

**The Foresight Interviews
Michel Crozier, sociologist
and member of the Institute**

Philippe Durance, translated by Adam Gerber

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Foreword

The Foresight Interviews is a research project commissioned by the *Laboratoire d'Investigation en Prospective, Stratégie et Organisation* (Lipsor) at the *Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers* (CNAM) under the direction of Professor Michel Godet.

The charter of this research is to conduct interviews with prominent futurists, and in so doing, promoting and diffusing the concepts and foundations of *la prospective* (foresight) whether they be French, European or international.

This project began because of the inaccessibility of work in foresight which had been done over the last 50 years (unavailable texts or those completely forgotten—scattered about by publishers and archivists alike). This unavailability is a major source of ignorance by current practitioners concerning the state of the art and the underlying fundamentals of foresight.

To pursue this objective we shall reconstruct the "intellectual capital" of *la prospective* with the aim of clarifying the present as well as the discipline of foresight itself.

The collection and management of this intellectual capital will be done by a core group of prospectivists in France, among them those active in Datar, the Futuribles group, the French General Planning Commission, and Lipsor. Their ongoing mission will be; to make these sources available, to optimize resources, and to ensure the greatest possible distribution of these sources. This organization is a cooperative and learning network which will likely grow beyond the initial partners.

Finally, this work will favour the establishment of criteria for the evaluation of projects which is all the more necessary today in the *culture of projects* which is being instituted at the highest levels of government.

The Foresight Interviews are part of this process. Their objective is to identify, through the direct testimony of important futurists, the important historical concepts and ideas which developed during the emergence of the modern practice of foresight in France and around the world.

Philippe Durance (ph.durance@wanadoo.fr) is an associate researcher at Lipsor.

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Philippe Durance: I see on your desk there the memoirs of Bertrand de Jouvenel. I remember that de Jouvenel was once being interviewed by a journalist who began the interview with the following question: "How does one become Bertrand de Jouvenel?" So, I would like to ask you in turn: How does one become Michel Crozier?

Michel Crozier: I'm going to give you an absurd answer. One becomes Michel Crozier by accident. I never had a vision of what I wanted to do, nor what I was going to become. I suppose there were a certain number of opportunities which presented themselves, but I hadn't expected any of them.

My first revelation was in America. I was living and working in United States with the aid of a scholarship which I hadn't really requested and just sort of fell into my lap by luck. There were even a few colleagues who said that there must have been an error. That was 1947 and at that time, I considered myself a poet. I didn't know anything about sociology, and I had a grant to study the labour movement in the United States. I discovered both. I forgot how to be a poet and I became passionate for what I had to do. Without any preparation, I interviewed heaps of union members. That allowed me to write a book on American labour unions [1951] and pass my doctoral thesis.

So, I found myself to be a sociologist. I applied for a job at CNRS [*Centre National de la recherche scientifique*] in France and I was accepted to work on a project concerning office workers. At that time, I was a Marxist. More or less everyone I knew at that time was either a Marxist or was strongly influenced by Marxism. So, I wondered why these employees didn't seem to have any class consciousness. My first study concerned the postal distribution center in Paris [1956]. I discovered that the women who worked there had absolutely no class consciousness. It was completely over their head—intellectually but also emotionally. However, these same women had a lot of grievances and an acute sense of what had been the structure of the organization. Their bosses weren't particularly cruel, but they found the system to be stupid and without meaning. So, I followed these workers and I focused on organizational behaviour. I had already seen a certain approach to these kinds of problems through the work that I done in America. Unlike in France, there was a huge body of literature on organizational behaviour in American which dealt with both unions and enterprise. I started then to orient my research in this direction, having fallen there, as you can see, a little by chance.

Philippe Durance: What did you learn from that experience?

Michel Crozier: What had started out as a somewhat Marxist thought process, became almost anti-Marxist—well, not really, because I still respect Marx—not so much the philosophy of Marx, but rather the author of socio-economic studies. Marx had

analyzed all sorts of systems and why these systems work—the reserve army forces, for example¹. It seemed simple, but it was really a big discovery in terms of how social systems function.

I distanced myself from Marxism and I began to work on two aspects of bureaucracy; the general aspect, and the French aspect. The latter enabled me understand my own country vis-à-vis my experiences in America. I better understood America from the distance of France, and likewise, better understood France from the distance of America.

Philippe Durance: Can you relate that to foresight?

Michel Crozier: At that time, I was influenced by Fourastié. I was also influenced by my friends at the French Commission of Planning. The first team at the Commission of Planning, which was comprised around Jean Monnet, had a very strange organization. Monnet said that the team should not exceed forty people, including secretaries — that was particularly interesting. Why that rule? Well, the idea was that the French Planning Commission should be markedly smaller than the Soviet Planning Commission. From then on out, it seems we've moved closer to the Soviet model [laughing]. This man had an extraordinary power of persuasion, even though everyone who worked with him, most of whom were young, somewhat Marxist, anti-establishment types, wanted to do otherwise. But, Monnet would also repeat, "No more than forty!"

I started to come across *prospective* (foresight) in the 1960's which had been the time of much social upheaval in France. We organized a colloquium on France² — Pierre Massé was the key figure. He was both a speaker at the colloquium and a prospectivist. He seemed interested in what we were doing³. But, I started to have some doubts. The planners said that they knew "how to make an economy function well", but without having any idea what objectives that economy should have. And they said to us, "You — sociologists — you should tell us why we have to work. What objectives must we give French society?" At that moment, I had a rather anti-prospectivist reaction, but it didn't last⁴. Anyway, this approach, which was linked to Marxist determinism, was firmly rooted in French society and continued to be applied throughout French social engineering. I said to them, "You don't know where you're going. This mix of free-will

¹ Marx studied how capitalist reserve army forces which were comprised of laid-off workers, were necessary to apply pressure on employees and to absorb frictional unemployment.

² In 1965, the French Planning Commission organized a colloquium in collaboration with CNRS on the theme of development in France, which brought together both economists and sociologists.

³ "[...] I was immediately smitten with Pierre Massé and the fact that he held the glorious position of general commissar of French planning, which was highly regarded by Charles de Gaulle, himself a pragmatist." [Crozier, 2002, p. 270].

⁴ "[...] the good intentions of planners bothered me. How could they have such confidence? And furthermore, how could they have such confidence in sociologists to define the goals of a society?" [Crozier, 2002, p. 271].

and determinism is completely crazy." From then on, I was the black sheep, and no one among those with whom I worked in Planning wanted to admit that this was crazy.

Philippe Durance: Were you already at CNRS at that time?

Michel Crozier: Yes. And my suggestion to know why employees did not have class consciousness corresponded well to the prevailing vision at that time. Marxist determinism dictates that there needs to be class consciousness in order for changes to occur, so why wasn't there any class consciousness in France? What was jamming it? So, you see, that was really a non-conformist idea [laughter]. Nevertheless, I quickly abandoned this path of thinking. The problem simply wasn't asked because people didn't have any class consciousness. I reoriented my subject in the direction of organizational behaviour, particularly the way in which a bureaucratic organization functions. Eventually, I started to work a little with the prospectivists as I worked through the problems of bureaucracy, and therefore stability. I was a student of stability. I very quickly reoriented myself towards the idea of the absence of change and what could perturb stasis. Certain things change, while others don't. Why?

After my first confrontation with *prospective* in 1965 during the colloquium with Pierre Massé on French society, I had another confrontation in 1973. I was nominated to the Commission '85. It was presided over by Paul Delouvrier. I presented a particular position, which was a minority position at first. Nevertheless, I managed to persist—to such an extent that Delouvrier had been impressed. I said that the system of planning, this foresight vision of the future, leads to extrapolations which, in the end, are contradictory. Change is a necessary ingredient in foresight and all the graphs are not going to develop harmoniously in concert. At that moment, I had a rather bizarre altercation with Raymond Aron⁵, but I had the last word. Then we thought about potential ruptures which were likely to happen in French society. Some had already taken place, for example, in 1968, when French society completely buckled because the government was incapable of responding to the profound contractions which were the result of combining central planning with a lack of political will.

Philippe Durance: Did you know Bertrand de Jouvenel?

Michel Crozier: I knew him, but rather late in his life. In any case, our relationship was not an important one.

Philippe Durance: How is a discipline born? How were you able to "create" a sociology of organizations?

Michel Crozier: Sociology had already existed elsewhere, in America essentially, and a little in the countries influenced by America, including the Anglo-Saxon countries, the Nordic countries and Germany. But, it hadn't really been developed

⁵ Raymond Aron was Michel Crozier's thesis supervisor at the Sorbonne.

and that was intellectually irresistible. I was influenced by the Americans, both by the early analysts of organizations, and then by the political scientist, philosopher, and economist, Herbert Simon. I had the good fortune to be invited to the United States, to the Center for the Advanced Study of the Behavioral Sciences in Palo Alto, where I had an extremely rich and exciting year⁶. I read a lot, worked a lot, and started to write "Le phénomène bureaucratique" [1965]⁷. I ingratiated myself in the American intelligentsia, and I wrote my book directly in English. I started it in English there and I continued it in English here, which was absurd [laughing]. Nevertheless, it was a good idea because it gave me access to an American readership, without having to wait for the translation. And, above all, I discovered that, by writing and thinking in English, the book's content fit into the American mould, and was understood immediately by American readers. I was immediately known throughout the United States and the book had as much influence in the United States as it did in France. At that time, between 1964 and 1965, writing that book put me smack in the middle of the debate going on in America. And so, it was through this experience that I came to do my research on the sociology of organizations, and then later to develop it in France. For a long time, I was received better by the general public in America, than by the intellectual community. I'm still not taken seriously by the French intelligentsia; however, this is not case in the United States.

Philippe Durance: What is the sociology of organizations and what are its links to *la prospective* (foresight)?

Michel Crozier: Many things. First of all, it's a capacity to inquire. In the 1960s, I equipped a small group, which ended up being rather well known, to study the phenomenon of organization. The organization was the fundamental problem of modern societies—if you will allow me to indulge in a bit of megalomania. I also had the great fortune to benefit from the Marshall Plan. That had been the point of departure for my work. In return for financial aid, the Americans demanded that recipient countries allocate a certain amount of the funds to education and research, and they also forced to the French to do research on these problems. There was a commission on productivity, which got some money but didn't know what to do with it. So, they sought out people who wanted to work in this domain, but they didn't find any. For most French intellectuals, doing only research was below their dignity. So, I happily stepped in and had research support for two years.

At this time, the Commission for productivity had been entrusted to the progressive financial inspector, a friend of Mendès, named Gabriel Ardant, who believe

⁶ In 1959, Michel Crozier was invited to the Center at the request of Daniel Bell.

⁷ This work includes the thesis of sociologist Michel Crozier, written between 1960 and 1961, and supported by the Sorbonne. A part of this thesis was written in Cerisy-la-Salle in "a tiny office which was also used by André Gide" during a stay in "this simple and austere château, whose proprietor, Madame Heurgon, organized many cultural symposia there—a tradition started by her father [...]" [Crozier, 2002, p. 195]. Much later, in June 1990, a 10 day symposium was organized at Cerisy by Edith Heurgon with and on the work of Michel Crozier [Pavé, 1994].

he had the right to this position because he had been the general delegate to the director of the development of productivity, Pierre Grimanelli. In compensation, Grimanelli was offered the position of general director of *tabacs*⁸ at the ministry of finance. Under these circumstances, Grimanelli asked the commission to do a study on the state monopoly of the *tabacs*, which seemed to him an economic aberration. I was in the process of constructing a new institute for the social science of work when the study was brought to my attention. I wasted no time, and immediately began working on the *tabacs*. The study thus became a model for the study of the sociology of organizations in the French style, or at least, sociological analysis of organizations in France. That had been a rather extraordinary phenomenon. There again, the sociology was founded on stability, which was the subject of our study. One of the fundamental ideas had been the "vicious bureaucratic cycle"; as in — we've always done it this way... and so we'll continue to do it this way...and nothing will ever change.

I worked on the foundation of something which had been very important for me — the vector of the sociology of organizations. I was an empiricist, in contrast to my colleagues. I attached little importance to theoretical questions. I was more interested in the practice of sociology and listening to people. Therefore, the first study, which was very sophisticated, was an analysis of the human relationships amongst those on the inside of the *tabac* system based upon oral testimony. I developed this work by relying upon the work done by my American colleagues, but also by inventing a sociological model of oral testimony which could be adapted to any institution and has been widely adopted. That's the first part of my story. Now for the second part which is about the development of a school for sociologists which is, in part, a result of the crisis of 1968. It wasn't possible to have a university that trains sociologists in a strictly theoretical way, we had to train them on the job. So, I took responsibility for this school and we essentially adjoined the Science Po, which was the only university-like institution at that time which was not a university, and therefore exempt from the ridiculous Edgar Faure law. This law, among other well-intentioned plans, was certainly necessary, but it had an absurd side, which blocked practically everything. That task of building a school was passionate and difficult work, and it took several years to achieve the results that I was wanted.

Philippe Durance: How does this association relate to the *Centre de Sociologie des Organisations* (CSO)?

Michel Crozier: The CSO was, and still is, a research institution. I mingled in both organizations. I'm not a proponent of doing both research and teaching, which poses a lot of problems, but to achieve my goal in France, I had to draw on both organizations. If you're not smart enough to wear two hats at the same time, you'll never succeed at anything. I made an analysis of this problem, actually, which is rather fundamental unfortunately. Personally, I've managed to take on both duties (teaching and researching) successfully. Now, you will likely tell me that that's done, at least in

⁸ The State Tobacco Monopoly Administration.

theory, throughout France, since professors are both professors and researchers. However, it doesn't always work like that in practice, simply because the professors don't have the time to do their research, and the researchers are in a completely different world. I've truly managed to do both. We were offering courses at Science Po, but it was a rather awkward relationship since I wasn't really a professor there. I was essentially an adjunct [laughter]. I've always had as a general rule to be as accommodating and diplomatic as possible. So, I was able to do pretty much whatever I wanted to do. For example, we didn't want to assign grades, which didn't go over very well at Science Po, but we worked it out anyway. The curriculum for our sociologists lasted a long year (we started before everyone else and finished after, and there were no vacations), which went against all the rules at Science Po. Nevertheless, everyone at Science Po just accepted it. I'm exaggerating a little, but anyway, we had a tremendous amount of independence, which was indispensable. I used the centre of research to train future professors from the pool of doctoral candidates, and at the same time, I had a lot of research done by the doctoral candidates, which was inexpensive and allowed us to do a lot of things. Also, the students supported the researchers. At the end of the year, we decided that all the students had to do some sort of master work, a long research report over which they'd have complete independence. This exercise was the most important part of the degree programme. They obviously had to find some research to do. Finally, we discovered that the students themselves were full of ideas, often preposterous ones [laughing], but nevertheless those on which we were able to rely and thus find new research. Thanks to my students, we were able to study a wide range of institutional and organizational milieu—everything from schools to hospitals, associations, and other types of organizations in both France and elsewhere.

I came across *la prospective* a second time. This time, the confrontation occurred as we studied the phenomenon of services. I was persuaded by American and Scandinavian research that this phenomenon was fundamental. I traveled to Stockholm where I met Richard Normann⁹ for the first time. He was a talented and interesting man who, unfortunately, recently passed away. He was a sociologist and a rather curious character. He was a brilliant man who had discovered services first as a domain of study, and then as a concept. Normann had also written on this subject. We worked a little together [Normann, Ramirez, 2000]. I was struck, especially towards the late 70s, by the transformation of society from the industrial to the service model. I very quickly realized that a revolution was occurring, comparable to that of the industrial revolution. At that time, in France, no one wanted to accept the fact that services were important. It would take another dozen years for anyone in France to come to that realization. I remember a

⁹ A Swedish national born in Finland, Richard Normann moved to France in 1977. He held simultaneous teaching positions at Copenhagen Business School and Helsinki Institute of Technology, in addition to consulting. In 1980, he founded Services Management Group (SMG), a consulting firm specializing in strategic change and development. R. Normann is the author of several books on management and services, of which certain have been translated into French. Michel Crozier had been the scientific counselor at SMG between 1992 and 1995.

particular discussion that I led at the Council for the future of France¹⁰ on the subject of an interesting book by Stoffaes, [1978]. Well, I got carried away and took the logic a bit too far. Giscard interrupted me and said with that characteristic look, "Yes, but you know that all those things are auxiliary to the economy. They don't have any real importance." It was classic. The socialists thought the same way. Chevènement laughed when we talked about services.

The idea of services had nevertheless, allowed me to situate the work that I had done at the *Institut de l'Entreprise*¹¹ and led to *L'entreprise à l'écoute* [1989]. This book had been important for me. In 1984, the Business Institute commissioned me to write a report on the future of organizations. Jacques Lesourne was in charge of a second report on the future of enterprise¹². My thesis showed that, although industry and agriculture would remain important sectors, much change would take place in the service sector. The shift towards the service sector had been major and it represented already more than 50% of employment in France at the time. I analyzed the various social upheavals which might entail, and identified the managerial revolution which absolutely must accompany such a transformation. Services, in themselves, have an influence on industry which is composed, at least partially, of services. The services interior to an industrial system allow the bureaucratic machine to function. If a bureaucracy doesn't change, then it's because it's incapable of responding to contemporary problems—problems situated in a world of connected services, and not the fabrication of goods according to some theoretical vision of consumption. However refined this erroneous theory of production may be, production and consumption can not be reconciled in this way.

La prospective must consider this managerial revolution. I was struck by the fact that the United States seemed to be in the throes of this revolution, which clearly had both an up- and a down-side. The Price of Excellence [Peters, Waterman, 1982] had been a revolution for management consultants in America. I followed Peters' work a little, which continued with re-engineering. All that interested me.

¹⁰ Public policy organization on social problems created in February 1982 by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, former French president.

¹¹ Forum for the exchange of ideas aimed at business, founded in 1975 by François Ceyrac, president of CNPF [Conseil National du Patronat Français], Jean Chenevier (British Petroleum) and François Dalle (L'Oréal), which was an extension of Centre de Recherches et d'Etudes des Chefs d'entreprise (CRC), created in 1953 by Georges Villiers (see interview with Armand Braun.) Michel Crozier worked on several projects there, including one very interesting report on mobilizing employees in an enterprise [Crozier, Gingembre, 1987] in which, after having stated that the success of an enterprise depends, above all, on the human factor and the organization, the authors showed the importance of personal engagement of management, and organizational simplicity, of personal participation, of the acceptance of long-term goals (which should not be confused with slowness), and the role of motivating employees through challenge. This report is available at the web site of the Business Institute (www.institut-entreprise.fr).

¹² On the theme of Business in the next ten years, this work's goal was, "to educate managers and the public at large on the transformations that were bound to happen to this fundamental unit of economic life[...]" (Jacques Lesourne, 2000, *Un homme de notre siècle*, Paris, Editions Odile Jacob, p. 514) This work was the subject of a book, *L'entreprise et ses futurs*, published in 1985 (Masson). Michel Crozier and Jacques Lesourne would have plenty of opportunities to work together after its publication, notably at the *Institut Auguste Comte*.

Marc Mousli: Your definition of actor in the context of organisational behaviour and your work on the interplay of actors within organisations has been indispensable for Foresight, since it demonstrates and supports the affirmations that the future is not written and remains to be created, and that an actor is a change agent who is capable of redirecting his own future.

Michel Crozier: Precisely. Furthermore, I have shown in several of my books just to what extent this non-determinist conception of the individual and his action in society could be a powerful factor of change if one accepts it and if one lets it play out. That is not always the case in France, where we are quite attached to bureaucracy and complicated situations with lots of rules. This was the impetus for my appeal at the end of the 1980s for a “modest state” [1987]. The problems of the state and those of enterprise have several points in common. The complexification of modern organizations, considerably aggravated by information technology and economic globalization, require that we leave it up to the intelligence of management to properly run their own organizations. Otherwise, they'll simply apply their intelligence to skirting the impossibly complex rules and structures imposed upon them. The most forward thinking entrepreneurs quickly understood this, as it doesn't take an army of operations engineers and planning bureaucrats to be successful. They understood, as I described in *L'entreprise à l'écoute* [1989] that management's role was to establish favourable conditions in which employees could work, and to simply set ambitious objectives. We don't so much as “motivate” people, as we “mobilize” them. We simply need to give them the opportunity to motivate themselves.

Philippe Durance: Do you assign a lot of importance to the pragmatic side of your work? Was it in the United States that you discovered this epistemological “posture”?

Michel Crozier: Yes, exactly. However, I will add that France is a country in which the elite have been, and continue to be, dominated by a theoretical vision which situates it in its own prerogatives, in its own scientific monopoly, and its own consciousness. However, ultimately, France survives because it's a pragmatic country. Many things have been done here in this pragmatic way. In the battlefield of ideas, someone like Claude Bernard, for example, with his experimental method, has been very important¹³. The biologists were more open than the physicists. We have really suffered

¹³ Medical doctor and physician, Claude Bernard (1813-1878) is one of the founders of the Scientific Method. Bernard said this, “The enlightened man is one who both embraces theory and experimental practice. First he observes a fact, then an idea arises from this fact in his mind, then upon reflection, he reasons, forms an experience, contemplates and imagines this idea in material terms, and then this experience becomes a phenomenon which needs to be studied more carefully. The mind of the enlightened man is constantly wavering between two modes of thought, one which serves as the point of departure for reason, and another which allows him to form a conclusion.” (*Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale*, 1865). The application of this method allowed Bernard to advance medicine in several domains. The scientific principals of the experimental method have elicited in France several important

at CNRS [laughter] from the unconscious tyranny of the mathematicians and physicists, while the human sciences have been spared the mathematical models and theoretical visions of the physics. But, my colleagues were, for the most part, influenced by the physical model—in other words; they wanted to discover immutable laws. There is a tendency in *la prospective* to follow a more pragmatic approach.

Philippe Durance: To my knowledge, sociology was a rather young discipline when you started.

Michel Crozier: Yes, fortunately. It's because sociology was a rather young discipline, an appendix really, and not terribly noble, that a lot of innovations were possible. The professional license for sociologist didn't exist before the middle of the 1950s¹⁴.

Philippe Durance: Gaston Berger was also general director of higher education at the time and he had been one of the artisans of this creation. At the time, human sciences, or what some call the sciences of man, covered essentially two large domains; psychology and sociology.

Michel Crozier: Exactly.

Philippe Durance: I would be very interested to know the vision that you have of the current evolution of the discipline of sociology, which has been transformed these last few decades. Besides the sociology of organizations, there is among others, the emergence of the sociology of science with someone like Bruno Latour, who, like yourself, has been widely recognized in the United States, and less so in France. Isn't one of the characteristics of a sociologist to be at the intersection of several disciplines? And furthermore, being so placed, are not sociologists poorly classified into the predefined academic niches of academia—a problem particularly acute in France?

Michel Crozier: Unfortunately, yes. And I've suffered much from this. It's a little less the case now. The fact that we have been supported by Sciences Po¹⁵ and that Sciences Po is gambling on opening up admissions to an international student body bears testimony to the changes taking place in French academia. That has allowed us to really change people's mentalities. Richard Descoings, the director of Sciences Po, is someone rather extraordinary. He has really increased enrollment—close to 7,000 students come through Sciences Po, of which 2,000 are from abroad. Descoings has really set up an internal organizational model that is rather close to the American one.

epistemological controversies (see for example René Thom, "La méthode expérimentale : un mythe des épistémologues (et des savants ?)" in Hamburger (Jean), 1986, *La philosophie des sciences aujourd'hui*, Paris, Gauthier-Villars, pp. 7-20.)

¹⁴ The professional license for a sociologist was created in 1957 in France.

¹⁵ L'*Institut d'études politiques de Paris* has about 10 centres for research. With respect to sociology, there are two, the CSO and the *Observatoire sociologique du changement* (OSC).

On the other hand, in the traditional intellectual milieu, we have not been accepted. There was a time when I was accepted as an essayist, but not really as sociologist writing an essay. My books sell well [laughing] and so they are immediately suspect by the French academic establishment.

Philippe Durance: A work such as the *L'acteur et le système* [1977] had been and remains, nevertheless, a references in the analysis of organizations.

Michel Crozier: Yes, up until the present it has been used as a reference. There are now quite a few books on organizations, but that one still holds sway. I learned moreover that with the paperback edition, we have reached 150,000 copies sold. That's not bad for a book that is both difficult to read [laughter] and doesn't have a particularly large target readership.

Philippe Durance: I don't think that a single business school doesn't recommend reading it during the first year of studies.

Michel Crozier: Exactly. The fact is that however much companies have evolved since its publication, there remain certain invariants like divisions among employees and hierarchy. The world of the big CEOs is much more open today than it was then. I collaborated, if only for a short time, with Bertrand Collomb. He had been the president of the *Institut de l'Entreprise* and he just got elected to the Institute, and so we're colleagues now¹⁶. He wrote a rather long and laudatory article for a magazine on my book *L'entreprise à l'écoute* — and so there is a certain rapport and respect on the highest level between us. But most French CEOs didn't understand, contrary to the American executives¹⁷, who were able to put these ideas to use. Fortunately, consultancy firms functioned as an intermediary. When we wanted to place graduates that we had trained, the consultancy firms had been, throughout the course of a decade, the most fertile ground for us in terms of influence¹⁸. We had placed a good part of our sociologists there—perhaps 20 per year. Of course, we wanted to be known for our quality, not for our quantity. In the beginning, the companies wouldn't accept women, even though they represented, on average, half of our graduates. They took men who had our DEA [Master's Degree] along with another degree, like those who had graduated with an engineering degree. We even had two or three students from "X" [X is one of the most rigorous engineering schools in France]. That's France for you—the reverence for excellence. It's a little like the United States, however, in the United States, the

¹⁶ X-Mines, founder of the *Centre de recherche en gestion* (CRG) de l'Ecole polytechnique, Bertrand Collomb is the CEO of Ciments Lafarge. He was elected to the *Académie des Sciences morales et politiques*, within the *Economie Politique Statistique et Finance*, in December of 2001.

¹⁷ Michel Crozier had been a professor of sociology for several years at Harvard. He also taught at UC Irvine.

¹⁸ Michel Crozier had been scientific counselor to several consulting companies, including Andersen Consulting (now Accenture), in which he attempted to integrate the different dimensions of the sociology of organizations, without much success.

executives rarely do their undergrad at Harvard—they go to Harvard Business School, which is completely different [laughing].

Marc Mousli: If we were to describe, very schematically, the path taken by management during the last century, we could say that Taylor had reduced the employee to his hands, Elton Mayo and the school of human relations added his heart, and you, with your model with the actor, the brain. How did you arrive at this conception?

Michel Crozier: the observation of a functioning organization reveals two things; first, that the rules dictated by management and technocrats are useful, but only constitute a single perspective, I would even go so far as to say a stage, on which actors behave according to the particular setting. In order for an enterprise to function well, the employees must interpret the rules, complement them, and even skirt them. Employees seize the inevitable ambiguity, which is transformed into margins of freedom and use this freedom to attain their own objectives. It is at the margins that all individuals operating in a concrete system of action — an expression I prefer to that of organisation — realise their power. Every actor is of course in competition with his colleagues, who are also looking for ways to occupy the margins and advance their own objectives.

The second lesson learnt from this observation is that we all operate within systems. The operation of human systems has been well understood since Bertalanffy. Individuals — elements of an organisational system — count of course, but the most important variables within a system are the relationships amongst them. When we understand the importance of power, conflict, and systemic relations, we can analyze any organisation, regardless of its size or influence.

Philippe Durance: How is your work related to that of the science of complexity?

Michel Crozier: We all fell into complexity. There wasn't any work being done on organizations that took this dimension into consideration. Already, in the 1980s, I had been struck by the analyses coming out of America. From my own work, I was able to draw a rather radical conclusion: the only possible response to complexity is simplicity. The habitual bureaucratic response to complexity is more complexity of structures and procedures, which inevitably leads to complications, which of course leads to the more bureaucracy. The only possible response is one of simplicity in terms of both structures and procedures. Structures and procedures, by definition, are stupid; only humans, individually, are intelligent. My slogan at the time was, "Make humans more sophisticated, rather than procedures and structures." That's very obvious in the practical evolution of organizations. The height of stupidity was General Motors with its nineteen levels of hierarchy and a code of procedures comprising some several hundred pages. At the same time, the Japanese auto-makers easily beat GM with only five levels of hierarchy and no code of procedures.

The beginning of the American managerial revolution, which started with Japanese competition in the 1980s, gave me a lot to think about. The Japanese won because their intellectual model was simplified and, at the same time, relied much more on human intelligence. From that moment, the Americans had to rethink the problems of organization. That's why Peters' "The Price of Excellence" was so successful, while, in the end, his advice is rather questionable. Let's just say that Peters' advice corresponds to American traditions, in which there is also a lot of good.

A few years later, the phenomenon of globalization emerged and at the same time, I started to come across organizational problems in financial systems. I wasn't able to integrate this dimension. There was a conflict between my vision of management, based upon simplicity and human openness, and the types of problems found in the domain of international finance. I was able to reconcile the Nipo-American system, in which the Japanese financed American development through the purchase of American treasury bonds. Now, we find ourselves in a system which goes way further, where Chinese workers, with their slave-wages, finance American consumption, to such an extent that the entire American system would collapse if China were to fold in on itself. This extraordinary system, allows China to develop and America to continue a course of consumption which it will have to stop one day—the trees don't grow all the way to the sky, you know.

Michel Godet: What is your opinion of the work of Edgar Morin?

Michel Crozier: I like Edgar Morin. He says a lot of passionate things. But, for me, he's not an empiricist. Personally, I had only considered systems as concrete systems. For him, it's about a systems perspective, or a method of analyzing reality. For me, the system *is* the reality. I even had an expression for this, which I rarely use anymore, "the system of concrete actions." We live in systems of concrete actions which are enmeshed, and these systems create problems that we need to study.

Marc Mousli: In several of your publications, particularly *L'acteur et le système*, you treat change sometimes as a function of structural mechanisms, and sometimes you lament the fact that France has a difficult time adapting to external change. How do you explain this difficulty to change in France?

Michel Crozier: the explanation often advanced concerning the political rigidity of France due to a specifically French "resistance to change" is absurd. When we understand how an actor, even the most modest one, creates his own power within the zones of incertitude of a system of action, we immediately realise that all change imperils this fragile construction. To accept this assertion, the individual must have something to gain from this rigidity, including those who operate in the underground economy whose activities are not always captured in official reports.

Change assumes the cooperation of actors who negotiate amongst themselves for (informal) power. It must be accompanied by collective learning. It's not sufficient for

the employees to simply read the new mission statement printed on glossy paper. Collective learning is a cooperative process by which the actors discover and elaborate, sometimes by trial and error, sometimes by deliberation, an entirely new set of behaviours forming the system. They can appropriate this knowledge, but it is neither the most important nor the most difficult aspect of the process. That which truly counts is inventing new ways to work together and codifying these behaviours. Once these behaviours have been codified, they can be transmitted to new arrivals, and be perpetuated – at least last for a certain period of time.

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