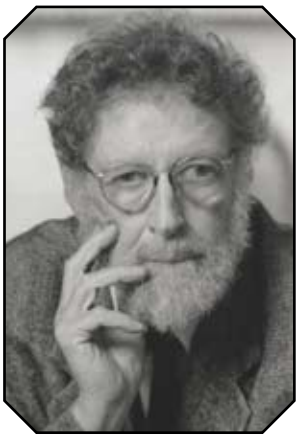
INTERVIEWS

Interview with John W. Meyer: "If You Study Organizations You Should Not Believe in Them"

Interviewed by Elena Gudova



MEYER, John W.—PhD in Sociology (Columbia University, 1965), Professor of Sociology, and by courtesy Education, emeritus, Stanford University. Address: 450 Jane Stanford Way, Stanford, CA 94305–2004, USA.

Email: meyer@stanford.edu

Abstract

An interview with John W. Meyer, emeritus Professor of Sociology, and by courtesy Education, at Stanford University, was conducted in October 2019 during his visit to the 10th International Russian Higher Education Conference (RHEC) in Moscow on "Contributions of Higher Education to Society and Economy: Global, National and Local Perspectives." The interview was performed by Elena Gudova, PhD and a lecturer in the Department of Economic Sociology at the Higher School of Economics.

John Meyer talks about the rise of hyper-managerialism and its implications for modern organizations. While previously, organizations tended to be subordination actors, today they have more legitimation in choosing mission and purposes, which marks a shift from management authority toward leadership and implies a need for managers with charismatic qualities.

Business schools, in their courses and educational processes, emphasize the importance of failures as part of entrepreneurs' experiences, while questions of vision are rarely a part of the agenda. Still, even a great charismatic leader/entrepreneur may lack authority because of a decontextualized vision as local communities' interests are usually not represented. Organizations with good vision (i.e., with proper corporate social responsibilities) may legitimate themselves through the routinization of the leader's charisma, the incorporation of norms of good citizenship, and the self-management of employees and citizens. As Meyer puts it, "You have to be an okay-person in the modern hyper-organizational context."

Due to these new scripts in the character of an individual, John Meyer discusses distinctions between the American and German educational systems and some possible outcomes for the world based on the German educational model instead of on the American one. As current types of organizational responses might be treated as invasive for individuals (even though they are useful in many ways), the German system resists many of the hyper-liberal changes in a much better way.

Another focus of Meyer's interests is connected with changes in universities and those in science in general. He talks about the mutual influence of society and academia and the legitimation of scientific knowledge, both per se and in educational process. A simple, but still important, issue regards keeping a research distance and asking the right questions, as moral commitment might weaken the research. The solution may be in comparing education to the forces that produce the observed changes, and not to what we imagine to be an ideal educational process and product.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility; hyper-managerialism; legitimation; organizational authority; organizational vision.

— When I first got into the field of organization studies long ago on some 101 course, one of the articles which really impressed me was "Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony" [Meyer, Rowan 1977]. Of course, it was an article written at the very beginning of your academic career, but I'd still like to ask, how do you feel about this piece of work now? Today it is still one of the most cited, a cornerstone in the field. Do you agree with your ideas? Or maybe you would like to reconsider them if you had the chance?

— No, I retain the perspective of the whole paper … I still think that way, I don't have issues with it. I would change some technical things that we put into that paper in order to get it published by the journal, whose reviewers were very skeptical.

— Really?

— Well, the reviewers were negative, and in order to get it published we had to make the distinction between institutional organizations and technical organizations. And that is a very distorting distinction.[1] We had to say: "Not only are there these more female institutional organizations, there are real manly organizations." So, we had technical organizations, which do something and manage it. We had to put it that way in order to get the paper published, and I thought that it was destructive. But we published the paper. That produced later literature, and my colleague, Richard Scott, emphasized that distinction . But I don't think it works well. There are obvious differences between organizations under pressure on their output side and other organizations that control the definition of their output. If Higher School of Economics (HSE) says someone has a PhD, he/she has a PhD.

— Sure, it's like that.

— If the automobile industry produces something that doesn't work, it has a problem. To say that something is an automobile implies a lot of things about it. Whereas, you could have a PhD in sociology, know this and that, or know nothing. There is a wide variation in what you know and can do. But to make a sharp distinction, especially in the current period, in which we have technical organizations with enormous numbers of social responsibilities to other environments beyond the markets for their products. I don't know about Russia, but in the United States they have to worry about all kinds of social responsibilities to their stakeholders, workers, suppliers, customers, and the community.

— Yes, sure.

— Then, they have to worry about all kinds of things related to the environment and the natural and social environment—the air, the water, but also transportation, community development issues, education, and childcare facilities for their community and also for their employees. The institutional environment is highly elaborated, and it makes no sense to think that they are primarily and only focused on efficient material production. So, yes, I retain the ideas in the article. And my own work now is an elaboration. I published a book on organization theory in 2015 with Patricia Bromley [Bromley, Meyer 2015]. Now I'm working on the rise of what we call *hyper-managerialism*.

— That sounds really interesting.

[1] See for example: [Meyer, Scott 1983; Scott 2003].

— Well, yes, the organization was, to a greater extent, a subordinated entity in the past, and now it can choose purposes, missions, strategies, and technologies. It is a legitimate actor. So, there's a very strong emphasis on the manager as a 'visionary,' with mission and purpose. In an older form, he/she was managing to carry out an assigned mission. Now he/she is supposed to choose, make decisions. And that implies charismatic properties. So, secondly, there is an elaboration from management to leadership. Both of these are captured in America with the word 'entrepreneur,' which is very fashionable in the neoliberal period since 1990. And there is a dramatic increase in references to that in the literature in regular management training and even more broadly in education in general.

We can take courses in something like entrepreneurship, which includes both the idea of vision and the idea of leadership. That is, you should have a vision, but you should also be able to persuade other people. And this is certainly emphasized in America, but I think that it is also a worldwide story. You can find it everywhere—in business schools, but also in professional schools, education, religious training, etc.—concepts similar to entrepreneurship, a rise in response to the elaborated responsibilities of organization. That also involves a dramatically expanded picture of the capacities of persons, especially educated persons. They are capable and responsible for a wider range of decisions, which means that they have the attributed capacity for choice and legitimate rights for choice in many more areas. Some areas are shocking for us because they are recent, and, in America, the range is increasingly wide. In the old days, you couldn't choose your gender, now it is what you'd think about. You can choose from a wide range, not just male or female, but all kinds of gradations.

— It's not a binary opposition, more of a continuum.

— A continuum, yes. You can be securely male or female, but in your emails you say what pronoun you use in English, what you want to be called, 'he,' 'she,' or 'they.' It's just one example of the expanded capacity and responsibility for decisions. But then, in the contemporary organization, everyone else has these capacities too, so you can't use imperative authority anymore. You have to use leadership because the others are also empowered actors.

— Do you mean a charismatic type of leadership?

— Yes, it might be called a charismatic form of leadership, but it gets institutionalized in the form of training, where you can learn how to do it.

— So is it now more like developing your soft skills?

— Developing yourself, your soft skills. Yes.

— And now you can become a better type of leader.

— Yes. And then you are leading other leaders too because they also have roles that people refer to as 'chief' or something. And then the literature talks about how anyone can be a leader. But that implies that if you are leading someone who is a leader, you have to have leadership qualities, not management qualities. So, it changes and expands the notions of organization, which I think are very widespread. This more charismatic hyper-manager has a right and the capacity to make a wider range of decisions, but he/she must do it with leadership, not imperative managerial authority.

— Do you mean those people, who are in charge?

— Yes, but even normal participants. You can be in trouble if you don't initiate and take responsibility for something, and that produces a lot of uncontrolled influence. Thus, at the world level, in the World Economic

Forum, you have lots of unelected people—the democratic deficit idea. They are not just simply business managers, doing their own interest, they are leaders in the world. And, that invites a lot of criticism of their positions because of the legitimacy problems in the world and the reason why they are allowed to assemble and pronounce. In the contemporary world of populist reactions, these are not only reactions to economic domination, but they are also those to this sort of cultural domination—universities, education, organizational leadership, charismatic organizations. The opposition is not what we would have expected, given modern inequalities. They are less to income inequality or economic inequality and more to this unlegitimated authority.

— You have mentioned that there can be two levels, leadership and vision. Do you think that the lack of legitimacy may also be caused by the lack of vision? Or is everybody a visionary today?

— There are a lot of arbitrary visionaries. If elites have the right to set organizational goals—and they can be anything, not just to make money, but also to change the world—what's the legitimation of that? That is the question of the legitimation of both hyper-managerialism and entrepreneurship … Historically, entrepreneurs have been treated with suspicion because a few decades ago, an innovation, which is now a good thing, was seen as corruption. And this could happen again. In August, I went to a small academic conference on entrepreneurship, and the tone was very different, quite critical. The most cited person at the conference was not Steve Jobs but Elizabeth Holmes, a young woman who created a huge industry based on inexpensive blood testing, which was entirely fraudulen[2].

— Yes, I heard about that.

— She was a very successful entrepreneur. Billions of dollars! A very successful entrepreneur, but it was entirely fraudulent vision. And she was gifted at leadership, and she dressed like Steve Jobs in black, totally black. It was a fraud, but if you look for the academic courses that teach entrepreneurship, they encourage fraud in a way. Because if you're just promising your investors what you can actually do, this is not entrepreneurship, this is an organized vacuum. Entrepreneurship is if you try to persuade them, when you are not sure what you can do. And with your vision you imagine something.

— So, you say: "It might work."

— But you don't say, "It might work." "It will work," you tend to say. You have to promise things that you are not sure you can do. It's articulated vision, and you have to mobilize supporters with that vision—you have to persuade them. And she was very good at both, persuading people that a vision existed, when it didn't, and that there was technology, when there wasn't. She made billions of dollars, and then it eventually collapsed. So, she was the most mentioned person, and the conference changed the evaluation or meaning of entrepreneurship from the recent past. It was interesting.

— You mean they were critical because they wanted to discuss how she obtained the authority?

— Well, yes. The theory of entrepreneurship is that if everybody does it, there will be nine failures and one success. But the success will be very big. In criticizing, you can emphasize the nine failures or you can emphasize the cost. In the training programs, they emphasize that you should look for failures. And failures are a good thing as they show that you've tried to do something, so you should not apologize for your failures and not learn too much from them. Too much experience slows you down, and you have to believe in yourself, to persuade yourself, regardless of the reality.

[2] Elizabeth Holmes is a former CEO of a now-defunct company Theranos. For more information: https://web.archive.org/web/20180828113917/https://theranos.com/

— It's again about vision, about faith.

— You have to mobilize your commitments so that you can get other people to commit.

— Why do you think people are so focused on criticizing authority? Is it because of betrayed trust?

— It is easy to find criticism of the claimed authority involved. If you say, "I want resources to do something different from what anybody else does," you're likely to not be telling the truth. One answer is that it's easy to call attention to the failures of the vision since there are high rates of failure. Another one is a legitimation issue, that in the contemporary world all these visions tend to be globalized and organized, and many local settings are undercut.

— These global visions are decontextualized and don't have any connection to the local context.

— Yes, and they are often quite destructive to the local context in the course of building up other local contexts. At a very macro sociological level … with a rapid expansion of possibilities on a global level, not only the economy, but also universities, world class universities are not responsible to the local communities, they are responsible to a global evaluation system. And as we would expect from any theory, globalization tends to increase inequalities in each local area and decrease inequalities between them, as happens with world income. But everybody talks about the inequalities in the local area; they do not talk about global inequalities in money and other dimensions, and the political reactions are local. The political structure is mixed; both local communities and nation states are very important, but you get an implantation of locality and nationality against globalization. I think globalization has taken a politically more negative connotation in the last 20 years, and that encourages resistance at the local level. In response to the neoliberal period, we get some reactions on all kinds of dimensions against the more expansive notions of organizational power and responsibilities.

— Do you think there are myths or any other instruments to legitimate these processes?

— There is a tendency of what Weber called the 'routinization of charisma.' There are many legitimating efforts, and the major one at the world level is corporate social responsibility, which elaborates a story about how empowered organizations are, in fact, controlled by norms of responsibility to the environment, to human rights, to the ethics of transparency, and so on. Another legitimating effort is the elaboration of managerial training systems, where you have the incorporation of such norms. What used to be called business ethics is now corporate social responsibilities, and you get extensive literature on the redefinition of managerial responsibility, how to be a manager, lots of executive training. Much of it emphasizes such matters, so you can see the rise in training, consulting, and an institutionalization of models of success, which incorporate good citizenship.

— You mean they incorporate what it means to be a good citizen into organizational models?

— In organizational systems, the values in these organizations become what we call a 'win-win' strategy. We redefine being nice, and that's an evolution in the whole system of evaluative criteria.

— And it also goes deeper into people's personal business because they also learn to self-manage.

— Yes, the emphasis on the 'self' is extremely important. The whole method of hyper-management implies a lot of self-understanding and control—a lot of corporate and executive training. It involves the elaboration of myths and realities of self-control. And that's another form of legitimation.

— Does it mean that organizations now penetrate deeper into us? Because these types of corporate control are embodied now, and we need to be in tune with the organization—to be good citizens, good workers, and even good people, who are productive, effective, and very soft-skilled.

— Yes, you can put it in a very negative Frankfurt school way, like talking about the invasion of organizational rationalization into the lifeworld. But, it goes the other way also; a 'self' can be introduced into the organizational pattern. You have to express yourself carefully and properly, but you can express yourself more. German social theory emphasizes the oppression of control on the system, and American social theory emphasizes the opportunities. That's an expanded range of qualities. You have to be an okay person in the modern hyper-organizational context. I'm always surprised when I create a seminar of 20–30 people, assembling researchers from all over the world. I go around the room, and people introduce themselves to begin the conference. And they do it now with so much more skill than they would have done in the past! With much more responsibility and a very aggressive assertion of themselves, but highly controlled and proper. In the old days, there would have been more variability, more awkwardness, more difficulties. Now they can all do it.

— Do you think it is a good or bad thing? Or both?

— It's about a story. The European story of America is very often that it is a nation of free people, but they are all conformists. I'm more interested in watching what happens than in making the normative assessment. It is easier to create and run a meeting if you have all these highly socialized people, who know how to interact and manage themselves and do not talk too long. Look at some old-style Russians—they ask a question with a preface of a full page of "Emm …" text. Younger people do not do that. It's more graceful and fits better into the system.

— Maybe it is also the video culture of YouTube and the peer influence of those who produce a lot of content on the Internet.

— It goes both ways. These people are able to do that, but it is also in tune with the scripted character of a modern individual. Sometimes I go with my wife for long walks, and we pass these young and well-educated people going the other way. They are talking, but you can hear just a fraction of the sentence, and you try to figure out what they are talking about, what they are doing. Well, the older world would not have been so quick and easy, there were norms of politeness, of pride, but not of self-expression. I guess it's a worldwide change.

In the organizational area, it was thought to be very difficult to create a multinational organization, but the number of these structures has gone from a couple of thousand to eighty thousand, and no one thinks it's still a problem. Young people acquire a scripted capacity to engage. You can have a multinational board of trustees, and no one makes a big deal of it, even though the differences remain—the kind of thing Hofstede was writing about in the 80s.

— But not so sharp any more.

— Not so sharp, and also, they reflect the many decades of the relative dominance of the United States. Everyone else, even if it's not their culture, knows how to do things in the international world and how to interact properly. I spent time in Germany in academic organizations, and I saw a funny interaction between three men: a German person, an American person, and another German person. In English, the Germans talked to each other in a less friendly way than when they talked to the American.

— Why so? And how could you feel it?

— Oh, you can see it in the language. The conversation was in English, and when people reacted with Americans, they were formally less polite, but more friendly. That's a sense in which the liberal individualism with "personality" becomes a dominant world culture, and some people know how to do that. Years ago I saw a German colleague, who was well functioning in the US, but moved back to Germany and directed a German research institute. I saw how he acted there, with much more formal authority, much more clarity, and direct inequality … And then, in an extreme case, he flew with his research assistants from Berlin to Frankfurt, which is a short flight of one hour. He flew business class, and they flew coach. I said: "You would never do that in the United States," and he said: "Oh, no, but here it's the only control I have." Asserting status was the one form of control he had, whereas in America, it is possible to have work relationships. I'm saying that the norms of modern organization theory, which are taught in business schools, have an American tone. And they do not give courses in imperative authority.

— In the first year of my master's program, I was on an exchange at George Mason University, and, together with other Russian students, I was really impressed by the style of the courses because it was completely different from the way we were taught here at HSE.

— Yes, exactly. Everyone knows these differences. It's hard to study. This system has historically developed from the German system, and there's a lot of rather direct influence in its construction. The logics differ, but in the German system and in Russia, I guess, the student is not supposed to enjoy the course.

— You think so?

— In the United States, he/she is supposed to have fun, and that's a part of the learning process. The student is supposed to enjoy it, and it should all be interesting. I don't think it is the same for the German system. I have two nieces who are both German; they came with their parents and spent a year at elementary school in the United States. And they had a good time, they really enjoyed it. Then, they went back to Germany and it wasn't as much fun there. But both of them got a little bit of sense that if it's fun, you are not learning anything. Pain, you should learn through pain. The self should be disciplined.

— I think it might also be inherited from protestant and orthodox ethics, where you have to suffer to get in touch with the sacred.

— We can distinguish between German Lutheranism and American Protestantism as there are differences, but of the same kind; suffering is a part of an educational process. And one of my German nieces understands it that way: she enjoys education in America, but it's *real* in Germany.

— So it's not a real thing until it's something serious?

— This shows up in many different ways. The German system creates a class opposition between teachers and students, which is very weak in America, where students are nearly [their teachers'] teachers. In Germany, for the lower classes, that's what happens; teachers are paternalistic to the students, and the students are friendly with teachers. It's not the same at the German gymnasiums, with the elite, where students are subjected to severe (at least imagined) discipline in the official knowledge system.

— You have mentioned this kind of educational culture, which is highly dispersed in the world now because of the US educational model. What might change if we used the German model? Would there be more discipline and suffering or at least just listening and agreeing?

— *I*f the world was a traditional German place, there would be more control of Third World development with universities because universities should exist in rich countries. In an open individualist world, universities are

everywhere, because everyone can develop. So, there are more concerns about allocation. In the old days, before World War I, universities were for professional training in the German system, and for disciplined "building," not for self-development. As a consequence, there were very few females in the universities, while in America, there were many more because it was about self-development. The changes have now reduced, but you can imagine thinking about people in terms of their location in the class structure, their status structure, and where they're going to be. That provides a very different education. So, in the German system, a gymnasium, theoretically, gives a different education than a Realschule or Fachschule[3] because they are different in vision. That would be a violation of the modern individualist model. It is clear now that there is more criticism of the open liberal system than there was 10 years ago, and I try to look at how that might affect education. One obvious effect is that it should present more involvement in the work-related field and produce more and more students in engineering and fewer in social sciences.

— You mean that if we used this German model it could be more intolerant to individual differences and more linked to social stratification. Would we have this hyper-managerialism in this case?

— Presumably not. And in the organizational theory area, there are several people who think that the German system resists many of these hyper-liberal changes. The crucial person is Renate E. Meyer from the Business University in Vienna. She has papers arguing that the old corporate arrangements produced more effective social responsibilities than the new open actor systems. Then there is Daniel Kinderman, who writes about corporate social responsibilities and argues that they are less widespread in Germany, meaning that the individualist system, which involves this expanded 'actorhood' and individual organizations, does not go as far. Then, there are papers by political scientists, Tim Büthe and Walter Mattli, who write on where does corporate social responsibility go. In America it goes to all kinds of organizations, including universities, when university presidents act like a leader, not only like a president. For example, two months ago, at my university, as unfortunately sometimes happens, a student killed herself. The president of the university sent an email to everybody about how bad we all felt about this and about the fact that we have counseling services, which we didn't use to have, and how if we are traumatized and feel bad about this girl's death, we should go and get help. And how if we see someone who might be in trouble, we should say it aloud and take care of him/her. This would not have happened 40 or even 20 years ago. It is his assumption to defuse the responsibility and highlight that we all have to deal with this.

— Where is the fine line between social responsibility and the personal and emotional invasion of the organization?

— What you are talking about is the German model; you understand the distinction. In Germany, it may be treated as invasive. What the organizational theorists say is that these processes generate enormously expanded administrative structures. If you have to have counseling for whatever problem, then you have to have a lot of counselors. And then you have to organize it through a vice president. And I guess American organizations that have resources do often expand in such directions. We wrote about it in our theory book in 2015.

— Do you think these structures of hyper-managerialism have also created a lot of supporting structures, like special training in yoga, business support, or therapy? This might be the case if we look at the example of Silicon Valley. People may doubt not only the authority of those who are in power, but also the authority of these counselors. So, there could be a lot of doubt and inequality and other different things.

— Well, we make sure that they have PhDs.

[3] Educational institutions in Germany. A *Realschule* belongs to the secondary school system, and typically students start there at the age of 10–11 years and finish there at the age of 16–17 years. A *Fachschule* is a special educational institution for full-time or evening education for people with primary professional education and practical experience, where a student gets a qualification certificate upon completion.

— But it doesn't always work. If you migrate the business structure, that's another system, and the criteria differ.

— Yes, I agree with this, it's a constant evolution of criteria—the evaluation systems. For example, students evaluate their teachers and counseling facilities, and then that becomes part of the responsibilities of the organization.

— We have it here at HSE, but we didn't for a long time.

— And we had them for a long time. Students evaluation is a professional field, the professionals know and would tell you how to do it. But in the Russian system teaching is supposed to be independent, that's what a paper yesterday said. How do you evaluate if you don't have student evaluation?

— Here, at HSE, we do have it.

— Yeah, but in normal university. If they are evaluating people and teach them, what criteria do they use?

— I do not know exactly, I'm only familiar with the way HSE does it, but it is the only case. Basically, you would ask students whether they understand your material, if you behave professionally, and whether it is easy to contact you in the case that they have some additional questions.

— And how do you get this information in the normal university, what do they do?

— I don't know how it used to work previously, but I know that we have initiatives in terms of using digital instruments when students' ideas, aims, and what they want to learn are assessed. The idea behind it is to build recommendation mechanisms and counseling courses, both online and offline, according to their aims. Then, they evaluate the usefulness and the other aspects of these courses, probably anonymously. The feedback is based on whether the students believe that these courses helped them to achieve their aims, how they felt about them, whether they were interesting, etc. But this is only the beginning; it's a very slow process, and I know of only about 50 universities who have tried these instruments for a couple of projects.

— Got it, okay. But that's a new system.

— Yes. And I also have a question concerning that. This is probably a common practice in the United States, and you have been using principles of blended education and its evaluation system for a long time. Do we have any new types of institutional rules and regulations here, which might be given power later? Are the rules actually changing or are they still the same?

— Yes, sure, I think so. It's a constant evolution of students' expectations that's going on all the time, so professors adapt. They experience student empowerment as students make more decisions. At the official level, there are more choices for students to make and more courses to take, and then, even within a course, there are more choices for students. I suppose there is a drift toward students' self-expression. And the legal rules have changed, so I have to explicate my work in a detailed plan of my course for the term because students should have the right to find access to the materials and manage their expenses to buy the papers and books. That is a benefit, especially for handicapped students. I might get a note from the university saying that I have this handicapped student in my class who needs special treatment, but they can't tell me the name of that student, because of privacy, so the student should come to me.

— Personally, on the first class?

— Yes. And last year one came during the last class.

— Oh, it happens all the time.

— So, we have this kind of evolution, and the big thing is the change in interactions—the balance, decision-making, teaching students, and more student-centrism in the choice of materials and tasks. For example, we looked at social studies textbooks from the last 50 years from all over the world. These are books in social studies, history, civics—secondary school books. More than 50 years ago, it used to be that the chapters in these books didn't have any questions at all; questions were only used to check information, whether the student understood the material. And now these course books have changed. Students may have an opinion, make judgments, and they may even have role playing exercises; they may participate hypothetically in historical conflicts or current social issues. This is the legitimation of students, of interest, opinion, choice. I think some of these issues are large worldwide changes.

— How do you feel about the gamification of these processes?

— I think that that is also expanding, with a really great use of new technology, yes. It's hard to track the spread of these things in a short period, because you can't get good data from many countries for a long period of time. But the changes we are seeing are quite general, occurring everywhere, at different rates, but drift was of the very general kind, especially in the 1990s—in the neoliberal period. I think the end of the Soviet Union had big effects on the whole world, not just here in Russia.

— It was a very different model, and we can look at how it developed throughout the whole century and then collapsed.

— Yes, and I guess there was something of a triumphal liberal reaction, which is part of what we are talking about—hyper-managerialism that has intensified in the period since 1999, that kind of picture of a brave new very global world, where individuals are very centered. The basic liberal mythology was also initialized in world organizations, such as the World Bank or UNESCO. These ideas are constitutions of a liberal society.

— You have mentioned that we can question the authority provided by leadership, 'Who gave you the right to be leader?' But it might be that when you don't have official authorities you don't have any other foundations for leadership. How would you persuade your students to learn from you if they don't believe that you deserve to be listened to even though you are a teacher?

— These are educational credentials. In an enormously expanded scientific system you are not just a teacher, you have the right answers. In science you are not teaching your opinion, you are teaching scientized knowledge. There is a huge expansion of the social sciences relative to everything else in the university, that's the 20th century phenomenon, very noticeable in recent decades as a proportion of students enrolled. Your authority is [based on] an objective knowledge. There is a right way to do things, and to some extent it is the right way everywhere. My students in Stanford could prescribe public policy for countries that they have never been to and don't know about. In old days if they studied history, they had to know about the place. They could now prescribe proper social policy, if they studied economics. And a sociologist also treats scientific knowledge. In reaction, people can be critical in regard to any substantial knowledge and local culture. Is that a right answer? Presumably—no. Some of the criticisms, for example, the entire vaccination movement, stand on the dramatic authority of the scientific knowledge. I think we have a contestation of authority, but if you get rid of the authority of science, then your questions arise, because enormous organizational decision making power rests on the implied authority of science about the environment, the human rights and other things.

— This type of scientific authority was also built on the ivory tower idea, where you were not obliged to come down to people and share your knowledge. And now you have to, because you are not so legitimate any more.

— Yes, you should, but there is contestation. The authority of the university expands, and the authority of resistance expands. So you get more legislation now. When I was young my colleagues in Stanford, would go to New York to get money for a research from the advertising industry. Now they go to Washington and give consultation, give advice to the government, and they don't go to New York anymore.

— This partially covers another interesting question. During your academic career, have you ever had the temptation to migrate to business, just work there, and maybe change something, and not think about papers and writing about these things you do not fully believe in?

— That is a very common migration, but personally, no. I was raised in an academic family, and I was designed to be an academic. There was not a realistic alternative. But, for many people there is. And so maybe people get PhDs in order to get into business school or maybe they go to a company. Some of them think they do not have academic options and possibilities, but some of them have a desire to make differences in the real world, so they like participating in non-governmental organizations. And, unfortunately, it is, from my point of view, also more common in a university, as it creates institutions which tell the world how to be. The university does it in commitment that they think they can influence the world. And so, they create institutes with soft money and give policy advice.

— And there is also another outcome of this migration between academia and business. Nowadays, people in business structures may use scientific discourse—"making hypotheses" or "doing experiments" or considering mistakes as experience.

— Yes, my collaborator Evan Schofer writes about this. He co-authored a book in 2003 *Science in the World Science in the Modern World Polity: Institutionalization and Globalization* [Drori et al. 2004], and the point is very central; you have to think about the scientization of society in both ways if you study social disciplines at university. Universities and societies are becoming much closer. Mostly people criticize the influence of society on university, talking about academic capitalism. But, there is an enormous penetration of society into the scientized knowledge system; it goes both ways. And it creates issues at the boundaries, which didn't use to exist. To some extent, scientific knowledge plays a central role in political decisions. Currently in America, the Trump administration hires businesspeople; they do not hire academics, they are not about science. They are concerned with the penetration of society by unlegitimated scientific knowledge. Academics are more concerned about the penetration of universities by social power and interest. Both things happen.

— They are more about entrepreneurs?

— Yes, they like entrepreneurs, they like money. So, I think that these boundaries occur everywhere, just in different ways and that they are shifting all the time. When I was a graduate student in America in the 1950s, we didn't expect academics to have much influence on society. We were not looking for that or thinking about that. When the European professors came, they criticized us for not attempting to be involved. Now, the sense of the academic responsibilities of society is built into the university. It undercuts huge problems in organization theory as it is primarily taught in business schools, which are in the business of creating new managers to do things. That produces great distortion in the knowledge system. In our field, 90% of the papers are written by professors at business schools. My colleague, James March, who died recently, used to complain about that all the time, although he himself held a position in a business school, and he thought it very much weakened the knowledge system. But my colleague, Richard Scott, thought it was a good thing, and that we were mak-

ing a difference in the world. I think it is terrible, because it distorts things—if you study organizations, you should not believe in them.

— Why not?

— Because you should stand back, and you should look at them. But you should not believe in them; it weakens you academically, and in a methodological sense, it is sampling on the dependent variable, and it's looking for success cases and how to be successful.

— Do you mean, like in anthropology, it's a question of 'otherness'?

— You have to constrain your involvement and you have to maintain some kind of, I would not call it objectivity but some kind of distance. For example, one of the weakest fields in sociology is the sociology of sociology. It's just terrible. I guess, in general, the sociology of science is weak and very ideological. I'll give you a concrete example from the sociology of education. There's been a huge change in female participation in education worldwide over many decades. And, people study mainly why they are not there, not why they are, which produces a very distorted analysis. A huge amount of research is in the so-called STEM field—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields. They say that female participation is low, and they study why females are not there obsessively. They start not with causal analyses from time one to time two, but by comparing time two to time three in the imagined future, producing a huge amount of research. A colleague of mine has shown that the increase in female participation in electrical engineering is just the same as elsewhere; it starts very slow but goes up well. But nobody reads these papers, people only want to know why they are not there; it's the wrong question.

— It's a kind of political question, and it sells well.

— Yes, everyone is morally committed, but it weakens research a lot. You find this moral orientation, comparing education to what we imagine as the ideal, not comparing it to the forces that produce the changes that we see. When phenomenologists criticize positivists' thinking they call it a 'reification of decisions,' and they are quite right about it. But the solution is not to give up, but to be conscious about what you are doing. With female participation, it is especially funny, because as you may know, there are now "too many" females; there are more females than males in most countries in education. And the scholars have no theory for that as they were happy when they had the injustice to work on. It's amazing how little explanation they have. And again, they could write about that, but they are just embarrassed, and so their solution is: well, there are only a few female electrical engineers.

— [Laughing]

— Well, you know they are there, but it produces real distortion. Yeah, it's really funny. And now I have run out of time, thank you.

— Thank you for the interview!

Moscow, 25 October 2019

References

Bromley P., Meyer J. W. (2015) *Hyper-Organization: Global Organizational Expansion*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Drori G. S., Meyer J. W., Ramirez F. O., Schofer E. (2004) *Science in the Modern World Polity: Institutionalization and Globalization*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Meyer J. W., Rowan B. (1977) Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 83, no 2, pp. 340–363.

Meyer J. W., Scott W. R. (1983) *Organizational Environments: Ritual and Rationality*, London: Sage Publications, Inc.

Scott W. R. (2003) *Organizations: Rational, Natural, and Open Systems*, 5th ed., New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Received: January 17, 2020
Citation: Interview with John W. Meyer (2020) "If You Study Organizations You should not Believe in Them". *Journal of Economic Sociology = Ekonomicheskaya sotsiologiya*, vol. 21, no 1, pp. 127–139. doi: 10.17323/1726-3247-2020-1-127-139 (in English).