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## Letter to the Editor: à la Recherche de la Normalité Perdue

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## Letter to the Editor: à la Recherche de la Normalité Perdue

The Discussion Note from Jean Claude Thoenig on US management research (OS3/3) stirs up the kinds of emotions that often become activated during our encounters with organization scientists from the European side of the Atlantic. As European-American management researchers we have always felt a certain degree of marginality because we have learned to appreciate the hypernormal organization science as it struggles along in the United States while still experiencing a strong affinity to our European brethren and their ways of advancing the field of organization theory. Taking all considerations together we acknowledge that research on this side has sometimes degenerated into sterile dustbowl empiricism but feel that there is still sufficient creative critical mass to expect the advancement of the field to be primarily resting on the US shoulders. Perhaps, because of sheer market size, as Thoenig suggests, Europeans collectively have little chance to counteract the directions of scientific research in the United States.

Since Thoenig recognizes the overwhelming influence of US organization theory and since both his institution as well as many other institutions of higher learning are major consumers of American research output, it becomes important to rectify his misconceptions of US management research. Such rectification may be useful, especially because his stereotypes are often shared by others, many of whom might never have much exposure to the activities behind the US stage. Thoenig could peek behind the stage but his observations are somewhat one-sided and seem to have been shaped by his European preconceptions rather than by trying to be an ethnomethodologist who seeks to gain an undistorted description of his observations. As European-American management researchers, we are not immune to the distorting effects of our stereotypes but as insiders we may at least present an alternative view of the US scene. Granted that our views reflect stereotypes too, we wish to review three central points in Thoenig's notes.

First, Thoenig argues that the reward system of US universities instills competitiveness, which is partly the reason for the sterile nature of their research. Secondly, he claims that US management research displays a strong inclination toward quantitative, irrelevant, nonpractical, and sterile work which is out of tune with its subject matter. Finally, he asserts that the departmental structure of US business schools have evolved into 'politicized cultures' which are not responsive to pragmatic (i.e., corporate) needs.

There exists a good deal of 'myth' about the decried and celebrated US academic reward system whose effects are so neatly captured by the 'publish or perish' slogan. Tenure-granting decisions hang as Damocles' swords above the heads of those pitiful hard-working academicians who try to slug it out by working long hours to crank out as many papers as possible. In Europe, tenure is granted within two or three years if not at the date of appointment, so that the university employees do not have to worry about job security but instead can choose between 'publish' or 'retirement' on the job. They can devote all their time to research and teaching, rendering their output high on 'profundity' and perhaps not high on 'quantity'.

We do not disagree that the US tenure system is flawed. It can lead to researchers foregoing profundity for quantity, it can create an unhealthy dependence of the have-nots on the haves whereby the latter enjoy considerable influence over the former. Yet in the dominant universities, including those that were visited by Thoenig, the tenure system has also led to an environment where the researcher has to show his potential contribution to the field. He cannot retire at the age of 28 or 30, the common age for getting a Ph.D. We strongly believe that, if European universities denied incoming faculty the choice of 'retirement on the job', European contributions to organization theory could be much more extensive than they are now.

In fact, the US tenure system might not go far enough; it would be better if every faculty member were evaluated every decade or so, such that he/she would not decline into a state of semiretirement as sometimes happens. Fortunately, however, numerous academicians do not need that sword of Damocles, since they continue to perform beyond the stage of securing tenure. The correctness of the tenure decision is as often corroborated by the continuation of a person's output as it is challenged by those who treat its conferred job security as a 'blank check' for semiretirement. Overall we feel that tenure granting can be conducive to the creation of a strong

research culture where faculty at various levels subscribe to academic values. This would certainly be the case in the prominent institutions Thoenig visited, where the tenure decision process is very thorough and where projections are made about a person's future commitment to research productivity.

What of the apparent trend toward sterile research? To some extent we agree with Thoenig about certain streams of research. The three decades of work on situational determinants of leadership effectiveness, for example, have yielded numerous dissertations and publications, but we are not sure they have provided theoretical insights into the role of leadership in organizations. However, it is easy to find more encouraging examples, where investigators have found scope to experiment with novel and provocative ideas. So we challenge Thoenig's view that US research is hypernormal. There may be pockets of hypernormality such as leadership research or structural contingency research. There are also inroads into new fields. They include organizational phenomenology and the pervasive trend towards qualitative, metaphorical, and ethnomethodological research. There is widespread interest in 'risky' new topics, such as organizational culture, organizational linguistics, decision making as a retroactive justification of behaviour, and the usefulness (*sic*) of organizational research. Journal issues and conferences are devoted to qualitative methodologies or to the usefulness of results.

Clearly such trends are quite compatible with Kuhn's observations where he argues that the presence of hypernormal research reflects the inherent weaknesses of a prevailing research paradigm. Varieties of other paradigms are at an embryonic stage waiting to gain acceptance. Thus US conditions can be characterized as a state of transition with both an adherence to traditional views (such as structural contingency theory) and multiple '*franc tireurs*' (such as organizational phenomenology and Habermasian, critical theory).

The third issue that surfaces in Thoenig's note is somewhat odd, coming from an organization theorist. It seems almost a truism that no matter how we divide an organization up into subsystems of roles, political factions will evolve that centre around the status quo. There are a few business schools that have abstained from departmentalizing themselves, but those schools are not less politicized than departmentalized ones. There are always the various professions whose presence in the business schools leads to the emergence of political rivalries, regardless of whether their existence is organizationally recognized. This is most clearly borne out in issues of promotion and tenure where parochial (i.e., political) considerations as well as merit enter prominently into the decision-making process. The implication is that the staffing of business schools is rarely inspired by a dean's strategic mission statement but rather that it reflects the pervasive incrementalism and retroactive sense making so pervasive in institutions of higher learning. The absence of a departmental structure does not lead to deans having wide strategic discretion. In fact, the absence of departmental decision-making structures impedes their discretion.

The more fundamental problem is that US business schools are part of universities, whose collegial decision-making ideologies preclude the concept of dean as the captain of the ship, who directs the future mission of his school. Rather, they render the schools highly inert.

We do not agree that there is a disengagement from the needs and problems of organizations and their managers. The recent interest in 'usefulness' is a case in point. As professional schools, business schools have both access and exposure to the organizations 'out there', an opportunity that is often not accorded to traditional, ivory tower departments. Indeed, imminent issues of the *Administrative Science Quarterly* will deal with the usefulness of organization theory. Several conferences are being held to address the same question.

This leads to an ambivalence between pragmatic usefulness and scientific innovation which may explain the element of hypernormality. The old paradigm is needed as a source of fresh, useful applications to management problems. At the same time, the nascent paradigms require a degree of insulation from pragmatism and even from established legitimacy so that they can come to fruition. Eventually, they too will be subjected to the test of pragmatism and only those which reach the stage of implementation will survive. However, this is no reason to neglect them, as Thoenig does, since they signal the progressive erosion of pockets of normal science and the emergence of new and useful organization theory.

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