Let's Get Organized: The Missing Spontaneous Action in Organization Theory

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We speak of strategy as being the firm's long-term policy, directed mainly outside, and structure as being the given organization of the firm, directed inside. Got it: strategy and structure.

Something is missing, though: namely, the shifting contexts of both markets outside and ethics inside, and especially their principles of evolution. They of course sit beyond the reach of the firm's policy. The manager can't prevent the market evolving out from under her product, or the ethics of her employees and other stakeholders drifting away from her suppositions. The manager does what she can. Good job. But meanwhile the surrounding markets and the underlying ethics evolve, according to laws of motion often separate from, though unpredictably interacting with, whatever policy she can manage intentionally.

This admittedly is no shocking discovery. Analysis of markets is the conventional concern of economists and economic historians, by contrast with—and sometimes in irritated tension with—business historians and students of management, concerned with firm-level strategy and structure. As the Blessed Adam Smith asserted, in one of only two instances of the metaphor in his published wrings, "he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an Invisible Hand to promote an end which was not part of his intention" (Smith 1776, vol. 2, bk. 4, ch. 2.9). Thus markets.

And Smith practiced, too, the analysis of stakeholder ethics, viewed as a product of social and personal visible and invisible hands. His other book, for which he first earned a Europe-wide reputation as a philosopher of ethics, was *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Smith 1759 [1790]). An economics following Adam that acknowledges both markets and ethics, using both the mathematical methods of the sciences of things and the verbal methods of the sciences of words, has been called recenltly "Smithian economics," or in a word "humanomics." (Smith and Wilson 2019; McCloskey 2021a).

Not everyone agrees. A convenient dogma in so-called neo-institutionalism among economists, following the Nobel economists Oliver Williamson and Douglass North, is that ethics, rhetoric, narrative, the words change very slowly, and can be assumed to be a mere backdrop to market logic—a backdrop painted over perhaps with the scrawled word "culture." Thankfully, says the neo-institutionalist economist, culture and its annoyingly humanistic and non-mathematical logic need not be investigated. Ethics, rhetoric, narrative, words, and other feminine fancies can be ignored, as irrelevant to the tough-guy action at the front the stage: incentives, maximizing, game theory, intentionality, strategy, and structure.

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During the past few decades, as economists have taken over schools of business, the dogma of culture-as-irrelevant-backdrop has spilled into the management literature (Khurana 2007). For example, Williamson in his reflections on governmental bureaucracies as "public agency," calls individual ethics learned at ones mother's knee "probity," that is, "the loyalty and rectitude with which the . . . transaction is discharged" (Williamson 1999, p322). Like all orthodox Samuelsonian economists, Williamson wants to reduce ethics to incentives: "Probity concerns will be relieved by governance structures to which reliable responsiveness can be ascribed," by which he means incentives that work to make it unnecessary that anyone actually have probity (p. 323). "Probity concerns," he claims, only arise in "extreme instances." "Breach against probity is better described as inexcusable incompetence or even betrayal. In the limit, such breach is punishable as treason" (p. 324).

His uncharacteristically hot language ("extreme," "betrayal", "treason") signals a common supposition that ethics is confined to grand issues such as murder or abortion or outright fraudulence in accounting. Yet ethics is also about daily good (or bad) will and professionalism (or its lack)—an accountant doing as well as she can, or for that matter a professor of economics or management earnestly trying to tell the truth about firms or bureaucracies.

Williamson claims repeatedly, as economists do when adhering to their dogma that one should not dispute about tastes (and the underlying positivist dogma that ethics is *merely* a matter of taste), that ethics always changes slowly. Yet there is no persuasive historical or experimental or common-sense evidence for such a claim. Sometimes ethics changes quickly. Sometimes it does not. You have to find out. Sometimes ethics is independent of incentives, as it is often among coreligionists, for example. Sometimes it shifts paradoxically against incentives, as when parents start coming late to pick up their little children from daycare when a money price for lateness is imposed, a shift from the sacred to the profane (Gneezy and Rustichini 2000). Slow or fast changing, it is not always a non-correlated backdrop.

For example, with big consequences for business the social ethics of labor-force participation by married women changed quickly in the United Kingdom during the 1960s and 1970, partly because of the birth-control pill and partly because of an ideological upheaval, feminism (McCloskey 2001). The ethics of the Roman state in the late first century BCE did not change slowly from republican to imperial. The ethics of Christianity in northern Europe in the early 16th century did not change slowly from a relaxed régime of papal indulgences to a rigorous Protestantism of congregational shaming. The ethics in such cases changed much more quickly than the institutions, which is why for instance Imperial Rome still pretended to have a powerful Senate and why Anglican Protestantism still claims (in this case with entire justice, I must say) to be a "holy, catholic, and apostolic church" back to St. Peter.

Ethical change, not solely the material incentives beloved of neo-institutionalists and neo-behaviorists and neo-positivists, made the modern world (McCloskey 2010, 2016, 2021a). The ethics in Britain evaluating trade and betterment in the late 18th century changed quickly from contempt to admiration. Ethics—understood not as individual ethics alone à la Max Weber but as what is honored or dishonored by the rest of the society—changed. What did not change, contrary to the claims of the neo-institutional economic historians, was the institutional environment. A time-traveler from England in 1630 or from Britain in 1730 would not have been astonished by the

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institutional arrangements of the United Kingdom in 1830—except for the shift during the previous century to the transcendent power of a (thoroughly corrupt) Parliament and the weakening by 1830 of the (thoroughly corrupt) King. The law courts in 1830 worked pretty much as they had since the 13th century. Property rights had not changed. Criminal law was still fiercely slanted against the poor. The legal institutions, such as criminal, contract, property, and corporate law, changed *after* the ethical change of the Bourgeois Revaluation, not before.

The institutions of strategy and structure in a firm, or indeed the comparable institutions of policy in a whole economy, are dead letters, in other words, if they lack ethical backing—the bus driver taking professional responsibility for the plans and the lives of the sixty people under his care, or the politician resisting the well-placed bribe offered by a highway construction firm. Professionalism, ethics, rhetoric matter, every day, not only "in extreme instances." Consider the upright judges and prosecutors in Italy who went after the Mafia in the early 1990s, at the cost of their lives. Sometimes the instances *are* "extreme."

When the price the Hudson Bay Firm offered Indians in Canada for beaver pelts was high enough, the beaver population was depleted, in line with the economist's routine logic. But the anthropologist's logic was crucial, too, making the economists relevant. As the economic historians Ann Carlos and Frank Lewis explain, "Indian custom regarding the right to hunt for food and other aspects of their 'Good Samaritan' principle mitigated against the emergence of strong trespass laws and property rights in fur-bearing animals; conflict in the areas around the Hudson Bay hinterland contributed to an environment that was not conducive to secure tenure, and attitudes towards generosity and even a belief in reincarnation may have played a role" in running against European property rules (Carlos and Lewis 1999, p. 726). The neo-institutionalist economist John Davis, echoing Karl Polanyi, speaks of trading as an "instituted process," which puts it well. The institution is the anthropology, the process the economics, the legal limits the realm of courts and law. They all matter, or can.

It's technical, if you wish. Econometrically speaking, for example, if the variables emphasized respectively by the economist, the anthropologist, and the lawyer are not orthogonal—which is to say if they are not sufficiently independent of each other in statistical terms, or alternatively if there is reason to believe that a combined variable has its own a separate influence (such as anthropological customs interacting with economic institutions, as in the fur trade)—then an estimate of the coefficients will be biased. Larger samples will not solve the problem. The bias is important in a tale of the economist's price variable if the anthropological and legal variables are important. If laws adjust to the economics, for example, an attribution of an exogenous effect of law's dominion would obviously be biased above what it truly is.

Institutional structures—organization charts, instituted spans of control, legal rules, generally accepted accounting principles—do not suffice. In the wake of the 2008 collapse of banking Sten Jönsson has long led a group of academic accountants at the Gothenburg Research Institute in analyzing "the appropriate banker"(Jönsson 2014; Torfoson 2014). The point is that structures enforcing rules do not work by themselves. *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes*, the Romans asked: who will enforce the very enforcers? Answer, if answered at all: the professionalism of the bankers, not much in evidence for example in Iceland at the time.

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Ideological change brings a new impartial spectator into the widespread habits of the heart, "socialized subjectivity," as Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant put it (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 126). A new egalitarian idea in Europe broke the cake of custom. Bus drivers and politicians, professors and housewives, felt themselves empowered to be equally responsible. Surprisingly, over the next two centuries the liberal pan of treating ordinary people as being liberated and honorable made the world by historical standards startlingly wealthy, raising up the wretched of the earth.

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The missing bits beyond strategy and structure are like language. In his speech to parliament in 1928 recommending that Sweden adopt a national socialist model on Bismarckian lines of *folkhemmet* ("the people's home"), Per Albin Hansson had of course a rhetorical strategy; and his formal structure relied of course on the grammar of Swedish. But the immense perlocutionary force of his speech depended on the ancient yet evolving traditions of the Riksag, the balance just then of Swedish politics between corporatist conservatives and social democrats, the mood of the listeners at the time, their uptake—the middle bits, the non-intentional evolution slow or quick in hearts and in markets. The point is "organizing outside organizations," as we say here.

The "Austrian" economists such as Friedrich Hayek and Peter Boettke call such matters "spontaneous order." At the market-and-economy level it's like the history of the forest as against the firm-level policy of the whole tree. And at the individual ethical level it's like the detailed biology of leaves, bark, and roots deep inside a single tree. It's a startling finding in fact of recent studies of trees that they communicate actively through their roots. So do people within and without a firm. Words matter.

For making, say, batteries for autos, Ronald Coase in 1937 pointed to the choice between the visible hand of management inside a firm and the inviable hand of the market outside (Coase 1937). DIY, Do It Yourself, or buy it? The auto firm can choose a strategy and structure on allegedly rational grounds. But the perlocutionary force depends on more.

And if the economist modeling a history looks beyond orthodox economics she realizes, too, as Coase did, that rational economic man as a template for a social science is nice but incomplete. The Austrians speak of "human action," which is their term for the theologian's free will (McCloskey 2020). It contrasts with the mere re-action—maximizing known utility functions subject to known constraints—that other neoclassical economists believe suffices for an economic science.

The Austrians, though, should be willing to go further in the directions suggested by the present special issue of the journal. With rare exceptions such as Ludwig Lachmann and Virgil Storr, even the Austrians fall into an organizational fallacy, a centralizing statism such as the neo-insitutionalists relentlessly advocate (Lachmann 1990; Storr 2012). Let's get organized, they cry. Let's have more management of strategy and structure. Let's set "culture" to the side.

Let's not.

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"Organizing" of course means, "making into an organ (Greek *organon,* tool), a biological organ like a visible hand of the manager or of the bureaucrat." The very word "manage" comes from

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Latin *manus*, "hand," as "manufacturing" from "making by a hand." A non-visible hand is metaphorically an organ, too, pushing us this way or that. But people strongly prefer to *see* a hand on the tiller, a masterfully strategic CEO or a brilliantly structural maker of economic policy. Thus the institutional "designers" of incentives and behaviorist "nudgers" of citizens or the statist "drivers" of innovation.

The wish to identify a literal hand comes partly from the rhetoric of praise and blame characterizing human storytelling, the "moral" of the story, we say. Humans evaluate all day long. We want to know which cowboy wears the white hat and which the black. We want to know who is the evil god or the nasty witch or the corrupt politician or the incompetent manager who caises badness in the world, so that we can so easily fix it. Appease the god, burn the witch, get rid of the corrupt politician, dismiss the incompetent manager, and badness will end. No invisible hand about it. It's the model in sermons and newspapers. Herbert Spencer noted as early as 1853 two of the major templates for modern news stories, still in vigorous use today: "Take up a daily paper and you will probably find a leader exposing the corruption, negligence, or mismanagement of some State-department. Cast your eye down the next column, and it is not unlikely that you will read proposals for an extension of State-supervision" (Spencer 1853). Put the right god, witch, politician, or manager in charge of a state with the monopoly of coercion, and then all will be well. Power doesn't corrupt. Bad people do. Find the bad 'uns and get rid of them. Elevate the very numerous saints and heroes and men on white horses ,with white hats, whom are so easily detected. For example, they have advanced degrees in economics. No need to worry about the theory of moral sentiments.

And high theory since the Enlightenment has claimed, as Isaiah Berlin put it (as a liberal, he did not approve), that the state can accomplish whatever it rationally proposes to do. It's the managerial revolution noted and seen as inevitable by James Burnham (Burnham 1941). As early as 1776 Thomas Paine, the wandering propagandist for the American and French revolutions, wrote in *Common Sense* that "We have it in our power to begin the world over again" (Paine 1776 [1987], p. 109). The "we" can employ the visible hands impowered by an extension of management to the whole society. Said Lenin in 1917, "The whole of society will have become a single office and a single factory, with equality of labor and pay," with that brilliant manager Vladimir Ilyich Lenin in charge. (Lenin 1917). Burnham approved, George Orwell was appalled.

It is the instrumental logic that most management theorists have dearly loved since Frederick Winslow Taylor articulated it in many editions, such as 1911, or the conscious maximizing that economists have dearly loved since Paul Anthony Samuelson articulated it in 1947 and many imitations after (Taylor 1911; Samuelson 1947) . Little wonder in such a modern managerial environment that Lenin could exercise his managerial fantasy, or that much later Samuelson himself could persistently expect that the visible management of Lenin's heirs in the USSR would in fifteen years overcome the so-imperfect invisible hands of the market in the USA (Levy and Peart 2011). Adam Smith hated it, and wrote in 1759 that "the man of system seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chess-board. He does not consider that . . . every single piece has a principle of motion of its own" (Smith 1759 [1790], VI.II.42) The economist Mariana Mazzucato is a splendid recent example of the man (and woman, dear Adam) of system (Mazzucato 2013; McCloskey and Mingardi 2020b).

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Taylor's goal (much quoted, though the exact source is obscure) was to make "neat, understandable world in the factory, an organization of men whose acts would be planned, coordinated, and controlled under continuous expert direction." It serves also for Samuelson's "new welfare economics" of the 1930s and its affection for more and more of what we rationally propose to do. They followed Auguste Comte's positivist *savoir pour prevoir, prevoir pour pouvoir* of 1830-1842, the reason side of the Enlightenment project.

Yet the helmsman at the ship's wheel has his own personal and ethical motives, exercised in free will. And, after all, the wine-dark sea is there, too, with waves and tides that do not regard the little craft. Both the inside and outside of the firm depend on more than instrumental reasoning and conscious maximizing.

Something we have slowly learned about such human groupings over the past forty years or so, against the positivist program of schools of business during the same period, is that they are conversations, markets, worlds, spontaneous orders working on the speakers in and listeners to the organization. Barbara Czarniawska has been saying this for decades. Organizations have a "rhetoric"—what the literary critic Wayne Booth defined as the "art of discovering good reasons [or sometimes bad ones], finding what really warrants assent because any reasonable person ought to be persuaded [or any fool anyway is] by what has been said" (Booth 1974, p. xiii). The listeners have perforce a hermeneutic, too—an art of listening, good or bad, as the pioneering practitioners of humanomics, Arjo Klamer and Don Lavoie have long observed (Klamer 1996; Lavoie 1990).

We say here that "A connecting collective actions, or 'doings' to one another. . . is the main trait of organizing." But such a saying is at least not complete. We go on to say, "and they have to be coordinated, connected, and stabilized – temporarily or for good. So, to use Bruno Latour's (2013) vocabulary, how are scripts written and dispatching performed."

But a script implies a playwright, the way a pocket watch found in a farm field implies a Maker. Since Adam Smith and Charles Darwin we have learned that a perceived order does not always entail some visible hand ordering it. Many thinkers at all positions along of the conventional political spectrum suppose that unless a priest or a bureaucrat is guiding a society, it must disintegrate. National conservatives think so, as do social democrats from quite another position. Yet social integration comes also from the middle bit without intention. Language and innovation do, and they in turn frustrates the best laid schemes of managers.

Anyway a script works best artistically speaking with improvisation. A wooden reading of Ibsen's lines will not inhabit Hedda Gabler. A jazz standard such as "Take Five" or "So What" provides the original script. But the performance, as the Duke Ellington's number in 1943 put it, "don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing." Gene Krupa, the great drummer in Benny Goodman's band, told of the first number in the group's inaugural performance in 1938 at Carnegie Hall. The band was not doing well, overawed by the classical-music reputation of the Hall, far from the plebeian origins of jazz. One of the musicians explained it later as feeling like a whore in church. When Krupa's turn came, though, he went nuts on the drums, and woke up his colleagues. He had saved the performance with a notably non-centrally organized riff, neither strategy nor structure. It's the reason that jazz and rock music are unpopular in authoritarian countries, while classical ballet and symphonies are not. Jazz and rock embody liberty and its

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spontaneous order. The symphony under a conductor or ballet under a choreographer embodies strategy and structure.

Annemarie Mol (2010) asks how is ordering (aligning) and coordination done, in informal organizing. But "informal organizing" is too easy, and turns the theorizing into mush, as in neo-institutionalism by many economists and economic historians. The word "informal" does all the work. If norms, speech, ethics, and ideology are lumped into the word "institutions," as is usual in this literature, the theory morphs into the Neo-institutionalist Tautology (McCloskey 2021b). Social structure, it bravely affirms, causes social structure. *S* is *S*. Uh-huh. It's irrefutable because it's true by definition: The tautology is the reason that the formulas "institutions matter" and "stagey and structure covers all" sound so obvious, and why some neoinstitutionalists and some students of management get angry when someone questions them. "Social structure is social structure, you idiot, don't you see? Black-letter laws are the same as customs of academic courtesy. Organization charts suffice for organizations. Shut up."

The main trait of an organization is instead hermeneutical, a humanly-perceived order *after* the doings. We see order in the starry constitutions. We do things to each other all day long, and in a Leibnitzian sense everything is connected with everything else, from the beginning of time. The English poet and priest John Donne declared in 1624 that "No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less." It's true, and undermines an ethics and science of intentionality.

The sociologist Howard Becker calls such spontaneous orders "worlds" (Becker 1982 [2008]). It's highly relevant that Becker as a teenager in the 1940s was a paid professional at jazz piano. In an e-mail exchange with a French sociologist in 2005 he contrasts his "world" with the nasty power plays characteristic of Pierre Bourdieu's "fields," or with any other social theory that focuses on mechanical striving without socialization, such as pre-Gramscian Marxian thought or the economist's illiberal theory of games:

The [Bourdieuian] metaphor "field"—contains people, all sorts of people, who are in the middle of doing something which requires them to pay attention to each other, to take account consciously of the existence of others and to shape what they do in the light of what others do. In such a world, people . . . develop their lines of activity gradually, seeing how others respond to what they do and adjusting what they do next in a way that meshes with what others have done and will probably do next. . . . The resulting collective activity is something that perhaps no one wanted, but is the best everyone could get out of this situation and therefore what they all, in effect, agreed to.

Becker and Pessin 2005

It's jazz improvisation, and also the vision of liberal economics since Adam Smith. Becker and Smith, with Benny Goodman and Gene Krupa, are suggesting that notwithstanding the attempts of modernist experts to lay down the future, in a free society you can't tell what's next. In a jazz riff or a human life or a firm or an economy, if it ain't got that swing, it don't mean a thing.

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