

Critique of Kenneth McNeil, "Understanding Organizational Power: Building on the Weberian Legacy." Administrative Science Quarterly, 23 (March 1978), 65-90.

McNeil's article has two problems that require resolution before we take up the project he proposes. He assumes that organizations' leaders define their organizations' interests and have the power to see them carried out. He also fails to show why organizational elites' interest in controlling the environment is a problem that warrants the attention of social theorists.

Organizational analysis should be concerned with how decisions in organizations are made and whose interests organizations represent. McNeil takes for granted that an organization's leadership defines its interests as a Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy. However, he must make the case that they actually define interests and have the power to bring about results or his theoretical approach will fail to be useful. Organizational elites may only think they are defining their organization's interests but are actually incapable of identifying them because of manipulation and distortion of information from outside or within the organization. Their power may also be marginal (instead of asymmetrical) or constrained by other forces. If, following his approach, we take for granted that organizational interests and actions can be understood simply by examining the actions and interests of organizational elites, we could miss the power of subordinates, the government, or clients/customers to constrain or determine organizational outcomes.

For example, subordinates may have special knowledge or skills upon which bosses are dependent to carry out a decision. By withholding it or covertly going to one of the organization's competitors with it, subordinates can subvert or undermine their boss's decision. Or perhaps more commonly, underlings collectively resist the supervisors' decisions through work slowdowns, stoppages, sabotage, or seeking outside intervention by the government. The interaction between organizational elites and others inside and outside the organization is not lost in McNeil's scheme, but organizational elite's asymmetrical power is generally assumed.

Even if elites define interests and have the power to realize them, McNeil fails to show why the "paradox of domination" is a bad thing. Weber does mention that democracy and bureaucracy may have some incompatibilities. He also warns that an "iron cage" may envelope our lives as bureaucracy expands. But these are just two short references to problems in hundreds of pages of description that includes Weber's rather favorable treatment of bureaucracy in relation to other possible organizational forms. As Paul Ricœur notes (1986: 13), the German word Weber uses in his discussion, Herrschaft, translates into English as both authority and domination. If some form of authority is necessary to social life, as I believe it is, and authority includes the power to use force, as Weber defines it, then domination and coercion is inevitable. Weber cannot

simply be invoked to make a case against bureaucracy. A case must be explicitly made against it if we are to share McNeil's theoretical concern. To put it differently, McNeil's implicit critical theory requires explication. Without positing some future condition and making a case for why it is preferable, he cannot attack the present on solid grounds or make us understand why we should join with him.

Domination may in fact be a desirable characteristic. McNeil claims that organizations' develop "strong power relationships over the people they [serve]" in order to achieve "predictability in the inherently unstable markets of industrial capitalism"(23). The goals of stability and predictability could be considered beneficial for both the dominating and the dominated under certain conditions. For example, some balance of dominating organizations--big business, unions, and government--could be desirable (eg., the Gary Hart plan two elections ago, Keynesian economics to some extent). Elites may remain dominant, but the range of their decisionmaking capability and the potential disruptiveness of market fluctuations will be restricted.

Images of vast multinational conglomerates gobbling up small firms and dictating their demands play on our egalitarian fears of domination. However, the extent of asymmetry in organizational power relations must be shown and a normative argument +or the problems this presents must be made before we decide that power is asymmetrical and must be controlled.

Ricouer, Paul. Lectures on Ideology and Utopia. Ed. George H. Taylor. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.