

cultural theory and triarchy theory

Twenty-five years ago the renowned anthropologist Mary Douglas invented a typology known as Grid and Group. (Douglas, 1982). 'Grid' refers to externally-imposed and formalised regulation of the actions of individuals, achieved through laws or through social discipline. 'Group' refers to membership of bounded groups, in which the behaviour of members is determined by relationships within the group.

There are four possible combinations of Grid and Group

Low group combined with low grid leads to individualism, since in this situation people are not much constrained, either by rules or by relations with other members of a group. The culture is one of self-sufficiency. Social interaction is through a loose network. Entrepreneurs of all kinds flourish in these conditions.

High group and high grid lead to a structured, hierarchical society. People are subject both to socially-imposed roles and to control by other individuals.

High group and low grid combine to produce egalitarian social relations. Individuals exercise power only by appealing to group values and purposes. A self-sufficient Western commune is an extreme example of egalitarianism. Its cultural bias is to reject the values of the surrounding society. Members are expected to be loyal to each other.

Low group and high grid lead to a fatalistic way of life, in which people are controlled from without but themselves exercise no control over others.

Thompson, Ellis and Wildavsky developed Douglas's ideas into Cultural Theory. They describe individualism, hierarchy and egalitarianism as the three active ways of life. In their view, societies that fail to include any of these three active ways of life lose the wisdom associated with the excluded way. Cultural theory sees a dynamic equilibrium between the three ways, which is to the advantage of societies in which they are combined.

Triarchy Theory, as expounded in my book '[The Three Ways of Getting Things Done](#)', relates to organizations, rather than to societies, the arena of Cultural Theory. Nevertheless there are parallels between the two theories. The three active ways of life of Cultural Theory (CT) correspond to the three ways of getting things done of Triarchy Theory (TT). TT postulates that there are three, and only three, ideal type ways of getting things done in organizations - hierarchy, heterarchy and responsible autonomy. CT's individualism corresponds to TT's responsible autonomy, CT's egalitarianism to TT's heterarchy, while both CT and TT have hierarchy.

Triarchy Theory claims that, while hierarchy may have real value in organizations, a judgment about its usefulness is not possible while it has a firm grip on nearly everybody. It should first be seen as just one option. Heterarchy is multiple rule, rather than the single rule of hierarchy. A trivial example of heterarchy is the children's game of rock, scissors and paper, where rock blunts scissors, scissors cut paper, paper wraps rock. None of the three is dominant. An organizational example is the relationship between the partners in a traditional law firm, where all partners are of roughly equal status, sharing decision-making, risks and rewards. A further example is the balance of powers between the executive, legislature and judiciary in the US political system.

Responsible autonomy allows an individual or a group to decide what to do, but is accountable for the outcome of the decision. It might be called 'no rule', or rather, no external rule. The existence of accountability distinguishes responsible autonomy from anarchy. Examples are: privately-owned businesses that operate autonomously, providing they satisfy their creditors; and basic scientific research, in which principal investigators are free to choose their line of enquiry, providing it leads to results judged valuable by peer-review.

Heterarchy and responsible autonomy are both non-hierarchical, but are distinct alternatives. Heterarchy requires strong interaction between organizational participants, in order to decide on coordinated action. The sheer density of this interpersonal communication can be time-consuming, which is a possible disadvantage for heterarchy. Responsible autonomy has less interaction and greater self-sufficiency.

Cultural Theory reinforces Triarchy Theory in two ways. Firstly, it provides a further justification for there being three, and only three, ways of getting things done in organizations. The second, and more important, benefit is that CT suggests a dynamic interaction between TT's three ways of getting things done. The interaction seen in society between hierarchy, individualism and egalitarianism is a possible model for what the interaction, in organizations, between hierarchy, heterarchy and responsible autonomy might be, were the hegemony of hierarchy to be removed.

Thompson, Ellis and Wildavsky suggest that people who follow a particular one of Cultural Theory's three active ways of life are promised particular outcomes. If, over time, these outcomes do not come about, its adherents begin to have doubts about their way of life. Eventually, they will listen to the stories told by adherents of alternative ways of life and may decide to adopt one of these. Such a switch might be manifested by supporting a different political party or reading a different newspaper.

One can see something of the sort operating in today's organizations. The frequent reorganizations that occur in many organizations may not be simply whims of the hierarchy. They may be the result of dissatisfaction with the achievements of the organization, with its failure to live up to its promises. Often, today, reorganization is a shift between centralisation and decentralisation, or something similarly trivial, which does not seriously disturb hierarchy. But it is possible to envisage more fundamental shifts taking place when the hegemony of hierarchy is relaxed.

Thompson and co-authors write: "The incapacities of the three active ways of life (hierarchy, egalitarianism, and individualism) prompt them to reach out for cultural allies who can compensate for their weaknesses...It is this ambivalence (being both attracted to and repelled by rival ways of life) that generates the "switching mechanisms", which continually forge, break apart and re-form alliances."

If the danger of hierarchical dominance were removed, one could envisage a group of people in an organization discussing how they might best cope with a new set of external uncertainties. Someone might suggest that their current practice of ample discussion of all new issues was too ponderous in this rapid-moving, new situation. Most of the uncertainties were well-understood, so quick responses were now more important than exhaustive analysis. The group might decide to put one of their number in charge of short-term decision-making, at least for a few months. In this example, heterarchy reaches out to hierarchy as a temporary expedient in dealing with a special situation.

Although we must continue to recognize that Cultural Theory is primarily a theory of society, it suggests how a more dynamic Triarchy Theory might be developed.

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