

In memoriam of James G. March

I was very sad to learn that Jim March had passed away on September 27, a few months after having celebrated his 90th birthday. He had been a good friend of Michel Crozier, and I have had the privilege to meet with him and to film him in two long interviews on his work first in 1999, and again in 2004, within the framework of my project "The Living Archives of Organization Theory". I shall always remember his warm welcome, his kindness and patience in answering all our questions, as well as the friendly, open atmosphere that he was able to create during these two long sessions.

With Jim March's passing, organization theory loses one of its most distinguished, emblematic and inspiring founding fathers. In his many books and innumerable articles all through his life he has enriched our understanding of how organizations really function, while following and deepening all the while one line of questioning that is the unifying theme behind his writings : the problems and limits (constraints) that humans encounter in their never finished quest for intelligence in their actions.

The point of departure for this line of questioning is the analysis of the reciprocal links between organization and decision making : decisions (choices) made by individuals impact (construct) the functioning of organizations, while the characteristics of organizations structure the way individuals make their decisions or choices. This was the main contribution of the concept of "bounded rationality" introduced in *Organizations* co-authored with Herbert Simon in 1958, a concept which radically renewed our way to conceive how organizations and their members are in fact (try to be) rational, even if it took a while for organization theory and management to come to grips with all the implications of "bounded rationality".

His second book, *A Behavioral Theory of the Firm*, co-authored with Richard Cyert in 1963 still at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, extends the analysis of this concept and produces a radical critique of the micro-economic model of the firm, in three directions in particular. First, by emphasizing the procedural nature of decisions : they are mostly the result of people following rules, of routines, of "standard operating procedures" that have been established (have emerged) within an organization. Second, by proposing a properly political interpretation of the functioning of organizations : organizations are seen not as unified entities, but as fields wherein multiple rationalities meet and confront each other, and these confrontations are resolved through coalition-building, leading to the existence of « dominant coalitions ». Third and last but not least, by proposing the concept of "organizational slack" which basically questions the idea of optimizing in organizations. In order to be able to function, to allow for bargaining among the competing forces as well as to take care of unforeseen contingencies, organizations cannot do without some « slack », which means that they will always have sub-optimal performance-levels. Given the emphasis on optimization in normal management thinking, it is not surprising that modern management has more or less ignored this concept which radically relativizes management's quest of optimization.

In the mid-sixties, March left the Carnegie Institute of Technology and followed a call to sunny California, first to the University of Irvine, where in his quality as Dean of Social Sciences he was also drawn into helping to administer a commune formed by the students, and later at the University of Stanford. March's research and thinking turned to new directions, systematizing the analysis of questions touched on in earlier writings as well as opening new lines of inquiry. Two parallel lines of

questioning characterize his work at that time: the fundamental ambiguity of action-contexts and the instability of decision makers' preferences.

The first radically relativizes the importance of intentions in and for action. For March, intentions are less important in decision-making than the accidental encounter of problems, solutions and choice-opportunities. This is the central theme developed in « *A Garbage Can model of Decision Making* », a provocative and highly celebrated article co-authored with Johan Olsen and Michael Cohen which has the undeserved reputation of being an apology of disorder, when in reality it is a reflection on different modalities of order, as March used to emphasize. The second line of questioning sets out to uncover all the implications of the instability of preferences, by trying to figure out where they come from and how they are created by human action which generates them as much as it is guided by them. In turn, this line of questioning led to the crucial question of learning, a topic which is central in particular in the later writings of March and could be formulated as follows: How can we help individuals as well as organizations to discover new, more interesting and richer preferences, thus enabling them to avoid their "cognitive closing" or to fall into what March also called, the "competence trap". (<https://youtu.be/5geJSDqGlr4>).

Looking over the table of contents of *Explorations in Organizations* published in 2008, it becomes evident that it would be misleading and wrong to confine March and his writings in the narrow field of management and organization theory, of which he will remain one of the foremost founding fathers. The study of decision-making in organizations, the study of the links between individual and collective rationality was for March an opportunity to widen his inquiry with pragmatism, but also with the humor and wit so characteristic of his writings, to the fundamental questions that human beings confront in their efforts to cooperate with one another, and in their quest for an ordered world. As his now mythical course on leadership in organizations underscores¹, with Jim March's death we have all lost a thinker who has demonstrated that the analysis of organizations and organizational dynamics is a powerful and heuristic way to gain a better understanding of the problems raised by our existence and life in society.

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