

## Taylor's Scientific Management

Hindy Lauer Schachter, *Frederick Taylor and the Public Administration Community: A Reevaluation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 175 pp.; \$39.50 hardcover, \$12.95 paper.

Frederick Taylor is usually identified with absolute efficiency, "the one best way," and pure "economic man," motivated solely by money. His Scientific Management is typically represented as managers getting the most out of workers by telling them how to do things the one best, "scientific" way and the workers doing it in obedience to management's money authority. This is what one learns from modern public administration textbooks.

Professor Schachter sets out, first, to correct this all too unilateral image of Taylor and, second, to correct the textbook record. She achieves these laudable goals by utilizing a paradigm different from that of most textbooks and by demonstrating it to be a sounder approach to learning.

The textbook paradigm she rejects is that of the natural sciences, which the social sciences have adopted for the sake of scientific legitimacy. Schachter notes that textbook authors have also adopted the scientists' suppressive approach to presenting their disciplines, in which the theories presented as paradigmatic are solely the latest demonstrable ones, those borne out by the most up-to-date empirical data. When natural scientists learned that Lavoisier's was a better explanation of air than Aristotle's, they presented that in texts and rightly relegated the earlier one to historical footnotes. Social scientists, in subordinating Taylor to this paradigm, have similarly reduced him to a historical footnote to the later and supposedly superior model of "human relations" theorists. This is as much an injustice as it is an inaccuracy.

The fact is, as Schachter convincingly demonstrates, Taylor's Scientific Management already offered a "humanistic" theory of motivation, with its democratic and participatory emphases, that was hardly improved on by Elton Mayo and others (worsened, I would argue, by the medieval notions of Mayo and the brainwashing functions of Barnard's executive).

Schachter makes her convincing case, first, by scrupulously rereading Taylor; second, by emphatically reviewing his reception among those whom Taylor deemed to have understood and applied him rightly, such as Morris Cooke and the members of the New York Bureau of Municipal Research; and, finally, by critically rehearsing his representation, and subsequent misrepresentation, in a historical sequence of public administration texts, in which proximity and fidelity to Taylor successively gave way to distant disregard and paradigmatic rejection.

In terms of actual public administration, Cooke and the New York Bureau Progressives clearly saw Taylorism, with its emphasis on information and participation, precisely as a way to enhance government responsiveness and popular accessibility. Likewise, had Taylor not been perceived as an advocate of democratic values, it would seem unlikely, too, that the likes of Brandeis and Tarbell would have championed him and that Leonard White would have presented him in this light in the very first public administration text. But the post-World War Two textbook authors, as Schachter thoroughly substantiates, reduced Taylor's motivation to that of an "economic man" who could serve as a foil to their supposedly more sophisticated "social man." And, as appropriate to the natural science paradigm, this social model wholly superseded any earlier economic one. (Ironically, even if Taylor had proposed such a purely economic model, he would have found himself vindicated by some of the recent studies which have stunned readers with evidence that at Hawthorne then and at work today, money talks.)

Public administration scholars would have had a more realistic sense of Taylor and Scientific Management and learned much more from him, Schachter argues, if they had applied the paradigm used in the arts and humanities. I certainly concur, but would even simplify that. To learn about and from historical figures, just do history right: study past phenomena in their historical (cultural, economic, political, social, etc.) context.

Taylor was, for example, not a scholar, but a practitioner and proselytizer, and he wrote accordingly. Moreover, the "management" problem he faced at the time was not, as it might be today, decentralizing and democratizing the organization, but, indeed, to centralize and coordinate operations. As a consequence, an authoritarian, top-down approach is often attributed to him. But such attributions ignore, as Schachter references to his texts and to the famous congressional hearing show, that such an approach should only be implemented with the voluntary cooperation of the workers. The real basis of these attributions is, in fact, not Taylor's work but the misapplication of Taylorism by self-styled Scientific Management "experts" who sold its efficiency techniques to executives eager to enhance productivity and hence profits without telling them of the cooperative efforts it would require to implement them effectively—the form without the content. (The infamous Watertown Arsenal incident palpably illustrates such abuse.)

I do not mean to canonize Taylor or to sanctify Scientific Management, political naif, and "scientific" idealism that they remain, but it does seem to me, and clearly to Professor Schachter as well, that Taylor's efforts in this direction attest to a great deal more integrity than do those of the so-called human relations persuasion. This is borne out by the fact that workers themselves were more amenable to Scientific Management than managers, which rightly perceived in it a loss of authority and power to themselves (while Mayo and his associates clearly served the interests of management).

An important point in regard to this progressive misinterpretation of Taylor is the shifting vantage point of the successive textbook authors. To see Taylor's notions of participation and democracy historically, readers clearly need to keep in mind that just as the democracy of Philadelphia differed substantially from that of Athens, the democratic demands of post-World War Two writers were vastly greater than those of Taylor's time—just as demands for democracy have again grown radically since that war. Looking through the purely latitudinal paradigm of the sciences, public administration textbook writers lose the longitudinal perspective that is the essence of history. Such ahistoricity retroactively imposes today's political demands on Taylor's times at the same time that it neglects what portentous demands were, in fact, already being made.

Fittingly, Professor Schachter points out the irony that if one views their respective texts in terms of style and audience, old Taylor comes out more democratic while the textbook authors, with their terminological arcana, could justly be charged with highly anti-democratic inclinations. May Professor Schachter's paradigmatic rehabilitation of Taylor serve as a powerful reminder to scholars to reacquaint themselves to "thinking in time" and to return to original sources to engender a more truly *public* administration.

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