

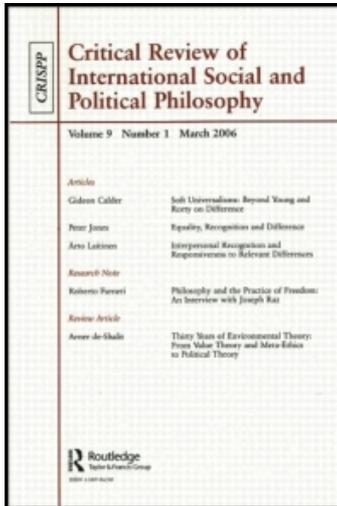
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Why is there hierarchy? Democracy and the question of organisational form

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Elitist and technocratic accounts of democracy assume the necessity of leadership and hierarchy, while participatory approaches claim that organisations can be more ‘horizontal’ yet remain effective. To inform this debate, this paper presents a critical examination of the hierarchical organisational form. It explores classic economic and political accounts of how hierarchy emerges and is maintained, and seeks to reveal the mechanisms by which it achieves organisational effectiveness. The paper argues that significant ideological distortion lies at the heart of elitist accounts of democracy and sometimes in our popular conceptions as well. This distortion takes the form of a false equation between organisational effectiveness and hierarchy, one that allows hierarchy to *appear* necessary, when it is no such thing. With social science unable to confirm the popular belief that hierarchy is inevitable, the paper concludes that those who seek to build more participatory organisations are correct to question its unreflective use. The paper is thus intended as a contribution to the activities of democratic citizens in their vigilant management of this most prevalent, yet mysterious, of organisational forms.

Keywords: democracy; hierarchy; leadership; organisation; participation

Demands for a deeper democracy and greater popular involvement in politics (Pateman 1970; Fung and Wright 2003), stand in stark opposition to more technocratic and elitist accounts of democracy that stress the need for leadership and the inevitability of hierarchy (Schumpeter 1943; Michels 1958; Körösenyi 2005). While the former claim that ‘horizontal’ organisations can be both legitimate and effective, the latter point to the extraordinary organisational capacity of hierarchy, and make claim to a more ‘realistic’ view of citizen abilities. At the heart of these disagreements lie fundamental assumptions about organisational effectiveness, the necessity of hierarchy and the meaning of democracy (Skinner 1973; Dunn 1993). Precisely how hierarchies achieve organisational effectiveness, why they emerge and are maintained, are thus issues of some importance to social scientists and democratic citizens alike.

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To democratic elitism, one must surely grant the remarkable prevalence and durability of hierarchy, throughout history and across cultures (Lanski 1984). As an organisational form, it boasts many of humanity's greatest achievements and a distinguished and voluminous lineage (Weber 1978; Sartori 1987; Scott 1990). Yet so must we acknowledge, to those of more participatory persuasion, that hierarchy has its costs. Among them are the excessive concentration of power, organised cruelty and a sclerotic inability to learn (Machiavelli 1979; Morgan 1997, p. 114; Cloke and Goldsmith 2002, p. 95). Hierarchy carries significant health costs for its participants (Sennett 1977; Marmot 2005; Wilkinson 2006), enforcement costs (Bowles and Gintis 1987) and range of deleterious psychological effects that include dehumanisation (Milgram 1974; Fiske 1997) and corruption by power (Acton 1887; Kipnis 1976; Minow 1990; Kipnis and Rind 1999; Ashforth 1994; Keltner *et al.* 2003; Blaug 2007). Such costs have taught participatory democrats to minimise their use of so troubling an organisational form. Yet if, as their opponents assert, hierarchy is inescapable, necessary and a fact of organisational life, then their efforts are in vain.

A central tenet of all forms of elitism is the appeal to the commonly held belief that hierarchy is necessary for effective decision-making; that its occurrence is somehow 'natural' in human affairs and that it is, therefore, inevitable (Gemmill and Oakley 1992). Organisations will always resemble pyramids; there will always be inequality and, sometimes, tyranny also. In the end, we simply do need leaders. Such views are extraordinarily widespread; meaning that they are frequently expressed, not only in democratic theory but also in our everyday understanding of organisations. Popular concepts and common conceptions are of proven sociological significance (Weber 1978; Crandall and Beasley 2001, p. 77), and this is surely the case with our everyday assumptions about the necessity of hierarchy.

This paper explores various explanations of hierarchy, particularly in economic history and social contract theory, in order to identify and describe the mechanisms by which hierarchy achieves organisational effectiveness. The paper argues that the prevalence of hierarchy across organisational life is due not to its necessity, but rather to ideological factors; chief among them being the widespread conflation of organisational effectiveness and hierarchy. This false equation lies at the heart of elitist evaluations of hierarchy, and sometimes in our popular conceptions as well. So too does it enable hierarchy to *appear* as necessary, even when it is no such thing.

We begin by examining the common claim that hierarchy is somehow 'natural', that the very structure of the material world makes it necessary. Here, we inspect economic explanations for hierarchy that reveal the mechanisms by which it achieves organisational effectiveness. These accounts also highlight a strong ideological component in the emergence and maintenance of hierarchy, which the paper seeks to formulate as a false equation between hierarchy and organisational effectiveness. We then turn to the classic

explanations of hierarchy offered in the history of political thought, again noting recurrent difficulties in demonstrating the necessity of hierarchy, the intrusion of ideology and the absence of stipulated mechanisms by which it achieves organisational effectiveness. The paper then seeks to clarify these mechanisms, and to explore the implications of how we explain hierarchy for contemporary debates in democratic theory.

As a way of organising human affairs, hierarchy is a set of arrangements bearing a strong family resemblance; all are structured as a 'ranked tree' (Radner 1992, p. 1390). It signifies a stack of power asymmetries, each featuring differentiated levels of status and degrees of power; layered, as it were, one above the other (Cloke and Goldsmith 2002, p. 83). Reasons given for its occurrence in general are used to justify particular hierarchies, and to defend their continued existence here and now. To ask why there is hierarchy is, therefore, also to engage in a sceptical inquiry into the legitimisation of power. After all, a hierarchy that can claim to be 'natural' and necessary has the struggle for legitimacy almost won (Douglas 1986).

Nature dictates that hierarchy is effective

With hierarchy so readily observable in nature, in food chains and the very structure of living organisms, the human body and even the night sky, ancient philosophers readily constructed analogous classificatory hierarchies for human affairs. The material world was seen to mirror relations among individuals (Douglas 1986, p. 48). Everything from the smallest insect to the divine being himself was arranged in ranked 'degrees' of relative status. Zeus's 'Golden Chain' (Homer 1992, pp. 19–27) and Jacob's 'Ladder' both reached from heaven all the way to earth and the world seemed a 'Great Chain of Being' in which each organism had its place (Lovejoy 1990). While the Reformation began the long process of undermining the notion that hierarchy is divinely sanctioned, the idea that the world was constructed of chains, links and layers continued to exert influence, even when Europe's Enlightenment sought to replace God's will with science. Indeed, the more science taught us about the nature of the world, the more it seemed that its physical structures served to dictate what happens when individuals seek to coordinate their actions (Morgan 1997). Of course, highlighting the hierarchic nature of the natural world is to interpret that world in a particular way. As Bookchin points out, a Queen bee can be seen either as the apex of a hierarchy or as dependent upon the hive (1982). The widespread perception that hierarchy pervades nature is, therefore, vulnerable to the charge that this is, already, a human imposition.

More certain is that to survive and prosper, humans must work together. Collective action needs to be effective, and it is commonly assumed that coordination is best achieved by leadership and hierarchy. In an environment dominated by scarcity and competition, for example, human relations are

seen to 'naturally' take on the hierarchic form in order to appropriate, generate and distribute scant resources. In a battle, a ship needs a captain (Plato 1974; Engels 1978, p. 729). In a firm, productive efficiency is improved by a hierarchic division of labour (Radner 1992, p. 1388). Even in democratic politics, effective decision-making is delivered by the hierarchic division of *political* labour into an active executive and a relatively passive populace (Mill 1975; Milbrath 1965).

Even if we dispense with the argument from analogy, here between the hierarchies of the natural world and those of human affairs, there remains a strong claim that the material world itself is structured in such a way that it *requires* us to arrange our decision-making in a hierarchic manner – if we are to achieve organisational effectiveness. To solve problems and survive, it seems we *must* adopt this particular organisational form, for *only* this form 'fits' with the demanding structures of the material world. The reason the vast plain of our organisational activity is dominated by hierarchy is thus that it delivers; it survives better than its competitors, it is 'natural'. Following Newton, God may indeed be a mathematician, but so is he strongly authoritarian in his politics, for he spent *Genesis* so structuring the world that it favoured hierarchic organisations over their competitors.

With material conditions determining which organisational forms are successful, we shade into Darwinian and evolutionary approaches to social structure (Gledhill 2000; Aldrich 2001). Hierarchy is here seen to provide the best 'fit' with environmental imperatives; it is the adaptation that gives competitive advantage. Thus, in both evolutionary anthropology and institutional economics, the prevalence of hierarchy is attributed to its superior performance, whether in terms of the competition for resources, the passing-on of genetic material or the attainment of greater productive efficiency (Nelson 1995). The first organisational hierarchies may, therefore, have emerged around biological differences such as physical strength or gender (Worsley 1992), yet subsequently, more complex hierarchies arose as political and economic conditions changed. In their analysis of the emergence and maintenance of hierarchy, both Marx and Weber favoured material structures which evolved over time, and so sought to show how existing hierarchies reflect the historically specific economic development of capitalism or the bureaucracies brought on by modernist rationalisation, respectively.

In such material accounts, hierarchy appears as an unintended consequence of human activity in a particular kind of environment. It comes into being because material conditions are such that it just happens to be uniquely effective. This, indeed, was precisely the account presented by Robert Michels, whose 'Iron Law of Oligarchy' held hierarchy to be inevitable and democracy to be merely a utopian dream (Michels 1958, p. 70; Schwarzmantel 1987). His suggestion that hierarchy is required by 'technical conditions' resonates with more detailed explanatory narratives that feature material structures as the primary cause of hierarchy. However, though Michels upholds a material

account of hierarchy, he nowhere offers an examination of precisely *how* hierarchy delivers effectiveness. As with many explanations for hierarchy, there is little detail given on the actual *mechanisms* by which hierarchy pulls off so neat a trick. To assert that hierarchy is 'natural' and necessitated by the structure of the material world is a good story, but it remains incomplete.

A more rigorous analysis of how nature favours hierarchy is offered by researchers in economic history who study the division of labour and the evolution of technology. Here, we can accurately observe the emergence of hierarchy and show that it in fact comes in two distinct phases. The first is material: a division of labour bequeaths an increase in productive efficiency. The second is social, psychological and ideological, for it involves the repetition of divided labour becoming culturally encrusted, as it were, so that it at last hardens into a settled social structure. One of the few political economists to have grasped this dual aspect of hierarchy was, of course, Marx, who claimed that the social and cultural hierarchy of class in fact derived from exploitative relations in the realm of production (Marx 1974). Particularly since Lukács, we can refer to the process by which material divisions of labour become culturally fixed as one of 'reification' (Lukács 1971). Reification is the tendency of abstractions and social constructions to appear as real, as external to and independent of, individuals (Gemmill and Oakley 1992).

Yet if the birth of hierarchy is occasioned by the structure of the material world, how, precisely, does this occur? Again, what are the actual mechanisms by which – the world being what it is – hierarchy delivers organisational effectiveness? Adam Smith used the example of a pin factory to illuminate this moment of generation. He showed that when production was divided into discrete and repeatable tasks, set-up time was saved, tasks were learned more rapidly and individual dexterity was increased (1937, pp. 4–5). When new machinery became available in the industrial revolution, such divided and repetitive tasks were easier to automate (Smith 1937, p. 7; Rosenberg 1994). Here, then, it is the very structure of the material world: of pins, fingers and machines, that bequeaths greater productive efficiency to the division of labour. Repeat that division and encrust it with reification, and we begin to see how hierarchy comes into being and is maintained.

Further clarification is provided by subsequent debates between the economic historians Steven Marglin and David Landes, for both are concerned to explain the historical emergence of the pyramidal hierarchy that characterised capitalism's industrial revolution. Marglin opens with just the right question: 'is hierarchical authority really necessary to high levels of production?' (Marglin 1978, p. 13). It is clear that new working practices resulted in workers being engaged in minutely divided and repetitive tasks (the 'putting-out' system) and that capitalists controlled the increasingly centralised workplace of the factory. Marglin returns to Smith's pin factory to show that the emergence of hierarchy is usually attributed (by political

economists and economic historians) to the *technical superiority* of the division of labour and its *centralisation* in a factory (p. 29). Marglin then reviews historical evidence in favour of the proposition that the division of labour did *not*, in fact, derive its gains from an increase in technical efficiency. Instead, he asserts, such gains were due to the opportunities they afforded capitalists for the accumulation of power (p. 14). While conceding that the division of labour (along with factories and new technology) enlarged the overall size of the pie, such innovations survived because they enabled certain players to secure a larger slice of that pie for themselves (p. 14).

Here, then, the division of labour (and its resulting hierarchy) comes into being and is maintained *not* because of its unique capacity to generate efficiency, but because it, 'guaranteed to the entrepreneur an essential role' (p. 20). What bosses do, and make their money doing, according to Marglin, is *re-integrate* divided tasks, supervise workers and discipline the workplace (p. 29). The division of labour thus becomes an entrenched social hierarchy because this helps a particular class to divide, conquer and profit. The emergence of hierarchy is, therefore, according to Marglin, more a matter of securing elite power than material necessity.

These are worrying suggestions, for they reiterate that hierarchy is (at least) a dual-aspect activity. There is a material component *and* a social, psychological and ideological component – to its emergence and maintenance. On the material side, Marglin does indeed see the divisions of labour that emerged in the factories of the nineteenth century as massively increasing productive efficiency. But, he argues, this was due *not* to task specialisation, as Smith and others have suggested, but to task separation and increased task duration (p. 18). Certainly, increased productive efficiency often derives from concentration on separate tasks and the reduction of set-up time between tasks. But Marglin points out that both were as available to the peasant farmer as they were in a new factory. The main difference between them is that the peasant did *all* the tasks, whereas the factory worker does only one; over and over again. For his part, Smith was quite aware that the division of labour could 'stupefy' workers. What so irritated Marx was that Smith (and sundry other 'vulgar' and 'dwarf' economists) (Marx 1974, pp. 82–83) did not extend his interest in that psychological component to an account of how the hierarchic relations of production determine the social relations among men (Marx 1974, p. 72).

Following Marglin, productive efficiency does not *need* the entrenched hierarchies that so often attach themselves to divided labour. A firm does not *need* a capitalist. There is nothing inevitable about this hierarchy, and nothing here enables us to conclude that hierarchy is determined by material conditions. Yet it seems vital that the hierarchy from which the capitalist derives his disproportionate slice of the pie *appear* necessary. Hierarchy itself, not just a division of labour, must be seen to generate gains in effectiveness; though the real productive engine is the collective activity of the workers. In this situation, then, hierarchy *appears* to be necessitated by material

conditions, but is in fact, largely an ideological encrustation that serves the interests of power.

When we turn to David Landes' objections to Marglin's arguments, we find the role played by material conditions reaffirmed and also, though for different reasons, confirmation of the intrusion of ideology. Landes applauds the attempt to show the 'economic – as opposed to the moral – basis of the division of labour.' But he rejects Marglin's efforts to 'demystify the capitalist ideal of technological efficiency' (Landes 1986, p. 589). For Landes, it is the 'preferences of technology' that gave factories their Schumpeterian 'head start' (p. 614). Being more capital-intensive, and thus better able to reap returns on economies of scale (p. 603), they also made innovations easier to conceive and implement (pp. 615–616). Contra Marglin, the role of the entrepreneur was here brought into being by the material structures of the world (p. 596). Landes concedes that hierarchy may well have an ideological component, and that it is, in part, a social construction. Yet the hierarchies that become attached to the division of labour under capitalism are here seen to have a hard materialist core. It is the evident stability of this core that encourages Landes to conclude: 'we are not going to abolish degrees of responsibility and authority in any operation of any size' (p. 622).

Whatever we think of Landes' analysis, both he and Marglin agree that productivity gains are achievable through divisions of labour, and divisions of labour often become culturally entrenched hierarchies. Yet Marglin's analysis, and indeed the history of the co-operative movement (Vanek 1970; Bowles and Gintis 1993; Prychitko and Vanek 1996), suggests that divisions of labour can be used to increase productive efficiency and, at the same time, prevented from ossifying into a static hierarchy of classes.

We have seen that while a given hierarchy may well be favoured by material conditions, its purported effectiveness might equally be due to ideology. This is a significant and recurrent difficulty for any claim to explanatory primacy, for as soon as we admit the *possibility* of other causes, we can no longer be sure that hierarchy is strictly necessary. Here, any material explanation quickly becomes contaminated by an element of social construction, present in proportions unknown. The problem of indeterminate proportion arises because the emergence of hierarchy has causal elements which are both material *and* social. When proponents of materialism lose sight of this, they begin a slide towards reductive determinism.

The ideology of hierarchy

When material conditions demand effective collective action, hierarchy is selected as the way in which organisational effectiveness is to be achieved. We must be effective, so we must adopt hierarchy. Yet it cannot be that hierarchy is always and everywhere the *only* way to coordinate collective action. The frequency with which organisational effectiveness is *equated*

with hierarchy, in both elitist democratic theory and in more popular discourses, is therefore puzzling.

Take the ship at sea which needs a captain, the obedience required in an army, or any organisation you have worked for, been educated in or treated by, and note the ease with which we conflate organisational effectiveness with hierarchy. To organise is to separate into layers of status. This false equation between organisation and hierarchy is extraordinarily widespread, and reverberates through common explanations for hierarchy, and across the disciplinary silos of social science (Powell 1996, p. 271). Indeed, what we might call the 'Simple Equation' between organisation and hierarchy is a social construct that lends itself to the justification of existing relations of power.

All too often, democratic elitism presents us with this equation in place of an analysis of the actual mechanism(s) by which hierarchy delivers effectiveness. This is particularly apparent when we consider material explanations for hierarchy which turn on questions of size and complexity. Most of us, for example, diagnose our collective inability to involve large numbers of citizens in government by appealing to a notion akin to Michels' 'Iron Law'. Again, Michels claims that all organisations *inevitably* generate leadership and hierarchy. As 'technical conditions' become more complex, he sees an increasing need for 'a certain amount of Caesarism' (1958, p. 79). Slowly but surely, those who are particularly able will gain status and hang onto it (p. 81). Yet, as already noted, Michels provides no real explanation for *why* hierarchies emerge. Nor does he show the mechanism by which hierarchy is able to achieve its unique effectiveness. He merely asserts, repeatedly and with great rhetorical power, that effectiveness requires hierarchy; and hierarchy will always have its way with democracy.

The presence of the Simple Equation is clearer still in Chandler, the business historian, who states that beyond a certain scale, coordination becomes so complex as to require, and reward, conscious organisation. It is this that necessitates the 'visible hand' of management (Chandler 1962). Large organisational hierarchies are thereby necessary because they fulfil the function of managing complexity. If asked why hierarchy emerges, Chandler merely gestures toward the evident need for organisation. To organise is to adopt a hierarchy. QED: organisation equals hierarchy.

Finally, in democratic theory, it is commonplace to assert that not everyone can participate, that there are simply too many of us, that the state is too large a political entity and that the complexity of decisions exceeds the capacities of participants (Schumpeter 1943; Dahl 1970; Dahl and Tufte 1974, pp. 68–69; Körösenyi 2005). Indeed, the stark impossibility of participatory democracy is the principle reason given for representative democracy (Keane 1988; Beetham 1992; Budge 1993; Clarke 1996; Canovan 1999, p. 13). Often, democratic theorists assume the necessity of a representational hierarchy, and pay little attention to other methods by which democracy

might secure organisational effectiveness. Democracy, it is (barely) argued, simply must make widespread use of hierarchy. There is no choice in this matter. By *necessity*, only the few can participate in effective organisational decision-making, and for this *structural* reason there must always be hierarchy. We can explain the fact that we are ruled *over* by asserting that we need organisation – which apparently only hierarchy can provide.

Organisation and hierarchy go so easily together; they become one and the same. Even as we move our attention from economic to more political accounts, we again find this Simple Equation offered in place of an explanation.

We choose hierarchy because of its effectiveness

In the history of social contract theory, there is no mystery whatsoever about how hierarchy comes into being. No longer is it an unintended consequence of collective action arising out of material conditions. Here, it is fully intended, for the mechanism by which hierarchy emerges is transparently that of purposive action. We *choose* hierarchy because we believe it to be necessary for the goals of social order and effective organisation. Here, again, we open the door for ideological distortion, for we remain unsure whether citizens select hierarchy on objective or ideological grounds. In the legitimating grand narratives of social contract theory, we once again encounter the Simple and ideological Equation between organisational effectiveness and hierarchy.

All social contract theorists require that hierarchy be agreed to by a community of rational individuals, real or imagined, and all attempt to sell hierarchy to those individuals by claiming its necessity. Whether intended to provide *ex post* justifications for existing hierarchies or to criticise them, social contract theories begin with a state of nature in which there is no hierarchy and all are roughly equal. For Hobbes (1958), this means that we are all equally dangerous; for Locke (1952), that we are equally imprinted with God's natural law; for Rousseau (1968), that we are all equally capable of finding the General Will. For all three, it is the agreement of equals (whether hypothetical, tacit or actual, respectively) that serves to legitimate collective power, and indeed, to bring hierarchy into being.

As the social contract variously moves us from the state of nature to political society, hierarchy is purposefully constructed in order to secure the benefits that only it can bring. For Hobbes, hierarchy is selected because it is the most effective organisational structure and thus the logical choice for rationally self-interested individuals. For Locke, seeking to explain and justify not only political but also economic hierarchy, this organisational form is selected for its evident productivity. Even God wishes us to be industrious, and will reward us if we know our place. For Rousseau, hierarchy emerges when property rights are suddenly, and illegitimately, asserted by the

rich. These rights are then consolidated as the poor themselves come to believe in them (Rousseau 1984). As with Marx, hierarchy no sooner appears than its justifications are concealed behind a layer of ideology that mystifies and placates its participants.

When it comes to accounting for the prevalence of hierarchy, however, it is Hobbes who makes the most fruitful mistake. The boldness and rapidity with which he articulates the Simple Equation, followed as it is by immediately swirling the reader across the floor towards the pressing need for action – make it difficult to resist his assumption that social order simply is hierarchic. In this sense, Hobbes' argument is constructed like a greasy slide. The slide shows that hierarchy has a material and an ideological element (Hampsher-Monk 1992, pp. 60–63). No sooner has Hobbes asked us to accept that human nature orients to rational self-interest than we immediately find ourselves slipping all the way down to requiring an absolute and centralised authority. To avoid this tumble towards authoritarianism, one must pick oneself up, walk round to the front and start again; this time getting one's objections in early. Such scepticism is beyond most of us, and for this reason, the stark clarity of his argument, his bleak exposition of human weakness and his cartoon-mechanical vision of psychology have subsequently enjoyed extraordinary influence (Elster 1988; Radner 1992, p. 1409).

When we act together, Hobbes argues, we need hierarchy. It is necessary if we are to reap the benefits of collective action. Here we encounter the Simple Equation, now in its most pristine form. For Hobbes, Michels and most of us ever since, effective organisation simply means the same thing as hierarchy. Elitist democratic theorists and generations of confused managers and revolutionaries have thus repeatedly selected hierarchy *because they assume the structures of the material world make it necessary*. Yet when we inquire into the precise mechanism(s) by which hierarchy delivers effectiveness, we find merely ideology and dogmatic assertion.

The Simple Equation is an invalid knowledge claim. Hierarchy and effectiveness are *not* the same (Morgan 1997). There is no necessity to the proposition that material conditions make hierarchy unavoidable, nor can materialist explanations for hierarchy prevent ideological elements from leaking in (Gledhill 2000, p. 41). The problem with the Simple Equation lies not so much in its dubious reliance on material necessity, as in its claim to the *exclusivity* of hierarchy's ability to coordinate. Certainly, markets coordinate collective action in a quite distinct way, as do networks (Castells 1996; Thompson *et al.* 1996; Blaug 2000), so there clearly *are* alternative organisational forms that could deliver effectiveness, and could be selected in place of hierarchy. The long and complex history of anarchism, for example, mounts a direct challenge to the Simple Equation by appealing to the coordinating capacity of networks. Its bold-faced assertion that 'anarchy is order', indicates the possibility that effectiveness often arises naturally in human networks, and does not require hierarchy at all.

Mere repetition of the Simple Equation tells us little about the material conditions that favour the emergence of hierarchy, but much about how we evaluate its effectiveness. Any explanation for hierarchy must take heed of this hard shell of ideology. The Equation is *not* the result of an analysis of material conditions, but is, in fact, a self-perpetuating social construction. This ideological component is itself a causal factor in the emergence of hierarchy, and becomes more important still when a hierarchy is preserved over time.

If hierarchy were merely materially necessary (and so justified), we would regularly observe hierarchies reducing themselves as their necessity passed. Yet this barely occurs. Instead, hierarchies are regularly maintained, even though material conditions may have changed in such a way as to no longer make them necessary at all. In this new situation, hierarchy is no longer required for organisational effectiveness, so material conditions are no longer in play. This is now a stuck hierarchy, one that has outlived its (alleged) original necessity and which, for ideological reasons, is now artificially preserved (Douglas 1986). Whether we conceive of the evident cultural 'stickiness' of hierarchy in terms of unconscious habituation (Bourdieu 1990), or with concepts like 'lock-in' (David 1975), path-dependency or reification, we once again confront ideological reasons for its prevalence. Clearly, then, one significant reason we have so much hierarchy in the present is because we had so much of it in our past.

The mechanism by which hierarchy achieves effectiveness

A recurrent theme in explanations for the effectiveness of hierarchy is that it affords a concentration of decision-making power. It is this image, of an unhampered expert (Burke 1987) funnelling the will of the people into a representative unity (Köröseyi 2005) that informs the insistence on elitist forms of democracy. Such notions, of funnelling and concentration, suggest the image of a bottleneck, a stricture; one which reduces the flow of information and so enables the executive to decide. Informational economists have shown how, as information moves within and between organisations, it can threaten to overload the organisation (Williamson 1975; Radner 1992). Effective decision-making thus requires a reduction in complexity, one that allows a restricted flow of information to pass through the bottleneck. Hierarchy thus delivers effectiveness by simplifying the knowledge environment and limiting communication (Cloke and Goldsmith 2002, p. 49). It forms part of a process of information selection. Simplification lowers costs (Landes 1986, p. 597), and when combined with a capacity for stabilisation and ideological concealment, constitutes a very neat trick indeed (Dewey 1927, p. 61). Another reason for the prevalence of hierarchy is, therefore, its ability to reduce information and simplify.

We see just this hierarchic simplification in democratic state constitutions, where we are, as Tom Paine pointed out, 'ruled over by certain dead gentlemen'. Instead of each new generation having to learn and enact its own

freedom, we have inherited a set of hierarchic institutions that relieves us of the onerous burden of full autonomy, and of having to reinvent the rules of the game every time a decision is required (Holmes 1988). Constitutions simplify; they offer constitutive rules. Here, again, hierarchy provides institutional relief, takes things off the agenda (Baynes 1992) and lightens the load of individual and organisational knowledge-processing.

We can conclude that any argument that claims hierarchy to be 'natural', or the *only* way to coordinate collective action, cannot be sustained. The reason hierarchy emerges so frequently in organisations is not because the material world demands it, but because we habitually equate hierarchy with effectiveness, both in our elitist democratic theory and in our everyday lives. When we hold that effectiveness can only be achieved by hierarchy, we merely illustrate the degree of influence exerted on our thinking by ideology (Blaug 2000). It is not God who is authoritarian, but us.

Hierarchy simplifies, but so does it corrupt; whereupon its very strength becomes its weakness. A hierarchy can become so simple, so stable and so ideologically concealed as to constitute a significant obstacle to learning. As an organisational form, it draws on material conditions, ideology, repetition and simplification for its prevalence. A particular hierarchy is always overdetermined, yet in the absence of its necessity, and with the ready availability of alternative organisational forms, causal factors for hierarchy become issues and concerns to which practitioners of participatory democracy might fruitfully attend (Clarke and Butcher 2006).

Hierarchy and democracy

The attractions of hierarchy, both for individuals and organisations, include a capacity to simplify the knowledge environment. Yet the costs of this simplification are high. Participatory democrats question authority because they recognise these costs. They know that hierarchies tend to corrupt, and to finally become so thickly encrusted with ideology that they at last conceal their origins, obstruct further learning and ruin lives. Social science is unable to establish the inevitability of hierarchy, and as we have seen, can itself be a strong carrier of ideological bias. Yet so can it illuminate the complex processes by which hierarchy emerges and is maintained.

Democracy is always concerned with hierarchy: its perceived necessity, its sanction and its management. For democrats, the hierarchic division of political labour into representatives and citizens is legitimate when it can withstand questioning. If it cannot, then debates over the organisation of democracy will turn on our expectations, and understandings of, the hierarchic organisational form.

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Ricardo Blaug is a political theorist specialising in democracy, critical theory and the politics of knowledge in institutions. Formerly a psychiatric social worker, he works with a range of public and voluntary organisations and coordinates social science knowledge transfer at the University of Leeds, UK.

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