



Theory and Method in  
**Organization  
Studies**

**Antonio Strati**

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Paradigms and choices

Antonio Strati



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*To my father, to Filippo, Rita, Silvia, and to the memory  
of my mother*



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# Preface

The study of organizations as social contexts concerns itself with fragments of organizational life, not with its totality or essential reality, nor with a representative sample of it. These fragments change in the course of the knowledge-gathering process. Organizational phenomena are in constant flux: just like Heraclitus' river, which cannot be stepped in twice because the water constantly flows and is never the same, so the same organization cannot be 'known' twice. This is an epistemological position. To adopt it entails not only awareness of the limited nature of one's knowledge of organizations but also recognition that it is neither correct nor opportune to compare heterogeneous fragments, except for elements so well circumstantiated that they yield some sort of generic information about organizational life.

This fundamental assumption gives the study of organization as social contexts a character different from that envisioned in the 1960s and 1970s. No longer is there the emphasis of those years on 'the development and empirical testing of generalizations dealing with the structure and functioning of organizations viewed as organizations' (Scott, 1992: 9) which constitute a 'specialized field of inquiry within the discipline of sociology' (Scott, 1992: 8). This certainty has faded since the demise of the paradigm which underpinned that formulation and the empirical verification of generalizations on the structure and workings of organizations.

Today, one finds a plurality of methods, ranging from ethnomethodology to grounded theory, no longer of insignificant or marginal importance for the study of organizations as social contexts. The divide between quantitative and qualitative research has narrowed since ethnographic and symbolic analysis gained equal legitimacy with structuralist inquiry. The 1980s saw constant conflict between studies and approaches which employed qualitative methods and those that conversely asserted the scientific value of knowledge acquired using quantitative ones. The history of organization studies and theories has been marked by this clash between so-called 'hard' and 'soft' analysis.

The controversy continues, as this book documents. But the way in which the study of organizations as social contexts has internalized the conflict has altered its character, since it is now formulated in more problematic terms. First, the findings yielded by research are not confused with organizational reality in analyses that prefer to measure organizational phenomena; nor is interpretation of organizational life confused with its true nature by those studies which instead explore the organizational

knowledge of organizational actors. Second, the study of organizations as social contexts problematizes knowledge and methods as it ranges among generalizations and nuances, from the concrete to the ephemeral. It relies neither on empirical verifiability nor on methodological individualism, neither on statistical explanation nor on interpretation based on direct and prolonged first-hand experience. These are all problems rather than solutions for the organizational researcher who studies society within and without individual organizations.

Organizational knowledge is therefore as composite, hybrid, confused, paradoxical and multifaceted as the sociological, psychological, anthropological, economic, semiotic disciplinary corpuses, and indeed business administration and management studies. Accordingly, it comprises sophisticated statistical analysis, a large number of organizational contexts and comparison among them, computer-assisted processing, repeatable and re-examinable analytic procedures, probabilistic forecasting, repetition of method by both the same research group and others. It delves into details, and sifts people's words and actions for the interpretations and meanings that they attribute to them. And it seeks out fresh definitions of itself. It draws on developments in interpretative sociology, in phenomenological philosophy and in hermeneutics. It moves freely between analytic and mythical thought in the social construction of the collective constituted by the organization *qua* organizational culture. It is a new, mercurial and imperfect form of inquiry which does not view the study of organizations as a historico-evolutionary process of knowledge acquisition but behaves as if it were a computer simulation of organizational reality.

This book therefore describes, not a motorway of organizational knowledge whose route is clearly plotted by the maps of organizational thought, but a labyrinth marked out by the heuristic endeavour of organizational researchers. The definition of the study of organizations as social contexts that results from this rests on approaches whose exploratory intent permits the use of less validated and often less reassuring methods. It is an illusion to imagine this field of inquiry as comprising mutually and clearly distinct sociological or anthropological or management study identities.

The book consists of two parts. The first deals with definitions of organization. It examines their rich variety, illustrates themes and issues associated with them, and then explores organizations as social contexts, yielding a corpus of knowledge which is viewed as socially and collectively constructed. It marks out the body of research, intellectual currents and theories which seek to understand and to explain everyday life in organizations, their governance, and their action within different societal arrangements. It highlights the pervasiveness of the study of organizations as social contexts in organizational thought, for its distinctive feature is that it examines the social relations created by communities internally

to organizations, and externally to them with other organizations and with society at large. This first part of the book, which has an ethno-methodological flavour (in that it works from the standpoint of the criteria adopted while describing the history and subjects of organizational thought), is closely linked to the second. The significance of theoretical paradigms in researching organizations and new awareness of old and new organizational topics, in fact, also require an understanding of methodological choices. The second part of the book takes the reader more deeply into the study of organizations as social contexts, describing some of the main methods of empirical research and providing examples of their use. The questions that organizational analysts ask themselves when they set out to investigate organizational life are numerous and disparate. What, they inquire, is a collectivity, or a formal structure, or a set of interactions among individuals? How do individuals reflect the life of an organization? Do they feel that they belong to it, or do they feel that it belongs to them? How do they define their action within the organization or on its behalf? What memories do they have of the organization, and how do they keep them alive? How do they take decisions? How do they behave at meetings? What skills do they deploy, and how? What beliefs, norms and rules do they construct, deconstruct and reconstruct? What sort of industrial relations system do they set up? There are as many questions as there are aspects of organization to analyse. All of them, though, rest on a corpus of organizational study divided among sundry schools and, more generally, theoretical paradigms which constitute the arena of theoretical debate in which organizational researchers frame their questions and their methodological choices: comparing organizations, compiling case studies, engaging in action research, measuring organizational actors' thoughts, using computer software to interpret organizational life, trusting their own tacit knowledge and connoisseurship in researching organizations.

This priority accorded to the exploratory rather than stabilizing nature of the study of organizations as social contexts is borne out by the experience of the present writer. It is my customary practice to question, challenge, refuse to take for granted, the body of organizational knowledge transmitted by sociology of organizations, organization theory and management studies. As a sociologist of organizations I prefer to view research into them as an endeavour to understand the complexity and paradoxes of organizational life, even when I am unsure which sociological theory or sophisticated methodology construes it best. I prefer to look beyond the confines of sociology to developments in anthropology, psychology, linguistics and other disciplines. On this basis I have sought in this book to describe a knowledge-gathering process which sets the study of organizations as social contexts within the broader context of the social sciences. My principal concern, however, is that the book will stimulate the reader to look at organizational studies afresh, prompting

him or her on the one hand to seek understanding of organizations and, on the other, to reflect on his or her manner of doing so. We should bear in mind the fact that, as William Gibson (1995: 124) reminds us, an 'essential fraction of sheer human talent' is 'nontransferable': you cannot put it 'down on paper', nor can you load it 'into a diskette'.

A book is always the fruit of a collective endeavour. In many respects it is much less of a personal undertaking than the name on the cover claims. My greatest debt of gratitude is to my colleagues in the Faculty of Sociology of the University of Trento. Their support over the years has enabled me to conduct the research and teaching work that provided the basis for this book. I am also grateful to my students, at the universities of both Trento and Siena, and to the heads of the numerous organizations, in both Italy and abroad, who made my empirical research possible. I must also express my thanks to the organization scholars with whom I shared work and friendship at The Tavistock Institute of London (formerly Tavistock Institute of Human Relations), the Department of Business Administration of Lund in Sweden, the Copenhagen Business School, and SCOS (Standing Conference on Organizational Symbolism), an international network of organizational scholars interested in culture and symbolism. Gianluca Mori suggested that I should write this book for *La Nuova Italia Scientifica* – Carocci, and Rosemary Nixon encouraged me to have it translated into English for Sage. Bruno Bolognini, Marta Calás, Margherita Ciacci, Barbara Czarniawska, Antonio de Lillo, Pasquale Gagliardi, Silvia Gherardi, Vittorio Mortara and Stefano Zan read draft versions of this book. Adrian Belton translated the Italian text into English, Bruno Bazzanella helped with the additional English references, and Mario Callegaro updated the cited softwares for qualitative analysis. None of them bears responsibility for what I have written; to all of them I extend my sincerest thanks.

# PART I

## THEMES AND PROBLEMS

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### Chapter 1

## Society in a Network of Organizations

This chapter discusses the theme of what sort of society it is possible to identify in organizations and in their everyday lives. It addresses this topic because, first, it constitutes a central issue of the study of organizational life, and secondly because of two social phenomena that have been of momentous importance in the course of this century. The first is set out in the post-war writings of the philosopher and sociologist Alfred Schütz (1962: 233), where he points out that the ‘world of working in daily life is the archetype of our experience of reality’, and that all ‘the other provinces of meaning’, or the meaning of our experiences that give sense to reality, ‘may be considered as its modifications’. The second phenomenon was provocatively pointed up by the organizational analyst Charles Perrow (1991: 726) when, with principal reference to the United States, he wrote that no one had fully realized that organizations, especially large ones, had by now absorbed society. It was as if organizations had sucked into themselves a good part of what had always been conceived as society, and from being only part of society they had grown into some sort of surrogate for it.

What, then, is an organization? The word itself denotes all the meanings comprised in its etymon, namely those of a physical organ or instrument relating to the Greek word *organon*, and the meanings to do with performance, work, execution and office which pertain to the other Greek word *ergon*. Reference to the etymological meaning of the term yields an instrumental view of the organization as a human artefact designed to achieve one or more objectives. The goal of the organization was for long

considered to be its *raison d'être*, but in the course of the twentieth century numerous other definitions of organization have been proposed.

Prior to the 1900s, however, organizations were not a subject of study in their own right, although they were one of the main social phenomena tied to the Industrial Revolution (1760–1830), to the French Revolution (1789–92), and to the formation of the modern nineteenth-century state. As highlighted not only by the numerous sociologists who have analysed industrialism, but also by the English psychoanalyst Elliott Jaques (1970; reprinted 1990: 21–2), industrialization had great human consequences. The majority of people came to belong to some organization, they performed some sort of organized work, they received an hourly, weekly or monthly wage, and collectively negotiated the value of their working lives. They no longer worked for themselves, or in small single-family farmholdings, or in small shops. Nor did they undertake seasonal work with its attendant migrations over long distances. The ‘landscape’ of the activities engaged in by the population underwent a change between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that was as important as the transition from slavery to feudalism. And, given that it occurred on a worldwide scale, it was a transformation which was unprecedented in its magnitude, allowing the emergence of, as Barry Turner (1971: 1–2) points out, ‘a distinctive set of meanings shared by a group of people’, that is the ‘industrial subculture’ with its diverse manifestations

in different industries, and in different companies. Outside the main industrial organizations, there are a host of subsidiary groupings – trade unions, manufacturers’ associations, professional bodies and so on – which partake of, and contribute to, the subculture. Within industrial organizations there are what might be called ‘micro-cultures’ made up of the distinctive normative patterns, perceptions and values associated with departments, work groups and other social subdivisions of the organization.

Today the landscape teems with organizations. It is no longer a question of individual enterprises, Jaques notes, but a ‘vast sector of society’ in which people ‘have their most direct relationship with their society’ (1970; reprinted 1990: 23–4). As a consequence, not only has the way in which people regard society been altered, but so too has the way in which society develops and takes shape. ‘Complex organizations exist ultimately as agencies of their environments’, wrote James Thompson (1967: 162), although the ‘fact that organizations exist with the consent of their environments does not automatically subject them to societal control’. They are, Perrow observes (1991), forms of collective life which, sometimes almost inadvertently but frequently in conflict with those that existed previously, take

root and develop, so that activities previously performed by the family, neighbours or informal groups are now fulfilled by great bureaucracies, by large organizations, as well as by their satellite organizations and various minor ones.

The centre of gravity of contemporary society thus rests in organizations. Many hours of the day, many days of the year, and many years of our lifetimes are spent within them. Western society, write Edward Gross and Amitai Etzioni (1985: 1), citing Presthus (1978), is 'an organizational society'. Of course, the organization is not an entirely modern invention, for the Pharaohs used it to build the Pyramids, the Chinese emperors to construct great irrigation systems, and even the 'first Popes created a universal church to serve a world religion. Modern society, however, has more organizations', which on the one hand are designed to satisfy a broader range of needs both personal and social, while on the other they involve 'a greater proportion of citizens, and affect a larger segment of their lives. In fact, modern society has so many organizations that a whole set of second-order organizations is needed to organize and supervise them' (1985: 2).

In contemporary society, people are usually born in hospital, they attend kindergarten, nursery school, elementary school and so on: their lives are conducted amid organizations. They work in large or small organizations, and when they are free from work they use tourist, cultural and leisure organizations, or they work as volunteers for welfare organizations or for recreational, religious or political ones. Organization, therefore, is today much more than the feature which the Roman legions so prided themselves upon: more than being a characteristic of an unusual social phenomenon, it is one of the many aspects of society that constitute our daily lives. It is almost impossible, in fact, to describe our daily lives without referring to the pervasive and continuous presence of a plurality of organizations. In modern industrialized societies, writes Richard Scott (1992: 4), there are huge numbers of organizations, all engaged in numerous and extremely diverse tasks. Their traditional duties used to be waging war, administering the state, and collecting taxes; but to these duties have now been added a multitude of others: socialization by educational organizations and universities; re-socialization by psychiatric hospitals and prisons; the provision of assistance by organizations which supply cleaning, medical and financial services; the protection of persons and property by the police, banks and insurance companies; the communication afforded by radio and television networks, information networks, telephone and postal systems; the conservation of culture by museums, universities, libraries, archives, art galleries; the leisure opportunities offered by sports clubs or national parks. Organizations are not just factories, large firms, supermarkets or armies.

Above all, they do not engage solely in the production and distribution of goods. The problem is, Jaques points out (1970; reprinted 1990: 23), that we are accustomed to considering each and every organization individually. We fail to grasp organizations as a whole. We are unaware of their profound influence on society and conceive them solely in economic terms. We see them as distinct entities separate from everything else that makes up society.

The image of the organization as a distinct entity in society at large is inadequate at the end of the second millennium. The image comprises, on the one side, the organization, its survival, its economic performance, its efficiency, its iron laws of productivity and competition; on the other side stands society, with its primary socialization during the first years of a person's life, and secondary socialization in interactions thereafter, with its rules of civilization, with its obligations to care for the disadvantaged and the handicapped. On the one hand a strongly masculine order; on the other, an order made up of education, nurture, support, pleasure and passions. Two entirely different worlds, with sharp boundaries between them, as the word 'separate' suggests in its sense of disuniting what was united, close, or merged together. This is the first hallmark that the dualistic framework – widely present in organization studies – has imprinted upon the analysis of society: it has created a boundary both mental and physical which even today distinguishes the organization from other social phenomena; a wall which has its legacy in contemporary society and is grounded in the theories and studies of organization at the beginning of the twentieth century, as we shall see in the next section.

### **'External society' and 'internal society'**

One of the principal conceptualizations of organizational life that defines it as sharply distinct from society is the notion of 'bureaucracy' developed by the German sociologist Max Weber.

Bureaucracy develops the more perfectly, the more it is 'dehumanized,' the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation. (1922; English trans. 1978: 975)

In the same period as Weber, an extremely important school of organizational thought arose in both the United States and Europe from the writings, speeches and consultancy work of Frederick Winslow Taylor, Henri Fayol and other organizational analysts. This 'classical' school, too, emphasized the separateness of organizations from social forms already

existing in society, their growth as bodies distinct from but vital to society, and the development of specific social relations.

Both conceptions stressed that modern organizations are the more perfect, the more that those who work for them leave their personalities outside their gates, abandoning their visibility, and shedding their complex essences made up of reason and professional expertise but also of emotions, tastes and idiosyncrasies. Involved here is something complex and subtle: the fact that organizations are one of the main sources of social integration and of modern control over individuals, groups and collectivities.

### *Subjectivity and social integration*

The theme of social integration is of prime importance, for it has been one of the great organizational issues of the twentieth century. The organization, it was argued, should transform itself into a social community and integrate individual identities and feelings of belonging not only within the everyday activities of the organization but also externally to it, through the recreational clubs, residential accommodation and facilities made available by companies for child care and religious worship.

From Saint-Simon (1821) through Barnard (1938) to Ouchi (1981) and Peters and Waterman (1982), 'a long line of social analysts', writes Richard Scott (1992: 323), have looked 'to organizations to provide the primary source of social integration, personal identity, and meaning in modern society'; he adds that Wolin (1960: 427) emphasized that this 'fondness' for large organizations stemmed from the anxiety caused by coping with mass society: organizations provided centres of stability able to structure the amorphous masses, to integrate them, and at the same time to control them; a phenomenon which, Scott insists (1992: 323), arouses alarm about 'proposals to expand the power and influence of organizations over individuals' and which focus on 'the emergence of norms and structures that place restrictions on the hierarchy of the organization and reduce the leverage of any particular organization in relation to the individual', as well as raising the fundamental issues of natural rights and individual freedom.

These are social science themes which have been examined and discussed throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Consider sociology, for instance: at its birth, and therefore with Comte – who worked within the framework of early nineteenth-century European positivism – it was not overly preoccupied with the freedom of individuals; rather, it was wholly concerned to prove that people's lives were determined by higher-order entities. Nor did Emile Durkheim consider

persons in order to explain social facts, since these were to be interpreted, not in terms of individual motivation but by reference to society, and in opposition to the idealism and romanticism that predominated at the time. It was Max Weber who dismantled these certainties at the basis of world-views and interpretations of society. Weber was closely influenced by the philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche and believed that explanation of society must begin with individuals and their intentional action, with the meanings that they attach to such action, with the relationships that they establish with each other, and with the web of interactions that they weave together.

This tendency to emphasize either individuals or social structures still persists (see Touraine, 1998). It does not, however, split sociology and social sciences into two. Although Max Weber and Alfred Schütz based their theories on individuals and their motivations, and although they considered social systems and symbolic orders to be the product of individual interactions, the social analysts who emphasize the structures and functions of social systems and contend that individuals are instead the outcome of those systems and symbolic orders embrace, as Franco Crespi (1985: 363) points out, highly diverse theories, ranging from the functionalism of Emile Durkheim and the structural-functionalism of Talcott Parsons to the phenomenological sociology of Erving Goffman and the neofunctionalism of Niklas Luhmann.

These two opposing emphases also lay at the origins of organizational analysis. Weber was preoccupied by the rationalization and bureaucratization that dehumanize, instrumentalize and manipulate, and grievously threaten the freedom of the human spirit and democratic and liberal ideals, turning organizations into 'iron cages' inspired by efficiency, specialization and technicism. Likewise preoccupied with organizations was the classical school, although it started from the entirely different premise that the deviance and crime caused by street life and unemployment could be prevented by time spent in organizations and by the habits acquired from exposure to everyday organizational life.

### *Legal authority and modern organizations*

The prime feature of bureaucratic organization is that it prevents the persons who work in it or on its behalf from freely expressing their personalities. However, for Max Weber bureaucracy was also the highest form of organization of both businesses and public administrations: it was rooted in the rule of law, in the concept of the citizen as opposed to the subject, and in the equality of rights and obligations. Bureaucracy,

in other words, marked the advent of modernization and the 'purely *technical* superiority' of one form of organization over any other, 'exactly as does the machine with the non-mechanical modes of production':

Precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs. (1922; English trans. 1978: 973)

Three principles, Weber writes, underpin the workings of modern bureaucratic organizations.

The first is that of office '*jurisdictional areas*' (1922; English trans. 1978: 956; original emphasis) defined and disciplined by rules, laws and regulations. This principle entails that an organization is divided and ordered in a stable way through:

- the activities habitually undertaken to pursue the goals of the 'bureaucratically governed structure' (ibid.), and which take the form of office duties;
- the powers of command necessary to perform the tasks involved in these routine office duties.

To ensure that office duties are performed satisfactorily, the organization must equip itself, again systematically, with qualified personnel recruited according to general and universal criteria.

The second principle is the '*office hierarchy*' (1922; English trans. 1978: 957; original emphasis), or in other words, a rigidly regulated ordering of higher- and lower-level organs of authority. Superior offices exert control over inferiors, but the system must give the latter opportunities to appeal against higher-level decisions.

The third principle concerns definition of what constitutes an office. Weber grounds the entire architecture of the modern organization on the notion of '*bureau*' (ibid.), defining this as an organ of authority comprising a set of individuals who have received specialized training ('state officials', for example), technical apparatus, and the materials produced by the office, for instance the official documents issued by public administrations. The activity of an office requires – indeed demands – the '*full working capacity*' (1922; English trans. 1978: 958; original emphasis) of individual officials.

Weber's principal interest was the distribution of power among the various organizational positions in the bureaucratic structure. 'There are three pure types of legitimate domination', he writes (1922; English trans. 1978: 215), and the 'validity of the claims to legitimacy' is asserted on rational, traditional and charismatic grounds. Legal authority is the pure

type of power that buttresses the bureaucratic administrative apparatus, and it can be wielded by any organization. As the pure type of power, legal authority entails that:

- People in bureaucracies must comply only and exclusively with their office duties. Even the legal authority of the ‘supreme chief of the organization’, who has a position of dominance because ‘of appropriation, of election, or of having been designated for the succession’ ‘consists in a sphere of legal “competence”’ (Weber, 1922; English trans. 1978: 220); and to this sphere belongs the ability of certain commands to obtain the obedience of specific groups of people;
- Although personally free, people in bureaucracies obey a specific office hierarchy in compliance with clearly defined office procedures, aware that they are subject to specific controls; the bureau, in fact, is based on ‘a free contractual relationship’, and people ‘are remunerated by fixed salaries in money, for the most part with a right to pension’ (ibid.);
- Office life and private life are rigidly segregated; anonymity is enjoined in order to enhance the visibility of the office and of its operations;
- Office secrecy is enforced; that is, the activities performed in the bureaucratic organization or on its behalf are kept confidential and distinct. Office materials, office documents and work equipment belong to the organization, and individuals are not allowed to appropriate them. In other words, an office job is the property of the bureaucracy, not of its incumbent.

The distinctive feature of a bureaucratic organization is its pronounced degree of rationality. It is therefore a structure that ‘is the antithesis of *ad hoc*, temporary, unstable relations’, note Gross and Etzioni (1985: 80). Hence derives the importance attributed to continuity in the exercise of functions, and the insistence that the latter should be bound by rules. These rules may be either technical or social, but their application invariably requires specialized training.

Consequently, the sources of legal or bureaucratic authority are knowledge and expert training. These do not replace legitimacy, although technical expertise and specialist knowledge are the basis of the bureaucrat’s legitimation. Bureaucrats receive salaries according to their positions in the hierarchy, responsibilities, social status and prestige. Bureaucrats consider their offices to be their main, indeed only, profession. They are offered chances of career advancement by virtue of seniority, although this always depends on the judgement of their superiors. They are hired according to their specialist qualifications for jobs which carry lifelong tenure.

Bureaucratic authority, therefore, is the purest type of legal power, and it is an entity that Weber terms an ideal type. Like all ideal types (Weber, 1922; English trans. 1978: 19–22), the pure type of authority does not exist in reality, nor does it reflect reality. It is a mental construct created by the scholar on the basis of empirically verifiable patterns of action by emphasizing a particular point of view and connecting a variety of specific phenomena which occur, perhaps randomly but nevertheless meaningfully, in a particular setting.

An ideal type serves to illustrate a conceptual scheme, or it can be used to investigate real world phenomena: it does not, though, correspond to organizational reality. Instead, it is a theoretical construct based on the assumption that sociological knowledge proceeds by systematic comparison and generalization among institutions, social and political systems, forms of government and economic management, technical and administrative apparatuses, historical periods, and so on. Ideal types, too, are both the charismatic authority legitimized by the charisma of a person who is consequently accredited as ‘leader’, and the traditional authority legitimized by institutions that have always existed and by the personal dignities ascribed by tradition.

The pure ‘types of legitimate domination’ – bureaucratic authority, charismatic authority and traditional authority – that Weber describes (1922; English trans. 1978: 212–301) differ from each other more by virtue of their origins and the characteristics of their legitimation than by virtue of the type of power wielded. However, if a modern organization is to efficaciously and efficiently achieve pre-established goals, it must be based on legal authority. Social relations grounded on charismatic power lack a systematic division of labour; they lack the specialization of tasks and activities; and they lack the stability and continuity which characterize legal authority in bureaucratic administrative apparatuses.

The social relations that rest on traditional power involve bonds of kinship, patron–client relationships, social stratifications and political ties which do not render individuals ‘personally free and subject to authority only with respect to their impersonal official obligations’ (Weber, 1922; English trans. 1978: 220). Moreover, they also preclude the choice of the organizational structure best suited to the achievement of goals, and obstruct the use of productive and administrative procedures, stably regulated and rationally directed towards the organization’s ends.

A bureaucratic administrative staff, Weber believes, exercises its legitimate dominance in the modern organization by virtue of legal power. This ideal type of authority can be theoretically and practically applied in economic enterprises, in any other type of private enterprise which pursues ideal or material goals, in non-profit organizations, in political or religious

groups and, obviously, in public administrative apparatuses: a variety of empirical realities culturally distinct because they are imbued with values, meanings and significances which require rational and even empathic interpretative understanding (Weber, 1922; English trans. 1978: 5).

*Managing organizations: the principles of the classical school*

The classical school of organizational analysis was concerned to structure organizations so that their destinies were also those of their members – destinies which in turn were bound up with that of society as a whole. In this conception of the organization, individuals were obliged radically to transform their perceptions of themselves and others. The distinctive feature of the classical school, therefore, was its marked applicative and managerial bent. It did not consist solely of arguments and prescriptions for organizational action, for it also comprised field studies and experiments in organizational management.

Its main proponent, the American engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor, developed principles of ‘scientific’ management which wrought a managerial revolution at the beginning of the century that lasted through thirty years of enormous change in American industry and a world war (Nelson, 1984: 51). Scientific management was vigorously opposed by the labour organizations because of the gruelling and alienating conditions in which factory workers were made to work (see Chapter 5). Indeed, it was after a workers’ uprising at the Watertown arsenal that, between the end of 1911 and January 1912, Taylor was summoned to defend his organizational theory before a special committee of the House of Representatives.

The so-called ‘classical’ school of organizational thought comprised a number of other authors of particular originality and importance: the engineer Henri Fayol, for instance, who in 1925 merged his Centre d’Études Administratives with the Conférence de l’Organisation Française set up in France to disseminate Taylorist principles of scientific management; or Mary Parker Follett, who taught sociology, history and political science at the University of Harvard, Massachusetts.

It should be borne in mind that the classical school was not the only movement engaged in the study of organizations at the turn of the century; nor was it the first. Indeed, several organizational scholars and organizational consultancy groups were active at the time, and Taylorism was in competition with them. Scientific management drew its inspiration from an earlier approach to organizations and to change in their methods – namely ‘systematic management’, which had arisen in the railways. Yet