M@n@gement

Special Issue

■ James G. MARCH   2013
In praise of beauty
M@n@gement, 16(5), 732-738.

In praise of beauty

James G. MARCH

Stanford University, CA
march@stanford.edu

One of the misfortunes of aging is the way in which the polite willingness of others to tolerate superannuated homilies reinforces a proclivity to pontificate. As one ages, one moves from writing papers that have something to say to writing papers that have nothing to say but say it with great seriousness. Unfortunately, awareness of the self-indulgence of age does not ordinarily inhibit it, as this essay, for which Olivier Germain (and possibly Milan Kundera) must take some responsibility, clearly demonstrates.

I have read the contributions of my friends and colleagues to the *M@n@gement* discourse with great interest but with an overpowering awareness of my own irrelevance to many of them. The issues they explore are grand and important: How does management theory contribute to the well-being of business, society, the poor, peace, and justice? What are the fundamental epistemological, ethical, and moral premises of management research? What is and should be the relationship between management theory and the prejudices of the intellectual, business, political, and social establishments?

I do not list those issues to mock them. They are enormously important, and I suffer from the embarrassment of feeling I am not sufficiently involved in debating and resolving them. Nevertheless, I will speak here for the virtues of disengagement from usefulness—as a coda not for everyone, but for me. For a number of years, I taught a course on organizational leadership that used great fictional literature (Shakespeare's Othello, G. B. Shaw's Saint Joan, Tolstoy's War and Peace, and Cervantes' Don Quixote) as texts. Invariably, some MBA student would ask: "What is the relevance of these ideas for management?" My equally invariable response was: "That is your problem, not mine." I play with ideas, happily observing as others try to make them useful and feeling grateful for their efforts, but without ever thinking that usefulness is the point.

This posture undoubtedly stems in part from my own incompetence at the relevance game. However, it is reinforced by 60 years of watching organization studies evolve. Over those years, I have come to believe that seeking relevance in the generation and development of fundamental ideas is more often dysfunctional than it is useful, that the ideas that transform ways of thinking about practical problems rarely come from a direct focus on those problems, and that the joys of appreciating the beauty of interesting ideas provide adequate justification for them. The single-minded pursuit of relevance is essential for effectiveness; it is useful for constructing railroads and manufacturing products, but it needs to be balanced in life by the inexplicable exuberance of a commitment to the beauty of ideas.

As a personal example that may suffer from its own obscurity, I would cite the ideas of Michael Cohen, James G. March, and Johan P. Olsen on temporal sorting in decision making, also known as the garbage-can

model of organizational choice (Cohen, March, and Olsen, 1972). We were serious about those ideas but embraced them playfully in tribute to their potential for enhancing the beauty in our lives, despite their less than elegant appellation. Subsequently, garbage-can metaphors have often been viewed as upsetting, even though sometimes useful, but they have also been stimuli for the exuberant commitment of others to the pursuit of beauty (Lomi and Harrison, 2012).

As the garbage-can model illustrates, a commitment to beauty in irrelevant ideas is often subversive. It often yields ideas that are inconsistent with conventional thought and thereby are often both obnoxious to the defenders of conventionality and embraced by critics of the status quo, for whom they are seen as allies in the eternal battle with the establishment. However, the pursuit of beauty proclaims neither special animus nor special allegiance to any particular intellectual, social, or organizational regime. Rather, it reflects a deeply personal urge to be surrounded by the aesthetic sensations of beauty, not as an instrument of social change but as reflective of human need, not as a substitute for the rigors of analysis but as a property of them.

In one of his more perfect, but minor, poems, W. B. Yeats wrote:

> How can I, that girl standing there,
> My attention fix
> On Roman or on Russian
> Or on Spanish politics?
> Yet here's a travelled man who knows
> What he talks about,
> And there's a politician
> That has both read and thought,
> And maybe what they say is true
> Of war and war's alarms,
> But O that I were young again
> And held her in my arms.

The poem can easily be interpreted as exhibiting the nostalgic lust of an aging man, but I think it is better seen as a monument to an ageless desire to embrace the beauties of life and to discover, superimposed on the admirable but tedious intelligence of reading and thinking, some glimmers of aesthetic (even, as in this case, erotic) pleasure.

Beauty is as elusive as truth. Many enormously thoughtful people have tried to provide an understanding of the architecture and appreciation of beauty, and anyone who has read Aristotle is conscious of the complications of aesthetics. Appreciating the elegance and evocativeness of ideas demands a nuanced and sensitive ability to impose standards while constructing them. It is essential to experiment with new components of beauty, even while embracing old ones. Imagining, identifying, reconstructing, and celebrating an aesthetic of ideas about organizations is an unending project. The point is not to achieve a stable consensus on beauty, but to recognize its importance and to endorse the pleasures of constructing, debating, and experiencing it.

In an earlier book (Lave and March, 1975), Charles Lave and I tried to specify some attributes of beauty in ideas. We identified three classical characteristics of an idea that contribute to its aesthetic appreciation: Simplicity, fertility, and surprise. Surprise, discovering that things are not what you imagined

they were, is an important component. Much of social science is devoted to explaining that things are not what they are imagined to be, a devotion that finds voice especially in exposing the pretensions of the political or social establishment. For example: Political innocence is really guile; virtuous leaders are really sinners; procedures manifestly intended to produce justice are really instruments of privilege. Interest in showing that things are not what they appear to be is, however, more general than exposing social hypocrisy. It generates beauty in discerning that what we previously believed, or what seems obvious, is not what is true. We aspire to be like the small boy who declares the emperor to be naked when all the courtiers affirm the elegance of his attire.

One aspect of discovering that things are not what they appear to be is the empirical disconfirmation of established belief. When Galileo Galilei used observations to demonstrate the heliocentric nature of the solar system, his work was beautifully heretical. Empirical surprises on the same scale are not conspicuous in organization studies, but the instinct is there: We find beauty in showing empirically that what is believed is not true, demonstrations that inevitably compromise our comfortable positions as handmaidens of the establishment.

A second aspect of discovering that things are not what they appear to be is the theoretical demonstration of paradox, showing how apparently innocuous premises have unexpected implications. The "Peter Principle" that hierarchical promotion on the basis of competence leads to each person rising to his or her level of incompetence is an example (Peter and Hull, 1969). Another is the "winner's curse", in which it is shown that winning a bid in a competitive auction is evidence of having made a mistake (Wilson, 1977; Thaler, 1988).

Some years ago, I published (March, 1974) a crude attempt to exhibit a particular instance of such surprise in ideas:

TRUTH AND BEAUTY

Suppose

> *that each couple agreed (knowing the relative value of things)*
> *to produce children (in the usual way)*
> *repeatedly*
> *until each couple had*
> *more boys (the ones with penises)*
> *than girls (the ones without).*

And further suppose

> *that the probability*
> *of each coupling (technical term)*
> *resulting in a boy (the ones with)*
> *varies from couple to couple*
> *but not from coupling to coupling*
> *for any one couple.*

And (we still have a couple more)

> *that no one divorces (an Irish folk-tale)*
> *or sleeps around (a Scottish folk-tale)*
> *without precautions (a Swedish folk-tale).*

And

> *that the expected sex (technical term)*
> *of a birth*
> *if all couples are producing equally*
> *is half-male, half-female (though mostly they are one or the other).*

Question: (Are you ready?)

> *What will be the ratio*
> *of boys (with)*
> *to girls (without)*
> *in such a society'?*

Answer:

> *The sweet truth is (given the supposings)*
> *that we end up with*
> *more girls (without)*
> *than boys (with).*

> *(That's beauty, baby.)*

The derivation is a minor tribute to what I have sometimes called the most important book in management theory published in my lifetime: William Feller's An Introduction to Probability Theory and Its Applications (Feller, 1950). On the surface, the book has nothing to do with organizations or management. Feller, I assume, would have shuddered at the thought. However, page after page of his book entrances the reader with beautiful counter-intuitive marvels of stochastic processes, many of which have applications to understanding organizations. The book offers numerous reminders that unusual phenomena that we seek to attribute to human agency or organization may well have been produced by random processes. They are reminders that have recently been proclaimed as a basis for a school of thought in management (Denrell, Fang, and Liu, 2013).

Feller's book is a lovely piece of work that translates into surprising understandings of organizations, but the beauty found in management theory is far from entirely a derivative of probability theory. Any listing of examples suffers from the omissions that would have added luster to the list, but there is beauty in the metaphorical leaps of description in the writings of Michel Crozier (1964), Barbara Czarniawska (1997). and Karl Weick (1996). There is beauty in the thoughtful application of razor-sharp intelligence in the writings of Raymond Aron (1955), Jon Elster (1983), Amartya Sen (1982), and Susan Sontag (1966). There is beauty in the experimental imagination found in the writings of Gerd Gigerenzer (2000), Daniel Kahneman (2011), and Amos Tversky (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979). There is beauty in the exquisite attention to institutional detail in the writings of Alfred Chandler (1962), Bruno Latour (Latour and Woolgar, 1986), Martha Feldman (1989), and Johan P. Olsen (2007). John Padgett's work on the development of the Florentine political structure is a

renaissance painting (Padgett and Ansell, 1993; Padgett and McLean, 2006). Recently, I read two unpublished papers that were sent to me by young scholars. One is by Charlotte Fillol and provides a rich appreciation of the life of French nuclear technicians and how efforts to honor their importance for the safety of nuclear power encourage them to take risks (Fillol, 2013). The other is by Laura Frigotto and provides a slyly humorous portrayal of Austrian and Italian organizational efforts to cope with some mummified human remains found in the Alps (Frigotto, 2013). It is imaginable that neither paper will be accepted for publication in a major journal, for neither follows the standard canons of journal expectations, but each gave me considerable aesthetic pleasure while illuminating my understanding at the same time.

On the whole, I think students of organizations and management should think less about inventing ideas that may be useful to the world or even to management and more about creating ideas with elements of beauty that evoke aesthetic pleasure. This is not an easy task; nor is it the only task; but it is a worthy ambition. Moreover, the pursuit of beauty can often be justified by the unintended usefulness of its outcomes. My own reading of the history of organization studies is that many of the more important ideas in management theory have in fact come not from trying to be useful but from imagining ideas with elements of beauty.

This beautiful imagination is exhibited in such seminal contributions as Albert Hirschman's commentaries on the decay of organizations (Hirschman, 1970) and Thomas Schelling's explorations of the dynamics of homophily (Schelling, 1978). It is found in the work of Robert Axelrod and Michael Cohen on harnessing complexity (1999), Ronald Burt on networks (Burt, 1992), Glenn Carroll and Michael Hannan on the demography of organizations (2000), Scott Page on the role of diversity in organizations (2007), Herbert Simon on bounded rationality (1957), and Harrison White on vacancy chains (1970). More recently, it has permeated the evocative work on organizational learning by Jerker Denrell and his colleagues (Denrell, 2007; Denrell and Le Mens, 2007). Such examples lend support to the idea that profoundly useful ideas about management and organizations are more likely to come from the playful pursuit of artistry in ideas than from an ambition to be helpful to managers or their social overseers.

Such a utilitarian rationalization of beauty can be justified, but it is less than beauty deserves. Scholarship celebrates ideas, and in that celebration it honors beauty not only as an instrument of utility but also as a fundamental human aspiration. The scholar who seeks beauty in ideas, despite the unbearable lightness of the search—or perhaps because of it—affirms an essential element of humanity.

James G. March is Professor Emeritus of Management, Sociology, Political Science, and Education at Stanford University. His research focuses on decision making and learning in organizations, and he has recently published The Ambiguities of Experience and (with Mie Augier) The Roots, Rituals, and Rhetorics of Change: North American Business Schools after the Second World War.

REFERENCES

- Aron, R. (1955).
L'Opium des intellectuels. Paris: Calmann-Levy.

- Axelrod, R., & Cohen, M. D. (1999).
Harnessing Complexity. Organizational Implications of a Scientific Frontier. New York: Free Press.

- Burt, R. S. (1992).
Structural Holes. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

- Carroll, G. R., & Hannan, M. T. (2000).
The Demography of Corporations and Industries. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Chandler, A. D. (1962).
Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the History of the Industrial Enterprise. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

- Cohen M. D., March, J. G., & Olsen, J. P. (1972).
A garbage can model of organizational choice. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 17*(1), 1-25.

- Crozier, M. (1964).
The Bureaucratic Phenomenon. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

- Czarniawska, B. (1997).
Narrating the Organization: Dramas of Institutional Identity. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

- Denrell, J. (2007).
Adaptive learning and risk taking. *Psychological Review, 114*(1): 177-187.

- Denrell, J., Fang, C., & Liu, C. (2013). *The random school of thought in managemen*t. (Working Paper). University of Warwick.

- Denrell, J., & Le Mens, G. (2007).
Interdependent sampling and social influence. *Psychological Review, 114(*2), 398-422.

- Elster, J. (1983).
Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

- Feldman, M. S. (1989).
Order without Design: Information Production and Policymaking. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

- Feller, W. (1950).
An Introduction to Probability Theory and Its Applications. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

- Fillol, C. (2013).
Experience in nuclear safety: light or darkness. Studying risk-taking behaviors in French nuclear power plants. Unpublished paper.

- Frigotto, L. (2013).
The emergence of novelty between exploration and exploitation. Unpublished paper.

- Gigerenzer, G. (2000).
Adaptive Thinking: Rationality in the Real World. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

- Hirschman, A. O. (1970).
*Exit, Voice, and Loyalt*y. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Kahneman, D. (2011).
Thinking, Fast and Slow. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

- Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1979).
Prospect theory: An analysis of decision under risk. *Econometrica, 47*(2), 263-291.

- Latour, B., & Woolgar, S. (1986).
Laboratory Life: the Construction of Scientific Facts. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Lave, C. A., & March, J. G. (1993) [1975].
An Introduction to Models in the Social Sciences (2nd ed.). Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

- Lomi, A., & Harrison, R. (Eds.). (2012).
The Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice: Looking Forward at Forty. Research in the Sociology of Organizations (Vol. 36.). Bingley, UK: Emerald Press.

- March, J. G. (1974).
Academic Notes. London: Poets' and Painters' Press.

- Olsen, J. P. (2007).
Europe in Search of Political Order. An Institutional Perspective on Unity/ Diversity, Citizen/their Helpers, Democratic Design/Historical Drift, and the Co-Existence of Orders. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

- Padgett, J. F., & Ansell, C. K. (1993).
Robust action and the rise of the Medici, 1400-1434. *American Journal of Sociology, 98*(6), 1250-1310.

- Padgett, J. F., & McLean, P. D. (2006).
Organizational invention and elite transformation: The birth of partnership systems in renaissance Florence. *American Journal of Sociology, 111*(5), 1463–1568.

- Page, S. E. (2007).
The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Peter, L. J., & Hull, R. (1969).
The Peter Principle. New York: Bantam.

- Schelling, T. C. (1978).
Micromotives and Macrobehavior. New York: W. W. Norton.

- Sen, A. K. (1982).
Choice, Welfare, and Measurement. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

- Simon, H. A. (1957).
Models of Man. New York: Wiley.

- Sontag, S. (1966).
Against Interpretation and Other Essays. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

- Thaler, R. H. (1988).
Anomalies: The winner's curse. *The Journal of Economic Perspectives, 2*(1), 191-202.

- Weick, K. E. (1996).
Drop your tools: An allegory for organizational studies. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 41*(2), 301-313.

- White, H. C. (1970).
Chains of Opportunity. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Wilson, R. (1977).
A bidding model of perfect competition. *Review of Economic Studies, 44*(3), 511-518.