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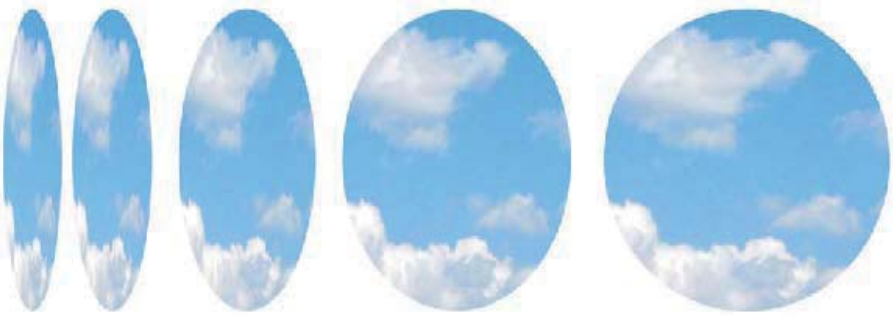

Readings in Global Organization Design
Articles

Wilfred Brown and Elliott Jaques: An Appreciation of a Remarkable Partnership

By Alistair Mant

Article #10-09-03-8

1

Wilfred Brown and Elliott Jaques: An Appreciation of a Remarkable Partnership

Alistair Mant

WHAT'S IMPORTANT

- This article demonstrates the unique partnership and commonalities of Wilfred Brown and Elliott Jaques.
- It gives an inside perspective on their roots, development, personalities, and work.
- It discusses their mutual belief in fairness, with Brown emphasizing technology and democratic philosophy and Jaques demonstrating great depth in understanding human psychology.
- It reveals their strongly humanistic roots in terms of the idealism of industrial democracy and in their profound understanding of being human.

A rock pile ceases to be a rock pile the moment a single man contemplates it, bearing within him the image of a cathedral.

—Antoine De Saint-Exupery, 1900-1944

My task here is to explain to devotees of Elliott Jaques's work how his 37-year friendship and professional collaboration with Wilfred Brown shaped that work. One cannot understand Jaques without a grasp of the Brown element. It was as if their great brains were fused together in their work. I knew them both, having worked for most of the 1970s at the Tavistock Institute in London. But I knew Wilfred Brown better, having played a great deal of golf and written a book with him.[1] For those who understand these matters, Brown had been a scratch golfer in his youth and was still dangerous in his late 60s. When he was ennobled in 1964, he took the title Lord Brown of Machrihanish (the name of his beloved golf course near his cottage on the Kintyre Peninsula in southwest Scotland).

The Partners

Few partnerships in history rival this for fruitfulness. Arguably, the association with Brown was the making of Jaques. Of course, following the tenets of Stratified Systems Theory (SST), Jaques would have made his mark somehow or other. But the circumstances of immediate post-war (World War II) Britain provided an almost perfectly complementary interest, knowledge, and access to power on the part of these two men.

This kind of partnership, between a major thinker and a major player, generally involves a great thinker gaining access, via a player/collaborator, to a great field of study in the real world of events. This tends to relegate the latter to also-ran intellectual status. Wilfred Brown, in his special way, was just as clever as Jaques about the work they did together.[2]

The Tavistock Background

The basic facts are well-known. In 1948, the newly-formed Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London had morphed out of the old Tavistock Clinic for

1 Brown, W., Hirsch-Weber, W., and Mant, A.; *Bismarck to Bullock; Conversations about Institutions in Politics and Industry in Britain and Germany*. Anglo-German Foundation, 1983.
2 Frankfurt, H. G. *On Bullshit*. Princeton University Press, 2004.

Medical Psychology (set up after World War I to treat and to better understand shell-shock and related traumas). The Institute was meant to bring the remarkable insights gained during World War II into the broader community, but in particular to post-war business and industry. Those insights centered mainly on the nature of effective leadership, managerial selection, and teamwork.

The post-war British government supported this development, but it was the Rockefeller Foundation that put up the initial grant money for the new Institute in 1946. It was incorporated in 1947 and the great Glacier Metals project, on which Jaques cut his action-research teeth and on which he would work for 17 years, was one of its first projects in 1948. But Glacier Metal only became a part of the Tavistock's initial program because of the determination of its remarkable 40-year-old chief executive Wilfred Brown.

Over time, this skepticism about the Tavistock's psychoanalytical orientation on the part of the established academics was paralleled by nervousness on the part of a resurgent British business community. Britain was broke by the end of the war, but making money from business wasn't so difficult in the post-war rush for growth. Numerous studies have shown how British business dashed for easy growth without ever revisiting or reforming its worst traditional practices. Marshall Aid money poured into Britain as well as Germany after the war (twice as much as it happens), but nowhere did it lead to the fundamental rethinking that occurred in Germany, especially as to labor relations.

Skepticism and Bullshit

This skepticism on the part of both the academic and the business communities is an important accompaniment to the Jaques-Brown story. Those people around the world who regard the Tavistock canon, "Stratified Systems Theory" and "requisite organization" as nothing less than blindingly obvious truths are generally puzzled that others (the great majority) don't get it. This is an important phenomenon to understand if we hope ever to spread these important insights more widely. The simple view is that most academics are distrustful of anything other than hard science and most business people are defensive in the face of any evidence that suggests they have got it all wrong. The Glacier study therefore attacked the establishment on two powerful fronts at once.

For the purposes of this paper, I propose to construct the events from 1948 to 1985 (the year of Wilfred Brown's death) in the following way: the intellectual alliance of a Canadian and a Scot (together representing clarity of thought and authority) against the massed ranks of American and English bullshit. (Here I employ the term *bullshit* in the same precise sense as Professor Harry Frankfurt in his famous Princeton monograph *On Bullshit*.[3]) In this version of history, those in the adjoining dominant cultures of America and England do not tell "lies" about themselves or about the glib consultants they employ, they have simply come to believe in the unrelieved diet of bullshit, emerging from the business and management academy.

This view of history casts Jaques and Brown as clearly superior intellects, drawn by their off-center position in the power nexus (not American; not English) to point out that the emperor isn't wearing any clothes. Both men were famed for not suffering fools gladly and neither bothered much with diplomacy. So they got along fine. Brown was nine years older than Jaques (who was only 31 when the Glacier project began.) The seminal *Changing Culture of a Factory* was his Harvard Ph.D. on Glacier, submitted in 1951.[4]

Thought Leadership

As the Glacier project proceeded, Jaques and Brown increasingly detached themselves from the Tavistock "human relations" and "group relations" movements. It was not that they were unmindful of interpersonal relations or group processes, but rather that they came to understand the higher importance of authority, role clarity, accountability, and power—in short, managerial leadership. Harry S. Truman probably captured the predominant post-war American view when he said: "a leader is a man [sic] who has the ability to get other people to do what they don't want to do—and like it!"[5] This captured well the pragmatic post-war American view that the key element of leadership is persuasiveness, backed up by sincerity.

In the post-war years, wherever American thinking about management led, England meekly followed. When parts of American academia turned against the Glacier/Tavistock view of reality, much of the English management movement

3 Frankfurt, H. G. *On Bullshit*. Princeton University Press, 2004.
4 Jaques, E. *The Changing Culture of a Factory*. London: Routledge, 1951.
5 Mant, A. *Intelligent Leadership*. Melbourne, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1999.

followed suit. One goes to England for eloquent charm (B.S., if one insists), but one goes to Scotland for strict role clarity and precise accountability. (In Scotland they say: "the only time you need an agreement is when there's a disagreement." In other words, get it in writing—what the English might regard as red tape.) Brown understood the importance of formal arrangements—something the "human relations" and "group relations" schools were then retreating from. In the course of time, Jaques became a constitutionalist too, just like the managing director. Jaques had had a deep education, but it wasn't broad. Brown, who never went to university at all, probably taught Jaques international history.

For Jaques, the formal break with the group relations movement came in 1952 when he quit the Tavistock, leaving behind a few eminent colleagues who felt, rightly or wrongly, that their contribution to the Glacier work had been marginalized. As a founder member of the Institute, Jaques's departure represented quite a schism in the Tavistock ranks. Not for the last time, Brown paved the way for Jaques's career development by providing a job at Glacier. By this time, Jaques had already grasped the importance of the time dimension as a measure of role responsibility and individual capability—an early example of his great skill in listening to other people.

It's likely though that Jaques's great concern with fairness had something to do with Brown's influence. Brown was old enough to have witnessed the slum conditions in Glasgow after World War I, and had already formed a political view on the centrality of work and employment in human dignity. Brown hated the idea of unemployment and saw it as the joint responsibility of employers and government to ensure it never took hold. It was enough to make him a lifelong socialist in a somewhat conservative family. The Brown family interests had been severely damaged by the bankruptcy of Clydeside shipbuilders in the 1920s. Brown brought to Jaques a profound understanding of history, and especially political and constitutional history.

Wilfred Brown: The Man

We know what these two warriors shared in common a fierce intellect, a deep-seated and passionate concern for justice (fairness), and a prevailing impatience with any shilly-shallying. This latter characteristic of both men (the impatience) was commonly misinterpreted by others as arrogance. Both of them tended to give other

people a hard time if they seemed to be confused or waffling. But what were the key differences, from which they drew their complementarity? It seems Brown was more firmly rooted in secure family and community. Jaques's family origins are obscure and apparently less ordered and happy. The Browns weren't rich, but they were solid, well-respected and clever.

Wilfred's father ran an electrical wholesaling business, and young Wilfred was always technically gifted. Most people at Glacier believed that if he had gone to university he might well have ended up as a distinguished scientist in one field or another. It was certainly important for Glacier to have a managing director who understood something of science and technology, given it was the biggest manufacturer of plain bearings in Europe at the beginning of the study.

So, although young Wilfred was sent to a minor English public (i.e., private) school in Blackpool, there wasn't the money to support university. He went straight to work and ended up in Glacier at the age of 24. He was an enterprising young man and a superb salesman. Also, not irrelevant, he was a scratch golfer, no bad thing if the boss and his daughter are mad on the game too. The short version of the story is that he married the boss' daughter in 1934 and she died in childbirth in the following year. Within a further year, both her parents died also, leaving Wilfred Brown's sister-in-law the major shareholder and the company (which had originated in the deep south of the US) somewhat rudderless in the next three years.

Brown: The Politician and Political Scientist

War was now approaching fast and Glacier, a crucial supplier of plain bearings to the war effort, needed a new chief executive. Technically, Wilfred Brown, still in his 20s, was too young and he had become attracted to the newly-formed Commonwealth party. Its main aims were common ownership of wealth, a revitalised democracy, equal opportunity, colonial freedom, and organization for world unity. (Sir Stafford Cripps did his best to persuade Brown that any incoming Labor government would need at least a few members running firms in order to offer practical advice to government).

However, by 1937 Brown had assumed the chairmanship and chief executive role at Glacier Metal. He was then 29. The demands of wartime production represented a baptism of fire for a brand-new, and very young, CEO. He married Marjorie

Skinner (his wife and partner for the next 46 years) in 1939. From the start, Brown was determined that the principles of social justice should determine the managerial leadership of the firm. Brown was a passionate believer in democracy in general and in industrial democracy in particular. He believed passionately that people at work had exactly the same need for political representation of their interests as *employees* as they did in their role as citizens in the body politic.

He also knew that the workers always had the potential *power* to bring the entire system to a halt if they chose, therefore, he reasoned, they must be brought within the constitution in exactly the same way that the lawless English mobs were tamed by the successive Reform Acts of the 19th century. Within 50 years or so, the English mob had become the sober and virtuous late Victorians. Their genes, he argued, had not altered but their interests were now properly represented in the parliament. The problem was therefore structural. It was Brown's great vision to replicate that process of political inclusion within the firm. That meant Glacier needed to develop a constitution and to replicate the great organs of the state in the firm—a representative legislature to make the laws (the works council), an executive branch to execute policy (management), and an independent judiciary to adjudicate in case of abuse of power (the appeals procedure).

Achieving that goal was not a simple matter. In the *Glacier Project Papers*, Brown confessed (with his customary frankness):[6]

> *Between 1939 and 1947, as a Chief Executive, I followed the "psychological" mode of thought about organisation. By the end of that period I had managed to get the executive, representative and embryo legislative systems hopelessly confused. The result was a dangerous weakening of the authority of managers and no consequential feelings of freedom or satisfaction on the part of other members of the Company. (p. 158)*

All this taught Brown the central importance of the manager's authority to manage (this was no wishy-washy view of industrial democracy). He disdained the idea that workers want or need to participate in decision-making. That, in his view, was the province of the manager and, he believed, most of the workers wished their bosses would get on with it—and competently. But policy formation, especially when it affects the workers' interests, is something workers do need to have a stake in, through some form of representation. Brown's view was that leaders should find out where the realistic power blocs exist, and then organize them into a constitutional frame-

6 Brown, W. and Jaques, E. *Glacier Project Papers.* New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1965.

work. Otherwise the managers will always be at their mercy. Brown understood power; his quest was to channel it into *legitimate authority.* He even persuaded the Glacier managers to form a union to represent their collective interests when it seemed likely their salary differentials with the workers were to be eroded.

Brown understood that Britain had largely showed the world how to create the civil institutions of democracy, but had failed utterly to install the parallel institutions in the industrial and employment sphere. He knew also that Germany, despite its travails of political democracy since unification in 1871, had started to pay attention to industrial democracy in the mid-19th century. He knew, for example, that the so-called "Frankfurt Parliament," born of the revolutionary period 1848-49, had drawn up provisions for local, district, and regional works council organizations. The irony is that the professionals who formed the "parliament" thought the British were forging ahead in industrial democracy, based on the example of a few Scots and north of England industrialists and thinkers. Not so.

So, from the start, Glacier Metal was Wilfred Brown's test-bed for social and political experiment and a kind of action research project into social justice. Brown had installed sophisticated veto-power works councils in each of Glacier's six factories as early as 1941—seven years before the Tavistock team appeared on the scene. Jaques and his Tavistock colleagues were *useful* to Brown's grand scheme.

Social experiments aside, Glacier faced an array of problems after the War ended, including growing competitive pressures in an increasingly international market. The firm desperately needed a proper R&D capability—something Brown set out to fix as a top priority. Even more pressing was the problem of manufacturing licenses—government had stepped in to suspend patent protections for the duration of the war effort. After the war, Glacier was sued for damages for the infringement of patent rights. This was a time of crisis for Glacier's young managing director and it took its toll on him and his young family.

One outcome of the contact with Jaques was Brown's entry into psychoanalysis, something he found very helpful in dealing with the enormous pressures he faced. Skeptics argue that psychoanalysis is often helpful for those who don't really need it—rarely for those who do. Brown was an enormously creative individual hemmed in by responsibility.

It is noteworthy too that Brown (the hard-headed managerial technician) was in pursuit of fundamental principles of human behavior in formal political systems:

Jaques (the social scientist) was in search of the hard science within the social milieu—hence his references to physics in demonstrating the replicability of RO principles. Nothing else shows their remarkable complementarity better than this odd juxtaposition of science and social science. By the time Wilfred Brown lay struck by a stroke, speechless and dying in 1985, with Jaques frequently at his bedside, their differences had dissolved into simple friendship.

The Partnership

Brown continued to provide a context for Jaques's professional development. Brown immediately involved Jaques as an associate lecturer at the local Brunel College of Advanced Technology (where Brown chaired the governing body). When the College became the platform for the new Brunel University, Brown and the Vice Chancellor wanted to create a new integrated School of Social Sciences embracing Psychology, Sociology, and Economics (along the lines of Oxford's PPE degree). Jaques was duly installed as its first head of school. He stayed there until 1970. Meanwhile, Brown had become the University's Pro-Chancellor in 1966, and was instrumental in making Brunel an all "sandwich" degree university—providing study programs that intersperse study with periods of real work in industry.

By then he had successfully engineered the sale of Glacier to Associated Engineering, a major UK industrial group. Brown hoped that the industrial democracy institutions he and Jaques had created at Glacier would be resilient enough to expand after the transfer of ownership. He was disappointed when that proved not to be the case. However, some of the best Glacier managers and labor relations professionals were snapped up in the following years by incoming Japanese firms (which knew all about the ability-based Glacier project).

Meanwhile, Brown had become a government minister in the Board of Trade (his Life Peerage allowed him into government ministry as a member of the House of Lords). The then Prime Minister Harold Wilson appointed him Chairman of the Docks Modernization Board, which duly did away with restrictive practices in the workplace by guaranteeing a minimum wage. The new Labor government knew that it needed a practical socialist businessman to steer industrial legislation through the House of Lords.

However, Brown, understanding that the iron rules of power obtain at the national level as well as in the enterprise, saw that the House of Lords was an anachronistic

institution in the sense that the power blocs it represented (the landed gentry, the clergy and so on) were largely irrelevant in the new world of business competitiveness. The union movement, for example, had no realistic stake in the national decision-making process. This tended to render them collectively irresponsible. Brown wanted to abolish the House of Lords and replace it with a "House of Occupations" in order to constitutionalize the main occupational power blocs (thus leaving geographic representation to the House of Commons).

This radical idea symbolizes Wilfred Brown's and Elliott Jaques's greatest bond, their shared passion about *fairness*. Much of Jaques's professional life was devoted to the search for a fair way of rewarding the central activity of human life—productive work. Brown simply took the principle to its logical national level. If work is central to the human experience, then government has a duty to ensure that our deep understanding of what is right and proper is reflected in the national system of rewards. Ever the institution-builder, Wilfred Brown looked for the means of achieving that at the national level through new institutions. Today, British labor unions are increasingly enfeebled. The gap between the rewards of barely-accountable captains of industry and their insecure and underpaid employees continues to grow, latterly under a "socialist" government. Nobody thinks it is fair.

When he finally left government, Wilfred Brown waited for the board membership offers to pour in from big business. But by that time his uncompromising intellect had made its mark in the boardrooms of London and, of course, in the House of Lords. For the City of London—the heart of finance capitalism—one needed charm and a talent for dissembling. The offers never materialized.

And that is the point. Brown was about clarity, precision of concept, formality, and the centrality of authority as liberating factors. English business was instead embarked on a long journey into reassuring bullshit. British business has yet to begin to attend to some of the fundamentals exposed by Brown and Jaques and to build industrial and employment institutions parallel to its great civil institutions. We all still await a grasp of the principles of industrial democracy in English-dominated business.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alistair Mant was a consultant and senior social scientist at the Tavistock Institute in London in the 1970s, having migrated from the IBM Corporation. At Tavistock, he met Elliott Jaques and through the Institute, he also worked with Wilfred Brown. In recent years, he has specialized in the study of the gray area between the private and public sectors, and especially in public-spirited corporations and businesslike government. This is the arena in which Jaques and Brown built their collaboration. The Glacier Metals project was essentially a deep exploration of the possibility of decent and dignified behavior in a highly competitive world.

Alistair Mant acknowledges a debt to these two leaders, and especially to their understanding that it is always fruitless to set out to circumvent the laws of nature. At Glacier this meant determining the natural properties of humanity (the need for fairness, justice, formality, and an appreciation of wisdom) in big and complex employment systems.

Alistair Mant's book *Intelligent Leadership* explores this "socio-technical systems" terrain in more general terms. For the past 12 years, he has been strategy advisor to the UK Employers' Forum on Disability, the world leader in linking big business with the interests (including employment) of disabled people.

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CONTACT US

Global Organization Design Society
32 Victor Avenue
Toronto, Ontario,Canada M4K 1A8
Phone: +1 (416) 463-0423
Fax: +1 (416) 463-7827
E-mail: Info@GlobalRO.org
URL: www.GlobalRO.org

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Sponsorship is provided in part by the generous support of the following organizations: