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Organizational Consultants, Conspirators, and Colonizers

WARNER WOODWORTH

An argument is made that the discipline of organization development needs to be scrutinized from a critical perspective. Thus, a series of value-laden objections to mainstream consulting practices and organizational theory are raised: consultants function as the servants of those in power, technical assistance often breeds further dependence on outside expertise, neutrality serves as a cloak for subtle partisanship, and the field suffers from an overemphasis on emotionality rather than structure and macrorelationships. Underlying this critique is a plea for the legitimacy of advocacy intervention and a recognition of the political and economic context within which the practitioner operates.

The present task can be initiated by paraphrasing Camus: "Social scientists cannot condemn themselves, so others must do it for them." A primary need in contemporary society is to examine the underlying assumptions and ideologies of the expert. The expertise on which this paper focuses is that of the consultant who intervenes in institutions such as schools and government agencies and, more heavily, in business and industrial organizations.

The discipline of organization development (OD) is rapidly becoming the popular sport of enlightened gentlemen managers who call on the outsider for planning, research, and advice. The functions of the court jester and the priestly legitimizer of the feudal kingdom are mixed, and both roles preserve and increase the divine right of the king. Organizational theory is oppressively based on an alignment with the powerful rather than the powerless, and organizational change is perceived as gradualistic rather than revolutionary. Research in organizations serves mainly to exploit captive subject populations—students in the school, patients in

the hospital, or workers in the factory—and the “findings” are cloaked in a veil of political neutrality that avoids the responsibility for substantive action.

What is needed is an advocacy intervention that would mobilize groups at the bottom of the social structure. Some of the origins and consequences of behavioral science consultants, primarily as they manifest themselves in corporate America, are outlined in the following paragraphs.

The consultant approach to organizations has been twofold. First, a literature of pathology was created in which various organizational “sicknesses” were described with accompanying symptoms. For instance, the authoritarian leadership style is analogous to a cancerous growth in the organism. Handbooks of malignant and healthy terminology were created to inform the public of organizational afflictions. Then networks were established, along the lines of the American Medical Association, so that budding professionals could travel around as diagnosticians and healers. So it is today; the consultant, a kind of jet-set shaman, covers a wide territory as he or she sells rituals and magic potions. In short, consultants first created a perceived need for help, and then they just happened to be able to provide it.

From a broader analytical perspective, the concept of organization development is a kind of gentle but persuasive social aggression picked up from consultants and fostered by management. It is very much an upper-middle-class notion that is popular among supervisors and social scientists of that societal grouping—people who are affluent, sensitive, and concerned. In their typically condescending way, they have determined that what the lower classes need is participation and the more, the better. Their view is that what workers want is identity, not salary; communication, not information; love and acceptance, not respect. The end claim is for organizational democracy, which is often a veneer tacked over the cheap wood of the company aristocracy.

THE SERVANTS OF POWER

Consultants come into systems to serve the way CIA advisors serve in foreign countries: they investigate, make recommendations, and help as the local government sees fit. They are basically in a conspiratorial relationship with management, seeking not cooperation but cooptation of resistant forces within the company, and they try to build these oppositional elements into the work system. The face of management needs cosmetic surgery in the process, so that supervisors appear less punitive than in bygone years. Thus brutality is cloaked with suavity.

Although most OD practitioners criticize Skinner (1971) for his overt philosophy and methods of human control, they neglect the implications of their own big brotherhoodism. The behaviorist is at least open about his strategies (“openness” is a good OD word). That management uses change agents to domesticate the worker is often not even recognized by

the professional. One's allegiance to the lords, however, is all too obvious in the consulting fee received, which has in some circles been referred to as the "great training robbery." Anyone paid \$700-\$1,000 per day can only be on a par with and tightly allied to the top executives who buy such services.

The consultant's job becomes one of interpreting reality, trying to make sense out of the organizational situation. He or she censors and filters out irrelevant or "interfering" variables. It is curious, for instance, to note the almost total omission of words like "labor" or "union" in OD literature except for events such as Scott Meyers' seminar for managers entitled "Making Unions Unnecessary." Of course, consultants would not admit to any bias here; they are just writing and talking about the "facts." Their role is not only to distort and rule out some forces within the system, but to build others in. They emphasize things like team building, which is an attempt to win workers over to the side of their archrivals so that management can have togetherness. Openness is valued because it gives supervisors more access to labor and more data from it. Trust becomes a key part of the jargon because it makes workers more vulnerable, and, hence, the confidence of the workers allows for further manipulation. Involvement and shared decision making give an illusion of participation, even if the decisions only concern things such as what to do about the China menace or what color of toilet paper to place in the rest rooms. In the end, the consultant functions as a P.R. man to convince the rank and file that things have changed, to swear that some real progress is being made, and in a kind of gentle, brainwash fashion to soothe the doubts of those who cannot yet see the "difference" OD has made in their working lives.

Another troublesome area is the question of client selection. Exclusiveness is built in from the start as the practitioner seeks and/or responds primarily to elephantine corporations who can pay the exorbitant fees and provide a refuge of political safety. Where are the OD-trained interventionists working with poverty programs, minority groups, environmentalists, and community organizations? The gap between value-free rhetoric and reality appears large indeed. The amoral tradition is typified by the position of Argyris (1970), who argues that one can work within a system like the Ku Klux Klan and still maintain his own integrity. Instead of recognizing any contradictions between OD and racism, hatred, and murder, he sets up an image of the interventionist as a technician interested in "valid information." Underneath it all, his real concern comes out at the end of the discussion, when he suggests that if things do not work out, "the intervenor can choose to leave *without being charged with bias*" (p. 24, author's emphasis). This argument, from one whom many consider the consultant's consultant, is an incredible admission that his fear is of being seen as biased! And by the KKK, at that! This same logic of objectivity would seem to apply to helping "humanize" the Stalinist purges of Russia or the U.S. government's attack on the Black Panthers, leftist student groups, and liberal politicians. It is ludicrous in

the extreme to picture a consultant working to obtain more participative decisions within the Klan or creating more trust among napalm manufacturers like Dow. What is needed in systems like these is the *de-utilization* of scientific knowledge. The only moral kind of intervention would be that designed to disrupt and overthrow the existing order of things, not to create more “valid information.”

KISSING THE HAND THAT FEEDS

A further problem in organizational practice is the orientation to top management. The cardinal rule is that a consultant must have the support and involvement of the highest levels in order to effect change. So a great deal of energy and time is invested in working with the powerful in the hope that, as they change their behavior and as they come out in support of a new leadership approach, it will filter down through the system and eventually affect everyone. The problem, of course, is that the pyramid peakers are oftentimes the most resistant to change. So a year or two goes by without any major improvement at the top, and the effort ultimately fails. House (1967), among others, has noted the conflict and dissatisfaction that lower level people experience when new training programs are so very much at odds with the behavior of their superiors.

There are other interests in working with top management than those claimed by the theoretical view of OD literature. It is probably an ego trip for the dusty professor to associate with the power structure—being invited to board-room luncheons, visiting in executive homes, taking a weekend on the yacht, and so on. Another source of the interest may lie in Freud's notion of identification with the aggressor. Bettelheim's (1943) description of concentration-camp prisoners who emulated their guards in dress, language, and behavior comes to mind when one reflects on the consulting style of many practitioners, who try to resolve the gap between their own extremity and the wealthy and powerful whom they are hired to serve. An illustration of the cooptation of service to the commanding officers is Eric Trist's statement in Schmidt's (1970) probe of organizational frontiers:

I would like to go on working in my role as a social scientist and as a professional as long as I can, so that I can have that relation with decision-makers of any kind which enlarges their field of options or alternatives If I am simply an advocate, I lose my property of increasing insight and understanding of all the issues, of opening up the situation for the people who are there. (p. 60)

Although I am not wishing to attack the author personally and although I acknowledge the likelihood of constructive motives, taken at face value the above statement suggests several assumptions and biases that unintentionally typify much of the OD field. These kinds of “politricks” underlie the orientation of many consultants, to the detriment of themselves and of the systems in which they work. We might see in Trist the

following: his relationship with decision makers, how sweet it is; a confession of susceptibility in working with “any kind” (which presumably could include the Mafia, John Birch Society, General Electric, and the Daughters of the American Revolution), indicating a type of house-servant morality; his declaration that advocacy is simple compared with the profundity of the true social scientist (translation: consultant); his intimation that “increasing insight” is God’s gift to the practicing social sciences; and his humble statement that he has the ability to understand *all* of the issues. Little wonder that the consultant is perceived so generally by the outside world as conceited, a Wonder Woman, or Captain Marvel; whereas in reality one is just a home-grown “crypto-deviationist antipeople incrementalist” (for a self-description, see Moy-nihan, 1970, p. 35).

Whatever the motives of the consultant, a potentially better perspective (if one is not concerned about a long-term relationship with the client) is that of working more at the lower echelons of the organization. Change at the top is so minimal that it might be more effective just to obtain a *carte blanche* to work throughout the system. Then, by working at the base with a more wide-ranging set of objectives, the consultant might increase the likelihood of substantial change. By extending the range of purposes, I am suggesting that, instead of gearing our approach to top-level concerns of how to work with subordinates, we reverse it. Thus consultant concerns could include helping workers learn how to (1) cope with management, (2) exploit the system to fulfill their interests, and (3) defend themselves from manipulation. Beyond sheer survival, the intervention strategies could focus on tactics for escalating productive conflict instead of resolution and on means of combat by improved methods of striking, revolution, and so forth. Strategies of this sort would not only shake loose the organization, but they would also expose the OD discipline to some fresh breezes of a new wind.

Another shortcoming of intervention approaches is the inability to shake off the old dogmatism of research and theory inherited from the social sciences. The businessman is practical, and he wants results. Part of the original impetus for fields like OD emerged from the desire to give management direct advice instead of just collecting data to write up in articles. Therefore, consultants go into the system under the guise of action, yet many of them end up collecting research results again! Lewin’s classic dictum was that a social phenomenon cannot be understood until one has changed it, yet his offspring continue to try to understand before they attempt to change. Thus they never move on to real action.

The presence of radical change in the literature on organizations is more of a prayer than a theory. The discipline seems to have an a priori commitment to equilibrium, which, in Likert’s (1967) timetable, is at least three to four years before any major movement is visible. Of course this has a payoff for the consulting firm in terms of a nice fat fee. The organization may experience results, too, perhaps less tangible, but at

least along the lines of a good feeling. After investing great wads of money, it should at least *feel* good. The evolutionary notion is like drug addiction: once a company is into it, it is hard to withdraw. The consultant offers a placebo or two along the way: a magic formula, a GRID package, and whatever else he or she can think of to sell as a good capitalist. However, much of that kind of paraphernalia acts to block rather than to effect major change. Among other things, such placebos give top managers the illusion that they are doing something to improve. But again, the medical model is evident. Consultants cannot cure organizations any more than doctors can heal patients or psychiatrists can really help clients. Rather than to seek dramatic changes for the better, OD interventionists need to maintain the sicknesses of the system to ensure that companies will need their expertise.

Therefore, conceptualizations continue to suffer and to create suffering. The stress on harmony and cooperation effectively keep the masses in their place, as their “place” is defined by management. Before consultants can ever become a real liberating force for change, they must recognize the need to de-colonialize theory before freeing the people. Note how oppressive and dogmatic OD concepts have become. For instance, McGregor’s later book, *The Professional Manager* (1967), suggests that Theory X and Theory Y were never intended to be used as labels of management style, but rather as illustrative frameworks for viewing explicit values about human behavior; yet Y has become a leadership pattern as rigidly insisted on as anything under an overtly authoritarian manager. It appears that the discipline is useful in hypocritically enforcing democratic standards.

THE HISTORICAL ANALOGY—IMPERIAL INTERVENTION

Another context in which former theories and methods parallel those of today emphasizes the potential of manipulation and subtle abuses in OD methods. The terms included trust, initiative, organizational mission, delegation of authority, and group decisions. If these concepts have a ring of familiarity, it may not be from the Addison-Wesley OD Series, but it may rather be an echo from the past. The time was the late Thirties and early Forties; the place was Europe; the event was the rise of the Nazi regime. The notion of a new “industrial self-responsibility” was created by one of Hitler’s closest associates (a consultant?), Albert Speer (1970). As head of the Third Reich’s industrial organization, Speer directed some 10,000 assistants and aids (the largest OD team in history!) in making the Nazi machine more efficient and humane. A series of short but impacting interventions created new “methods of democratic economic leadership” (p. 211). The strategy of the internal change agent (Speer) was described as follows: “I exploited the phenomenon of the technician’s often blind devotion to his task. Because of what seems to be the moral neutrality of technology, these people were without any scruples about their activities” (p. 212). The effort, like all good OD projects, yielded “solid results”: the

production of guns went up 27 percent, tank manufacturing increased 25 percent, and ammunition rose 97 percent. As Speer says in good OD jargon, "We had mobilized reserves that had hitherto lain fallow" (p. 210). In the long run, however, the method was not adopted sufficiently throughout the empire to create widespread change. Speer's warning to Hitler in 1944 is typical of insightful interventionists. He suggested that if they did not arrive at a different system of organization (see Likert's Systems 1-4, 1967), it would be "evident to posterity that our outmoded, tradition-bound, and arthritic organizational system had lost the struggle" (p. 213). Thus, the imperative to change was that of conquering the entire world by the corrupt and power-hungry methods of a new democratic, participative management. Perhaps today the Fuehrer would take pride in seeing the rise and acceptance of OD ideology in the new national supremacy of corporate America. It causes one to reflect on Santayana's observation that those who do not remember the past are forced to relive it.

The day may come when organizational psychologists are able to look beyond the naivete of existing theory to the larger issues of class, race, profits, and conflict. At that time the current perspective may be perceived as the attempt to create an illusion of humane organizations amidst the reality of a technocratic society. Illich (1973) has articulated the problem well in his work on convivial society:

Movements that seek control over existing institutions give them a legitimacy, and also render their contradictions more acute. Changes in management are not revolutions. The shared control of workers and women, or blacks and the young, does not constitute a social reconstruction if what they claim to control are industrial corporations. Such changes are at best new ways to administer an industrial mode of production which, thanks to these shifts, continues unchallenged . . . They expend management, and at an even faster rate, they degrade labor. (p. 72)¹

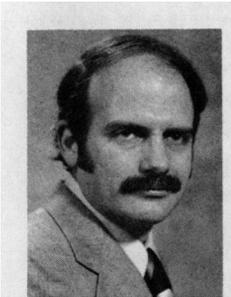
The need for advocating more substantive issues than T-group solutions and two-way-communication patterns should be evident. One wonders where the psychologists are who will stop their fiddling and go out to fight the organizational fires burning in contemporary America. Gvishiani (1972) cites Lenin's warning that bourgeois professors, although they may do fine piecemeal research, cannot be trusted "one iota" with respect to general theory, but they function instead as "learned salesmen of the capitalist class." The challenge facing organizational change for us today is to question the work of the experts so that, as Lenin says, we may "be able to lop off their reactionary tendency" (p. 442). Perhaps what is necessary, to paraphrase Nietzsche, is the *trans-scientization* of organizational research. We need to turn everything over and discover the dark, raw, crude, and neglected aspects of the nature of social science. By inverting the study of social systems, we may be able to move closer to the

¹Reprinted from: I. Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973. Used with permission.

reality we seek, and by so doing we may sense the mythology that consultants have invented to sell to the world and that they themselves have ended up believing.

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