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Comments on "War and Peace"

Abstract

[Excerpt] In "War and Peace," Baron, Dobbin, and Jennings provide an integrative analysis of the role of internal organizational requirements and external environmental forces in structuring the personnel function in modern organizations. To appreciate fully the scope of this contribution to organizational theory and research, it is useful to consider briefly the general development of studies of formal organizations over the last four decades.

Keywords

organizations, research, institutional theory, groups, structure, variation

Disciplines

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Comments

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Commentary

Comments on "War and Peace"

Pamela S. Tolbert

In "War and Peace," Baron, Dobbin, and Jennings provide an integrative analysis of the role of internal organizational requirements and external environmental forces in structuring the personnel function in modern organizations. To appreciate fully the scope of this contribution to organizational theory and research, it is useful to consider briefly the general development of studies of formal organizations over the last four decades.

Although the historical origins of the sociological study of organizations as a distinctive academic subfield are usually traced to the early twentieth century, with Weber's (1946) classic analysis of the bureaucratic form of organization and Taylor's (1911) more pragmatically oriented studies of the structure of weak organizations, the central impetus behind the contemporary proliferation of systematic, comparative analyses of sources of formal organizational structure is probably most closely identified with Woodward's (1964) pioneering work on organizational structure and technology. Over the approximately 40-year span since Woodward began her research, some marked shifts have occurred in work on this problem.

Probably the most notable change has been a general shift from closed systems models of organizations, treating formal structure as the result of efforts to manage relations among individuals and groups within an organization (e.g., Blau, 1970; Pugh, Hickson, Hinings, & Turner, 1968; Woodward, 1964), to open systems models, premised on the assumption that formal structure is driven primarily by problems of changing resource flows and relationships with major actors in the organization's environment (e.g., Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Thompson & McEwen, 1958). Most empirical analyses and explanations of structural variation have focused primarily on either internal relations or

external relations; few have attempted to consider systematically both sets of relations or the interplay of internal needs and external demands in shaping structure.

Despite changes in dominant theoretical views of the primary locus of structural variation, a remarkably constant assumption that has underpinned the vast majority of post-World War II research on formal structure is that organizations can and do adapt their structures frequently in response to immediate problems they face. This implicit assumption is evidenced both by researchers' reliance on cross-sectional data in developing and documenting explanations of structure and by the notably ahistorical character of such explanations.

“ We do not mean to imply that such firm-level considerations as scale, turnover, and labor unrest were unimportant in shaping modern personnel systems; indeed, we have alluded to their effects throughout. Nor do we wish to suggest that management and labor were thoroughly passive recipients of edicts from above. We do, however, take issue with perspectives that trace changes in the employment relationship to ineluctable imperatives shaping organizational behavior, whether those perspectives refer to surplus-expropriating capitalists, profit-maximizing managers, or utility-maximizing laborers. Such accounts are reductionistic and overly simplistic. By sanctioning modern employment practices and by encouraging the diffusion of those practices throughout the economy, the state has played a major role in the spread of bureaucratic control and internal labor markets. ”

(Baron, Dobbin, & Jennings, 1986, p. 379)

However, the notion of a normally high degree of flexibility and responsiveness in structural arrangements runs directly counter to the real-life experiences of most individuals in organizations. A common response to those who question apparently inefficient and ineffective organizational practices or policies is some variant of “This is the way we do it.” Occasionally, such responses are elaborated by historical explanations of the origins of the arrangements. Hence, in sharp contrast to traditional organizational theory, everyday practical experience in organizations is likely to lead to the conclusion that structural arrangements often have more to do with historical problems and inertial forces in organizations than with current problems and conditions.

Major paradigms in organizational theory have begun only recently to direct attention to historical and inertial aspects of organizations in explaining structure (see, e.g., Hannan & Freeman, 1977; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). A central and very valuable contribution of the work of

Baron and his coauthors on structures for personnel management is the provision of a well-developed model of what such explanations might look like.

By examining historical data on the use of various personnel practices by firms in different industries over a lengthy period, they are able to trace the patterns of adoption of personnel structures in the context of a carefully developed historical account of critical national events, an account that considers a range of corporate actors and interests involved in such adoptions. Based on the quantitative data and the more qualitative historical record, they argue that the spread of personnel structures is not completely compatible with current class conflict explanations (which, like traditional closed systems models in organizational theory, typically emphasize organizational problems of internal coordination and control as the driving force behind structural arrangements). Their analysis suggests that in most cases the spread also reflects the progressive institutionalization of rationalized personnel systems; thus the role of environmental pressures on organizations, created both by increasing governmental regulation and proselytization by representatives of the new occupation of personnel management, is also taken into account in their explanation.

It is important to note that in developing this argument, they effectively deal with a central criticism of institutional theory: its frequent failure to specify the roles of particular agents and interests in instigating social change. The analysis carefully locates the source of the institutionalization of personnel structures in the interwoven interests of the state, industrial managers, unions, and an emergent occupational group.

I have used this article in courses on occupations, as a well-articulated case study of the role of organizations in generating new professional and managerial occupations, and in courses on organizations, as an important example of a well-crafted, contextualized analysis of sources of structure. As an incidental point, it is interesting to note that most graduate students in human resource management that I have taught are both fascinated with and generally convinced by this account of their occupational origins.

“ In sum, our analyses provide some support for theoretical perspectives that link unionization with the evolution of technical and bureaucratic control in U.S. industry. However, it is clearly difficult to determine from these data whether industrial unions were “co-opted” by management’s experiments in personnel administration or to estimate precisely the magnitude of unions’ influence on changes in the employment relationship during this period. As we have seen, management sometimes

adopted and extended specialized personnel activities even in the absence of unions or proximate union threats, especially in the nonmanufacturing sector (see, e.g., banking, insurance, and trade in table 1). Also, unions genuinely perceived many of these innovations to be beneficial. The same seniority systems that provided firms with convenient bases for administering rewards also protected industrial workers from layoffs and capricious treatment. Thus, unions and bureaucratic arrangements may have been complementary means of controlling workers in many instances (particularly in CIO industries), rather than alternatives, as Pfeffer and Cohen (1984) have suggested. Increased accommodation between labor and management during this period aided the diffusion of modern personnel innovations. ”

(Baron, Dobbin, & Jennings, 1986, p. 368)

As a model for theoretically integrative research on organizational structure, this analysis has a number of implications for future work on this topic. First, although a variety of researchers have underscored the need to incorporate historical and social context into any explanation of organizational structure, strikingly few studies have heeded this injunction. “War and Peace” illustrates the theoretical richness that is gained when the historical contexts of structural analyses are explicitly taken into account. This work also demonstrates the importance of being sensitive to potential alliances of interests among various actors, both within and outside of the organization, in constructing historically grounded explanations of structure. Another way of putting this is that Baron, Dobbin, and Jennings’s analysis highlights the frequent problems that beset accounts positing a single dominant interest as the driving force of organizational change. More often than not, “competing” explanations that point to different interests as the locus of structural change are not as competitive as they seem, but rather represent partial explanations.

This approach also points up the need for careful construction and mining of historical, archival sources of data on organizations. Because longitudinal data—specifically, data that extend over several generations—are usually necessary to observe changes in structural patterns among organizations, researchers need to develop the required methodological skills for locating and using historical sources of organizational data. It is clear that such data are not without serious problems and limitations. This is pointed up by Denk’s (1988) criticism of Baron et al.’s failure to address directly the issue of sources of inter-organizational variation in the adoption of personnel structures. The kinds of data needed to answer adequately the questions raised by Denk are quite different from the data that were available to the

researchers. Hence the collection and use of archival material require not only considerable ingenuity on the part of researchers, but also careful recognition of the limitations posed by such data to the documentation of underlying theoretically causal mechanisms. In some cases, it is likely that such limitations could be overcome in part through more in-depth historical analyses of a subset of cases designed to supplement the analyses of the broader patterns of change.

Finally, although Baron et al. do not specifically raise the issue of processes of population-level change, their research underscores the need for empirical research addressing the current theoretical debate over respective roles of selection and adaptation in generating changes in organizational populations. Did the increasing prominence of formal personnel practices across industries occur primarily through the widespread adoption of such practices by extant organizations, or through environmental selection of organizations that resisted such change? This issue, which has important implications for the research agenda of organizational studies, requires the kind of broad-scale, longitudinal research exemplified in "War and Peace."