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GUEST SPEAKERS AT THE ECOLE DE PARIS

Session no. 1

GENESIS OF AN AMERICAN IMAGE or Making sense of transatlantic misunderstandings

discussions with
MICHEL CROZIER

chaired by
MICHEL BERRY

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*The following write up has been prepared by Michel Berry
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Michel Crozier's experience serves to show that people on different sides of the Atlantic can read very different things into the self-same book. Are the Americans and the French doomed to say endlessly to each other "Je te comprends, moi non plus?" (I understand what you're saying, me neither) ? or can we improve understanding despite the fact that our channels of communication are on different wavelengths?

The Association des Amis de l'École de Paris of management organises discussions and distributes accounts of these on the understanding that the ideas therein are solely attributable to their authors.

I. PRESENTATION BY MICHEL CROZIER

Michel Berry : In the domain of management research, Michel Crozier is the best-known French author in America ; indeed, almost the only known French author - it seems one can't see the wood for this particular tree. But what exactly do the Americans know about his work ? Those I met in 1991 in the course of a study visit to American Business schools often knew very little about Crozier's work subsequent to the publication of *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon*, and they tended to underestimate the influence of Crozier's school of thought.

Somewhat perplexed, I asked Crozier for his view and he said "*I think there have been one or two misunderstandings as a result of the success in America of 'The Bureaucratic Phenomenon' and the more disappointing reception of the books I published afterwards. It would be an interesting point to discuss.*" This gave us the idea for our first session of 'Guest speakers at the Ecole de Paris' : we'll talk about the basis of Crozier's image in America and the misunderstandings it reveals in communications between the Americans and the French, and we'll examine how the two nations can communicate despite being on different wavelengths.

THE BUREAUCRATIC PHENOMENON

Michel Crozier : For me the subject is quite simple, familiar - and complex, all at the same time. Basically, one is used to presenting and defending published work ; but talking about one's image is different - it involves you personally. I'll try to be detached, and I'm sure your questions will help me. Actually, we're talking about two very different images, American and French.

The lure of America

MC : I should explain first of all how I got to know America. I spent fifteen months in the US in 1947-48 ; not at a

university, as a research student would these days, but conducting research among the American trades unions. I spoke to hundreds of very different people, who often spoke a pretty strange sort of English, and so I learned 'on the job' how to interact with Americans. Later, in 1956-57 I was one of a productivity task force which allowed me to make numerous contacts in American universities, though not as yet in the business schools.

After that, I had a period of immersion which proved decisive : in 1959-60 I was a guest of the Behavioral Sciences Center in Palo Alto. I had all the material which gave rise to my writing *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon*, but I still hadn't written anything. I wanted to gain ground, and it was marvellous to be outside France. I compared my ideas with those of my American colleagues, and took part in seminars, as well as giving presentations. These interactions were intensely productive.

Next, I had a stroke of luck, although in the event it made me waste a year later. Stanford University Press was looking for manuscripts, and lunching with the leading lights of the Behavioral Sciences Center, afterwards putting pressure on certain of these to write a book. They succeeded in persuading me by telling me, "*You speak such good English (which wasn't true), we'll have you write in English because translating doesn't work*". I was young and foolish, and I agreed. There was one lady there, a copy editor, and I reckoned the experience would be entertaining and I'd have someone to help me. We started work, and I managed to write a third of the book in English.

I continued when I returned to France, but it was more difficult : little by little, and with the help of various other people, I was able to finish the book. I then rewrote it in French, which lost me a year. I didn't publish with Stanford University Press, where I couldn't reach an agreement with the editor. In the end, the English was published by University of Chicago Press and the French came out with Seuil, a highly reputable house.

Two ways of reading

The two books had a very different history after publication. *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* was read initially within a cultural perspective which was right on target in the US ; its first readership was amongst academics who specialised in French issues, and what attracted their interest was the notion of 'face to face' interactions, the difficulties the French had with such dealings. This idea appealed to the Americans enormously ; that is to say, what appealed was the cultural aspect, or one might say the exotic. The title in itself was unusual; they tried to persuade me to change it (and the same with the French edition) but I held my own : it's not such a bad idea to have a curious title. I'll come back to that point.

The French, on the other hand, completely rejected what had so interested the Americans. They appreciated the book more as a study of French bureaucracy in the tradition of de Toqueville, but with a different slant : we weren't talking about great figures any more, but about petty officials. The book also appealed because it didn't get bogged down in abstract discussions but took real cases. In France its first admirers were specialists in political theory.

In short, there were two different readings, two readerships who had nothing in common. This fact helped me to distance myself from the book - as you can see, misinterpretations can be productive.

Undergraduates and bureaucracy

Shortly afterwards, from 1967-70, I had the good fortune to teach at Harvard, with a well-known lectureship post, which is an important factor in the US and particularly at Harvard.

Once again, I was in for a surprise. What interested the American students was not the same as what had appealed to the academics and intellectuals : they weren't concerned about the French fear of face-to-face dealings because what interested them was America ; which is understandable. They said "*What you're talking about isn't particularly French, it's universal. You find the same thing in America.*" In order to prove it, they wrote me papers on America ; they wanted instinctively to show me that America could be as bureaucratic as France. In those heady times (remember America in the late sixties), they wanted to prove that they had it worse than us.

Naturally I encouraged them, seeing that they appreciated my line of reasoning. I could also see that bureaucracy was everywhere. You can always say that the sociologist, by reason of professional bias, finds proof of his thesis everywhere he looks ; but in this case it was my students who were bringing me the proof : another productive transatlantic misunderstanding.

I taught at Nanterre immediately afterwards, and tried to persuade the French students to work along the same lines as the Americans. It was a disaster. It's true that everything at Nanterre at that time tended to result in disaster, but the experience made me think about the reasons for the differences. I told myself I was too attached to the method which had worked in the US. Since there was nothing to be done with the French students, I and my colleagues invented different methods. I also used the work I was doing with professionals (we were involved in the further training of people in

management). In sum, my most productive experience was with students in the US and professionals in France.

This, again, was a case of making good use of misunderstandings : one tries to reproduce a process which works elsewhere, one meets obstacles, adapts and tries something else. In the course of the last forty years there have been, in general, more productive misunderstandings between both sides of the Atlantic. I believe that it is because there are both marked similarities and considerable differences between France and America.

It is interesting to note that the same phenomenon has not occurred in England : the book was not a success there. The publisher gave it an unremarkable title : *The Bureaucratic System...*

THE TYRANNY OF DEDUCTIVE HYPOTHESIS

Our teaching and research experiences in France led to the book *L'acteur et le système* which was translated in english (*Actors and systems*). This rather difficult text was a success in France and has progressively replaced *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon*. We could bring it out in America but with a lot more difficulties since it no longer fitted the American university model.

From open exchange to closed minds : the 1950s-60s vis-à-vis the 1970s-80s

Let's go back a while. *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* appeared at a time when ideas were not yet fixed, or I might even say atrophied, by the tyranny of hypothetico-deductive philosophy.¹

In the 1950s and 60s different intellectual models coexisted ; besides which, the major names in research had a more inductive approach.² However, during the 1970s deductive hypothesis gained the upper hand and dominated almost without concession. In 1967-70, while I was at Harvard, the system was not yet fixed to that extent; but in the 1980s it was irremediable : our ideas came through to the students, but not within the academic system. In 1986 I had François Dupuy, then a member of the Centre de Sociologie des Organisations (now a consultant) come to Irvine University. We were a wild success at the business school.

¹ Hypothetical-deductive approaches emphasise the **validation** of hypotheses. The procedure starts with a system of hypotheses taken from literature (or inductive research), and then tests their general truth. This leads to the determination of quantifiable variables, to surveys by means of questionnaires with large-scale representative cross-sections and thus to a statistical "validation". Such approaches render in-depth field studies almost impossible since it is always deemed necessary to test hypotheses on a large-scale cross-section... This kind of research is denominated "quantitative" by the Americans, which has in their eyes positive connotations. The French, on the other hand, often find that this proves the Americans to be too "positivist". (Ed.)

² Inductive approaches emphasise the **formulation** of pertinent hypotheses in order to analyse a problem or a phenomenon. The interpretative system does not therefore precede the research but is built up in the course of the latter. Such methods are appropriate to in-depth field studies. They are denominated "qualitative research" by the Americans, which for them has worrying connotations, and they are inclined to find the French too "qualitative". (Ed.)

Question: With the MBA students or at doctorate level ?

M.C. With the MBA students. Students are tired of the abstract material they are given; but when you speak to them about real cases, to which they can apply their own experience and where they can discuss problems they have had, they're thrilled. François Dupuy soon had more students than his colleagues did ; and of course that infuriated them, and he was not invited again.

In that context, neither *Actor and Systems* nor the translations of other books widely read in France went down very well in the States. I had an excellent publisher for *La Société bloquée*, Viking Press, and an outstanding editor who habitually brought out best-sellers. She hoped to make *La Société bloquée* a best-seller, but it didn't happen ; and it was the same with *Le Mal Américain (Trouble with America)*, which was an important book for me but which didn't make much impact despite a full-page excerpt in the *Washington Post*.

Going native : how to publish in America

In sum, I was lucky to be in the US before the changes occurred which caused the rest of the world to question their own ways of operating. The 1950s-1960s were really the golden age : there were a lot of translations and people were genuinely interested in what happened abroad. Publishers took risks. To go back to *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon*, Stanford University Press first promised me the moon and the earth and then offered me a pittance. I was appalled, and my friend Lipset sent the book to Basic Books and to Chicago Press. Within ten days Chicago wrote back making a serious offer, paying me for the translation, offering an advance and giving me half the rights they would give the French publisher into the bargain. I had my contract with Seuil ; Chicago bought the rights from Seuil for all English-speaking countries, so that I had half of that. Furthermore, they drew up a personal contract for me to cover the translation and royalties on sales ; with all of which they took a risk, and made a lot of money.

I never met with similar conditions later, as a result of the evolution of academic norms and also the evolution of the publishing system itself, which effectively saw the establishment of a two-tier system : on the one hand, the mass-market titles, with their demand for simple ideas and short sentences, subject-verb-object ; and on the other, the university press system which has less and less funds and cannot entertain the high costs of translation. This latter is filtered according to academic norms, and so doesn't get anywhere near the American management readership, nor the student body unless you are a university lecturer actually in the States.

By contrast, if you have a university post and you spend enough time in the US, it's a very different story. Once you have made a name for yourself, your reputation is maintained by the system. Hence, my first book sold well for a long time, for over fifteen years which surprised me, it was much more than the average. It is often quoted, simply because it has often been quoted before. I even discovered that, as late as the 1980s, I was an influential figure at Irvine : given that I was one of three professors who between them accounted for 90% of quotations within the Social Sciences index, it was obviously important to keep me there on the faculty.

A fair number of French academics have a high profile in the States, but by dint of having become three-quarters or even totally American themselves. René Girard and Gérard Debreu are cases in point. There are also genuine misinterpretations, notably arising from the reputation of philosophers like Michel Foucault, essentially attributable to his phenomenal success at the university of Berkeley.

When one is recognised both in France and in America, one can benefit from transatlantic misunderstandings. My experiences led me to make progress when I discovered that what worked on one side of the Atlantic needed to be modified in order to

work on the other. At the end of the day I am persuaded that these misunderstandings have helped me considerably to develop my ideas.

II. DISCUSSION

Should we go native ?

Michel Berry : Is it really necessary to be based in the US ? If you had been entirely US-based, you might have become a quantivist like the Americans, or else you would have had difficulty in developing your own approach. At any rate, that's the conclusion I was led to by my analysis of American business schools.³

It seems that French ideas are coming back into fashion. Editorial staff from some influential academic reviews have told me "*You're doing original work, it's different from what's coming out over here ; and with your being French as well, that adds to the novelty of it - you've got a lot going for you !*"

With the American system in crisis, there's a call for new ideas. When you first worked there the system was open to "qualitative" research. Subsequently it became more limited, and now it's in the process of opening up again. Should we therefore be talking about transatlantic misunderstandings ? Isn't it rather the case that the American system has phases of being open to inductive approaches, but only from time to time ? With the result that the French are only ever appreciated temporarily ?

Wouldn't it therefore be better to stay in France to cultivate one's style, and take advantage of the periods of openness as and when they present themselves ?

Michel Crozier : I agree with the notion of a kind of fluctuating evolution. We could be having a return to the old way now, one can see the signs; but I still think the difficulties are greater now than they were thirty or forty years ago. Even if the Americans perceive themselves to be in the midst of a crisis, they don't appreciate being told so by outsiders. Besides which, their interest in the French is ambiguous : what attracts their curiosity is the folklore, the wines, the perfumes, the cheeses.

To begin with it was mostly folklore, so to speak, that interested my American colleagues. I took a real pleasure in my success when my students said that my ideas were also valid in understanding the American system: I was no longer bracketed as a specialist in French folklore. Nonetheless, I think it is necessary to establish oneself in the US in order to achieve as much. I don't mean that it is imperative to be based in the States, but that's the price one has to pay if one wants a high profile there.

Filling a gap in one's knowledge

Mitchell Koza (Insead) : I was a doctoral student in sociology at the University of Chicago in the early 1980s, and Michel Crozier's book was one of our set texts. I looked back at my notes from that time, and I found three reasons why the book seemed important to us :

1) *Administration subjected to sociological critique*. We were faced with an instrumental approach, of which school Herbert Simon may have been the most intelligent representative, but Michel Crozier showed us that the critical approach could be valuable.

³ "What shall we do with America?", Michel Berry, "Business life" seminar, January 1992; & *Gérer et comprendre* no. 27, June 1992

2) *Power as a means of explaining social order.* We had been studying the sources of social order for a while at Chicago. American sociology analyses social order by looking at the mechanisms for integrating differences in social systems ; which seemed tedious to us although probably useful. We had only heard power discussed within the terms of typologies and taxonomies which didn't seem very interesting to us either ; whereas Michel Crozier showed us that power was a mechanism to be studied in its own right in order to understand the construction of social order. It was far from trivial, and genuinely interesting to study.

3) *Studying collective choices as processes, a means of obtaining worthwhile sociological perspectives.* By studying the positions, vested interests and resources of the participants, one can deduce the results of their collective choices. Michel Crozier was the first to identify the process of influence as a crucial point in examining collective choice.

The mechanism of influence was, and still is, a black hole in the field of research into collective choice. Michel Crozier demonstrated how mechanisms of influence could be brought into play, and how one might protect oneself from them, and furthermore he expressed these concepts particularly elegantly. I may say that this theme has been the major influence in my own work.

MC : What you say gives me particular pleasure : it's the kind of reaction I had with my American students. I was influenced myself by the research produced in the US in the 1950s-60s on collective choice : so you see, it's possible to find inspiration on both sides of the Atlantic. Nonetheless, the difficulty still lies with the institutional barriers of the American system which can only be surmounted by one's actual presence - had the book not been translated and distributed in the US, a doctoral student such as yourself could not have been influenced by its ideas.

Claude Riveline (Ecole des Mines) : What I've been hearing leaves me a little perplexed. I read *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* shortly after its publication and I thought it was describing two essentially French institutions : there can't be many in the States like Tabacs and Chèques Postaux (French tobacco industry and postal cheques organisation). I thought maybe Michel Crozier had achieved his success in the States, despite his foreignness, because he had succeeded in being more American than the Americans. Now I hear that it is because of his foreignness and because he hit on a gap in our knowledge that he was able to make the breakthrough there.

On this side of the Atlantic it seemed to me that Crozier's success was due to the fact that he had hit on a gap in the French school of human sciences, dominated on the one hand by the Catholics, on the other by the Communists ; and when Crozier arrived on the scene, neither Catholic nor Communist, discussing institutions with something like a naturalist's approach, we said "It's because he's so Americanised, he must have learned the style there."

What I wonder is whether your success might have been favourably influenced by the fact that you were reckoned to be a true Frenchman at the right moment in America and a true American at the equivalent stage in France.

MC : It wasn't that easy to be a true American in France - especially being French myself! I was snubbed at every turn.

When I said the Americans were attracted by the 'folklore', I might make a few further distinctions. I was lucky to be there before the catastrophic hegemony of

hypothetico-deductive methodology, and my book was considered to be a reputable work of sociology ; for the Americans, it was also a good American publication.

I think you're right about what I learned in the US, with one small misconception nevertheless: I had begun doing empirical studies there without being acquainted with American sociology. I set myself up in France with colleagues who were younger than me and who placed their trust in me, with whom I established a small and effective research institution, the Centre de Sociologie des Organisations. We started out without really knowing how we ought to proceed, we learned a lot along the way and it was only afterwards that we compared our work with the Americans. I think this is part of what gave my contributions their strength : the work was authentic, the style wasn't copied.

Secrets of the great classics

Jean Padiou (MSH & ESCP) : One has to be a good player to take on the role Michel Crozier has accepted tonight ; I'd say the way his image is being analysed is somewhat specious. We shouldn't forget that *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* is the French organisational sociology text most often quoted in English-language writings, by virtue of being a classic, which it is for three reasons:

First of all, Crozier doesn't just tell stories, he offers "du concret pensé", to coin a phrase from Marx : that is to say, he delineates typical situations with descriptions which are not just well structured but are also thought through.

Secondly, within the book one finds intimations of key formulae, as a chemist would understand, and in particular regarding the relation between power and uncertainty. Crozier didn't necessarily invent the phenomena he describes to us, and he never claims as much, but he worked out the equations.

Thirdly, it's a book by a French author which undertakes in its first part to explain France, in a style which is both intellectual and reformist. It's the latter part, for which Stanley Hoffmann appointed himself apologist, which brings the book its popular readership. This latter part is what most intrigues me, since Crozier himself has disclaimed it, for reasons which he might explain tonight.

Basically, if we wish to be famous in the US, let's start by writing a classic which can still be referred to in thirty years' time.

MB : If it's the case that the books which followed *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* were less widely read, do we infer that they weren't classics ? Or is it the case that the Americans and the French were no longer on the same wavelength ? And anyway, would it be enough these days to write a classic in order to be famous ? I have my doubts.

MC: My answer of course is that we were on different wavelengths : the books I wrote subsequently had almost equal success in France, whereas in America I really only had the one book ; that's why I emphasised the idea of misinterpretations.

Regarding Michel Berry's second point, from my experience I conclude that it's because I wrote a book that became well-known in the States - not immediately, but lastingly.

JP : I consider that if a book like *Actors and Systems*, written in collaboration with Erhard Friedberg, met with less success, it's for one basic reason : there are very few theoretical works, or texts exposing problems, which last in the long term. And why? Because when a book contains a wealth of real situations theorised we take pleasure in reading it and the accounts have universal implications.

MC : A text which exposes problems can be a lasting success: *Actor and System* was published in 1977 and is still selling in France and Italy.

Jacques Girin (CRG Polytechnique) : You were saying that you wrote *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* first in English, 1/3 in California and 2/3 in France. To me that's interesting - I imagine that writing about Tabacs or Cheques Postaux in California is rather extraordinary. My question is : does the book's exceptional nature and its clarity have something to do with the unusual exercise of writing in a foreign language ? Aren't you tempted to begin writing another book in English ?

MC : Maybe if you give me another life, but I have other vested interests at present. Does writing in American (English) make the book more accessible ? I could accept the idea, although it's difficult to know for sure. Above all I've benefited from the fact that I was able to present the same thing to different audiences; and not just the French and the Americans - I taught a lot in Belgium in the early 60s, actually I must have taught at least 10% of today's senior Belgian civil servants.

Books and articles

Hamid Bouchiki (ESSEC) : It seems to me that you haven't written many articles, mainly books - which is the inverse of what they tell research fellows in the US today, apparently, and indeed in France : Publish articles, establish your career, and we'll see about books later.

MC : To begin with I did write for journals and periodicals, including English-language ones. All the same, in France we don't have the idea of "publish or perish". We were even told we shouldn't pillage material from a thesis before its submission ; so I took the time to work on my thesis.

That, indeed, is the advice I give younger students today : don't scatter your talents to the four winds, don't be impelled to frenetic activity for its own sake but cultivate your capacity for in-depth study. I find people waste too much talent and energy on publications.

I took a seminar at Harvard in April 1993 and presented the kind of work we were doing. The students told me "*What your researchers and students are doing is excellent, but it wouldn't be possible in our system if you wanted to keep your place in the competition for tenure*". That's a weakness of the American system - the French - style thesis no doubt has its disadvantages, it creates a lot of stress and anguish, but its great advantage is that it encourages students to produce a complete work. I say, let the French take their time writing good theses, and they can turn them into books later.

MB : In the course of my research in the US I asked whether we should be publishing books to inform people about what was happening in France. Most of the people I asked said that we shouldn't start with books : so many books and articles are published these days that people are overwhelmed. The rate of production is much higher than it was thirty years ago and academics and students are months behind on their reading lists : "*How are we supposed to find the time to read a book by an unknown author when we have no incentive to read it ?*"

The strategy for building a reputation these days is different in consequence. I was advised to write articles instead, in journals with a large circulation, and to play up the novelty value of being French. If this brings some renown, one can then start writing books.

MC: Basically, the insistence on publishing at all costs in the States has catastrophic results. One shouldn't sacrifice the most important thing : establishing oneself in one's own field. It seems more important to me to write a book, even if it isn't read, than to spread oneself too thinly in a series of articles.

Europe, land of innovation

Susan Schneider (Insead) : I'm American myself and it makes me sad to hear French academics saying that these days you just have to publish in American journals, that's all that counts. In effect, you have a very different system, a different philosophy and mode of research from the US. If you play European football well, what's the point of measuring yourself against American footballers and their different rules ? We ought to be asking ourselves instead whether the research undertaken in Europe can bring something specific to the field, something worth protecting and developing. I believe so - that's why I came to Europe.

Americans are asking themselves a lot of questions these days, and they have a certain curiosity about Europe. You should take advantage of that to express your specificity ; the opening could close up again pretty quickly.

MB : There would be a nice symmetry in transatlantic relations if we could persuade the Americans to publish in European journals ; but it's not easy. Americans are curious about what's happening in Europe, but not to the point of writing articles within the restrictions imposed by European periodicals ; and the more so if they count for nothing in the race for tenure. If Europeans publish in America, it's because the American myth is still powerful enough despite the criticisms Americans aim at their own system.

This is where we had the idea of exploiting another mythical location : Paris. The city's magic is such that it's not difficult to attract people from other countries ; so the Ecole de Paris organises meetings and disseminates the ideas raised in these. In order to contribute to the Ecole, one comes to Paris ; and when one reads papers from the Ecole, one is reminded that they were produced in the course of events organised in Paris and that it would be possible to take part in such. Like this, people from different places and backgrounds could get into the habit of coming to Paris, not just to immerse themselves in the city's magic but also to discuss and exchange ideas. These discussions can be organised according to procedures rigorous enough that coming to Paris is worth the effort.

If the Americans start to see how fascinating this is, it'll be easier for the French to recognise that not everything has to be copied from the American model in order to achieve excellent results.

All of which constitutes a misinterpretation - a profitable one, I hope - of the name of the Ecole de Paris.

MC : There's something more at stake: getting the Europeans to meet more often. For a long time they met up in the States : at Harvard or Chicago I used to have discussions with German or British academics, but while I've crossed the Atlantic about twenty times, I've only crossed the Channel twice or three times.

These days, Europeans are keen to meet in Europe, and Paris is an ideal place. This could revolutionise the intellectual system ! Long live the Ecole de Paris !