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MAZES without minotaurs: Herbert Simon and the sciences of the artificial

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Summary In this essay, I remember Herbert Simon as author of *Sciences of the Artificial* and my thesis advisor and collaborator. Even for a lifetime of deep insights into human behavior and its role in shaping the world we live in, Simon's insight into the need for a whole new class of sciences is an astonishing one. The artificial is essential for entrepreneurship and for developing an organization-centric view of markets and economies. Published by Elsevier Ltd.

The week of June 18, 1996 was the first week of Herbert Simon's 81st year. When I asked him what he would like to have done differently if he were to live his life again, he demurred, "Not much" and then went on to muse, "perhaps, I would like to have begun earlier on challenging the centrality of markets in economics, pushing the field to start with organizations and move outward to market relations rather than the other way around." One reason for the musing could have been that the outline of his polemic on the subject had been published just a few years earlier (Simon, 1991c, p. 34) and he was continuing to work on its elaboration in at least two more talks that came after his 80th birthday (Simon, 1997b, 2000). Yet Simon's understanding of organizations began as early as his dissertation in Political Science at the University of Chicago (Simon, 1945) and remained with him through an intellectual lifetime that spanned over six decades, hundreds of articles, many of them co-authored with students and collaborators, and dozens of books, talks and interviews.

It is not easy to provide a brief biography of such a man. Nor to summarize his works in a few pages in ways that tease out his influence on management and organization science today and going forward into the future. In formulating

the ensuing account, I used several published sources including Crowther-Heyck's (2005) book on the subject and the sources that book draws upon to triangulate my conversations with him. I also scanned a number of short pieces readily available online and reread Simon's own telling of the first seventy four years of his life-story (Simon, 1991b). Finally, I found that the collection of essays by Simon's friends and colleagues in tribute to his memory provided texture and nuance to the published biographies (Augier & March, 2004).

Brief biography

Explaining the title of his autobiography, *Models of My Life*, Simon wrote:

"But there is a further reason for using the plural. It is a denial – a denial that a life, at least my life, has a central theme, a unifying thread running through it. True, there are themes (again the plural), some of the threads brighter or thicker or stronger than others. Perhaps clearest is the theme of the scientist and teacher, carrying on his persistent heuristic search, seeking the Holy Grail of truth about human decision making. In my case, even that thread is woven of finer strands: the political

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scientist, the organization theorist, the economist, the management scientist, the computer scientist, the psychologist, the philosopher of science.” (Simon, 1991b, p. xviii)

To the scientist-teacher, he then added the private person, the university politician and science politician as the four panels of the tetrptych that was his life. The multiple strands that made up the thread of his scientific life is important to understanding Simon’s contribution to organization science. In rereading the list at the end of the quote above, I could not but wonder if he wrote them down in the order in which he valued each. A similar wonderment also emerged as an evocative refrain during his memorial ceremony where each eulogist sought to claim his own discipline as somehow primary in Simon’s life and work. John R. Anderson gave explicit voice to the wonderment as follows:

“I am reminded of the story Herb told about how he amused himself as a young man when he used to travel by train across America. He would start up a conversation with some fellow traveler, inquire as to their profession, and carefully listen as they described what they did. Then when he was confident he understood the language of that profession, he would reveal to the traveler that he too shared that profession and then would try to maintain that deception for the rest of the trip. Herb must have sustained that deception for the 25 years I knew him for I am firmly convinced that he is a psychologist and that the claims of the other fields to him are simply false.”¹

After almost six years of conversations on the subject, I feel a similar temptation to cast him as an organization scientist with a particular interest in how *new* – i.e. entrepreneurial – organizations come to be. His autobiography provides some fodder for the tempting folly through one of the most profound and transformative experiences of Simon’s youth² – an entrepreneurial (mis?)adventure called Rockmarsh:

“The real adventure of my life was Rockmarsh. It was real to me, perhaps surreal, for the same reason that Don Quixote was real to Cervantes – more real than the Battle of Lepanto that cost him an arm.” (Simon, 1991b, p. 29)

Born the younger of two sons to Arthur, an engineer-turned-patent attorney and Edna, a piano teacher and homemaker – both of German-Jewish heritage, young Herbert Simon spent most of his early life in the American state of Wisconsin. Simon’s Rockmarsh adventure took place during the summers of his sixteenth through twenty-first years. The “entrepreneur” behind Rockmarsh was Maurice Davis, veteran of World War I and promoter of a scheme to transform marshlands into highly profitable pastures for dairy cattle by planting them in reed canary grass. Davis convinced Simon’s father to invest in the venture and Simon ended up working as Davis’ right hand man (or boy) in getting the enterprise going. The history of the venture had

several of the recurring drama of new ventures everywhere and everywhen – technological and logistical surprises, unpredictable market responses and of course, far-from-rational human beings capable of glory and pathos all at once. Simon avers:

“Such interpersonal skills and understanding of people outside academe and the professions as I possess owe more to Rockmarsh than to any other single experience I have had.” (Simon, 1991b, p. 34)

The venture did not end well. Davis, who was manic-depressive, committed suicide. And the cattle simply would NOT eat reed canary grass:

“They would eat anything but reed canary grass, and broke down every fence we constructed, including barbed and electric, to get out of the pasture.” (Simon, 1991b, p. 35)

Simon carried this formative experience into the University of Chicago where he earned both a bachelor’s degree (in 1936) and a PhD in political science (in 1943) while studying under and working with a pantheon of social scientists and philosophers such as Henry Simons, Nicholas Rashevsky, Henry Schultz, Rudolf Carnap, Charles Merriam, Harold Lasswell and Clarence Ridley. What Simon took away from Chicago was not merely the content of courses or even the intellectual challenges the high-octane community provided him with, but a sense of how to *do* social science and the *social* aspects of doing it well. In his own words:

“As for myself, there could have been no better school than the Political Science Department at Chicago to teach me about the march of ideas, and how the interplay of scientific research with the social organization of the disciplines determines its direction and pace. It helped me understand that new ideas do not fly solely on their own wings; the scientist is a communicator as well as a discoverer – sometimes even a missionary.” (Simon, 1991b, p. 63)

From biography to dissertation: foundational concepts of organization science

Simon’s dissertation, published with the title *Administrative Behavior* has been hailed as one of the most influential books in the social sciences and prescribed as required reading in a variety of doctoral courses even today. Yet it has not been without controversy through its four editions – with critics questioning the necessity or even possibility of studying administration as a science (Harmon, 1959; Storing, 1962) let alone the wisdom of doing so for fear it drive the field down narrow or even unprogressive paths (Argyris, 1973a,b; Waldo, 1952a,b). Yet it was the intensity of the empirical experience on which the book was based combined with the great conceptual care it took to create a precise “vocabulary” with which to describe that empirical experience that formed the foundation of a *science* of organizations as we know it today.

For Simon, the term *organizations* did not merely refer to an alternate form of coordination to that of markets. In fact, in later years, he expended considerable energy and

¹ A tribute to Herbert Simon. All remembrances. Available at: <http://www.cs.cmu.edu/simon/all.html>.

² Explicitly acknowledged as such in the footnote at the bottom of page 28 in *Models of My Life*.

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