

THE IRRATIONALITY OF ACTION AND ACTION RATIONALITY: DECISIONS, IDEOLOGIES AND ORGANIZATIONAL ACTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Irrationality is a basic feature of organizational behaviour. Organizational decision making tends to be irrational, and organizational ideologies bias organizations' perceptions. Much effort has been spent on prescribing how organizations should achieve more rationality. However, rational decision making affords a bad basis for action. Some irrationalities are necessary requirements for organizational actions. Choices are facilitated by narrow and clear organizational ideologies, and actions are facilitated by irrational decision-making procedures which maximize motivation and commitment.

THE DECISION-MAKING PERSPECTIVE AND IRRATIONALITY

A characteristic of social science is the multitude perspectives used by different researchers. The significant differences between research fields lie less often in what is described than in how it is described. One important way of developing a social science is to apply new perspectives to a part of reality, thereby highlighting new features of the reality. Perspectives determine what data are seen, what theories are developed, and what kinds of results turn up.

One of the most influential perspectives has been the decision-making perspective which conceives of human behaviour as resulting from decisions made by individuals, group, or organizations. A decision is normally described as a conscious choice between at least two alternative actions. Researchers have studied the choosing among alternatives, the generating of alternatives, and the forming of criteria for choice (goals, objectives).

The attractiveness of the decision-making perspective has several explanations. One explanation is that diverse social theories can be stated in decision-making terms. This is true for parts of microeconomics and of political science. Another explanation is that the perspective lends itself to experimentation; psychological researchers can create experimental decision situations by giving people objectives and information, and then they

study the resulting choices. In addition, social development has spawned situations where the decision-making perspective seems relevant from a common-sense point of view. The establishment and growth of large organizations have added hierarchy to society and, consequently, many actions are determined by forces outside the actors themselves (Chandler, 1977; Galbraith, 1967; Lindblom, 1977). This separates cognition from action and makes it natural to say some individuals decide and others carry out the decisions. The decision-making perspective seems almost imperative in democratic conventions. According to the existing law for industrial democracy in Sweden, for example, the employees' influence should be guaranteed by their participation in decisions. These imperatives may result from a spread of the decision-making perspective from researchers to practitioners.

Still, the decision-making perspective has derived from studies of individual behaviour rather than organizational. An individual has less difficulty going from decision to action than does an organization. This emphasis on individual behaviour might explain why the choosing of actions has received much more attention than the carrying out of actions. Organizational decision processes are described in essentially the same terms as individual decision processes, and research has often characterized organizations as being led by single powerful entrepreneurs (as in microeconomic theory) or by coalitions (as described by Cyert and March, 1963).

The decision-making perspective has been most elaborated in normative research which prescribes how decisions should be made. This kind of research sets the criteria for a 'rational' decision. Strong efforts have been devoted to prescribing how a best choice should be made, given a specific problem, specific alternatives and specific information. Typically, a problem is described as one where there is either too little information or too much. Little attention has been paid to other phases of decision-making processes or to implementing the decisions made.

Normative research has engendered an increasing consensus among researchers as to what kinds of decision making should be called rational. At the same time, empirical research has found ample evidence of decision-making processes that appear irrational by the normative standards (Cyert and March, 1963; Janis, 1972; Lindblom, 1959; March and Olsen, 1976; Nisbett and Ross, 1980; Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). What is more, the apparent irrationalities are not limited to insignificant decisions: people behave similarly when making major decisions on strategic issues. It can even be argued that the apparent irrationalities are largest in major decisions. Janis (1972) demonstrated how decisions with serious actual or potential effects—such as the decision by the Kennedy administration to start the invasion in the Bay of Pigs—were made without normative rationality. Disturbing information was suppressed, and false illusions of unanimity were built up among the decision makers, who took immense and unjustified risks.

There are three common ways of explaining the irrationality found in practice. One chauvinist explanation is that the people studied are not clever enough to behave rationally. For instance, difficulties of implementing models from operations research have been explained by managers' emotional reactions or by their cognitive styles (Huysmans, 1970; Tarkowsky, 1958). If decision makers only had the brain capacities and knowledge of scientists, they would behave as the rational decision models prescribe. Thus, decision makers ought to be selected better and trained better.

A second explanation derives from recent psychological research, which indicates that certain types of irrationality are inherent characteristics of human beings, and these characteristics are difficult to change by training (Goldberg, 1968; Kahneman and Tversky, 1973). Consequently, not even experts can be fully rational, and full rationality can only be reached by mathematical formulae or computer programs.

A third way of explaining apparently irrational behaviour is to point out practical restrictions. In realistic decision situations, values, alternatives and predictions interact; so decision makers have incomplete information, or they have more information than human beings can grasp. This view implies that normative research should design systems for gathering and processing data. Not many years ago, some people expected computer-based information systems to solve numerous management problems (Murdick and Ross, 1975). Also, recognizing that objectives may be difficult to compare with each other, normative research has produced cost-benefit analysis and multiple-criteria methods (Keeney and Raiffa, 1976; Prest and Turvey, 1965).

These traditional explanations are made within the decision-making perspective. They refer to diverse phenomena that disturb decision processes. Like the decision processes themselves, the disturbances are described as being cognitive; they arise from deficiencies in perceived information or deficiencies in decision makers' mental abilities.

These ways of explaining irrationality cannot be said to be inherently wrong, but there is much evidence that these explanations do not suffice. Computer-based information systems have not been used in the prescribed ways; recommendations given by operations-research models have not been followed; cost-benefit analyses have not been done or have been neglected even by competent and successful managers and politicians (Ackerman et al., 1974; Argyris, 1977; Churchman, 1964; Harvey, 1970).

If actual behaviour is to be understood, other explanations are needed. As long as actual behaviour is not fully understood, the recommendations of normative research may be irrelevant, confusing or even harmful.

The main purpose of this article is to argue that an action perspective will be more fruitful for understanding large areas of organizational behaviour. The action perspective explains behaviour within attempts to change and differences in abilities to achieve changes. Because organizational actions do

not lend themselves to laboratory experiments, the article is based on studies of major organizational changes or stabilities in seven organizations. The organizations include industrial companies, governmental agencies and local governments. Processes of change were observed, and people's ways of describing both the changes and the general situations were measured.

The decision-making perspective fails to recognize that practitioners do more than make decisions. Making a decision is only a step towards action. A decision is not an end product. Practitioners get things done, act and induce others to act.

An action perspective makes it easier and important to observe that there exist both decisions without actions and actions without decisions. Some actions are not preceded by weighing of objectives, evaluating of alternatives or choosing; and decision processes and decisions do not always influence actions, particularly not when the actions precede the decisions. On the other hand, decision processes often comprise some of the processes associated with actions. Because managers and representatives in political bodies describe part of their work as decision making, decisions and decision making should remain important topics for study.

In fact, the very relationship between decision making and action helps explain why decisions deviate from normative rationality. Since decision processes aim at action, they should not be designed solely according to such decision-internal criteria as the norms of rationality; they should be adapted to external criteria of action. Rational decisions are not always good bases for appropriate and successful actions.

How can decisions lay foundations for actions? The next section attempts to answer this question.

DECISIONS AS INITIATORS OF ACTIONS

Making decisions is just one way among several of initiating actions in organizations. However, it is a familiar one. Actions are often preceded by group activities which the participants describe as decision-making steps. Certain issues are posed in forms that allow them to be handled by decision processes: several alternative actions are proposed, their probable effects are forecasted, and finally actions are chosen. Sometimes the decision makers even formulate goals or other explicit criteria by which the alternatives can be evaluated. The final results are called decisions.

For decisions to initiate actions, they must incorporate cognitive, motivational and committal aspects. One cognitive aspect of a decision is expectation: the decision expresses the expectation that certain actions will take place. A decision also demonstrates motivation to take action, and it expresses the decision makers' commitments to specific actions. By making a decision, decision makers accept responsibility both for getting the actions carried out and for the appropriateness of the actions.

To go from decision to action is particularly complicated and difficult when there are several decision makers and several actors and when decision makers and actors are different persons. These conditions are typical of organizations. Thus, organizations should provide motivational and social links from decisions to actions. Strong motivations, sometimes even enthusiasm, are needed to overcome big intellectual or physical obstacles. Cooperating actors should be able to rely on certain kinds of behaviours and attitudes from their collaborators, so they should construct mutual commitments: the actors should signal to one another that they endorse proposed actions, for example, by presenting arguments in favour of them or by expressing confidence in success. Actors should also elicit commitments from those who will evaluate their actions afterwards, because committed evaluators are more likely to judge actions as successful (Brunsson, 1976).

Thinking, motivation and commitment are aspects of all actions. However, the importance of each aspect might differ in various situations, depending on such variables as the actors' time horizons, the degrees of change that the actions involve, and the power relationships within the organization. Cognitive activities probably become more important where the actors expect more information to be beneficial. Motivations would be more important where actors lack information needed for predicting the consequences of acting, where the negative consequences could be great, or where great efforts are essential; motivations would be less important where the actions are highly complex and the actors must collaborate extensively (Zander, 1971). Commitments would be more important where many people are involved in actions, agreements from many people are necessary, efforts must be tightly coordinated, or results depend upon the actions or evaluations of collaborators who are accessible through communication. Since motivations and commitments represent internal pressures for action, they are particularly influential where external pressures are weak. This is true of wait-and-see situations where people think that it may be possible to take no action: the actors can reject one proposed action without having to accept another at the same time.

The stronger the expectation, motivation and commitment expressed in a decision, the more power that decision exerts as a basis for action. Insofar as the constituents of decisions are determined by decision processes, the likelihoods of actions can be influenced by designing the decision processes. However, effective decision processes break nearly all the rules for rational decision making: few alternatives should be analyzed, only positive consequences of the chosen actions should be considered, and objectives should not be formulated in advance.

The following subsections explain how irrationalities can build good bases for organizational actions.

Searching for Alternatives

According to the rational model, all possible alternatives should be evaluated. This is impossible, so the injunction is often reformulated as evaluating as many alternatives as possible.

In reality, it seems easier to find decision processes which consider few alternatives (typically two) than ones which consider many alternatives. It is even easy to find decision processes which consider only one alternative. This parsimony makes sense from an action point of view, because considering multiple alternatives evokes uncertainty, and uncertainty reduces motivation and commitment. If actors are uncertain whether a proposed action is good, they are less willing to undertake it and to commit themselves to making it succeed. For example, in order to facilitate product-development projects, uncertainty should not be analyzed but avoided (Brunsson, 1980). If people do not know which action will actually be carried out, they have to build up motivations for several alternatives at the same time, and this diffuses the motivations supporting any single alternative. For the same reasons, commitments may be dispersed or destroyed by the consideration of several alternatives. Therefore, very early in decision processes, if possible before the processes even start, decision makers should get rid of alternatives that have weak to moderate chances of being chosen.

On the other hand, alternatives with no chance to being chosen do not have these negative effects: they may even reinforce motivation and commitment. One strategy is to propose alternatives which are clearly unacceptable but which highlight by comparison the virtues of an acceptable alternative. This defines the situation as not being of the wait-and-see type: rejecting one alternative means accepting another. Another and more important effect is that commitments become doublesided: commitments arise not only through endorsements of acceptable alternatives but also through criticisms of unacceptable alternatives. Thus, considering two alternatives can lay a stronger foundation for action than considering only one alternative if one of the two alternatives is clearly unacceptable.

One example is the decision process following the merger of Sweden's three largest steel companies. The merger was supposed to make production more efficient by concentrating each kind of production in one steelworks. A six-month-long decision process considered several alternative ways of redistributing production. Besides the alternative that was actually chosen, however, only one alternative was investigated thoroughly. This was the alternative to make no change at all. Because this alternative would have made the merger meaningless, no one considered it a practical action.

Estimating Consequences

Decision makers who want to make rational decisions are supposed to consider all relevant consequences that alternatives might have; positive and negative

consequences should get equal attention. But such a procedure evokes much uncertainty, for inconsistent information produces bewilderment and doubt, and stimulates conflicts among decision makers (Hoffman, 1968). Also, it is difficult to weigh positive and negative consequences together (Slovic, 1966).

One way of avoiding uncertainty is to search for consequences in only one direction—to seek support for the initial opinion about an alternative. People tend to anchor their judgements in the first cues they perceive (Slovic, 1972; Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). Searching for positive consequences of an acceptable alternative has high priority, while negative consequences are suppressed. The purpose is not only to avoid uncertainty: active search for arguments in favour of an alternative also helps to create enthusiasm and to increase commitments. If negative consequences do pop up, adding more positive consequences can at least help to maintain commitment and motivation.

For example, in a company with high propensity to undertake innovative product-development projects, personnel spent most of their discussions collecting arguments in favour of specific projects. This helped them to build up enthusiasm for projects—an enthusiasm that they deemed necessary to overcome difficulties (Brunsson, 1976).

Evaluating Alternatives

The rational model prescribes that alternatives and their consequences should be evaluated according to predetermined criteria, preferably in the form of objectives. Decision makers are told to start with objectives and then to find out what effects the alternatives would have on them. This is a dangerous strategy from the action point of view because there is a high risk that decision makers will formulate inconsistent objectives and will have difficulties assessing alternatives. Data are needed that are difficult or impossible to find, and different pieces of information may point in conflicting directions.

For producing action, a better strategy is to start from the consequences and to invent the objectives afterwards (Lindblom, 1959). Predicted consequences are judged to be good because they can be reformulated as desirable objectives. The relations between alternatives and objectives are not investigated in detail, only enough to demonstrate some positive links. The objectives are arguments, not criteria for choice; they are instruments for motivation and commitment, not for investigation. The argumentative role of objectives becomes evident in situations where objectives are abandoned after data indicate that they will not be promoted by preferred actions.

For instance, the calculations in the merged steel company actually demonstrated that the no-change alternative would be at least as profitable as the alternative that was chosen. The decision makers then shifted their

criterion from profitability as defined in the calculations to criteria such as access to a harbour and the age of a steelworks—criteria which favoured the alternative to be chosen.

Choosing

Within the decision-making perspective, a decision is normally described as a choice which follows automatically from preceding analysis. But when decision making initiates action, a choice is not merely a statement of preference for one alternative but an expression of commitment to carrying out an action. A choice can be formulated in diverse ways which express different degrees of commitment and enthusiasm. Which people participate in choosing influences which people participate in acting.

A local government with an unstable majority postponed for eight years a decision about where to build new houses. Yet, at every time, there existed a majority favouring one location. Majority support was not thought to be a sufficient basis for the complicated and time-consuming planning work to follow (Brunsson, 1981; Jönsson, 1982).

Making Rational Use of Irrationality

The purpose of action calls for irrationality. Some irrationalities are consistent with the prescriptions of Lindblom (1959) who argued that thorough rational analyses are irrelevant for the incremental steps in American national policy. But irrationality is even more valuable for actions involving radical changes, because motivation and commitment are crucial.

Much of the decision irrationality observed in decision processes can be explained as action rationality. The hypothesis that such may be the case is worth considering at least in situations where motivation and commitment are highly beneficial. For example, this kind of explanation can be applied to some of the strategic decisions described by Janis (1972). Much of the irrationality Janis observed in the decision of the Kennedy administration to invade Cuba can be explained by the fact that such risky and normally illegitimate actions needed extreme motivation and commitment to be adopted. Strong motivations and commitments seem actually to have arisen, and they led to very strong efforts to complete the action in spite of great difficulties and uncertainties.

According to Janis, better alternatives would have been found if the decision process had been more rational, giving room for more criticism, alternative perspectives and doubts. Perhaps so. But deciding more rationally in order to avoid big failures is difficult advice to follow. If the decisions should initiate actions, the irrationality is functional and should not be replaced by more rational decision procedures. Rational analyses are more appropriate where motivation and commitment offer weak benefits. This is

true for actions which are less significant, less complicated and short-term. Lundberg (1961) observed that investment calculations are made for small, marginal investments but not for large, strategic ones. If one believes that rational decision processes lead to better choices, this observation should be disquieting. Moreover, important actions tend to be carried out with strong motivations and commitments, which make it difficult to stop or change directions if the actions prove to be mistakes.

There is also the opposite risk—that decision rationality impedes difficult but necessary actions. For actions involving major organizational changes, the magnitudes of the issues and the uncertainties involved may frighten people into making analyses as carefully as possible. At the same time, the uncertainty potentials and the involvements of many people heighten the risks that rational decision making will obstruct action.

One extreme and pathological case of decision making giving no basis for action is decision orientation. This occurs when people regard decision making as their only activities, not caring about the actions and not even presuming that there will be actions. In full accordance with the decision-making perspective, these people look upon decisions as end points. In one political organization, for instance, the politicians facilitated their decision making substantially by concentrating on making decisions and ignoring subsequent actions. Since the decisions were not to be carried out, the politicians did not have to worry about negative effects, and they could easily reach agreements. On the other hand, the lack of actions threatened the survival of the organization.

To sum up, rational decision-making procedures fulfill the function of choice—they lead to the selection of action alternatives. But organizations face two problems: to choose the right thing to do and to get it done. There are two kinds of rationality, corresponding to these two problems: decision rationality and action rationality. The one is not better than the other, but they serve different purposes and imply different norms. The two kinds of rationality are difficult to pursue simultaneously because rational decision-making procedures are irrational from an action perspective; they should be avoided if actions are to be facilitated.

How can the problem of choice and the problem of action be solved concurrently? One way is to solve the problem of choice by means of ideologies instead of by decisions. Ideologies can fulfill the function of choice without impeding actions. This is the theme of the next section.

IDEOLOGIES THAT FACILITATE ACTIONS

Recent research has stressed other cognitive aspects of organizational life than decision making. Organizational members share interests which determine their participation in an organization. They also perceive similarly the organization, its environment, its history and its future. Some shared

knowledge, perspectives and attitudes persist over time (Clark, 1972; Jönsson and Lundin, 1977; Starbuck, 1976; Starbuck et al., 1978). These cognitive phenomena, or parts of them, have been given names such as frames of reference, myths or strategies; here they are called organizational ideologies.

An ideology is a set of ideas. A person's ideas about one particular object or situation is here called a cognitive structure. Because people can be more or less closely related to their ideas, it is possible to distinguish three kinds of organizational ideologies. One kind is the members' individual cognitive structures. These can be called *subjective ideologies*. The members also have ideas of the cognitive structures of their colleagues. These ideas are *perceived ideologies*; what people think other people think. Finally, *objective ideologies* are ideas which are shared by all organizational members and which afford common bases for discussion and action. These different kinds of ideologies are at least partly inconsistent.

Ideologies describe both how things are and how they should be, and these two aspects are often strongly interdependent. Both the descriptive and the normative aspects answer questions about reality. One question is *how?* How do the members act in relation to each other or to people outside the organization? Another question is *what?* What has happened (history), or what will (expectations)? Ideologies define not only what is perceived as fact but also which facts appear important. Thirdly, ideologies can answer the question *why?* Causes may be attributed to an individual member, to the whole organization (self-attribution), or to the organization's environments (environmental attribution).

Organizational ideologies interrelate closely with decisions, since they make it easier for people to agree on what objectives to pursue, on what action alternatives hold promise, and on what outcomes are probable. Ideologies afford short-cuts in decision making by enabling decision makers to omit or abbreviate some steps and by filtering out some alternatives and consequences (March and Simon, 1958).

Ideologies also substitute for decisions. Many organizational actions do not follow decision processes; agreement and coordination arise without decision making, because the actors perceive situations similarly and share expectations and general values (Danielsson and Malmberg, 1979).

In the innovative company mentioned earlier, most ideas for product-development projects clearly matched the ideology. Such proposals could be accepted and projects started without explicit decisions. Instead of carrying out decision-making processes, management engaged in supporting the proposals by arousing commitments and strengthening the expectations that the projects would succeed.

Organizational ideologies tend to arise by themselves in any organization, but according to some authors, they can also be consciously moulded by an organization's members (Ansoff et al., 1976; Lorange and Vancil, 1977;

Starbuck et al., 1978). This suggests that ideologies can be formed with the direct purpose of avoiding rational decision making, thus reinforcing the potential for taking difficult actions. In fact, organizational ideologies might reconcile the tasks of thinking and of acting, because ideologies might identify appropriate actions and also contribute to their accomplishment.

If ideologies are to take the place of rational decision making, confrontations between proposed actions and ideologies should give clear results. It should be possible to classify a proposal as acceptable or unacceptable after little analysis and discussion. There should be high consistency among the cognitive structures of individual organizational members. There should not only be common ideologies to undergird discussions, but these objective ideologies should be very conclusive—so clear and so narrow that additional filters for ideas are unnecessary.

Conclusiveness could be accomplished by objective ideologies that include just a few, precise normative statements. However, a confrontation between very simple ideologies and a nonconforming action proposal might throw the ideologies into question rather than the proposal. Complex ideologies that make contingent statements about an organization and its environments can also be conclusive, and such ideologies are unlikely to be challenged by a single action proposal.

A comparison between two companies revealed that the one with narrow, clear and complex objective ideologies was able to accomplish great changes in its product mix, whereas the company with broad, ambiguous and simple ideologies had great difficulties getting new products into production (Brunsson, 1979). Ideologies which are clear, narrow, differentiated, complex and consistent can provide good bases for action because they solve a large part of the choice problem. Such ideologies can determine what actions are right, so analysis is minimized, and efforts can concentrate on reinforcing actions. Decision rationality can be used for forming ideologies, and action rationality can be used for forming actions. Thinking can be separated from acting.

Attribution is important too. If the outcomes of action are believed to depend on environmental events, an organization should construct forecasts of the type prescribed by rational models. If the outcomes seem to depend on what members do within an organization itself, the key task is to create motivations and commitments. Thus, environmental attribution fits decision rationality, whereas self-attribution facilitates action rationality.

IDEOLOGICAL SHIFTS THAT FOSTER RADICAL CHANGES

Actions that would radically change an organization's relations to its environments are typically difficult to carry out and need strong commitments and high motivations, so ideologies should endorse these actions precisely and enthusiastically. But such ideologies constrain the possibilities

for change, because only changes that match the ideologies receive ideological support.

Changes within narrow ideologies do sometimes suffice. Often, however, organizations need quick and radical changes to accommodate rapid environmental changes, and precise ideologies would rule out changes which are radical enough to cope with these situations. Yet, broad and ambiguous ideologies would not afford strong bases for action. A company which regards itself a transportation company may be no more flexible than one which considers railways its domain. There seems to be a dilemma: radical changes require conflicting qualities of organizational ideologies.

There is a solution, however. Again, the trick is to separate thinking from acting. If change actions are preceded by ideological shifts, they can attract enough support to be accomplished. This implies that change actions should wait until new ideologies have been established.

If ideologies are to serve as bases for choice, they must resist pressures for change and change slowly. In fact, the slowness of ideological shifts can explain the long time-lags before organizations respond to important threats in their environments, even when the threats seem obvious to external observers (Starbuck et al., 1978).

The need for complex and precise ideologies that shift explains the 'myth cycles' reported by Jönsson and Lundin (1977). They found that organizations jump from one dominant ideology, or myth, to another. Belief in a dominant ideology is strong under normal conditions, and the dominant ideology is questioned only during crises. When members lose faith in a dominant ideology, they replace it by another. Such myth cycles imply a strong belief in one objective ideology and a consistency between subjective and objective ideologies which seem irrational from a decision-making point of view. On the other hand, the cycles contain much action rationality. A dominant ideology maximizes an organization's ability to act. Consensus and strong adherence to one ideology are not merely results of people's analytical and perceptual deficiencies; they are necessary conditions for organizational survival.

If radical changes have to be initiated by ideological shifts, it becomes a crucial issue how ideologies can be changed. External factors—such as crises or shifts in leadership—may be important, as may the properties of ideologies themselves. What properties make ideologies apt to shift when shifts are needed? Fortunately, the same properties that make ideologies good bases for action make them apt to change. Precision and complexity facilitate both.

Because descriptive statements in ideologies can be checked against reality, changes in reality provide incentives for ideological shifts. The more factors an ideology considers, the greater is the chance that some of them will change; and the more causal links among these factors, the more repercussions a change in one of them will have. If statements are clear, they can be proved

false, and they have weak chances of surviving drastic changes in reality. The most stable ideologies are simple ones which are both vague and widely applicable—such as, our goal is profitability, or we shall operate in the transportation industry.

Paradoxically, the refining and elaborating of ideologies are steps toward abandoning them. However, a situation from which a change is initiated need not have much in common with the situation in which the change occurs. Existing ideologies are threatened when their implications contradict observations. If these threats cannot be met by making ideologies more ambiguous, inconsistencies arise within both subjective and objective ideologies. If subjective ideologies change more rapidly than the objective ideologies, inconsistencies arise between the subjective and the objective ideologies, so belief in objective ideologies decreases. Diverse subjective ideologies appear, and these may correspond to social structures different from the ones founded upon the old ideologies. The result is inconsistency between an organization's social and its ideological structures, inconsistency which gives less room for compromise and authority. Differences between what people think privately and the ideologies to which they can refer publicly in their discussions give rise to misunderstandings. When people misinterpret each others' statements, conflicts arise, escalate and remain difficult to resolve. Once the objective ideologies have been questioned, many people see chances to change the organization's environments, its internal functioning and their own positions. The differences increase between what is and what should be, with regard to what goals to pursue, how things should be done, and who should control events.

Ideological shifts afford very bad contexts for action. Ideological inconsistencies increase uncertainty and make it extremely difficult to marshall commitments for organizational actions. Conflicts interfere with coordination. Simultaneous attempts to change environments, the ways things are done, and who has control may easily exceed an organization's problem-solving abilities. Thus, an ideological shift has to be completed before acting begins. In fact, an ideological shift in one organization produced a complete inability to act, a social deadlock where everyone worked for change, but their individual actions actually impeded change, and where no one understood how to break out of this frustrating situation (Brunsson, 1981). A social deadlock is a steady state: it is full of activities, but these activities stabilize the situation, reinforcing the deadlock. A productive ideological shift must be a step in a process which leads to something new.

The difference between social deadlocks and productive ideological shifts has two implications. The first implication concerns observers of organizational changes: they might mistake confused situations for productive ideological states. Since confused situations precede the actions that create radical changes, observers might infer that confused situations produce changes, and that organizations should try to remain confused in order to have high

propensities to change and high abilities to adapt to changing environments (Hedberg and Jönsson, 1978). This inference neglects the transitional character of confused situations, and it mistakes processes of change for initiators of change. The confused situation during an ideological shift may resemble neither its predecessor nor its successor. On the contrary, consistent, clear and complex ideologies are both good starting points for ideological shifts and desirable results of the shifts. Consensus rather than conflict breeds change.

The second implication is more practical: ideological shifts may become steady states. Social deadlocks are created and maintained by vicious circles in which ideological confusion leads to more confusion, and conflicts lead to still more conflicts. The confusion and conflict during an ideological shift bring an organization to the brink of social deadlock. How to prevent social deadlocks is an intriguing question for research.

CONCLUSIONS

This article discusses two aspects of organizations' thinking: decision making and ideologies. Observations of organizations demonstrate that both aspects tend to be irrational in the traditional meaning of the word. Many decisions are based on biased information about a biased set of two alternatives, sometimes only one, and the information is weighed improperly. Organizational ideologies focus members' perceptions on just a few aspects of reality, and members' confidence in their biased perceptions greatly exceeds what seems justified. Organizational processes systematically reduce, rather than exploit, the multitude perceptions that numerous people could have brought in.

These irrationalities appear both harmful and difficult to explain if the main purpose of an organization's thinking is to choose the right actions. However, the main problem for organizations is not choice but taking organized actions. Decision making and ideologies form bases for action and can be fully understood only by recognizing that function. Thinking must be adapted to the purpose of action; and, in that perspective, irrational decision making and narrow, prejudicial ideologies are necessary ingredients of viable organizations inhabiting complex and rough environments.

Organizations have two problems in relation to action—to find out what to do and to do it. When confronting difficult actions, organizations separate these problems. Organizations solve the problem of choice by forming ideologies, then the activities preceding specific actions focus on creating motivations and commitments.

Getting things done is particularly problematic in political organizations. These organizations institutionalize conflict: people are recruited on the basis that they adhere to disparate ideologies, and these ideological differences persist in spite of common membership in the same organizations. The

ideological differences block radical actions because each proposed action is scrutinized from diverse viewpoints. Actions are supposed to be initiated by rational decision procedures that integrate the disparate viewpoints. Thus, proposed actions that involve major changes are rejected, and the organizations move in small steps (Brunsson and Jönsson, 1979). Generally, political organizations try to generate action by forming strong majorities. Where this is impossible, the problems aggravate.

Lindblom (1959) argued that irrationalities can be accepted in national policy making because policies develop incrementally. The conclusion here is instead that the high degree of rationality in political organizations produces incrementalism. It is rationality, not irrationality, that is tied to incrementalism.

Decisions and actions can also be separated organizationally. Civil servants can take actions, while the politicians discuss and debate. This heightens the chances of powerful actions but decreases the politicians' influence over what actions to take. Strong political influence seems to hinder radical changes even if there is a strong majority.

In Sweden, the control of industrial companies is shifting from managers to groups representing diverse interests, such as unions, local governments, and regional and national authorities. The industrial companies are becoming more and more like political organizations. Finding ways to combine influence by diverse groups with ability to act is a pressing challenge for organizational research.

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