Phil Herbst: Alternatives to Hierarchies

F. Emery and M. Emery 1977

Ultimately this is a book about liberation – the liberation of people from their theories about the world, and in particular the liberation of the world of work from the logic and theory of bureaucracy. This may not be entirely evident from the title, nor from the table of contents. For some indeed, it may not even be evident from the contents themselves, for the book is also 'about' the characteristics of bureaucracy and non-bureaucratic forms of work organization, the diffusion of industrial democracy in Norway and the general nature of diffusion of social science findings. I believe however, that its really distinctive contribution lies in the explication of the 'logic of bureaucracy – which I take to be a specific example of what Herbst calls a behavioural logic – and the demonstration that the very axioms of this logic must be understood if we are to build and to sustain a non-bureaucratic world of work.

In some respects yesterday's winding trail from bureaucratic to democratic forms of work organization has become a highway. As Herbst himself says, "some of the basic characteristics of bureaucratic organization are becoming more clearly visible in retrospect as we move away from them to explore and implement other forms of organization" (16).

In terms of its substantive contents, part One of this book represents essentially a consolidation of existing knowledge and understanding of the processes of work democratization. (The author, to be sure, has made his own sizeable contribution to this, in his earlier writing).[i] There is now a sizeable literature, including other volumes in this series, of experiences in the democratization of work. The special value of this contribution is its penetration to the 'genetic core' of bureaucratic logic – those deep-seated and widely shared basic assumptions which delimit in our minds what is possible in terms of large-scale human organization around production tasks – and the provision of some guidance as to why, and how these axioms must be exorcised if truly democratic forms of work organization are to be more than exotic aberrations, and become the dominant form.

Commenting on the 'step-wise' character of the six alternative strategies in work democratization he discusses in chapter one, Herbst says:

"In any of these cases, while worthwhile changes in the direction of providing increased responsibility and autonomy for those at the lower level of the hierarchy can be achieved, internal inconsistencies and conflicting expectations are created. The problem is that what has been achieved can become eroded over time, or become nullified by subsequent technological and organizational changes along traditional lines" (10)

Democratizers of work are all too familiar with the 'erosion' and 'nullification' of progress that derives from the reassertion of bureaucratic behaviours and methods in the face of such a challenge. Herbst suggests that two main sources are the defensive reaction of an encircled middle management , and the survival in democratized work settings of production control techniques and planning technologies which are fundamentally bureaucratic. Thus he asserts the perpetuation of a highly sophisticated MTM system in the Volvo plants emerged as a major impediment to shop floor reforms, and recommends as the next major step in work democratization, "to work through the problem of the management and the specialist production and planning staff level" (12)

For me, a major implication of the book is that 'sowers must also weeders be'. The roots of the bureaucratic logic are virile and extensive, and have an impressive regenerative capacity. Any democratization project must clear some of this ground before a new form can be nurtured, but it essential that the tap root is found. The foundations of behaviour logic are the tap roots for social structures and their correlated belief systems, and if we are really committed to transforming such structures and belief systems, then we must discover, expose, and replace these foundations. We are reminded also that in processes of social change, apparent transformations of the behaviour logic can be achieved by moving from a given state to its converse (e.g. from a centralized bureaucratic structure to a de-centralised bureaucratic structure), to its opposite (eg. from a centralized bureaucratic structure to an unstructured chaotic state), or by rejecting the existing logic. The latter point is made in a characteristically pithy footnote:

"In fact we are more deeply bound by what we reject than by what we accept. For, that which we accept can be transcended by insight and understanding, but that which we reject and repress is beyond conscious control". (81)

The foundations of our behaviour logics are typically beyond our control in a different sense – with respect to them we are like the fish that does not know that it swims in water. It is only in the process of change that "the basic assumptions and characteristics of bureaucratic hierarchic types of organizations have become more clearly visible" (1).

In giving the emphasis that I have done in my interpretation of this work, I am hopeful that this will discourage its readers from regarding Part One as the main course and neglecting what follows. The temptation to do so lies in the fact that Part Two – 'The human foundations of organizational logics' – consists of only two short chapters, which are made to appear somewhat difficult by the presence of several pages of logical notation, and which may have no obvious appeal to those who want or expect a short cut wisdom on improving the quality of working life.

The final chapter of the book – 'Foundations for behaviour logic' – is in fact the most fundamental, and certainly the most difficult. Moreover its linkages with the subject-matter of the rest of the book are scarcely developed at all, and it is left to the reader to search out the strands that connect it with the project of creating alternatives to hierarchies. For any really serious enquirer this will entail going back to the book – 'Laws of Form' by G. Spencer-Brown (Allen and Unwin, London, 1969) of which the chapter is a development.[ii] Herbst attributes to Spencer-Brown 'a remarkable step forward in the history of Western thought' – the discovery that "… the making of a primary distinction… is by itself sufficient to generate the structure of logic…" If then the primary distinction, say into an internal and external world is made, and this by itself is sufficient to generate the structure of logic, then the structure in terms of which phenomena are apprehended can be located neither in an internal or subjective world nor in an external or objective world, and in this case both idealist and materialist type theories can be rejected." (85-86). What is offered instead is the exciting possibility of a fundamentally existential foundation for the structure of logical systems: "what the infant discovers and learns in his operational encounter with this surrounding world will be the consequences of the primary distinction which he has made between himself and his environment" (87. Here then, we enter a realm of metatheory, where the reader is thrown

back quite severely upon his or her own mental resources, and the outcome is at best, a better specification of the problem.

The preceding chapter – 'Totalitarian logics: the quest for certainty' – emphasizes the essential purposefulness and subjectivity of all logical systems, and analyses in particular Manichean and Totalitarian types of logic. The basic axioms of totalitarian logics are 'self-evident' assumptions about human nature, and such logics arise from the need to contain or counter the enormous potential variability in the way in which the world is perceived, interpreted, and responded to. Thus the basic axioms of the Manichean logic are:

1. Persons are good or evil. They cannot be both.
2. A good person can only have good characteristics, and an evil person can only have evil characteristics.

Herbst argues that such logics are employed in the compulsion of behaviour, either by their premises being presented as self-evident (which is characteristic of partisan political argument), or by their rationality per se being identified with accepted values such as truth, or effectiveness. Thus advocates of EDP systems for management are inclined to argue that such systems are of value merely because they are rational. Herbst remind us that we can reject any logical system on the grounds of either the empirical validity of its premises, or the consonance of its action consequences with our own aims and values. (72)

Because of the mutual dependence of logic and purpose – 'one can not exist nor be understood without the other' – psychological theories are in a sense contingent on the type of logic that is being used. Each type of logic structures the universe in a consistent and meaningful way, defining both the person who makes use of the logic, and his environment, in a particular way. To gain insight into the type of logic, its conceptual and theoretical ramifications, to which we are ourselves beholden is the first stage in a process of liberation. The second stage 'goes in the reverse direction' and entails of the assumptions and theories with which we build our world." (83). The end of this chapter leaves us once again in that ambiguous domain of metatheory and inner discovery, where we would perhaps all like the author to help us further, while realizing at the same time that this is a journey each must make for himself.

From this chapter we do find a direct link back to the substantive topic of creating alternatives to bureaucratic hierarchies in the workplace. Chapter two, on 'The logic of bureaucratic hierarchic design', is prefaced with the observation that "The bureaucratic system can become inhuman to the extent that it becomes the predominant system for organizing human activities, and when adherence to its rationality becomes a self-legitimizing aim and value in itself. While adherence to rules, programmes and computer logic represents an attempt to overcome the problem of arbitrary authoritarianism it does not solve the problem of human responsibility". (17)

Herbst asserts that the two basic assumptions which generate the logic of bureaucracy are as follows:

I. The organizational task can be decomposed successively into smaller and smaller independent units.
II. Each person or unit should be allocated exclusively to a single task element. (18)

These assumptions are held to produce a single structure of relationships between units, a uniform type of relationship (superior-subordinate), and a single and precise boundary around the function of each person or unit. Basic Assumption II is the crux to the problem of designing non-bureaucratic organizational forms, for if we allow that each person or unit may be multi-functional, then we create forms with the potential for 'multi-structured functioning' – organizational forms which can assume different patterns of relationships while maintaining task performance.

Three specific forms of non-hierarchical (ie. Non-bureaucratic) organization are analysed – the composite autonomous work group, the matrix group, and the network group – and these are compared in terms of six major characteristics, with the bureaucratic form.

While there can be no doubt that the 'one-man one-task' assumption is the structural lynch-pin of the bureaucratic form, it is somewhat surprising to find that the splitting of decision-making (control and coordination) from task performance is not given the same centrality, but dealt with instead in the fourth, fifth and sixth consequences of the two Basic Assumptions. It is not possible to move to 'one-man many-tasks' while maintaining the separation of control and coordination from task performance? Isn't this the character of many job enrichment schemes? And if this is so, does it not entail that the splitting of decision making and task performance should itself be treated as a basic assumption rather than as a consequence?

The most challenging parts of the discussion of non-hierarchic forms are those which deal with the network group (the authors experience of the informal European Group of social scientists is called upon here), and the consideration of how these forms may be extended to larger scale social units.

The two chapters on the process and direction of diffusion in work democratization give both a valuable summary of experiences gained so far, and a prospective view of possible future developments in the short-term. The first of the two analyses three stages in the development of action research projects, and shows how the role of the action researcher must change for each phase. The second develops a diffusion map' of the Norwegian Industrial Democracy Project, the special value of which is to draw attention to a range of possible negative offshoots and their most salient characteristics.

Overall, this is both a shorter and a slighter work than its predecessor 'Socio-technical design', although its hundred or so pages could well have become 150 in a book less sparingly written. It is in my judgment not a beginner's book, and will be of chief value to those who have had some experience with democratization projects. This, happily enough for the publisher, represents a sizeable and growing international market!

Herbst's great strength, abundantly evident in this book, is his capacity for conceptual and theoretical clarification and exposition. The finest example in this book is to be found in the final chapter. Practitioners may feel that this strength is also a source of imbalance when it comes to the description and interpretation of change programmes in the workplace, for the various democratization and diffusion strategies are discussed in a somewhat idealized environment, in which the trade unions for example are at least acquiescent, and the rank and file workers seemingly rational in thought and generous of spirit. This may be widened to the more general criticism that the book as a whole is somewhat lacking in the dimension of contextual appreciation, with the exception

perhaps of the substantial references to Scandinavian developments. For example, the historical and socio-cultural context of bureaucracy is given singularly cursory treatment at the beginning of chapter two, and no mention is made of the developments now taking place in worker education and in industrial legislation as these effect the progress of industrial democracy. However, this soon becomes accusing the book for what it is not, and that is a foolish, and endless, task.

Part of the quality of a book which is, like this one, challenging to the reader, is that it carries within its bowels the seeds of further enquiry. While this exposition essentially relates men, through their theories and concepts, to action in the world, an occasional light is flashed on what might lay "in the reverse direction, a swimming against the stream to discover the one who is engaged in theory creation" (82). If this type of understanding can be further elucidated through the written medium, it is to be hoped that such an endeavour will be a successor to this fine book.

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Footnotes:

[i] See in particular 'Autonomous group functioning', London, Tavistock, 1962; and 'Socio-technical design', London, Tavistock, 1974.

[ii] The enthusiast may also wish to refer to the discussion of Spencer-Brown's contribution in Volume 2 of the International Journal of General System, 1975.