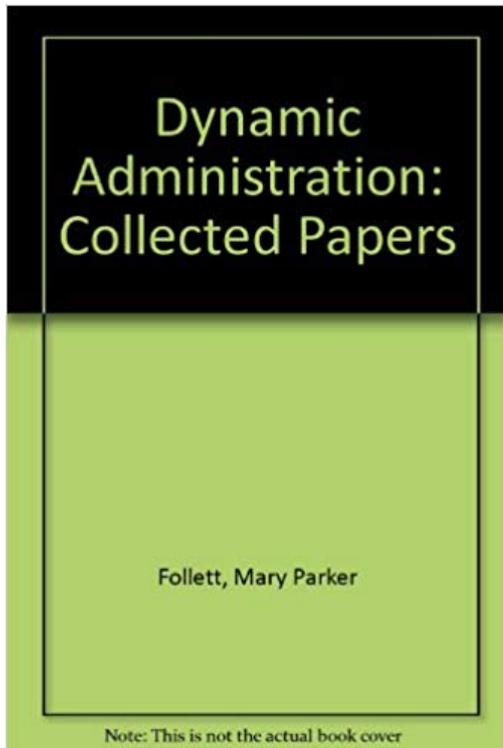


Dynamic Administration: Collected Papers *by* Mary Parker Follett, L.F. Urwick, Elliot M. Fox



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Reviews of the *Dynamic Administration: Collected Papers* *by* Mary Parker Follett, L.F. Urwick, Elliot M. Fox

Siralune

The Human Problems of Industrial Civilization by Mayo, Elton (1933) Revisited.

Book Review by Punit Arora

Human problems of Industrial Civilizations is a unique management book that starts with fatigue and monotony and ends with theories of government, international politics and effectiveness of League of Nations! Even though the breadth of the topics covered in the book is breathtaking, at the

heart of the book lie Hawthorne experiments at Western Electric Corporation in the inter-war period (1924-32) in Chicago, IL. Therefore, I propose to spend as much time on the context of the experiment and the book as on the actual Hawthorne experiments, their implications and shortcomings.

Hawthorne experiments were conducted in an era when scientific management reigned supreme. It is interesting to note that though the results from the experiment led to the foundation of human relations school in management, it never was the intent of the researchers when the experiment began. Mayo and his team were essentially looking for the effect of illumination on the productivity of the workers. As the design of study itself reveals, it was very much in the nature of scientific management inquiries: impact of changes in physical environment on the workers' productivity. However, the researchers accidentally stumbled upon something entirely different. They claimed to have come across certain human processes at work that were impacting the workers' productivity. Though, in 15 years that I have known about Hawthorne experiment, this claim never has fully convinced me. I firmly believe that perhaps the scientific management had already peaked by this time and its shortcomings were becoming apparent. However, challenging an established line of inquiry was still fraught with risk and the researchers still had to position their work in a certain way so they could be taken seriously. Therefore, when I opened this book and confronted fatigue on page one of the book, I was slightly taken aback; that despite knowledge of what was in store for me.

It was also instructive to note that Mayo spent more time reviewing work done in England than in United States. Outside of Hawthorne experiments, there are very few studies from United States that he cites. There are some odd references to France, Germany and Russia too, the references to which grow towards the later half of the book; a theme to which I will return later. Suffice it would be to say that it was a period in which European powers still ruled the roost and United States wasn't yet a world power, politically or industrially; and I used word industrially, instead of economically, deliberately because it was a world in which state of manufacturing determined the nature of economy.

The application of principles of scientific management resulted in systematization of the work and increased productivity up to a point. However, obsessive concern on "the best way of doing things" neglected the human dimensions of the capitalist economy. Not unsurprisingly, therefore, when Marx and his friends crafted their seminal treatises, they confronted and reported a world that had rapidly rising discontent among the workers. This is the neglect that also confronted Mayo and his colleagues when they conducted Hawthorne experiments.

Their research which was to come under severe criticism later on showed that the illumination levels in factories had no bearing on the productivity. When they increased illumination, the productivity increased and when they subsequently decreased it the productivity still increased up until it became humanly impossible to work. They were "astonished" at this result. They concluded that the manner in which workers were treated played a significant role in determining their performance. The nature of supervision and friendliness in particular were found to be a crucial factor. "We concluded that the best way to improve morale was ----- through improved supervision ----- A relationship of confidence and the friendliness with these girls has been established to such an extent that no supervision is required."

Based on this study, Mayo, Roethlisberger and Dickson founded the Human Relations School. Their basic premise was that "the industrial worker doesn't want to develop a blackboard logic which shall guide his method of life and work. What he wants is --- a method of living in social relationship with other people and value to the group."

Remember, however, it is distinct from Human Resources School which emerged later and had much loftier ideals and broader goals and agenda. The Human Relations School was basically limited to softening the edges of capitalistic economy by humanizing the work processes. It was limited to advocating for changes such as reduction in fatigue and monotony and improving the morale of the work. Self-realization, knowledge workers, human resources development and such other extensive changes were to take another 30 years to come into dictionary of organizational researchers.

Though Mayo and his colleagues are criticized for limitations of their methodology and conclusions drawn, their work has to be seen in the light of the prevailing environment. Rise of Russia and threat of communism, end of one world war and threat of another on horizon, looming great depression, near inhuman treatment of workers at the factories and such other great historical processes were all in play when they were conducting their experiments. One may ask what all of this has to do with research on management- a lot; if the range of topics covered and the constituencies that the book seems to be addressing is kept in mind. On the one hand, the researchers are reporting results from an experiment and on the other they seem to be talking to policy-makers to address the genuine grievances of workers to stem the tide on rising communism. Mayo (and his colleagues) seems to be addressing several stakeholders and constituencies simultaneously. Under the constraints of the environment in which the book was written, I think it's an excellent work and a must read. Whether the methodology was strong or weak is a secondary question to what the book achieved in the results: getting human issues on the center-stage of the capitalist economies' agenda. Perhaps, that's the reason the book is still a seminal work despite all that critics have to say about it. And I believe it's going to become relevant once more under the impact of roll back of several welfare measures that had found acceptance over last 50 years. Shorter employment terms and absence of meaningful relationship in particular is likely to create the disconnect between employers and employees. While the wheels of time can't be rolled back, it would be useful not to forget the lessons hard learnt.

Overall, a very good book to read.

Ygglune

Here Mayo compounds mistake upon thoughtless mistake through flimsy psychological speculations. Given the hindsight of history, precision denunciation of Mayo's work (carefully preserving the slightly tainted results of mostly accurate contributors to this school of thought, such as those of Douglas McGregor) should really be a full-time activity for someone in Cambridge, MA (where Mayo worked). Such efforts would probably prevent another Enron-type business blow-out.

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