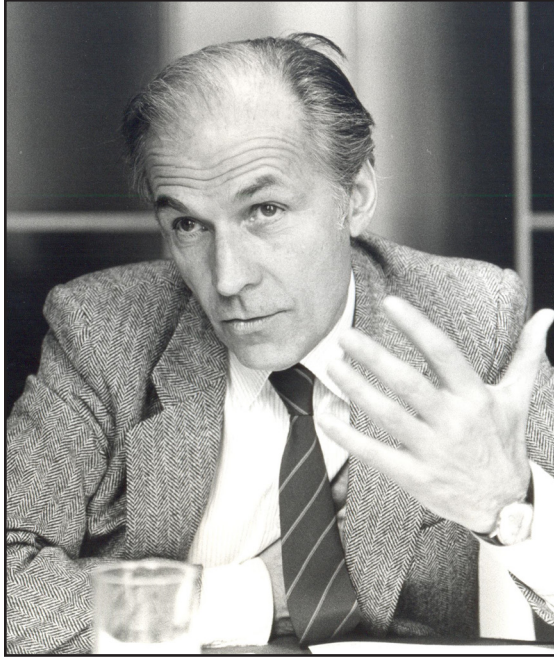


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MICHEL CROZIER



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MICHEL CROZIER EST MORT. Michel Crozier is dead, and I must write about him as a minor representative of the hundreds of his American friends. I will try, but I know too well the inadequacies of words. Michel was a model of an engaged social scientist, an inspiring teacher and scholar, and a beautiful man.

One day in the 1960s, a secretary (there were such people in the 1960s) came into my office and spotted a book by Michel Crozier face down on my desk. The book displayed a picture of Michel on the back. “Wow,” the secretary said, pointing to Michel’s portrait, “buy me that!”

Michel was a handsome man who elicited such enthusiasms routinely and dealt with them bravely. He probably could have been a movie star, but he elected to be a scholar—one of the most profound and elegant sociologists of his generation. He was also my friend, and I write with sorrow and love.

Although he had earlier survived the German occupation of France, studied business and law at the Hautes Etudes Commerciales (HEC) in Paris, devoted more than a decade to studying and writing about labor organizations in Europe and North America, and had established his reputation in France as an outstanding young researcher, Michel Crozier first came to the attention of the international social science community with his remarkable book *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* (1964). Michel wrote the book in English and subsequently prepared a French version.

*The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* became a standard text for the new fields of organization studies and public policy. The book eschewed the large noises of methodological bombast, but it exhibited a style of research that became a template for much of the better work in those fields over the following years. The methodology combined intensive and careful field work with robust theoretical speculations about how bureaucratic organizations worked.

*The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* outlined a perspective on organizations that Michel further elaborated in the 1970s and that proved to be extremely fruitful. He saw the essence of organizations as lying in the mosaic of games played by multiple self-interested actors in local arenas. These actors are by no means limited to the hierarchical heads of organizations but include myriads of others whose worlds overlap in complicated ways. Michel’s distinctive contribution was in detailing the games that were played and how they interacted with each other. He was one of the earliest scholars to identify the ways in which the dynamics of inter-group interaction in organizations led to persistently unattractive outcomes desired by no one, anticipating, in that respect, the subsequent analyses of people such as Thomas Schelling and Albert Hirschman.

The *Bureaucratic Phenomenon* was the first of a series of books published over a 15-year period through which Michel stimulated attention to the organizations of contemporary society and their contributions to social and political problems. In *La société bloquée* (1970), *L'acteur et le système* (with co-author Erhard Freiberg; 1977), and *On ne change pas la société par décret* (1979), he explored modern, particularly French, society and its social, political, and economic structures. Better than most, he saw the difficulties of achieving democratic aspirations in a modern nation state. In particular, as his 1979 book trumpeted, he saw that modern societies did not change simply by giving them well-intentioned orders.

Michel successfully avoided being encased in the bureaucratic coffin that frequently typifies universities, especially French universities. In the 1960s, he created the Centre de Sociologie des Organisations (CSO). The CSO developed a culture similar in spirit to other small groups that have made distinctive contributions to scholarship, for example, the group around Kurt Lewin at MIT in the 1940s. The CSO attracted a remarkable group of young scholars, including some from Quebec and China at a time when that was not common in French centers, who exhibited extraordinary loyalty and affection toward Michel while pursuing independent courses that only partly paralleled his. He was a teacher and a colleague who came to be respected and loved not only in France and America but also throughout the world.

Michel's interests were fundamental, but he saw his analyses not only as contributing to sociology but also as informing public debate. He was affected by the student unrest of the 1960s, but he turned the quest for reform into a desire to use research knowledge to improve public policy. He actively engaged French political and social elites through articles in major mainline journals. He was exceptionally good at this activity and came to be recognized in France as one of a small number of sociologists who spoke to issues of importance. He came to have standing, and that standing was ultimately reflected in the honors of a grateful nation. In 1999, he was elected to L'académie des sciences morales et politiques. In the last 20 years of his life, he was also made an officer of the Légion d'honneur and a commander of the Ordre national du mérite. He was awarded the Prix Alexis de Tocqueville.

Michel never forgot the United States, however, spending extended stays at Harvard and on the California coast. In 1980, he sought (in *Le mal Américain*) to engage the American elite in a discourse similar to what he had stimulated in France. The effects were, I think, disappointing. The American elite proved to be more chaotically organized than the French and less disposed to intelligent discourse. It was also

possible that although Michel knew America better than most and periodically had to combat a tendency for his French audience to consider him “too American,” his most thorough knowledge of America was knowledge of the cultures around the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. When I first read *Le mal Américain*, I wrote Michel that he needed to spend less time along the Charles River and more time along the Mississippi. He was generously tolerant of the remark, but he mostly abandoned the project of helping America. Although I never heard him say it, I think he found the American indifference to thoughtful public discourse a discouraging feature of American life.

He was, however, openly enthusiastic about other aspects of America. In particular, he saw American universities as less stultified by bureaucracy than European universities and more open to young talent. He enjoyed the interaction with American students in American universities.

He had a great deal of admiration for and envy of American organization and work habits. On one visit to the United States, he came directly to my office from the airport and asked me to have a letter typed for him. (This was before word processors.) His comment: “If you want a decent dinner conversation, go to France; but if you want a letter typed, go to America.”

Michel was himself a better dinner companion than a letter writer. He could talk engagingly about anything from soccer to philosophy, but he truly excelled in conversations about political and social life. He had an open and curious mind, an intellectual without any of the pretense that so often infects that breed. He thought that the ordinary problems of social and political life deserved the attention of serious minds, and he preferred informal settings with inquiring minds to the rituals of formal ones with established leaders.

On one occasion, he was visiting our house for dinner, and before the meal, some of us had gathered in the kitchen and adjacent eating space for drinks and talk. As usual, Michel was engaged in animated conversation while nibbling on some edibles. I said, “Michel, you are certainly welcome to those tidbits, but you might want to know that you are eating the cat food.” Without any sign of distress, Michel responded, “Tasty, but perhaps I should not deprive the cat.”

Michel was enormously welcome in America. His English was excellent. His research was important. He fit into the culture easily. He had the easy, comfortable style of an old acquaintance, the imposing depth of a classical scholar, and the impeccable courtesies of a true gentleman. He would have been an ideal immigrant to the United States, but no one ever imagined that.

I recall being with Michel when he was preparing to go to an international conference at Varna in Bulgaria. I asked him what language he would use to make his presentation.

“French, of course,” he answered.

I pointed out that the conference would have very few Francophone participants, and he was equally proficient in English, which most of them could understand.

“Ah,” he said, “but I am French, you know.”

He was, indeed, French without hesitation, but he was also embraced and is mourned by the rest of us—a man who enlightened us as a scholar and touched us as a man.

Elected 1975

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