
RADICAL INSTITUTIONALISM AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: A REVIEW OF NILS BRUNSSON'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC SECTOR ORGANIZATIONS

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Public administration, whether a practical art or an academic discipline, is inherently ethnocentric. (1) History and political culture make contemporary organizations, and the institutions of which they are a part, peculiar to a nation's or a locality's specific conditions. Organizational theorists, however, must find models that fit more than one state's narrow experience if they want to generalize about organizations and their behaviors. New interpretations of the institutional approach may accommodate such differences. Nils Brunsson, a "Scandinavian institutionalist," has authored two books in English, The Irrational Organization and The Organization of Hypocrisy. With Johan P. Olsen, he has also edited and contributed to two others: The Reforming Organization and Organizing Organizations. Despite the accessibility of his ideas American public administration has largely ignored what Nils Brunsson has to say concerning public sector organizations, and this body of work remains unreviewed in public administration journals.

While this lack of attention is a remarkable oversight, there are several aspects of Brunsson's work that might deter students of public organizations from pursuing his ideas. The association of Brunsson and his colleagues with the institutional perspective of James March--more specifically with the "normative" institutional school (*Peters, 1999*)--may lead to rejection of their ideas out right by those unsympathetic with this perspective. An appreciation of Brunsson's work requires knowledge of the March and Olsen (*1979*) garbage can theory, their assertion of the "new institutionalism" (*March and Olsen, 1984, 1989, 1995*), and subsequent

development of the implications of their ideas for organizational theory. In The Irrational Organization and The Organization of Hypocrisy Brunsson develops themes laid out in March and Olsen's work and pushes these to their logical, if radical, conclusions. For some his conceptual language may be antipathetic--e.g., "action rationality" versus "decision rationality," "action organizations" versus "political organizations," "defensive scrutineers," "traps." Even his book titles contain concepts--irrationality and hypocrisy--that the reader may misinterpret as negative without some initiation into their technical uses and the literature from which they are derived.

Other prejudices may thwart readers' interest as well. Brunsson presents a messy and paradoxical view of organizations that lacks the crisp and more readily measurable assertions of "instrumental" models. The urge for clear predictability in theory goes unsatisfied in Brunsson's organizational world, for he attempts to capture how organizations get things done while they try to satisfy many external demands and seek to present a coherent appearance to external stakeholders. Rejecting with other institutionalists the rational, goal-oriented Weberian vision of the organization, Brunsson sees them marked by conflict, limited powers of leadership, uncertain goals, and nonrational behavior. Organizational behavior suggests paradox for Brunsson. Paradox arises from expectations of cause-and-effect that are unmet. His counter intuitive--or better, counter-rational--assertions about organizational behavior make them hard for many readers to accept at face value. He observes contradictions between values and action, leaders and led, leadership and responsibility, decision and result, the rational and the irrational, the effort for change and the tendency for stability.

Brunsson's theoretical assumptions are not based in survey research. The institutional view rejects the notion that organizations and their larger institutional contexts can be understood by aggregating observations of individual behaviors. For the institutionalists the whole *is* greater than the sum of its individual, human parts. Brunsson's method upholds the institutional tradition of looking for patters of structures, interactions, and behaviors in organizational case studies. Critics of the case study approach may find this method and its data wanting. Moreover, for the non-Scandinavian reader his use of regional cases raises questions of comparability of findings across national boundaries and cultures.

Notwithstanding the many reasons some might reject Brunsson's work without reading it carefully, his interpretation of organizations, their leaders, their followers, and their environments speaks to many issues in public administration. Included among these are organizational change, the nexus of political decision-making and administrative action, as well as the prospects for organizational reform. Brunsson's work not only addresses these significant themes, but in so doing also examines a number of other concerns to public administration including the politics-administration dichotomy; implementation, the public-private distinction, the "fishbowl" quality of public work, and organization-environment interaction. Brunsson's analyses are incisive, advancing understanding of many issues, including the politics of the administrative process.

The Paradox of Rationality and Irrationality, Decisions and Actions

Along with March and Olsen, Brunsson opposes an instrumental view of organizations while at the same time holding to the centrality of decision-making behavior to the nature of organizations. In The Irrational Organization Brunsson contends that "irrationality"--non-rationality--in decision making and in the use of organizational ideologies is a fundamental feature of organizational life and salutary to maintaining the organization and effecting action. Decision making, he argues, is almost always removed from the rational model and involves "biased information about a biased set of two (sometimes only one) alternatives, and the information is not properly weighted." (*Brunsson, 1985, p. 31*) Organizational ideology gives members a distorted, narrow, but practical, view of reality, facilitating coordinated action. Asserting that action requires members who display commitment, motivation, and expectation, Brunsson contends that "actions that would involve radical changes in organizational behaviour are generally difficult to carry out and they call for strong commitment, firm expectations, and high motivation; conclusive, consistent and complex ideologies should endorse these actions." (*p. 181*) Apparent irrationality may be a good thing: "My main argument, addressed to practitioners in the field, is that in many situations decision irrationality and ideological narrow-mindedness may be functionally effective." (*p. 182*) Rationality has its place where decisions, per se, are concerned, but irrationality is a requisite of action.

Brunsson sees organizational life displaying inflexibility; yet change aimed at achieving efficiency, pursuing new policies or responding to environmental pressures may be necessary for organizational survival. Brunsson rejects the idea that hierarchical decision-making, in and of itself, can effect change; rather, he posits that organizations consist of "numerous individuals, no one of which has complete control over the others when it comes to organizational actions." (p. 7) "Action" for Brunsson designates "activities other than the purely cognitive, and it cannot be expected to derive automatically from decisions, or choices, or problem-solving activities. Organizational action is accomplished by several organization members in collaboration." (p. 7)

The problem for public sector organizations is that they are especially inhibited by their nature when it comes to making significant changes. Brunsson (*Chapter 7*) explains that political organizations, attuned to and reflective of their environments, are destined to operate with inconclusive, inconsistent ideologies and to use rational decision processes which invite conflict and uncertainty. These conditions allow the organization to make a choice--a change decision--but conflict and uncertainty will make it especially difficult to implement any change agreed upon since the same conditions lower expectations, motivation, and commitment on the part of implementers. Although constitutions and public laws assume that legislators or elected/appointed leadership make decisions that lead to action, in reality, Brunsson argues, things operate the other way around. Reflecting diverse norms and interests legislators and elected/appointed decision-makers are ideologically weak, whereas administrators are more likely to have a single set of professional norms and ideological strength. Change initiated by the latter is more likely to be accepted by those nominally in authority and the action implemented.

The Irrational Organization, while brief, challenges the reader. The argument frequently seems disjointed. Although there are transitions between chapters, the discussion often brings the reader to a case study or paradox rather than the summary or conclusion anticipated. As with some theoretical works, it proves helpful to read the last chapter first, just to discover where the journey will arrive. Rationalistic "prejudices" may inhibit following the argument. The reader must grasp carefully drawn distinctions regarding decision-making and its relationship to action.

Brunsson requires the acceptance of the idea that irrationality is good for change, whereas the rationality of planning and policy analysis is bad for it. The upshot is that change requires commitment, expectation, and ideological compatibility on the part of those who are to implement it. Concepts such as "commitment" and "expectation" appear to be intentionally imprecise. Such a practice is both helpful and distracting. Vague concepts allow Brunsson to accommodate many organizational situations, but trouble the desire for clarity. All the same The Irrational Organization illuminates many factors that restrain and promote implementing change.

The Survival of Public Organizations

While change action may be necessary to adaptive survival of organizations, "action," as a product or service, may not be essential for organizational survival, especially in public organizations. Organizational survival requires, according to The Organization of Hypocrisy, that an organization maintain its legitimacy with external actors, particularly those that give the organization support. These conditions are especially true of public sector organizations, given the varied and inchoate demands of social agents, but such conditions increasingly prevail for private organizations as well. "Organizations in modern societies are public . . . in their ultimate dependence on public acceptance, i.e. of positioning themselves in relation to the perceptions and policies of society at large." (*Brunsson, 1989, p. 216*)

Brunsson puts forward a kind of "dual factor theory" of legitimacy: (1) organizations may gain support by supplying goods or services and/or (2) they may gain support by reflecting the inconsistent norms and demands ("symbolical accord") of environmental agents. Depending on the nature of the organization, its goods/services, and the number and kinds of demands made on it by environmental actors, the organization may produce more of one of these factors than the other. Brunsson asserts that inconsistent social demands and norms require organizations to speak one thing, but do another-- to present themselves to their environment in a way that is inconsistent with the realities of internal operation and action. This "hypocrisy" addresses the "demands for rationality, decency and fairness, while also efficiently generating coordinated action." (*p. 7*) Brunsson explores under what conditions organizations may be more action-(product/service) oriented or more political (reflecting inconsistent

norms/demands). These factors help explain why implementation is prone to weaknesses and failure.

Brunsson's analysis results in normative suggestions for practitioners. Chief among these is the observation that "politicization does have one advantage: it seems to provide a better chance of survival." (*p. 212*) But leaders will find politicization limits the ability to take efficient action. How can this contradiction be overcome? Echoing the American notion of the politics-administration dichotomy, Brunsson advises separation of leaders (decision-makers) from followers (action takers). Leaders legitimate the organization by indulging in politics, articulating inconsistent ideas and satisfying symbolically the varied demands from the environment. Followers produce services or goods. The danger here is not that political power will corrupt administrative action; rather it is the other way around. In order for leaders to avoid being controlled by their subordinates, they must keep their distance and, by doing so, allow for inconsistency between talk and action. Distance permits leadership to establish vision, mission, and goals, albeit unrealistic ones, which may inspire the led to "change the boundaries of what they regard as feasible." (*p. 223*) Leadership, under the distance principle, will not be able to claim control of administrators, but under the guise of the rational model they can claim responsibility and thereby receive legitimation. The discrepancies between value claims and action lead to demands for reform, Brunsson suggests, which leadership should undertake by changing formal structures, rules of behavior, and ideologies--not action.

The empirical basis for Brunsson's claims rest largely on a series of case studies, each interpreted to support a set of hypotheses built around the hypocrisy thesis. Although Brunsson makes his theoretical point effectively, he would admit that this empirical base is slim. All the same he depicts the nature of organizational behavior with a confidence that his case study evidence may not justify. The many advocates of the case study method in public administration should find satisfaction in trying to extend Brunsson's conceptual frame to other cases. One of the benefits of this research is the development of conceptual tools for case interpretation. Brunsson's language accommodates the tension that naturally exists between ideals and realities, policy and action. His institutionalism allows us to observe with understanding the admission: "Here is our mission, here is what we are doing, and here is the gap between these."

The Nature of Organizational Reform

Brunsson extends and refines the reform theme with his better known co-author, Olsen, and other contributors in The Reforming Organization. Brunsson and Olsen (1993) characterize reform as a rationalistic effort at organizational change, and they explore why organizations undertake reform, the nature of reform content, and the effects of reform from an institutional perspective. They focus on what reform efforts mean to organizations, especially since, from their point of view, reforms seldom result in change. Change goes on all the time, they insist, in keeping with an organization's institutional identity--values, interests, and opinions. Comprehensive, intentional reforms that violate this identity are rare.

Essentially Brunsson and Olsen question whether leadership can choose new organizational forms and impose them on employees. In keeping with the implementation literature, they observe that those who have the power to decide reforms have little influence over their implementation and outcome. This lack of power may not be important, they argue, because reform is an organizational "routine" used to present the organization to its environment, to adjust to the expectations of that environment, and to attract legitimacy for the organization and responsibility for its leadership. The paradoxical result of reform efforts tends to be stability rather than change.

Having little power, reformers tend to be agents of other forces--external actors, fashion, etc.--rather than "actors." This is not as bad as it sounds. Except for the disappointment of reformers themselves, the authors claim, a reforming organization may benefit from changing members' ideas about its meaning and purpose, drawing attention to the problems that need solving, and influencing how those outside perceive it. Because reform decisions tend to stimulate resistance among implementers, organizations tend to maintain stability. Yet commitment to the rational model of hierarchy and power, encourage leadership to perpetuate the reform routine. " . . . [T]he paradoxical result is that the image of formal organizations as instruments and of reformers as heroes, will be reinforced despite every indication that the picture is largely an inaccurate one.

Reforms then simply obstruct any learning based on reality." (*Brunsson and Olsen, 1993, p. 202*)

Brunsson either authored or co-authored four of the chapters in this volume, which bears evidence of close collaboration among editors and authors. The collaborators and their case studies speak directly to the reform themes established by Brunsson and Olsen. Brunsson's chapter, "Reform as Routine," suggests why many reform efforts are undertaken in large organizations, their trendy nature, and the reasons why employees may have little or no commitment to yet another "crazy idea." In a subsequent chapter, "Organizational Individuality and Rationality as Reform Content," Brunsson explores how individualism and rationalism affect assumptions about organizations and dictates the norms of organizational behavior that govern reform efforts. Brunsson insists that Western culture attributes the characteristics of individuals to organizations. This "fact" accounts for the assumption of rationality, managerial responsibility, managerial control, as well as the perpetuation of the reform idea. Although Brunsson identifies conditions that would end "routine reform," he fails to outline the means for overcoming cultural barriers to achieving these.

This work illuminates a number of themes debated in American public administration: the nature of reform, implementation, control, power, and the effects of reform. If we embrace Brunsson and Olsen's assumptions about reform and change, then this work conveys an appreciation of the limitations on reform and provides critical tools for assessing reform proposals. At the same time their characterization of organizational processes smacks of a fatalistic conservatism which may not conform to reality.

Research on Inter-Organizational Relations

For those who want to gain a broader perspective on Brunsson's work and "Scandinavian institutionalism," Organizing Organizations provides an excellent opportunity. Brunsson and Olsen's (1998) recent volume gathers thirteen previously printed articles by regional authors advancing theoretical developments based on a wide range of cases studies. There is focus to the book, however: What is the nature of organizations of organizations? Brunsson and Olsen's introductory chapter summarizes the

evolution of institutional thinking that has led to the interpretations this anthology presents. An understanding of modern complex organizations requires more tools of analysis than hierarchical and market models afford, they claim. The institutional approach, enriched by elements of critical theory and phenomenology, has become a tool for understanding interorganizational relationships. The findings reported here speak to many different organizational issues, but they have considerable relevance for the integration process of the European Union and the disintegrative process of the states of the former Soviet Union.

Of particular interest to public administrationists are chapters addressing municipal project selection and implementation, the debate over "subsidiarity" in European federalism, the policy-administration dichotomy, diffusion of innovation, a critique of institutional research applications to public administration, as well as several accounts of applied public policy. Brunsson's own chapter continues the debate over the nature of reform by questioning the institutional contention that "organizational forms are strongly influenced by widely held norms and ideas about the kind of organizational forms that are natural, correct or desirable." (*Brunsson and Olsen, 1998, p. 260*) Rather, he wants "to explain the homogeneity and the heterogeneity that can arise among organizations which do in fact recognize similar ideas." (*p. 260*) As in *The Reforming Organization* Brunsson asserts that reform is an ongoing process in large organizations. Questioning the popular diffusion model for the transfer of organizational ideas, he posits that such reform is cyclical and that homogeneity and heterogeneity tend to reflect the independent "cropping up" of new cycles of reform in different organizations at irregular intervals. Brunsson concludes that explaining homogeneity and heterogeneity in organizational forms is an "urgent" item on the institutional agenda. (*p. 276*)

Assessing Brunsson's interpretation of organizations and their prospects for reform and change pose a challenge to readers; yet the effort is worthwhile. Brunsson and his colleagues offer an alternative to the popular application of economic concepts to organizational phenomena and draw us closer to an interpretation anchored in an organizational context rather than a single discipline. Although Brunsson's efforts are strongly based in the normative tradition of institutional analysis, they are empirical. He clearly separates his observations of organizations from the prescriptions that these observations may imply. Public sector organizations provide much of the

data for his analysis of organizations, and his conclusions have a particular relevance to government. His work deserves a careful reading by normativists seeking to prescribe new paradigms for governmental effectiveness and efficiency. His work has significant implications for the problem of accountability and the prospect of enhancing the citizen's role in democratic governance. Empirical theorists will find his work rich with hypotheses to be tested from many methodological perspectives. Brunsson's work deserves greater attention from students of public administration.

NOTES

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