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# FACING UP TO THE PRESENT? CULTIVATING POLITICAL JUDGMENT AND A SENSE OF REALITY IN CONTEMPORARY ORGANIZATIONAL LIFE

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## ABSTRACT

*Organizations are confronted with problems and political risks to which they have to respond, presenting a need to develop tools and frames of understanding requisite to do so. In this article, we argue for the necessity of cultivating “political judgment” with a “sense of reality,” especially in the upper echelons of organizations. This article has two objectives: First to highlight how a number of recent interlinked developments within organizational analysis and practice have contributed to weakening judgment and its accompanying “sense of reality.” Second, to (re)introduce some canonical works that, although less in vogue recently, provide both a source of wisdom and frames of understanding that are key to tackling today’s problems. We begin by mapping the context in which the need for the cultivation of political judgment within organizations has arisen: (i) increasing proliferation of political risks and “wicked problems” to which it is expected that organizations adapt and respond; (ii) a wider historical and contemporary context in which the exercise of judgment has been undermined – a result of a combination of economics-inspired styles of*

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*theorizing and an associated obsession with metrics. We also explore the nature of “political judgment” and its accompanying “sense of reality” through the work of authors such as Philip Selznick, Max Weber, Chester Barnard, and Isaiah Berlin. We suggest that these authors have a weighty “sense of reality”; are antithetical to “high,” “abstract,” or “axiomatic” theorizing; and have a profound sense of the burden from exercising political judgment in difficult organizational circumstances.*

**Keywords:** Organization theory; organizational sociology; metrics; political judgment; political risks; sense of reality

## INTRODUCTION

Executives in the upper echelons of public and private organizations have to navigate problems that have a “political” component. While this is hardly a novel comment (March, 1962; Pfeffer, 1992; Selznick, 1957), recent decades have nevertheless accentuated the political nature of problems in a number of interrelated ways. On the one hand, this tendency has become manifest in the manner in which organizational environments are increasingly mined with a number of “political risks” that in the blink of an eye can cause significant problems and therefore call for swift and imaginative responses (Brands & Edel, 2019; Kitsing, 2022; Rice & Zegart, 2018; Zhang & Duschesne, 2022). On the other hand, problems pertaining to how to act appropriately in the face of major crises such as accelerated climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic, rising inequality, new security threats, populism, and a devastating war in Ukraine also challenge organizations in significant ways and necessitate reflexive organizational conduct with a keen awareness of political threats and possibilities (e.g., Council on Foreign Relations, 2023; EY, 2022; Grant et al., 2022; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2023; The National Intelligence Council, 2021). As a response to the latter, recent discussions within organizational theorizing have suggested that organization scholars better face up to reality by theorizing how to respond to, navigate, and/or alleviate such major, indeed even potentially “existential” (Ord, 2020), risks and problems (Adler et al., 2023; Creed et al., 2022). Given the nature of the political challenges facing organizations today, it is therefore deemed necessary that managers and leaders are capable of not only exercising good judgment (DeRose & Tichy, 2008; Tichy & Bennis, 2007) but also of fostering the ability to exercise “political judgment” with a keen sense of reality, if they are to act responsibly in the face of the manifold problems they can expect to encounter (du Gay, 2023).

While the ability to exercise political judgment is in high demand, it is less clear whether and to what extent organizational theorists have much to contribute to sharpening and articulating the relevant capacities and dispositions that go with this. Indeed, rather than having a solid foundation from which to fashion concepts and frames of understanding requisite for intervening in organizational settings, there are reasons to believe that a number of problems within the field of organizational analysis currently prohibit a proper cultivation of a “sense of reality”

and the “political judgment” that goes with it. First of all, there is the obstacle of adequately grasping what such judgment and its accompanying “sense of reality” consists in and where one can go looking for some of their crucial characteristics. Second, several deep-seated practical and theoretical hindrances work counter to, and reduce the conditions necessary for, the exercise of responsible judgment with a “sense of reality.” Having a proper understanding of these obstacles, too, represents an additional crucial step for creating the conditions under which the exercise of political judgment can be developed.

In this article, we argue for the necessity of cultivating “political judgment” with a “sense of reality,” especially at the higher echelons of organizations. As will become evident in this article, where you find the one, you inevitably find the other; and, conversely, where one is absent, the other will be weak or missing too. As a stepping stone to advancing this proposition, this article has two objectives: On the one hand, to highlight how over recent decades a number of interlinked developments within organizational analysis and practice have contributed to problematizing and undermining judgment and its associated “sense of reality.” On the other hand, to (re)introduce some canonical works that, although currently less than fashionable, provide both a source of wisdom and frames of understanding that can be fruitfully deployed in facing up to today’s major problems in organizational analysis and practice. The argument proceeds as follows: First, we map the context in which the need for the cultivation of political judgment within organizations has arisen. We locate two trajectories: an increasing proliferation of political risks and major “wicked problems” to which it is expected that organizations adapt and respond, and a wider historical and contemporary context in which the exercise of judgment has been undermined. In regard to the latter, we focus especially on economics-inspired strands of theorizing and indicate how these have been interconnected with the proliferation of metrics within organizational life. Second, we flesh out the specific nature of “political judgment” and its accompanying “sense of reality” by mining the work and stance adopted by authors such as Philip Selznick, Max Weber, Chester Barnard, and Isaiah Berlin. In spite of their immediate differences, these authors, we suggest, have a weighty “sense of reality”; are antithetical to “high,” “abstract,” or “axiomatic” theorizing; and furthermore have a profound sense of the burdens that go with exercising political judgment in difficult organizational circumstances. Finally, we discuss the implications of this article and map its contributions, including how these advance and add to existing lines of research within organizational theorizing.

## **JUDGMENT UNDERMINED AMID POLITICAL RISKS AND PROBLEMS**

The quality of judgments made in the upper echelons of organizations are a significant contributing factor to whether organizations are successful or not (Barnard, 1968a; Berlin, 2019a, 2019b; Selznick, 1957; West et al., 2020). Countless organizational successes and failures throughout history have as their overriding determinant the proper use (or lack thereof) of judgment – whether

in business, politics, or military affairs. Judgment is usually understood to come into play, when there is a certain indeterminacy, a lack of clear evidence supporting a definitive approach or decision (Likierman, 2020; Tichy & Bennis, 2007), and a general openness pertaining to the context within which an assessment and/or decision has to be made, sometimes under considerable time constraints (Schumpeter, 1911/2011). Hence, the situations within which judgments are called for in organizations are not the equivalent of situations resembling an arithmetic puzzle, but, more often than not, an ambiguous and highly complex setting in which a large number of only partly intelligible, interrelated processes and variables are present (Geuss, 2009). As such, situations demanding judgment are different from situations amenable to mere calculation, or so-called “optimization.” As recent research shows, decisions based upon judgment often outperform decisions made on the basis of analytical and logical foundations (Gigerenzer, 2015; West et al., 2020). As Acar puts it:

Under extreme uncertainty, managers, particularly those with more experience, should trust the expertise and instincts that have propelled them to such a position. The nous developed over the years as a leader can be a more effective tool than an analytical tool which, in situation of extreme uncertainty, could act as a hindrance rather than a driver of success. (Lambert, 2021, n.p.)

Judgment is therefore at the heart of responsible organizational conduct, especially at the higher strata of organizations, where the quality, or lack thereof, of judgment can have significant consequences for organizational survival and flourishing (Brown, 1974, pp. 71–72). Indeed, judgment is said to be “the essence of leadership” (DeRose & Tichy, 2008, p. 26), because when “a leader shows consistently good judgement, little else matters. When he or she shows poor judgment, nothing else matters” (Tichy & Bennis, 2007, p. 94).

It is therefore not surprising that judgment is considered to be of vital importance. As we will highlight below, however, the exercise of judgment in organizations is challenged on several fronts. On the one hand, judgment, and especially political judgment, is currently in high demand. On the other hand, major tendencies in recent decades have contributed to undermining the exercise of judgment. In the remainder of this section, we will first signpost a number of rising political problems that call for the necessity of developing the prudential use of judgment. We will then seek to highlight how the conditions for the exercise of such judgment have been increasingly undermined.

### *Facing Political Risks and Problems*

Throughout the last couple of years, it has become increasingly apparent that the wheels of history are turning again, and that the relative political stability and security provided by the breakdown of Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union is a thing of the past (Brands & Edel, 2019). From the beginning of the 21st century onward, a number of events and trajectories have ushered in a new and increasingly uncertain environment, where risks and threats have been accumulating. 9/11, the financial crisis of 2008, a surge in populist discontents, climate catastrophe, and increasing polarization within and across many societies

have all contributed to turbulent organizational environments, where new risks and threats appear to be constantly emerging. Whether one looks at the academic literature (Brands & Edel, 2019; du Gay & Lopdrup-Hjorth, 2022; Gewen, 2020; Kitsing, 2022; Zhang & Duschene, 2022), threat assessments and documents from intelligence organizations (e.g., Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2023; The National Intelligence Council, 2021), or reports from the large consulting houses and think tanks (e.g., Council on Foreign Relations, 2023; EY, 2022; Grant et al., 2022), the picture painted across the board is unanimously bleak, indicating an increased number of political risks facing organizations. Such risks can be of a varied nature and scope (encompassing everything from war, espionage, and geopolitical rivalry to the actions of disgruntled employees, for instance), affecting, among other things, consumer demand, public perceptions, supply chains, and macroeconomic conditions. While the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the intensified geopolitical competition between the United States and China have obviously accentuated the intensification of recent political risks facing organizations, such risks, however, have been on the rise for quite some time (Rice & Zegart, 2018). In their practitioner-oriented book on how organizations can cope with political risks, Condoleezza Rice and Amy Zegart (2018) outline numerous examples of what such risks can look like, and how they might emerge seemingly out of nowhere. From hacker attacks to “shit-storms” on social media, Rice and Zegart highlight a number of different ways in which a plethora of organizations have had to face up to a wide variety of political risks, sometimes bringing them to the verge of bankruptcy or disintegration. Indeed, as the authors stress, navigating such risks is not merely something to take seriously for organizations operating in volatile and often hostile political environments. Rather, as several of their examples illustrate, it is something that organizations as diverse as SeaWorld, Sony Pictures, Ford, and Boeing, among others, have had to navigate – with greater or lesser success.<sup>1</sup> To provide merely one example, in 2014, a hacker group attacked Sony Pictures and released bundles of confidential information (comprising personal information about employees, copies of unreleased films, information about salaries, emails, plans for future films, etc.). The hackers additionally demanded that Sony Pictures should withdraw the movie *The Interview*, a comedy about a plot to assassinate North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un. This demand was accompanied by threats about possible terrorist attacks to be directed at cinemas screening the movie (Rice & Zegart, 2018, p. 52). Although a state actor (North Korea), in this instance, in all likelihood, was responsible, that is by no means always the case. Indeed, political risks can come from within the organization too, as recent #MeToo incidents at the *New York Times* and *Uber* attest to (Rice & Zegart, 2018, p. 53). No matter their origin, however, the intensification of political risks should be seen in conjunction with recent decades’ surge of so-called “wicked problems,” the consequences of which have already proved disastrous for numerous organizations. The financial crisis of 2008 and its repercussions (Tooze, 2018), the accelerating, multifaceted climate catastrophe (Wallace-Wells, 2019), the Covid-19 pandemic (Tooze, 2021), increasing inequalities, and political polarization within and across several countries (Moore, 2018; Nagle, 2017) all accentuate the need for sound judgment with

an eye to the political implications of decisions and conduct. Exercising judgment and having “a sense” of one’s organization and its environment therefore becomes *sine qua non* in navigating “hard to quantify” political risks (Rice & Zegart, 2018, p. 93).

Although there is no simplistic causal relation between the prescriptions inherent in organization and management theories disseminated via business schools, on the one hand, and managers and leaders’ practical exercise of judgment, on the other hand, it would also be misleading to assume that there is a no relation at all. In particular, the economics-based governance and agency models that came to proliferate from the 1980s onward, with business schools as the key disseminators (Khurana, 2010), are deemed to have had remarkably damaging effects for how managers exercise judgment (Dobbin & Jung, 2010; Ghoshal, 2005; Stout, 2014). The prevalence and propagation of these economics-based models and theories has had a number of pernicious effects (Ghoshal, 2005; Stout, 2012) including a gradual undermining and mistrust of managers’ ability to act responsibly and exercise judgment in a host of organizational settings (Donaldson, 2002; Muller, 2018). For that reason, any attempt at strengthening the ability to exercise judgment in the face of the numerous political challenges outlined above necessitates both a recognition of the less than benign impact unleashed by a number of interrelated conditions that have contributed to the undermining of judgment in organizations, and an associated recognition of which kinds of alternative conceptions might prove more useful in facing up to the organizational and societal realities of today. While several early figures in the history of organizational analysis pointed to the indispensability of judgment in organizational life, a number of, allegedly, more “scientific” and “rigorous” approaches have represented these authors and the maxims they developed as anachronistic and increasingly redundant.

#### *Undermining Judgment Through “Rigor” and “Science”*

Across its various exemplars (such as, for instance, Henri Fayol, Mary Parker Follett, Chester Barnard, Lyndall Urwick, Luther Gulick, and Wilfred Brown), “classical organizational theory” is characterized by

a pragmatic call to experience, an antithetical attitude to “high” or transcendental theorizing, an admiration for scientific forms of enquiry (in the Weberian sense of the “disciplined pursuit of knowledge,” and as such not reducible to the laboratory sciences, nor to the content of the sciences per se), a dissatisfaction and devaluation of explanation by postulate, and, not least, a practical focus on organizational effectiveness, for instance, born of a close connection to “the work itself,” or (...) “the situation at hand.” (du Gay & Vikkelsø, 2014, p. 737)

While this antipathy toward high theorizing and an associated preoccupation with practical experience allowed several of the classical theorists to supply frameworks and concepts adapted to real-life concerns in organizations, it did, however, also make many of its exponents vulnerable to a number of critiques of not being sufficiently based on “science.” Thus, toward the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, a set of, allegedly, more scientific and systematic ways of practicing organization were deployed against the classical theorists’



“proverbs,” as Herbert [Simon \(1946\)](#) dismissively portrayed them. Against the approach adopted by several of the classical theorists, a new “management science” began to emerge, one that purported to teach students a science-based methodology for decision-making. “Instead of being taught to rely on judgment (...), students could develop a more analytical competence by being immersed in quantitative methods and decision theory” ([Freedman, 2015](#), pp. 516–517). Fueling these efforts were two reports issued in 1959 by the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation, respectively ([Khurana, 2010](#); [Waring, 1991](#); [Wren, 2005](#)). In these reports, a strong case was made for the necessity of dispensing with preexisting conceptualizations and understandings of organizational analysis and business school education. Rather than a pragmatic call to experience, and a close connection with the work itself, the new “management science” was to be anchored in quantitative methodologies and the new behavioral sciences. The scientific approach that was to emanate from this “would allow managers to make decisions solely on analytical and rational grounds, without recourse to fuzzy notions such as intuition and judgment” ([Khurana, 2010](#), p. 271). To realize these purposes, however, it was also deemed necessary to bring a new set of requisite analytical competencies into business schools – something that in the United States entailed an influx of, especially, economists into the latter’s ranks. With this turn, a new ideal of the manager also materialized. Rather than one steeped in the practicalities of distinct industries and specific work practices, the “general manager” emerged as a category of person who would apply a set of context-independent techniques and quantitative methodologies that could be deployed in any organizational setting. However, in committing “themselves to omniscient rationality” and simultaneously omitting practice, judgment, and the specific contexts within which these allegedly universal techniques would be set to work, “economists and other hard management science advocates” ended up producing “a science divorced from reality” ([Locke & Spender, 2011](#), p. 17).

While these developments did provoke concerns and critiques, their proponents nevertheless maintained a strong belief in the possibility of turning management and business school education from a “wasteland of vocationalism into a science based profession,” as Herbert Simon memorably expressed it (quoted in [Freedman, 2015](#), p. 517). Such a stance was exacerbated in the 1970s and 1980s, when a new cluster of economically inspired organization theories made rapid forays into, and eventually became dominant within, business schools ([Ghoshal, 2005](#); [Khurana, 2010](#)). Of major significance in this regard was “agency theory,” a strand of theorizing initiated by a group of economists at The University of Chicago ([Jensen, 1983](#); [Jensen & Meckling, 1976](#); see also [Khurana, 2010](#), pp. 313–326; [Perrow, 1986](#), pp. 224–236). With the casual modesty of an economist, Michael Jensen proclaimed a “revolution in the science of organisations” – a field he considered was “still in its infancy” ([Jensen, 1983](#), p. 324). While Jensen and his colleagues shared with their earlier business school colleagues the ambition to turn management and organization theory into a true science, they were even more skeptical of managerial judgment than their predecessors. Indeed, they not only mistrusted any reliance upon managers’ judgment, they mistrusted managers per se, because they were opportunistic by default



and could not be relied upon to look out for anyone but themselves. Inspired by Milton Friedman, and building upon “the efficient market” hypothesis, Jensen and Meckling brought a set of controversial theoretical economic postulates into the world of organizations. As Justin Fox remarked:

“the rational market idea” moved from “theoretical economics into the empirical subdivision of finance.” There it “lost in nuance and gained in intensity.” It was now seeking to use the “stock market’s collective judgment to resolve conflicts of interest that had plagued scholars, executives, and shareholders for generations. (quoted in [Freedman, 2015](#), p. 526)

By taking this route, agency theory sought to erase previous conceptions of organizations, and with them preceding theorizing about the nature of responsibility pertaining to the function of management. Now, it was claimed that organizations were nothing but “legal fictions which serve as a nexus for a set of contracting relationships among individuals” ([Jensen & Meckling, 1976](#), p. 310). The implication of this was that a form or other form of organization was simply

a legal fiction which serves as a focus for a complex process in which the conflicting objectives of individuals (...) are brought into equilibrium within a framework of contractual relations. In this sense the “behavior” of the firm is like the behavior of a market, that is, the outcome of a complex equilibrium process. ([Jensen & Meckling, 1976](#), p. 310)

The key assumptions and operating concepts of agency theory therefore implied that “an organization’s history and culture were irrelevant, staffed by people who might as well be strangers to each other” ([Freedman, 2015](#), p. 528). Due to this, organizations, in the memorable phrasing of Oliver [Williamson \(1991\)](#), could essentially be considered as “a continuation of market relations, *by other means*” (p. 162). With this frame of understanding, managers became reconceived as opportunistic actors in need of market discipline, since they could not be expected to think and act beyond their narrow self-interest. “Managers being trained in this theory would offer no loyalty and expect none in return. Their task was to interpret the markets and respond to incentives. Little scope was left for the exercise of judgment and responsibility” ([Freedman, 2015](#), p. 528).

### *Undermining Judgment Through Metrics*

The practical implication of agency theory has not merely been an even greater wariness toward managerial “judgment” than that exhibited by earlier advocates of “management science,” it also implied a generalized suspicion toward management practice that – in several registers – has proved toxic to organizations and societies. Indeed, while some scholars have pointed to the ways in which agency theory’s central tenets were directly implicated in the Financial Crisis of 2008 ([Dobbin & Jung, 2010](#); [Robé, 2011](#)), others have highlighted how the key doctrines of the theory have been hugely damaging as its ideas spread from business schools into organizations. [Ghoshal \(2005\)](#) and [Donaldson \(2002\)](#), for instance, have indicated how agency theory has undermined more or less well-functioning management practices. [Muller \(2015, 2018\)](#), too, has emphasized how the increasing proliferation of metrics in organizations should be seen as intimately linked with the dominance that agency theory came to have over the last three to four decades. This mode of theorizing, he argues,

articulates in abstract terms the general suspicion that those employed in institutions are not to be trusted; that their activity must be monitored and measured; that those measures need to be transparent to those without firsthand knowledge of the institutions; and that pecuniary rewards and punishments are the most effective way to motivate “agents.” (Muller, 2018, p. 49)

In this sense, agency theory has theoretically legitimized and been one (albeit not the only) driver paving the way for the onslaught of the metrics fixation framing the proliferation of what Michael Power (1997) termed the “audit society.” In line with agency theory, this metrics fixation can be characterized by the belief that the most fair and effective way of managing organizations is to replace judgment based on experience and in-depth practical know-how with numbers, the belief that such numbers should be “transparent,” and the belief that those subject to such numbers should be motivated via penalties and rewards in regard to their “objective” performance (Collini, 2018; Muller, 2015, 2018). The problem, however, as Collini highlights, is that as

[...] soon as numbers come into play, we are all liable to fall into what Oscar Wilde called “careless habits of accuracy.” A number holds out the promise of definiteness, exactness and objectivity. But a number is a signifier like any other, a way of representing something (...). The digital revolution has brought with it a huge increase in quantifiable information, the very existence of which provides a constant temptation to metric misbehaviour. If there are numbers to be had, we come to feel that we must have them, even though they may mislead us into thinking we have solid information about something important when in reality all we have is the precise and selective misrepresentation of something insignificant. (Collini, 2018, n.p.)

The retort to such a critique by agency theorists, and others predisposed to the same kind of thinking, has been that without determinate and clear indicators, managers cannot make responsible decisions. As one of the pioneers of agency theory, Michael Jensen has argued,

Any organization must have a single-valued objective as a precursor to purposeful or rational behavior .... It is logically impossible to maximize in more than one dimension at the same time .... Thus, telling a manager to maximize current profits, market share, future growth profits, and anything else one pleases will leave that manager with no way to make a reasoned decision. In effect it leaves the manager with no objective. (quoted in Stout, 2014, p. 108)

As Jensen puts it, “[t]he solution is to define a true (single dimensional) score for measuring performance for the organization” (quoted in Stout, 2014, p. 108). However, as Stout (2014) goes on to argue, such an approach neglects the fundamental human “capacity to balance, albeit imperfectly, competing interests and responsibilities (...). Balancing interests – decently satisfying several sometimes-competing objectives, rather than trying to ‘maximize’ only one – is the rule and not the exception in human affairs” (pp. 107–108). This is essentially what judgment is about. However, with the excessive use of metrics across any number of organizations – universities, the police, schools, hospitals, businesses, the military, etc. (for case studies pertaining to these, see Muller, 2018) – the capacity for organizational members to exercise prudent and balanced judgment has been significantly reduced. And no wonder. The central traits and bases of agency theory and like-minded approaches that underpin “trust in numbers” have consisted in setting up abstractions and models bent on escaping the messiness of reality (Espeland, 2001; Skidelsky, 2021).

In his review and critique of the economists' reductive approach to organization, Charles Perrow writes about "the challenge" that agency theorists have presented organizational analysis and practice. This challenge, Perrow states, "evokes the menace of the novel and film *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, in which aliens occupy human forms, but all that we value about human behavior (...) has disappeared" (Perrow, 1986, p. 257). The ability to make prudent judgment has been one of the casualties of this foray. On the one hand, it has been compromised by a set of ideas that from the 1950s onward have progressively discredited and undermined practical judgment; on the other hand, it has been challenged by the closely associated proliferation of "metrics" that have colonized public as well as private organizations. As Muller (2015, pp. 1–2) states, the "characteristic feature of the" metrics fixation and its underlying ideas "is the aspiration to replace judgment with standardized measurement"; the virtues of these metrics "have been oversold and their costs are underappreciated."

So far, we have sought to argue that judgment, and especially political judgment, is in high demand today, not least as a result of the proliferation of "political risks" we discussed above. At the same time, however, the conditions for cultivating and exercising judgment have been weakened. As we have attempted to indicate, this development is in no small part the result of the proliferation of theoretical approaches bred within the modern business school and the related tendency to rely increasingly upon metrics in contemporary organizational life. However, in stating this, it would be misleading to pretend that this is a unitary and total history, where problematizations of judgment within specific kinds of theories translate one-to-one into organizational practices. Indeed, the history of quantification and its relationship to how judgment is exercised in organizations has more nuances and details than what we have been able to cover here.<sup>2</sup> However, our ambition has also been more modest: to highlight how a number of emerging political risks necessitates the cultivation of prudential judgment in organizations, at the same time as the conditions for the exercise of the latter has been weakened by the proliferation of economics-inspired modes of theorizing (Ghoshal, 2005; Khurana, 2010; Perrow, 1986) and its associated metrics fixation (Muller, 2015, 2018).

## **RE-ENTER "POLITICAL JUDGMENT" AND A "SENSE OF REALITY"**

We now turn to the second part of our argument, namely, that in attempting to face up to the plethora of "wicked problems" and political risks in the present, inculcating a "sense of reality" and the "political judgment" that goes with it, might be a more requisite stance for those in the senior echelons of organizations to develop. Our task is therefore to explore what such a stance entails. We do so by returning to the work of Chester Barnard, Max Weber, Philip Selznick, and Isaiah Berlin. In spite of their evident differences, these thinkers (i) share a certain disposition toward (organizational) reality, (ii) highlight the importance of (political) judgment, (iii) are antithetical toward deriving practical conduct

and judgment from a “rigorous” and science-based foundation, and (iv) have an appreciation of tragedy.<sup>3</sup> We can begin to get a sense of what this stance entails by outlining contours of its constituent components in Selznick, Barnard, and Weber’s theorizing to begin with. We will then turn to Berlin. We proceed in this manner because Berlin’s thinking, while adding important nuances to the insights developed by the former authors, is considerably less well known within the orbit of organizational theorizing.

*Political Judgment and Sense of Reality in Organizational Sociology and Theory*

In his book, *Leadership in Administration*, the organizational sociologist Philip Selznick draws on what, at first sight, appears to be a curious analogy pertaining to the responsibility of those exercising authority in the upper echelons of organizations. Their role and responsibility, Selznick claims, is to act like “statesmen,” no matter whether their particular role happens to be located in a public or a private organization (Selznick, 1957, p. 37). Thus, they might be heads of state, senior public officials, or managing large commercial enterprises. By describing the activities of those leading public institutions and private enterprises as involving statesmanship [*sic.*], Selznick wants us to recognize that there are certain responsibilities pertaining to such roles that transcends the parameters of what he conceives of as a constricted business stance. The narrowness that he attempts to warn his readers against is the outlook of those executives who – blinded as they are by a technical point of view – are less than well grounded in reality than the office for which they have assumed responsibility necessitates. As he writes:

To be ... “just a businessman” is inconsistent with the demands of statesmanship. It is utopian and irresponsible to suppose that a narrow technical logic can be relied on by men who make decisions that, though they originate in technical problems, have larger consequences for the ultimate evolution of the enterprise and its position in the world. (Selznick, 1957, p. 148).

According to Selznick, the “statesman” must first and foremost be attuned to the organizational realities within which s/he is placed. Only by being grounded in this way is it possible to exercise judgment in a responsible manner. Thus, there is an intimate connection between the responsible use of the statesman’s political judgment and having a firm grasp of reality. Indeed, facing up to reality in a requisite way can be considered the foundation and first step in exercising judgment. To illustrate this point, Selznick quotes the Prussian general and theorist of war, Carl von Clausewitz:

the greatest and the most decisive act of the judgment which a statesman ... performs is that of correctly recognizing the kind of war he is undertaking, of not taking it for, or wishing to make it, something which by the nature of the circumstances it cannot be. (quoted in Selznick, 1957, p. 78)

As we have already indicated, Selznick is not alone in making this connection. Max Weber and Chester Barnard came to similar conclusions, and for not entirely unrelated reasons. Both of them also argued for the tight-knit connection between the responsible use of judgment and a profound sense of the realities of distinct, though widely differing, organizational contexts. And they recognized

some of the same dangers, too. By not being receptive to reality, by insisting upon holding on to a set of ideas (metrics, frameworks, etc.) that abstracts from the “total situation,” people in positions of authority are prohibited from exercising judgment in a responsible manner. Indeed, this is one of the chief dangers Weber warns of in his famous lecture, *The Profession and Vocation of Politics*. Here, he highlights that “*responsibility* requires ... *judgement*, the ability to maintain one’s inner composure and calm while being receptive to realities” (Weber, 1994, p. 353). What matters most in a leader, Weber claims, is “the trained ability to look at the realities of life with an unsparing gaze, to bear these realities and be a match for them inwardly” (Weber, 1994, p. 367). While definitely being less sanguine about the prospects for humankind than Selznick, Weber nevertheless expresses a stance that is not entirely unrelated to Selznick’s view of the statesman’s responsibility, especially when Selznick expresses this via Clausewitz, with whom Weber has an even closer intellectual affinity. Weber, too, worries about the erosion of political judgment and responsibility that arises when statesmen and leaders lose their sense of reality by seeking to represent it in a manner that makes it into something it cannot be. As da Mata argues, “Weber clearly realizes that disconnection to reality leads to the decline of political judgment and, with this, a conscious and responsible engagement.” For him, much like Clausewitz, “specific intellectual fashions have the potential of leading social actors to take the way of a ‘mystical escape of the world’ (*mystische Weltflucht*) so that they are not ‘a match for the world as it really is’” (da Mata, 2019, p. 607).

This is also one of the chief dangers Chester Barnard addresses, not only in his magnum opus, *The Functions of the Executive* (1968a) but also in articles and public speeches (see, e.g., Barnard, 1968b). While Barnard’s warnings about this are not drawn from the study of 18th- and 19th-century warfare, like Clausewitz, nor from political and societal debates of 19th- and 20th-century Germany, like Weber, they persistently move across a terrain of problems where overreliance on utopian and abstract ideas are linked to the erosion of responsible conduct. As with Selznick, who approvingly quotes Barnard (see, e.g., Selznick, 1957, p. 36), and Weber before him, Barnard highlights judgment as dependent upon a sense of reality that is not amenable to “scientific” or “rigorous” representation. Contrary to agency theorists, such as Jensen, Barnard (1968a, 1968b) points to the necessity of having a “sense for the whole situation” as the indispensable foundation for the exercise of judgment (Barnard, 1938a, p. 235). And he insists that grasping the reality pertaining to “the whole,” and the forming of judgment in relation to this whole, has to be described in the registers of “intimate experience,” “sensing,” and “having a feel for,” rather than through a terminology emphasizing logical and analytical processes of thought (Barnard, 1968a, p. 235). In particular, he warns against the irresponsibility and utopianism implicated in the abstractions associated with economics-based approaches to executive decision-making (Barnard, 1968a, p. 239; Selznick, 1957, p. 148), something which Weber was familiar with, too (Hennis, 2000, pp. 40–41, 125–126, 200–201).

In a lecture given at Princeton in 1936, Barnard illustrates the manner in which a central component of most leadership roles exactly consists in exercising faculties that are not logical, nor grounded in science. As he says to his audience:

“be careful not to be logically arithmetical about organization” (Barnard, 1968b, p. 316).

You cannot get organization by adding up the parts. They are only one aspect of it. To understand the society you live in, you must *feel* organization – which is exactly what you do with your non-logical minds – about your nation, the state, your university. (Barnard, 1968b, p. 317)

He emphasizes that the often denigrated “intuitive” and “non-logical” thought processes tend to be *the most important* – albeit not the only ones necessary – across a number of different occupations, such as, for instance, the statesman, the junior and senior executives, as well as the politician. Conversely, in the accountant and the engineer, logical processes tend to dominate (Barnard, 1968b, p. 320). Hence, it is not a question of one set of competences or thought processes being more important than others per se. Barnard’s more general point is that we can only determine the importance of distinct thought processes when we view them in relation to a particular context, on behalf of which they *then* can be seen to be more or less important. In other words, such capacities should be assessed as a function of the distinctive offices an individual occupies (du Gay et al., 2019). Nevertheless, Barnard (1968b) argues that the “failure observed in many concrete instances to take into account all the elements of the situation as a whole” is “promoted by a specialization in thinking that arises in part from the specialization of the sciences” (p. 290).

In the common-sense, everyday, practical knowledge necessary to the practice of the arts, there is much that is not susceptible of verbal statement – it is a matter of know-how (...). It is necessary to doing things in concrete situations. It is nowhere more indispensable than in the executive arts. It is acquired by persistent habitual experience and is often called intuitive. (Barnard, 1968b, p. 291)

The same point is reiterated in his book *The Functions of the Executive*:

the essential aspect of the process [of organization] is the sensing of the organization as a whole and the total situation relevant to it. It transcends the capacity of merely intellectual methods, and the techniques of discriminating the factors of the situation. The terms pertinent to it are “feeling,” “judgment,” “sense,” “proportion,” “balance,” “appropriateness.” It is a matter of art rather than science, and it is aesthetic rather than logical. For this reason it is recognized rather than described and is known by its effects rather than by analysis. (Barnard, 1968a, p. 235)

Just like Weber before him, Barnard is of the opinion that cultivation of the requisite exercise of judgment at the top of organizations require experience, practical training, and development; hence, Weber’s overriding preoccupation with the distinctive life orders, such as the bureaucracy, the parliament, the political party, etc., wherein appropriate office-based comportment was to be shaped and perfected (Hennis, 2000). “It seems to me clear,” Barnard (1968b) says, “that, whatever else may be desirable, it is certainly well to develop the efficiency of the non-logical processes. How can this be done?” (p. 321).

No direct method seems applicable. The task seems to be one of “conditioning” the mind and to let nature do what it then can. The conditioning will consist of stocking the mind properly and in exercising the non-logical faculties. The mind will be stocked by experience and study. Experience means doing things, action, the taking of responsibility. It is the process by which an immense amount of material is unconsciously acquired for the mind to use (...). Study

supplements that process by introducing facts, concepts, patterns that would fail of perception through undirected experience. Action or experience at the same time gives the opportunity for practice. There seems to be no substitute for using the mind, applying it, working it, to develop its power. (Barnard, 1968b, p. 321)

This training for the responsible use of judgment grounded in real circumstances is about as far away as one can get from the abstract approach proposed by the early “management science” proponents and their later, even more “rigorous,” agency-theoretical successors.

We have now elaborated a number of common themes and shared dispositions across such different classical organization theorists as Philip Selznick, Chester Barnard, and Max Weber. Although they differ in a number of important respects,<sup>4</sup> they nevertheless coalesce in their persistence that responsible leadership requires the cultivation of (political) judgment, and that this in turn requires being receptive to reality. This is what acting as a “statesman” entails. This is what acting as a responsible politician entails. And this is what acting as a top executive entails. They furthermore agree that abstract theorizing, technical logics, and the intellectual frameworks that go with these (whether numbers or utopian ideas) tend to move leaders further away from, rather than closer to, reality. Being guided by these results in what Weber called a “mystical escape of the world,” that is, the route traveled by economics-based theories of organization and the related metrics fixation that now dominates the ways in which public and private organizations are managed.

#### *Isaiah Berlin: “Sense of Reality” and “Political Judgment”*

By outlining the common concerns linking Selznick, Barnard, and Weber, we can begin to see the contours of a common stance; one that, we believe, is of considerable importance to our present circumstances. To more fully articulate this stance, we now turn to the work of Isaiah Berlin. While in no sense an “organizational theorist,” Berlin traveled across an intellectual terrain where he encountered problems that contain more than faint echoes of what we have attended to above. While not easily categorizable within anyone tradition, Berlin has for good reasons been called a “realist” or “proto-realist,” a position which brings him in close contact with Weber, for instance.<sup>5</sup> For our purposes, however, the important thing is the way in which Berlin circles around like-minded concerns to those explored by Selznick, Weber, and Barnard – although, obviously, from a different angle of attack. Most notable, perhaps, is the insistence on the tight-knit interconnection between having a “sense of reality” and what Berlin refers to as “political judgment.” Like Weber and Barnard before him, Berlin, had a profound understanding of how the world works – hence his association with “realism.” As John Gray (2013) states, the reason for this has to do with biographical details of Berlin’s life:

Unlike that of the majority of philosophers in his time, and nearly all at present, Berlin’s work was not shaped primarily by an academic agenda. Much of his life, including much that was formative of his thinking, occurred outside the seminar room. Moving among writers and musicians, working for the British government in Washington during the Second World War, talking with diplomats and political leaders about international issues, not always in public, he gained a



sense of how the world works that is painfully absent from much academic writing on ethics and politics. These practical involvements are one reason for the vivid sense of reality that informs Berlin's work. (p. 33)

Berlin laid out his thinking on these matters in speeches and lectures given as early as the 1950s (Hardy, 2019, pp. xxx–xxx). In particular, in the two thematically overlapping texts, “Political Judgment” and “Sense of Reality,” Berlin emphasizes what having “a sense of reality” implies for the making of “political judgment,” and, additionally, how this dimension is inescapably located beyond clear-cut theoretical delineations and modeling attempts. Failing to act in accordance with “reality” has dire consequences. Indeed, as Berlin (2019a, 2019b) stresses, several catastrophes throughout human history are attributable to leaders who failed to exercise political judgment with a sense of reality.

So what does this “sense of reality” consist in and what are its key characteristics? And if it is not liable to modeling and clear-cut theoretical delineations, then how is it knowable? Before providing us with an answer to these questions, Berlin, like Weber, Barnard, and Selznick, emphasizes how judgment can be let astray, if it relies excessively on science and techniques, especially in the hands of those who do not have a “sense of reality.” Furthermore, Berlin (2019b) emphasizes that the optimism with which some advance a scientific approach to the conduct of human affairs, whether in business, politics, or elsewhere, has deep historical roots in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries (e.g., Spinoza, Holbach, Helvétius):

It was argued (...) that just as knowledge of mechanics was indispensable to engineers or architects or inventors, so knowledge of social mechanics was necessary for anyone – statesmen, for example – who wished to get large bodies of men to do this or that. (p. 51)

The optimism with which many hoped to uncover the laws governing human behavior, however, has been unwarranted, according to Berlin. While no skeptic of science per se, he nevertheless draws attention to how the various advances made within science and technology do not necessarily entail the advancement of civilization more generally, especially in the domains of human conduct:

The techniques of modern civilization, so far from guaranteeing us against lapses into the past or violent lunges in unpredictable directions, have proved the most effective weapons in the hands of those who wish to change human beings by playing on irrational impulses and defying the framework of civilised life according to some arbitrary pattern of their own. (Berlin, 2019a, p. 14)

In this sense, Berlin is skeptical toward the attempt to grasp political and social reality through numbers, formulas and/or rigorous frameworks. Indeed, he thinks that attempts so to do are not only utopian, but they also lead us astray in grasping reality. However, as he indicates, there is more than one way in which this can happen:

It would be generally agreed that the reverse of a grasp of reality is the tendency to fantasy or Utopia. But perhaps there exists more ways than one to defy reality. May it not be that to be unscientific is to defy, for no good logical or empirical reason, established hypotheses and laws; while to be unhistorical is the opposite – to ignore or twist one's view of particular events, persons, predicaments, in the name of law's, theories, principles derived from other fields, logical,

ethical, metaphysical, scientific which the nature of the medium renders inapplicable? For what else is it that is done by those theorists who are called fanatical because their faith in a given pattern is not overcome by their sense of reality? For this reason the attempt to construct a discipline which would stand to concrete history as pure to applied, no matter how successful the human sciences may grow to be – even if, as all but obscurantists must hope, they discover genuine, empirically confirmed, laws of individual and collective behaviour – seems an attempt to square the circle. It is not a vain hope for an ideal beyond human powers, but a chimera, born of a lack of understanding of the nature of natural science, or of history, or of both. (Berlin, quoted in [Gray, 2013](#), p. 111)

If we cannot gain a “sense of reality” necessary for the exercise of political judgment through a scientific method, how can we then approach this, still, somewhat vaguely formulated, reality? [Berlin \(2019a\)](#) now moves closer to an answer to these questions by indicating how a medical chart or diagram differs from the qualitative knowledge he seeks to articulate the contours of:

A medical chart or diagram is not the equivalent of a portrait such as a gifted novelist or human being endowed with adequate insight – understanding – could form; not equivalent not at all because it needs less skill or is less valuable for its own purposes, but because if it confines itself to publicly recordable facts and generalisations attested by them, it must necessarily leave out of account the vast number of small, constantly altering, evanescent colours, scents, sounds, and the physical equivalents of these, the half noticed, half inferred, half gazed at, half unconsciously absorbed minutia of behaviour and thought and feeling which are at once too numerous, too complex, too fine and too indiscriminable from each other to be identified, named, ordered, recorded, set forth in neutral scientific language. And more than this, there are among them pattern qualities – what else are we to call them? – habits of thought and emotion, ways of looking at, reacting to, talking about experiences which lie too close to us to be discriminated and classified – of which we are not strictly aware as such, but which, nevertheless, we absorb into our picture of what goes on, and the more sensitively and sharply aware of them we are, the more understanding and insight we are rightly said to possess. (p. 29)

This, Berlin continues (sounding remarkably like Barnard), “is what understanding human beings largely consists in. To try to analyze and clearly describe what goes on when we understand in this sense is impossible,” he says, “not because the process in some way ‘transcends’ or is ‘beyond’ normal experience, is some special act of magical divination not describeable in the language of ordinary experience,” but rather

for the opposite reason, that it enters too intimately into our most normal experience, and is a kind of automatic integration of a very large number of data too fugitive and various to be mounted on the pin of some scientific process, one by one, in a sense too obvious, too much taken for granted, to be enumerable. ([Berlin, 2019a](#), p. 29)

[Berlin \(2019b\)](#) now goes on to stress how the characteristics of the kinds of knowledge he has just described is what those at the upper echelons of organizations need to master, or, more generally, those who wish “to get large bodies of men to do this or that” (p. 51), such as, for instance, “industrialists,” “social welfare officers or statesmen” (p. 55). Hence, statecraft, leadership, and the sense of reality and judgment implicated here “is unlike either the erudition of scholars or scientific knowledge” ([Berlin, 2019a](#), p. 39). In contrast to those who master the (natural) sciences, the statesman or leader “cannot communicate their knowledge directly, cannot teach a specific set of rules, cannot set forth any propositions they

have established in a form in which they can be learned easily by others”; nor can they “teach a method which, after them, any competent specialist can practice without needing the genius of the original inventor or discoverer” (Berlin, 2019a, p. 41). “What is called wisdom in statesmen, political skill” rather relies upon political judgment, and this requires “understanding rather than knowledge – some kind of acquaintance with the relevant facts of such a kind that it enables” leaders in the upper echelons of organizations

to tell what fits with what: what can be done in given circumstances and what cannot, what means will work in what situations and how far, without necessarily being able to explain how they know this or even what they know. (Berlin, 2019a, p. 41)

If we look for the key to unlocking the secret, to grasping the sense of reality and the accompanying political judgment, Berlin says that we will be disappointed. For the truth of the matter is that “there is no key” (Berlin, 2019a, p. 41).

Botany is a science but gardening is not; action and the results of action in situations where only the surface is visible will be successful, partly, no doubt, as the result of luck, but partly owing to “insight” on the part of the actors, that is, the kind of understanding of the relations of the “upper” to the “lower” levels, the kind of semi-instinctive integration of the unaccountable infinitesimals of which individual and social life is composed (...), in which all kinds of skills are involved – powers of observation, knowledge of facts, above all experience [...] [I]n short the kind of human wisdom, ability to conduct one’s life or fit means to ends, with which, as Faust found, mere knowledge of facts – learning, science – was not at all identical [...] [T]here is an element of improvisation, of playing by ear, of being able to size up the situation, of knowing when to leap and when to remain still, for which no formulae, no nostrums, no general recipes, no skill in identifying specific situations as instances of general laws can be a substitute. (Berlin, 2019a, p. 41)

This sense of reality and the political judgment that goes with it, however, is not reducible to “the celebrated distinction drawn by Gilbert Ryle between knowing that and knowing how. To know how to do something” does not, in most instances, “imply an ability to describe why one is acting as one is; a man who knows how to ride a bicycle,” for instance, “need not be able to explain what he is doing or why his behaviour leads to the results he desires” (Berlin, 2019a, p. 42). “But a statesman faced with a critical situation and forced to choose between alternative courses (...) does,” in contrast to the cyclist “judge the situation” and assess it in such a way so that she/he “can answer objectors, can give reasons for rejecting alternative solutions” (Berlin, 2019a, p. 42). The statesman, though, “cannot demonstrate the truth of what” is said “by reference to theories or systems of knowledge, except to some inconsiderable degree – certainly not in a sense in which scientists or scholars must be ready to do it” (Berlin, 2019a, p. 42).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

From its very inception, organizational theorizing has been marked by strife and critique about what constitutes the field’s *raison d’être* (Westwood & Clegg, 2003, p. 3; see also Ringel, 2024, this volume). However, from the 1960s and onward, a number of developments have cumulatively added to promoting a style of

theorizing that in its attempt to emulate the natural sciences has contributed to undermining a distinctive practical stance in which the exercise of (political) judgment was considered premium. As we head into a very uncertain third decade of the 21st century, this latter stance might be worth reviving. Instead of “maximizing,” “optimizing,” and relying upon allegedly objective metrics, managers in the upper echelons of organizations ought rather to cultivate a “sense of reality” and “political judgment” as the requisite dispositions via which they could attempt to face up to the problems of the present. Although we have only been able to scratch the surface of the works of Max Weber, Chester Barnard, Philip Selznick, and Isaiah Berlin, we nevertheless hope to have made it evident that key elements of such a practical stance runs through their otherwise diverse works. In this final section, we will discuss how the argument we have set forth contributes to ongoing discussions within organizational theorizing. We shall do so by emphasizing two points in particular: looking forward via the past and educating responsible practitioners.

Like other scholars in our field (e.g., [Adler et al., 2023](#); [Creed et al., 2022](#)), we are also of the conviction that theorizing ought to be engaged with responding to major contemporary problems. And although it is perfectly reasonable to seek to bring about new syntheses and concepts tailored to our particular contemporary predicaments, a less explored route – and the one we advocate here – consists in pausing to ponder if already existing – but now largely forgotten, belittled and “old fashioned” – organizational principles and stances, can (still) be of assistance in tackling the problems of responsible organizational conduct in the face of political risks and dangers. In arguing for the latter, we aim to contribute to a distinctive turn within organizational theorizing, which, over the last couple of decades, has had as its ambition to show the continuing relevance of some of the classical works within our field (e.g., [Casler, 2020](#); [du Gay & Vikkelsø, 2014, 2017](#); [Lopdrup-Hjorth, 2015](#); [O’Connor, 2012](#)). As [Hinings et al. \(2018, p. 341\)](#) have recently argued, it is perhaps time to skip the “unhealthy obsession with the recent and the novel,” which to a large extent dominates contemporary organizational theorizing, and instead consider reconnecting with history and the wisdom that some of the classical works of our field has to offer. In this article, we have attempted to follow this route by highlighting how threads of a distinctive practical stance that places judgment, and its accompanying sense of reality, center stage can be found in works as diverse as Weber’s, Selznick’s, Barnard’s, and Berlin’s. We have attempted to argue that not only is this stance of continuing relevance for organizational theorists and practitioners but also that this stance, throughout the last five decades, has been problematized and belittled, as newer and, allegedly, more “rigorous” quantitative frameworks have been on the ascent within both theory and practice. In making this argument, our ambition has been to suggest that key resources for conceiving and understanding what exercising judgment with a sense of reality amounts to can be lifted directly off the pages of the works we have dealt with here. This, however, is not to suggest that elements of such a stance are only to be found in these works. Rather, additional resources for revitalizing such a stance might equally draw from the works of, among others, Mary Parker Follet, Wilfred Brown, and/or Robert Michels, too.

Here, though, we have sought to indicate how four very different theorists shared a preoccupation with thinking through the requirements of what exercising judgment in a responsible manner amounts to, and, not least, how executive conduct might be let astray if managers and leaders overemphasize the extent to which actions can have a solid foundation in “rigorous” metrics-based frameworks at the expense of a “sense of reality.” By reconnecting with the thoughts of these and other classics, it is worth following Thomas Hobbes, who, in the introductory pages to his translation of Thucydides’ *The Peloponnesian War*, argued that “the principal and proper work of history” is “to instruct and enable men, by the knowledge of actions past, to bear themselves prudently in the present and providently towards the future” (quoted in [du Gay & Lopdrup-Hjorth, 2022](#), p. 157).

This leads us to discuss how our argument contributes to ongoing discussions pertaining to the education of responsible organizational practitioners. This theme has been extensively debated in the slipstream of the corporate scandals of 1990s and 2000s and further accentuated in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008 (e.g., [Dobbin & Jung, 2010](#); [Ghoshal, 2005](#)). Whereas some have argued that several of the most influential organization and management theories of the last four to five decades are essentially anti-management ([Donaldson, 1995](#)) and therefore undermine the whole purpose of management education ([Donaldson, 2002](#)), others have highlighted how especially economics-based theories have colonized the business school curriculum and – directly or indirectly – contributed to the destruction of otherwise more or less well-functioning management practices ([Ghoshal, 2005](#); [Khurana, 2010](#)). While we are largely in agreement with most of these diagnoses, we have sought to highlight some other pathways to addressing these ills. Whereas [Donaldson \(1995\)](#) argue for revitalizing structural contingency theory as the dominant paradigm within management and organizational theorizing, [Ghoshal \(2005\)](#) has urged management and organizational scholars to dispense with what he terms “ideology based gloomy vision” and instead (guided and inspired by the turn toward “positive psychology” within the discipline of psychology) to pursue “positive organizational scholarship.” This, in combination with more diversity in dean’s hiring practices within business schools, is [Ghoshal’s](#) proposal for countering how “bad management theories destroys management practices.” Finally, [Nohria and Khurana \(2008\)](#) have proposed installing an “oath of management” in order to make management more like the professions (medicine, law, etc.), with all the attending ethical guidelines and sanctions that go with a process of professionalization. While these suggestions might have some traction, we have suggested here that organizational theorists and practitioners ought rather to (re)familiarize themselves with the classics of our field and to utilize the wisdom accumulated in these works as a potential remedy for tackling contemporary political risks and wicked problems. The authors we have attended to here, in their diverse ways, wrote against a background where tragedy was never too far away. In spite of the fact that they lived and wrote within largely divergent contexts, and through only partly overlapping historical periods, there might be more than faint echoes between their differing circumstances and our own less than optimal societal, political, climatic, and economic prospects today. If our own “end of history” moment is finally over, and tragedy and difficult

choices explicitly force themselves upon us (Brands & Edel, 2019; Gewen, 2020), it might be worth resuscitating ideas and outlooks stemming from before this moment became prevalent, not least because several of the concepts and frames of understanding outlined by Weber, Barnard, Selznick, and Berlin were penned on a canvas where tragedy, turmoil, and political risks were prominent, too. It is thus worth remembering that Weber in his lecture *The Profession and Vocation of Politics* spoke against the background of a devastating World War, a worrying lack of responsible leaders and statesmen, and, not least, political disorder and revolutionary fervor. Barnard, too, sought to cultivate and express his stance on responsible leadership against the background of tragedy in the form of devastating economic and social turmoil. Written in the midst of the Great Depression in the 1930s, *The Functions of the Executive* opens with an emphasis on the fragility of organizational life. In spite of the fact that what we find “reliable, foreseeable, and stable” is accomplished by organizations, Barnard argues, “successful cooperation in or by” organizations “is the abnormal, not the normal, condition. What are observed from day to day are the successful survivors among innumerable failures. The organizations commanding attention, almost all of which are short-lived at best, are the exceptions, not the rule” (Barnard, 1968a, pp. 4–5). Berlin, too, witnessing the Russian Revolution in 1917 and fleeing the Bolshevik mobs with his family, always kept an eye on tragedy and the harms that humans do to each other in the name of “higher truths.” He probably would have agreed with Selznick (1994) who, in his major work, *The Moral Commonwealth*, drew on political realists such as Niebuhr when he wrote: “The most important evils are those we generate ourselves, from ourselves, rather than those imposed upon us by external conditions. This is a lesson liberals and radicals have been slow to learn and loath to accept” (p. 175). While history never repeats itself, it certainly often rhymes, as Mark Twain is believed to have said (MacMillan, 2020, p. 14). And although students within business schools do not learn to become responsible managers and leaders solely by reading books and articles, their outlooks and their professional “persona in spe” is nevertheless shaped to a significant extent by what they read and are taught. Here, as Cummings and Bridgman (2011) have argued, exposing students to classical theorists within our field is one way in to fashion more reflective and responsible practitioners.

## NOTES

1. In this context, we are less concerned with whether and to what extent the frameworks proposed by Rice and Zegart (2018) to counter political risks are adequate in regard to the problems they diagnose, just as we shall abstain from entering into discussions about whether one of the authors (Rice) might herself have contributed to an increase in political risks by being part of an administration exhibiting remarkable few restraints in its foreign policy ambitions in combination with a notable inability to think “tragically” (Brands & Edel, 2019; Gewen, 2020). What concern us here is solely the fact that such political risks have been on the rise – something that can be seen in the scholarly literature, in documents from intelligence agencies, and in reports from think tanks and large consulting houses, all of which we have cited above.

2. For instance, the trajectory outlined above has abstained from relating to inquiries of a more encompassing historical scope, whether in the form of the development of statistical



reasoning (Desrosières, 1998), the formation of the overwhelming appeal of quantification in the modern world (Porter, 1995), and the even more encompassing philosophical history of the relationship between numbers and humanity (Nirenberg & Nirenberg, 2021). Equally, we have also abstained from entering into close dialogue with more recent discussions within valuation studies, where debates about how organizations respond to metrics, rankings, and quantitative assessments paint a considerably more nuanced and multifaceted picture (see, e.g., Chun & Sauder, 2022; Dahler-Larsen, 2012; Espeland & Sauder, 2007; Greenwood et al., 2011; Mennicken & Espeland, 2019; Pollock et al., 2018; Strathern, 1997) than what we have been able to provide here. Also, due to limited space, we have only mentioned Herbert Simon and the Carnegie School in passing, although they play a rather crucial role.

3. Concerning the latter point (i.e., iv), see the final section “Discussion and Concluding Remarks.”

4. We will here only highlight one such difference, although there are numerous. Distinguishing between “organization” and “institution” is, for instance, one major difference between Selznick and Barnard. Whereas Selznick insists on this distinction, Barnard (1968a, p. 235, 1968b, p. 317), as we have seen, continually speaks about the necessity of “sensing the organization as a whole” and of the important ability to “feel organization.” Such phrases make little sense in Selznick’s (1957) conceptual universe, where organizations are defined as “expendable,” “technical instruments” that “are judged on engineering premises” (p. 21). In essence, several of the positive qualities that are retained within Barnard’s (more expansive) understanding of organization is in Selznick’s theory relocated under the conceptual umbrella of “institution,” thereby leaving organization – relatively speaking – as a more stripped down, technical, engineering entity – hence its “expendability.”

5. The question as to whether Berlin is a “true realist” is of less importance for us. Moreover, although “there exists considerable discrepancy between the amount of ink spilled on [Bernard] William’s and [Raymond] Geuss’ thought *vis-à-vis* (...) Berlin’s,” much of Berlin’s work can nevertheless be described as “proto realist” (Vogler & Tillyris, 2019, p. 20 (n. 5)). “Proto-realist,” however, is not just a label used to describe Berlin, since it is also used to describe, among others, Max Weber and Hans Morgenthau (see Maynard, 2022).

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