

This Week's Citation Classic

Perrow C. A framework for the comparative analysis of organizations.
Amer. Sociol. Rev. 32:194-208, 1967. [University of Wisconsin, WI]

The structure of an organization depends upon the kind of task it typically performs. Routine tasks suggest specialization, formal-ization, hierarchy, and centralized power; nonroutine tasks are better performed under the opposite conditions. Tasks are defined cognitively as search procedures and excep-tions encountered. [The Social Sciences Cita-tion Index® (SSCI™) indicates that this paper has been cited over 210 times since 1967.]

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"This article was one of three inde-pendent statements in 1967 of what came to be called 'contingency theo-ry.'^{1,2} It held that the structure of an organization depends upon (is 'contin-gent' upon) the kind of task performed, rather than upon some universal prin-ciples that apply to all organizations. The notion was in the wind at the time.

"I think we were all convinced we had a breakthrough, and in some re-spects we did —there was no one best way of organizing; bureaucracy was ef-ficient for some tasks and inefficient for others; top managers tried to organize departments (research, pro-duction) in the same way when they should have different structures; organizational comparisons of goals, output, morale, growth, etc., should control for types of technologies; and so on. While my formulation grew out of fieldwork, my

subsequent research offered only modest support for it. I learned that managers had other ends to maximize than efficient production and they sometimes sacrificed efficien-cy for political and personal ends. That gave me considerable pause and while I gave the theory a big play in a 1970 book,³ I downplayed it considerably in a 1972 book.⁴ But it wasn't until I read Harry Braverman⁵ and others that I realized how much of a mystification the theory was. The historical record showed that bureaucracies were set up to control the work force without any change in the technology initially, and only after a compliant, wage depen-dent work force was assembled were technologies created to fit this favor-able structure. At the macro level at least, the causal direction could be reversed, and go from structure to technology.

"In its limited way, my article is reasonably useful and accurate, but on-ly if we assume there was no better way industrial development could proceed and only if we ignore other types of ef-ficiency, e.g., for employees, the com-munity, and the society. If we note how the technologies we favor reproduce authoritarian and exploitative struc-tures, then the theory is of limited nor-mative value indeed, and falsely sug-gests an evolutionary inevitability.

"I hope the citations to it and similar works fall off rapidly and citations to a much more power-relevant and politi-cally sophisticated view of organiza-tions will increase. Far more than at any other time, organizational theory is bursting with new ideas and much more awareness of pervasive biases, as a new edition of my 1972 book shows.⁶ The field has grown far beyond contin-gency theory; that theory has a very limited and not very interesting appli-cation."

1. Lawrence P & Lorsch J. Organization and environment. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967. 279 p.
2. Thompson J D. Organizations in action. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967. 192 p.
3. Perrow C. Organizational analysis: a sociological view. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1970. 192 p.
4., Complex organizations: a critical essay. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1972. 224 p.
5. Braverman H. Labor and monopoly capital: the degradation of work in the twentieth century. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974. 465 p.
6. Perrow C. Complex organizations: a critical essay. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1979. 270 p.