



Chris Marquis (Harvard University), the 2006 Lou Pondy Best Paper from a Dissertation Award winner interviews Steve Barley (Stanford University), the 2006 recipient of the OMT Distinguished Scholar Award about Steve's presentation.

CM: I really enjoyed your presentation. Your topic is something that I've also been thinking about, although not in such dire and stark terms. What led you to write this paper?

SB: The talk represents my first attempt to speak about a growing concern of mine: the role of the corporation in contemporary American democracy and my fears for our country's future as a republic. I am unpleasantly reminded of this issue every morning when I read the newspaper. So I saw this occasion as an opportunity to talk about developments that deeply trouble me and that don't get enough attention in our field.

CM: Do you think this is because most organizational scholars are at business schools?

SB: As a sociologist it would be hard for me to say that context doesn't have an effect. What we do is very much shaped by the milieu in which we find ourselves. There's considerable subtle pressure in business schools not to bite the hands that feeds you. Although I was trained in a business school and I do executive education, I've never had a position in a business school. I've purposely avoided it my entire career.

CM: What advice would you give to young scholars at business schools who care about the issues you raised?

SB: Speak out and take on the problem, especially in your teaching. If you feel you can't say what you want to say because of your context, then perhaps its time to consider the cost of not being true to yourself. I fear too many doctoral students find business schools irresistible because they pay from 50% to 100% more than positions in the social sciences and in other professional schools. But if you're willing to trade salary for fewer (or at least different) constraints, then there are jobs to be had in schools of public administration, schools of labor relations, schools of information science, medical schools and even in engineering schools. With a few notable exceptions, you don't typically find these jobs listed with the Academy of Management placement services.

CM: This also raises a question about the role of academics more generally. One implication from your talk is that documenting these three areas is important which suggests more of a descriptive and practically-oriented approach. But young scholars are frequently trained that the theoretical contribution of their research is paramount. Do you think that there is a tension here?

SB: I'm agnostic about the objective of research, with the exception that research ought to be empirically well grounded and so that you can substantiate the claims you make. In other words, I'm not sure research always needs to makes a theoretical contribution. A considerable amount of research in the real sciences does not make theoretical a contribution, but most does make an empirical contribution. John Van Maanen used to tell students at MIT that theory was overrated. In my old age I've begun to believe him. Should we not study an important phenomenon because we can't decide how to hang a theory on it? This sounds like a

prescription for scientific as well as social irrelevance.

CM: Do you have any thoughts on the different methodologies that may be helpful for projects in this area?

SB: I was trained to believe that our job as researchers is to do the best we can to prove or disprove claims in empirically sound ways. One can be empirically sound using a variety of techniques. Methods ought to follow the problem as well as the kinds of data that are available. Much of the information on how organizations influence government action is to be found scattered around archives. For this reason, my talk was historical and I think much research in this area will continue to be investigative, archival and historical. In some instances, phenomena can be counted or transformed for quantitative analysis. For example, it might be possible to trace networks of influence using names and memberships mentioned in published documents. If quantifiable information can be found, then by all means researchers should count and analyze it quantitatively, even if they can only do so in a rudimentary way. I can also imagine interview studies being used in this area and there are even opportunities for ethnography. Imagine talking your way into a lobbying organization. A good ethnography of a lobbying group would be quite a contribution.

CM: Do you plan to follow up with any studies on the topic yourself?

SB: Yes. At the moment I'm involved in several studies on other topics that I want to complete, but my intentions are to move more deeply into examining the role of corporations in democracy. I have been anxious to take on this topic for quite a while. I think the issue is crucial and I don't think has been getting enough air play.

CM: One of the specific things you mentioned is the need for organizations scholars to study legal environments of corporations. Is that an area you might study yourself?

SB: I have been considering taking law classes. I think that, if we're seriously interested in how institutions develop through time, then we must pay more attention to the law than we have. There are a handful of institutional sociologists who consider law in their research, Mark Suchman and Lauren Edelman come to mind, but most organizational scholars do not. As a scholars we have an obligation to notice that organizations have just as much impact on their

environments as their environments have on them. For our research to be empirically and theoretically complete we to be concerned with influence in both directions. Our field has not gone far enough in studying the impact of organizations on their environments.

CM: One thing that was clear to me, particularly from the FDA and military examples, that one of the underlying mechanisms that drives this is dependence, whereby the government is actually dependent on companies for some revenue or services. This seems like it might be one interesting area to delve into as well. I was wondering if you had thoughts on that, or what some of the other underlying mechanisms may be?

SB: I think dependency is certainly one of the clearest ways to think about these phenomena using traditional organizational theory. What's interesting is that people with specific agendas actively created these dependencies. So these dependencies are not like those you find in a production process or a construction project, which are at least partially dictated by the material aspects of the situation. In this arena dependencies are socially and politically constructed.

CM: That actually raises a question that an audience member asked: is this really any different than earlier eras when there were other set of elites that dominated political life. Perhaps corporations are just the contemporary manifestation of a broader and enduring pattern. Was there a tipping point when corporations came to achieve the position they currently hold?

SB: There has never been an era in American history where there wasn't an elite. The founders of the country were elites. In fact, their conflicts reflected differences between the interests and philosophies of agrarian and commercial elites. But before the Civil War, American politics was not shaped by a corporate elite because there were no corporations in the sense that we know them. One way to read the history of the U.S. since the Civil War is as a contest over the degree to which corporations would become the dominant elite. As I said in the Q&A period, there have been periods of time when corporations made progress in exerting influence over the government, and there have been periods of time when they made less progress. The 1880s through the first two decades of the twentieth century was a time of corporate ascendance, much like the period we are living through. Corporations made critical legal headway during that period. Checks came with the rise of the Progressive party. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s and 40s placed even more checks on corporate power. Since the Second World War there's been a movement to roll back New Deal safeguards and accumulation of corporate power over government has escalated since the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980.

CM: Do you think that it has escalated even more since Bush was elected?

SB: I suspect so. But that's a political opinion; I don't know for sure. Aside from the notion of a general increase in corporate power since 1980, I don't yet have more refined image of shape of the trend line. I do think we can pretty safely say that corporate influence has not declined under Bush. In my talk I was careful to choose examples that made it clear that significant advances in corporate power also occurred during Clinton's administration. On this issue, I think the differences between Democrats and Republicans are a matter of degree.

CM: You also mentioned that an important thing that we can do is bring some of this material into the classroom. Do you have any recommendations of material on this subject or even further readings for people who are interested?

SB: There are number of books that you can easily bring into the classroom. Thom Hartman's book, *Equal Protection*, is quite well suited for undergraduates. It is well written and engaging. The same is true for Ted Nace's, *The Gangs of America*. Chick Perrow's *Organizing America* and Harland Prechel's, *Big Business and the State*, are excellent choices for graduate classes. There's also a film called *The Corporation* (based on Joel Bakan's book by the same name) that covers much of the material in the introductory section of my talk. Pratima Bansal at the Ivey School at The University of Western Ontario has developed teaching materials for using *The Corporation* in classes.

CM: Thanks again Steve for the time and the provocative talk.

References

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