she) is interested in. Thereby, the subject is actually creating the preconditions for understanding and intervention.

Rational construction. The model is a product of the subject's intellectual efforts. Even if empirical observation *can* be part of the foundation, this is not necessary. Ultimately, the model is supposed to be conceived and accepted by people's intellect.

Manipulability. The object is susceptible to intervention and manipulation by the subject.

In this dualistic framework rationality is primarily attributed to the subject. However, the rational subject can create a rational system. While, for Descartes as a rational subject, the task was to conceive a rational philosophical system, the very same view of creating rational systems has been applied to a variety of objects.

Indeed, the influence from Cartesian philosophy on modern approaches to rationality can hardly be overestimated. While this influence can easily be recognized in the fields of natural science and engineering, it is also recognizable in the rationalization of society.

In the endeavour to build a rational society, sometimes labelled as "social engineering", the Cartesian characteristics of the rationality concept is very evident. Thus the history of political thinking as well as the history of social science includes an array of very optimistic approaches to planning and controlling the social system (e.g. Bentham, 1948; Forrester, 1961).

The mechanistic conception of rationality has also been prevailing in the field of organization and management. Within the mechanistic framework, the organization is basically a *rational tool* for somebody's purposes. In this respect, it is a machine-like device. This view presupposes a rational mind (subject) behind the organization. This subject is creating the organization to be a rational instrument. More specifically, this view of the organization is typically characterized by:

Focus on model building. The subject is creating a model of the organization. Then, the model is a tool for understanding and intervening in organizational events.

Presumed rationality. Model creation, as well as other actions performed by the subject, are supposed to be on a rational basis. This means not only a recognition of the subject's rational capacity. Even the most rational mind is dependent on sufficient ground to support thinking and action. In particular, sufficient information is necessary. It shall be added that mechanistic conceptions of organizational rationality tend to presume that the premises for rational decisions and actions are at hand also at other levels than the grand strategist's. For instance, the subordinate bureaucrat may also be recognized as a rational subject with sufficient information for rational decisions, although his subordinated position means less discretion to act.

Mechanistic manipulability. It is presumed that the organization can be manipulated by the subject. Typically, manipulation is supposed to be mechanistic. This means that the organization consists of separable and manipulable parts. The whole organization can be manipulated by changing some part of it, without uncontrollable effects on other parts.

Emphasis on planning and control. Considering the characteristics above, it is logical to be optimistic about the possibility of planning and controlling the organization. Thus, the more saliently mechanistic approaches to organization and organizational rationality, such as scientific management (Taylor, 1947) and the bureaucratic school (Weber, 1964), has been emphasizing the importance of plans, rules, routines and other means for reducing uncertainty.

While the view described is a mechanistic view of the organization as a rational tool, it would probably not have provoked any reaction from most readers if I had labelled it "the rationalist view". Our conceptions of organizational rationality are still under very much influence from the mechanistic view. Thus, while research has shown the unsolid foundation of organizational rationality in this mechanistic sense, the very concept of organizational rationality has become increasingly controversial.

4. Critique of mechanistic rationality

As mentioned above, the critique of the conception of organizational rationality is one of the main themes in organization theory. The critics has pointed out a wide range of weaknesses in the mechanist assumptions on which this conception is based. Here we cannot go into a detailed overview of that critique, but must be content with sketching some of its main characteristics. More extensive discussions can be found elsewhere (e.g. Abrahamsson, 1993; Etzioni, 1988; Halpern & Stern, 1998; Sjöstrand, 1997).

Generally speaking, the critics are showing the lack of realism in the assumptions about rational behaviour, mechanistic manipulability and rational planning/controlling, on which rational management and organization theories are based. It should be mentioned that although it seems well-motivated to make distinctions between those mechanistic assumptions for analytical reasons, nothing says that those same distinctions have always been acknowledged by critics of organizational rationality. For instance, a study focusing on planning or controlling can be focusing on the lack of mechanistic manipulability or on the insufficient conditions for actor's rational behaviour as well.

Since much of the critique has roots in systems approaches such as the General Systems Theory (Miller, 1965; Bertalanffy, 1968) and the sociological structural functionalism developing in the middle of the twentieth century (Merton, 1957; Gouldner, 1954, 1959; Selznick, 1949, 1957), it has often been labelled as the "systems theory" or the "systems perspective" (e.g. Abrahamsson, 1993). As a result, organizational analysis has often been described as a rather dichotomous and bipolar field, where the systems model stands against mechanistic models of the organization. This bipolarity is outlined by Alvin Gouldner (1959). According to Gouldner, the rationalist model is a heritage from the classical sociologists Max Weber and Henry Saint-Simon, while the origin of the systems model is rather to be found in the thinking of August Comte. While Weber and Saint-Simon were stressing the rational construction of complex modern organizations, Comte was instead focusing on the natural, spontaneously established and sustained social order, which he was considering to be superior to any rational, planned and controlled social order (ibid, p. 401). This conception of the natural social order, or the natural social system, is an idea of seminal importance for the, mainly structural functionalist, attack on the rational model of organization, particularly represented by the Weberian bureaucracy, that Gouldner was actively involved in (ibid, p. 404, see also Abrahamsson, 1993, ch. 4).

The very idea of a natural social system is indeed in opposition to the view of the organization as a rationally manipulable instrument. More elaborated, the idea of a natural, or organic (Burns & Stalker, 1961) social system was particularly a theoretical contradiction to the mechanistic manipulability assumed by the rational model. In a system, parts are not separable. All parts of the system are supposed to be interdependent. When changes occur somewhere in the system, the whole system is adjusting in order to maintain the "balance" or equilibrium. Thus, contradictory to the assumption of mechanistic manipulability, changes in one part of the system are supposed to lead to consequences in other parts of the system, which is clearly complicating the task of controlling the effects of any intervention.

While the differences above are inherent in the very theoretical frameworks, structural functionalists have also provided empirical support for their scepticism against the rational model of bureaucracy. Several studies have been focusing on the efficiency, or rather inefficiency, of the bureaucratic organization. In particular, most of this research is stressing the unanticipated consequences of using

bureaucratic control instruments. It seems well-motivated to mention some of the more well known studies here.

Merton (1957) shows that rules tend to be overemphasized in the bureaucratic organization. While originally intended to be the means for achieving the objectives of the organization, rules and obedience to rules tend to become more like the ultimate values of the organization, overshadowing the original objectives. Merton's analysis also indicated that the expert knowledge of the bureaucrats actually can decrease the flexibility and innovativeness of the organization. This is also supported by Crozier (1964), who concludes that the inability to adapt to changes in the environment is characteristic to the bureaucratic organization.

Blau (1955) shows that work group needs on low levels in the organizational hierarchy tend to result in unanticipated changes in bureaucratic operating procedures. Gouldner (1954) shows that rules regulating work procedures not only have the anticipated consequence of decreasing the visibility of power relations, thereby decreasing the interpersonal tension in the work group. By defining what is unacceptable behaviour, they also increase knowledge about the minimum level of acceptable behaviour, which tend to lower the achievement to that minimum level, at least if the internalization of organizational goals is deficient. While Merton and Gouldner are focusing on the unanticipated consequences of controlling by rules, Selznick (1949) is showing that another control technique, delegation of authority, also brings about unanticipated consequences, such as increasing bifurcation of interests among organizational units.

Another major attack on the rational model, to some extent inspired by the structural functionalist sociology discussed above, came from the Carnegie Institute of Technology. This attack was heavily grounded on the seminal contributions to our understanding of decision making processes, made by Nobel laureate Herbert A. Simon. As mentioned above, the mechanistic conception of organizational rationality is based on assumptions about rational decisions. Thus, organizational rationality presupposes that decision makers are making the optimal decisions, just like the economic man in economics or the rational man presupposed in statistical decision theory. Simon (1947) is showing that this understanding of how decisions are made in organizations are very misleading. Human decision making, including the decision making in the context of an organization, is usually more concerned with the discovery and selection of satisfactory alternatives, than with the discovery and selection of the optimal alternative.

Simon's theory on decision making became incorporated into the theoretical framework on organizations, elaborated at Carnegie Tech (March & Simon, 1958; Cyert & March, 1963). His research has also inspired several other studies about decision making, resulting in more radical rejections of rationality assumptions. I shall mention only a few, particularly well-known, examples. When Cohen, March & Olsen (1972) developed the garbage can model for understanding human decision making, they were abandoning the view of decision making as an individual phenomenon for the more interactional approach that decisions are the outcomes of interactive processes between problems, solutions, actors and choice opportunities. They find that those interactions are not in accordance with the assumptions of rational decision models. For instance, just as problems "look for" their decisions (possible solutions), decisions "look for" problems to solve. The use of information in decision making has been problematized by the findings of Feldman & March (1981), showing that, contradictory to what is stipulated in rational models, information often is primarily used for legitimizing decisions, not for

the actual decision making. Also the assumption that we are aware of our preferences when deciding about our actions has been shown to be problematic (e. g. Weick, 1969).

As mentioned above, the aim here is not to give a detailed overview of the research undermining the belief in organizational rationality. The critical points referred to here should be sufficient to verify that the assumptions on which the belief in organizational rationality is based, has undergone a very substantial amount of empirical study and critical analysis, showing that the mechanistic "rational" model of the organization is built on a very unsolid foundation. However, while this critique has undermined the mechanistic view of organizational rationality, it is much more doubtful if it provides a sufficient basis for the rejection of organizational rationality *per se*. I am claiming that there is a rationalist "core" of beliefs applicable to management and organization, that cannot be refuted by showing the weaknesses of the mechanistic view. Furthermore, it may be detrimental to the theory and practice of management and organization if this "core" of rationality is neglected because of the lacking confidence in the mechanistic assumptions. In the next section, I shall move away from the particular mechanistic assumptions, while discussing the basics of rationality.

5. Rationality as theoretical understanding

In his essay "Rationality", the Canadian philosopher and political scientist Charles Taylor is focusing on the meaning of the rationality concept (Taylor, 1982). While the rationality critics overviewed in the previous section are mainly concerned with how rational the organization really is, Taylor is normative in his approach. He is arguing that there is a universal foundation for rationality that deserves to be preserved and defended. His essay merits a great deal of attention here, since he is discussing the basics of rationality in a way that is leading us beyond the mechanistic framework.

Taylor's interest in the meaning of rationality should be understood in the context of the philosophical discourse on rationality and relativism (Wilson, 1970; Hollis & Lukes, 1982). Basically, the matter of controversy is whether there are any universal criteria for distinguishing between the rational and the non-rational. This issue can be relevant to any academic discipline studying conceptual frameworks or systems of beliefs, but much of the debate has been focusing on the rationality of cultures (e.g. Jarvie, 1984), languages (e.g. Hacking, 1982) and science (e.g. Newton-Smith, 1981; Riggs, 1992).

In Taylor's essay, the rationality of cultures is in focus. For the debate on this issue, comparisons between so-called primitive cultures and modern scientific cultures has been particularly interesting. For instance, in a well-known study of the belief in witchcraft among the Azande, Edward Evans-Pritchard concluded that the Azande beliefs were irrational (Evans-Pritchard, 1937). He was understanding rationality in terms of logical consistency. Thus, his observation that the Azande belief in witchcraft rested on an inconsistent set of other beliefs, lead him to the conclusion that it was irrational.

Peter Winch has written a well-known article, rejecting this conclusion from a strongly relativist position (Winch, 1964). As he puts it:

"Zande notions of witchcraft do not constitute a theoretical system in terms of which Azande try to gain a quasi-scientific understanding of the world." (Ibid., p. 315.)

Accordingly, to Winch, Evans-Pritchard's conclusion is based on an ethnocentric misunderstanding. The notion of rationality, in terms of which Azande beliefs were judged to be irrational, is a Western, scientific notion, that should not be used for judging about the rationality of Azande. They should be entitled to their own notion of rationality.

Taylor's interest in what we mean by rationality should be seen against the background that the rationalist position of Evans-Pritchard and the relativist position assumed by Winch are both insufficient to him. Although he is articulating his position rather elaborately, not least by relating it to major arguments from the anthropological debate between rationalists and relativists, a brief summary of his position should be enough for our purpose here.

Taylor strongly disagrees with Evans-Pritchard's conclusion that the Azande are irrational. About this issue he agrees with Winch, claiming that logical consistency is an inappropriate criterion for judging about the rationality of another culture (Taylor, 1982, p.105). The conclusion that the belief in witchcraft is irrational on this basis presupposes that witch power operates according to the same principles as science. This is a clearly ethnocentric presupposition, as Winch points out (*ibid.*, p. 89).

However, Taylor does not find that the insufficiency of the consistency criterion of rationality justifies the relativistic conclusions Winch is arriving at. Winch is wrong, because there is more to rationality than avoiding inconsistency. In Taylor's view, it is still justifiable to think of the Azande culture as a less rational (if not irrational) culture. This judgment of lesser rationality is not on the basis of inconsistency. Instead, Taylor stresses the difference between theoretical and atheoretical cultures, which he finds more relevant to the rationality issue (*ibid.*, p. 91). The Azande culture is atheoretical in the sense that the interest in theoretical understanding is not part of, or at least not an essential part of, that culture. The concept of theoretical understanding is part of the intellectual heritage from ancient Greece, and it means, by Taylor's definition, an activity that aims at a "disengaged perspective". He describes, somewhat more concretely, how this aim manifests itself:

"We are not trying to understand things merely as they impinge on us, or are relevant to the purposes we are pursuing, but rather grasp them as they are, outside the immediate perspective of our goals and desires and activities. ... The understanding itself is framed in terms of a broader perspective, and it gives us a picture of reality which is not simply valid in the context of our goals." (*Ibid.*, p. 89).

While theoretical understanding hardly replaces other, atheoretical, perspectives, it adds a dimension to how we think in our civilization. In Taylor's view, it implies that we distinguish a theoretical, disengaged, perspective which we value as offering a "higher" view of reality. (*Ibid.*, p. 89.)

The idea of a theoretical understanding is intimately linked to articulation. As defined by Taylor, it means to "distinguish and lay out the different features of the matter in perspicuous order" (*ibid.*, p. 90). This is what we do when we are formulating something in any language. By articulation we can give an account of something, thereby, at least in principle, making it possible for ourselves and others to see it clearly. Articulation is a way of making our views known and possible to discuss and judge about. It can also reveal inconsistencies in our thinking.

Taylor claims that theoretical understanding and articulation are fundamental to rationality (*ibid.*, 90). Accordingly, it is the absence of these interrelated activities when Evans-Pritchard points out the apparent contradictions in the Azande belief in witchcraft, that leads him to the conclusion that the Azande culture is less rational than a modern scientific culture. In a theoretical culture, Evans-Pritchard's

imputation of contradictions in the belief system would have attracted a theoretical interest in ironing out the apparent contradictions by perspicuously articulating the nature of witches and witchcraft. But this theoretical interest cannot be found among the members of the Azande culture. They seem to be quite uninterested in seeing their belief in witchcraft from a broader perspective, external to how it is functioning for them in their social practices. (Ibid., p. 92.)

Taylor does not claim that the lack of interest in getting theoretical understanding and finding the appropriate formulations means that the Azande culture is irrational. The word "irrational" is appropriate only when someone "acts flagrantly in violation of his own interests, or of his own avowed objectives" (ibid., p. 87), and this is not what Taylor is imputing to the Azande. Instead, he wants to point out that although the Azande culture is not irrational, it is still not a rational culture as long as it underemphasizes or neglects activities fundamentally important to rationality. In that respect the Azande culture is a non-rational or at least less rational culture.

As Taylor fully realizes, also theoretical understanding can be seen as an ethnocentric criterion of rationality (ibid., p. 92). After all, he is, just like Evans-Pritchard, assessing activities in a foreign culture by the standards of his own culture. As Taylor is interested in advancing the argument for universal rationality standards, he has to give a reason why theoretical understanding should be accepted as a universal criterion, despite its origin in a particular cultural context and its discrimination between cultures.

In order to find his argument, Taylor turns his attention from the Azande to the scientific and technological advance that has taken place in theoretical cultures. He argues that the advanced scientific understanding of nature and its associated increase in technological applicability are achievements of transcultural value, justifying some claims to "superior" rationality without being ethnocentric (ibid., p. 102). However, while Taylor is sophisticating his argument a great deal on this issue, considering the purpose of our interest in his essay, it would lead us far away from our subject to dwell more on the controversy over relativism.

In most respects, the view of rationality as theoretical understanding deviates from the mechanistic assumptions of rationality discussed above. Society is not seen as a rational creation by any subject outside the system. It is not supposed to be manipulated by any external mastermind. Instead, its claim to rationality is supposed to be sustained by the many actors within the system. Activities aiming at theoretical understanding are rational by definition, regardless of their instrumentality. All this taken together means that while the massive critique of rationality in organizations, discussed in the previous section, has undermined the foundation of the mechanistic approach to rationality, it can hardly be concluded that the view of organizational rationality as theoretical understanding is discredited by the same critique.

In the final section of this article, I shall argue that, despite the fact that Taylor did not say anything about organizational rationality in his essay, the concept of rationality as theoretical understanding deserves to be taken seriously by organization theorists.

6. Implications for organization

There are at least three major reasons why organization theorists should be interested in the views of rationality introduced in the previous section. First, as we have already seen, this kind of belief in

rationality do not rest on the mechanistic assumptions that have been belaboured and shown to be rather unsolid by the critics of organizational rationality. This means that although it is basically a rationalist approach, it can hardly be rejected on the basis of the systemic, anti mechanistic critique of rationality discussed above. Instead, its rejection or justification must be based on other considerations, e.g. about the corner-pillars of rationality stressed by Taylor; theoretical understanding and articulation. This can actually be described as a reorientation of the interest in organizational rationality, from an interest in the pure instrumentality of the organization to an interest in organizations where the basic principles of rationality are cultivated.

A second reason why organization theorists should consider the idea of rationality as theoretical understanding is that this perspective tends to focus on fundamental aspects of rationality which tend to be overlooked when rationality is discussed within the mechanistic framework. In particular, I am thinking of two aspects: the connection of rationality with reason and the location of rationality with the many actors in the organization. Each of these aspects requires at least some brief comments here. Although the very purpose of the rationalization envisioned by the Enlightenment philosophers was to build social institutions on reason, this foundation is not always evident in real modern institutions, supposed to be rational. Not least the connection between organizational rationality and reason seems to have become rather obscure. It can even be claimed that the rationalization of modern organizations to a considerable degree has been founded on a created gap between reason and rational behaviour. This is not to deny that the major rationalization movements under the industrial epoch, bureaucratization and scientific management, postulate that reason is applicable to organizations. But, according to the mechanistic model, reason is supposed to be induced in the organization, for making it a rational instrument.

Not surprisingly, it is not always evident how reason is involved even in the creation of the so-called rational, or formal, aspect of the organization, although some models of rationalization are rather explicit about this issue. For instance, scientific management postulates that reason is involved through the scientific studies which are supposed to provide a foundation for rational organization. Even if this is an extreme example, I see no problem with assuming that mechanistic approaches to organizational rationality rather generally presupposes that some kind of reason, obscure or not, is behind the imposed rationality. However, the rationality imposed on the organization tends to be of the kind that has been succinctly described as "thoughtless rationality" (Etzioni, 1988, p. 166). Rules, routines and other devices are supposed to provide instrumental rationality while minimizing the application of reason at individual decisions in various working situations. While it would be foolish to categorically deny the instrumental value of rules and routines, it is worth noticing the somewhat paradoxical consequences of rational models that tend to neglect reason for the sake of rationality.

The idea of rationality as theoretical understanding seems to offer a defence against the tendency to forget about the connection between rationality and reason. To say that nothing is more fundamental to rationality than assuming a disengaged perspective that, at least in principle, will allow us to understand things as they are, without being content with framing them in terms of our most immediate perspectives, our self-interests etc. comes very close to saying that nothing is more fundamental to rationality than getting in touch with reason. Accordingly, anything without anchorage in reason, or even with an obscure anchorage, is not likely to be accepted as rational when looked upon from this point of view.

The emphasis on theoretical understanding makes it harder to forget that there is no rationality without actors. This is easily forgotten when we are focusing on organizational rationality or on the rationality of

any other kind of collective entities. Although many organization theorists and other social scientists (e.g. Abrahamsson, 1997; Arrow, 1951; Gellner, 1968) have been deeply concerned about the justifiability of collective attributes of any kind, not least rationality, the attribution of rationality to an organization is not necessarily accompanied by clarifications of where that rationality begins and ends. As we have seen, the mechanistic view on organizational rationality implies that it is implemented, or even imposed, from outside the system. It is, so to speak, a quality given by the external creator of the system, i. e. the Cartesian subject. The other side of this coin is that the rationality that stems from within the system, from the human beings whose actions and interactions are sustaining the organization, is less emphasized.

As we can interpret from his discussion about the Azande case, the rationality Taylor has in mind is inherent in the social system. Taylor claims that a rational society is recognizable by its members' interest in theoretical understanding. He stresses the importance of articulation for such purposes as making our views known and open for discussion, revealing inconsistencies in our thinking etc. In every respect, the rationality he has in mind has an anchorage in interests and activities of people within the system. If we are accepting this view, it does not make sense to talk about any "organizational rationality" that is not founded on the rationality of people. Organizational rationality, like the rationality of the Azande culture, becomes a matter of the degree to which theoretical understanding is part of the system. It can only be so if people strive for it and articulate what they think for others to reflect on.

A third reason why organization theorists should consider the idea of rationality as theoretical understanding has to do with the wide variety of current theoretical and managerial perspectives which claim to build on great trust in people in organizations, in their competence, judgement, ability to think etc. Words like empowerment (see e.g. Block, 1986; Bowen & Lawler, 1992; Semler, 1994) and organizational learning (see e. g. Argyris & Schön, 1978, 1996; Senge, 1990) have become fashionable. While the view of man inherent in such human resource orientated perspectives tend to be at odds with mechanistic views, it is nevertheless basically a rationalistic view. Thus this development seems to make it even more important that the concept of organizational rationality stresses the rationality of human actors within the organization. Such a rationality concept, well in accordance with ideas about empowering people in the organization, would probably contribute to the consistency of many perspectives.

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