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Wake up! The world is out of balance and if you do nothing you are part of the problem—An interview with Henry Mintzberg

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Abstract: Henry Mintzberg has made—and continues to make—fundamental contributions to various areas of management research, practice, and education. In this ‘Meet the person’ conversation, he discloses part of his journey in pursuit of a rebalanced society. He addresses, in particular, the reasons and the process behind the writing of the book ‘Rebalancing Society,’ in which he argues that a healthy society is one where there is a balance across its public, private, and plural sectors. This conversation with Henry Mintzberg offers perspectives that are inspiring and provocative. Overall, it also reveals his expectations of how the framework provided by the book may help to reframe the relation among different parts of society to bring our planet back into balance.

Keywords: Rebalancing society; Plural sector; Social change; Communityship; Writing

Introduction

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then is not an act but a habit.”

(Will Durant, commenting on a passage of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*.)

Henry Mintzberg is a writer. Most Days, from 9:00am to 2:00pm he writes. His habit has generated 19 books and more than 170 academic articles. Best known for his academic writings, he also has authored uncountable opinion pieces, fiction, humor, and collections of short stories.

We feel that his most accomplished scholarly work can be characterised by three distinctive qualities: maverick thinking, committed scholarship, and obsessive crafting. Having had the opportunity to observe his work routine, we wish to introduce this *Meet the Person* feature with a commentary on how these three traits relate to his individual style of identifying, building, and presenting some of his most impactful arguments.

Maverick thinking. Henry is a sharp observer of the human nature. He is a pattern recognizer, but the spark to his ideas does not come from an empiricism of idealized neutrality, of tests and measurements. Instead, his ideas emerge from observing, listening, reading, and engaging in conversations with all sorts of people. These ideas are typically noted down on small pieces of paper; piles of them. These can be about the invention of a new term, a provocative take on a poorly understood phenomenon, or simply an elegant or witty *tourneure de phrase* that catches his fancy. His ideas flow with fecund effervescence and are generously shared, for having ideas may be like love: the more you give the more you have. Some of these initial thoughts are however short-lived and end nowhere, being sometimes dismissed with a definitive: “that was silly.” But many remain. And among those that become the most important are ideas of the the-emperor-has-no-clothes type: managers don’t work the way we think they do (Mintzberg, 1973); strategies are not formed the way we say they are (Mintzberg, 1994); MBA graduates are not nearly as good for business as we may think (Mintzberg, 2005). These ideas are radical because they carry the seeds of turning-points to collective convictions. They also come with great responsibility, for they can make significant bodies of literature obsolete, irrelevant, or even discredited.

Committed scholarship. Responsibility requires the commitment to read, digest, and organize massive amounts of knowledge. Literally boxes of papers and books are devoured, as ideally all the existing arguments need to be

acknowledged and, depending on where they fall, challenged or built upon. Impressive mental power is applied to this process that could be imagined as meticulous and systematic but, in reality, is better described as energetic, cerebral, and even playful. Extant literature is reviewed but support to his arguments must also come from the real world: let's follow managers and see what they do; let's ask those who made decisions how their past strategies happened; let's see what MBAs do after graduation. Henry patiently expands the initial ideas into a vast collection of interconnected arguments, often reaching across domains of knowledge and disciplines. These arguments need not only to stand as strong pillars of new research, but also need to deflate the counterarguments that will certainly arise. What often emerges is a typology, a framework, or an overall schematization of a process or structure that he captures in a hand-scrawled image. All the while, Henry continues to write: noting details, capturing stories, even creating new vocabulary to support his theory. At this point, he has too much. It is time to start to search for what is essential and to craft a manner to present it.

Obsessive crafting. A collection of strong arguments is not enough. Bold ideas should be published in clear, memorable, and powerful terms. Style and precision become fundamental as Henry rewrites obsessively. There is a constant flow of annotated, crossed-out, and amended material that gets sent to Santa (Henry's fantastic personal assistant) for re-typing, or else—in later stages—gets edited by himself. Every story, paragraph, phrase, and word has to pull its weight. Most of the sentences and paragraphs that are typed will not exist in the final version; they have existed only to pave the way to something better. Rewriting and redrawing go hand in hand. Aesthetics matter and bold ideas require certain plasticity, perhaps some symmetry, the repetition of a certain numerical pattern, or even the invention of new sorts of diagrams. Once judged good enough, Henry shares the text with initial readers and actively solicits their comments and criticisms. Fostered debates transform the manuscript. This can be a slow process and a text can remain fluid for years. But obsessive crafting eventually leads to a text that he considers publishable. And published it gets.

This conversation with Henry¹ is chiefly about a book (Mintzberg, 2015) whose origin can be traced back to 1991, when some were proclaiming the triumph of capitalism. Henry’s reaction was: “that’s a nonsense!” and this project evolved—mostly under the codename of *Beyond Smith and Marx*—over 23 years of maverick thinking, committed scholarship, and obsessive crafting.

Rebalancing Society is arguably Henry’s most ambitious project. It has a broader scope and took longer than any of his previous projects. But what makes it stand out is its noble—and now critically urgent—intention of changing the world. Nothing less.

Conversation with Professor Henry Mintzberg

Andy (A): Thanks very much Henry for allowing us to come into your home to talk to you about your new book “Rebalancing society: Radical renewal beyond left, right and center.” What are you trying to rebalance and why?

H: The central theme of the book is that a balanced society finds a certain balance across three sectors, not two. My argument is that when you only recognize two sectors, which is what we do—public and private, nationalization and privatization, Adam Smith and Karl Marx, capitalism and communism, and so on and so forth—you either swing back and forth, which many countries do—or you are paralyzed in the middle. It’s unhealthy. You can’t balance a stool on two legs, but if you add a third leg—and I call it the plural sector—balance is more probable. People call it civil society, not-for-profits, NGOs, social sector, or community sector. The trouble is that it has got so many labels, and I wanted a label that would see it taking its place alongside the other two. So, public, private, plural sounds like they go together. Also, it is plural because it is much more eclectic, much more varied than the other two sectors. The other point is that it is huge, and yet it is not recognized. I include here social movements, social initiatives but also include organizations that are neither owned by the state nor by private investors. There are coops [cooperatives] which are owned by

members. By the way there are more coop memberships in the US than people: 350 million coop members. Or, they are owned by nobody, like McGill, Greenpeace, Harvard, the Mayo Clinic... People need to see the plural sector as a partner with public and private sectors in order to get past the last two centuries of swinging back and forth between left and right.

A: In the book you do spend a fair amount of time talking about the problems with the private and public sectors. Can you talk to us about where you see the problems?

H: And the plural sector. They each have a similar problem of narrowness. At the limit, the public sector is crude. Governments are not very nuanced in how they do things, they have regulations, they have all kinds of rules and they can be quite gross: they are not always, but often they are crude. Markets at the limit, or even before, are crass. Pharmaceutical companies ignore who dies for want of affordable pharmaceuticals because they want to make obscene profit, not reasonable ones. That is a most crass example. The plural sector can be closed—favoring one sector of society at the expense of others, as in the many populist movements we see today. Under communism in Eastern Europe, it was the public sector that dominated and it was incredibly crude. In America today, it is the private sector that dominates and it is too often crass. In a place like Egypt, where Morsi took over, or in Venezuela today, it was a plural sector community type movement, but they were closed. Morsi didn't represent the sector, he represented one segment of the sector, and in Venezuela the same thing. They were closed to the rest of society.

Gui (G): So that the plural sector is not always good...

H: No, no. The Nazi movement was a plural sector movement, it was a community based movement. Thugs who roam the streets are plural sector movements, so is the U.S. National Rifle Association.

G: How do you see the difference between a balance and a compromise? Why isn't compromise among the three sectors sufficient?

H: Compromise implies that you are adjusting to each other, but it is not necessarily constructive. Balance can encourage feeding off each other and working with each other. There are lots of responsible and concerned businesses. There are governments that are constructive in some of the good things that they are doing. And there is a side of the plural sector that is wonderfully positive. The idea is to tap into the positive of each. Instead of the plural sector attacking government and business, instead of business lobbying government, and instead of government trying to control the population, plural sector interests can activate the government; the government can legislate for both regulations and incentives, and the private sector can provide responsible products and services for the needs of society like windmills and solar panels and many other things.

G: So that the transformation you propose is about changes within each sector, but also about changes on how they interact with one another...

H: Yes, in the book I am much stronger on the role of the plural sector because right now the private sector is much too strong. Globalization is out of control. It's an economic force that has no social constraints to speak of. There is no global government that constrains global business, so it is out of control and it is undermining the sovereignty of nations and the robustness of communities. I think that the plural sector has to initiate major change. Governments are too co-opted by business, and much business is too out of control. So, the plural sector has to take the lead, not just in pressuring business, that too but in pressuring government to act.

A: Do you see the plural sector as sort of the social conscience, environmental conscience of society? Is that where they are coming from, their force?

H: The plural sector is plural. There are huge movements, with Greenpeace and much else, that are rooted in the plural sector. The public sector acts too: cap and trade, COP21 out of Paris, and so on. And there are all kinds of things that are happening in business too. Tesla is trying to create a huge market for electric cars.

So, they are all active, but you could argue that the environmental movement is significantly rooted in plural sector forces.

G: Is there anything in the nature of the plural sector that makes it a sort of moral guardian?

H: Well, there is a long history of that. One of my points about organizations is that if you work for government, there are strong bureaucratic forces. If you work for business they are very strong forces for profit and more, more, more. The tradition in the plural sector is engagement. Even with the Nazi movement and the like, there is engagement. It is not the type of engagement that we like, but it is engagement. Plural sector organizations are characterized by engagement. When I did some work for Greenpeace years ago, the politics were fierce because everybody there says: I am my own person, I don't take orders from a boss. They are engaged. One of the problems of the plural sector is that each person or each institution, or association to use de Tocqueville's word, often thinks that they are better than everybody else. So, anybody to your left is an extremist, and anybody to your right is a reactionary. The associations have trouble cooperating with each other because of little nuances. They are not so different and they have to cooperate. Business knows how to cooperate. If the oil companies that compete with each other want a different tariff structure, they know how to work together. They know how to use their chambers of commerce, or at Davos. The plural sector organizations are much more hesitant to work together. But if things are going to change, that is going to have to change.

G: One of the points that you make about the nature of the business, or at least the way that it has been portrayed, is that it is based on an economic model that assumes that human nature is greedy, materialistic, and self-serving. Is the plural sector where we will find people motivated by generosity, affection, caring?

H: I wouldn't make it that black and white. But there is more of that in the plural sector. We have been sold a bill of goods by frankly idiot economists, and I include Friedman among them, who have given us this absolute nonsense that it's all about greed, it's all about self-interest, and it's all about individualism. Of course, it is about individualism, of course we are greedy, of course we are self-serving. But if we were only that, we

would have never have survived. We are about common interests and benevolence as much as we are about greed. Every time I hear an economist question benevolence, I think: what kind of mother did you have? It's these extremes. I don't question Friedman for talking about self-interest, or Hayek, or Rand. But what I do question is this extreme view of society which at its limit is utter nonsense. It is utterly crass and now it is destroying us. Just as swinging the other way, under the communist regimes of Eastern Europe, were utterly crude and were destroying their countries. To come back to what you are saying, there is more of a natural propensity for community interest because plural sector organizations are largely, largely community based. In other words, you don't have movements of people all over the world... As I joke: If you want to find out about the difference between a community and a network, ask your Facebook friends to paint your house. I use the example of barn-building which is a tradition in the United States. When the barn burned down, the whole community got together and rebuilt the barn. Facebook isn't exactly about that. Let's not kid ourselves, community is personal face-to-face interaction.

G: Talking about technology, I think we were all very impressed, for instance, with how effective technology was in mobilizing people and in bringing them into the streets during the Arab Spring. There was a lot of optimism in a sense of perhaps mobilizing a larger community, beyond the local one...

H: Every technology has two sides to it, and you had better understand both, you just can't understand one. A downside of technology is that almost every new one you can think of has driven us to be more and more individualistic. If you are communicating with someone on your iPhone, you are not sitting with a group, you are just shooting off emails, or tweets, or what ever. That just reinforces individualism. When the car was developed, we got road rage, and tail-gating. Get off *my* highway; I am here, I am surrounded by this hunk of metal, and get out of *my* way! When I first moved to Aix-en-Provence in 1972, people had trouble getting telephones. So, the people I knew would appear and knock on the door. It was charming. Once you have a telephone, you don't knock on the door anymore. And once you have a television set you, sit there by yourself. Once you have a laptop or a desktop you sit in front that thing all alone. People don't tailgate on the sidewalk right, because it is closer to community. But, of course, the people who tailgate on the side walk are

texting because, they don't even see you, as they bump into you. All of these technologies, including the new social media, are very individualistic.

A: Technology does affect community. Does it have use in terms of collaboration, trying to connect communities between one another?

H: Yes, connect is where it is fantastic. Somebody said about Tahrir Square that the social media were good for communication, but not for collaboration. In other words, it got people into that square together, but they didn't figure out how they were going to make changes. Occupy Wall Street, and particularly when Trump was elected and so many came out on the streets. It was social media that brought them out. But what is the point about Occupy Wall Street, about protesting against Trump if it doesn't change things? Why go after Wall Street? It's a street! Why not go after Goldman Sachs for sucking \$5 billion out of the market for recycled aluminum while adding nothing.² There is a great line by Tom Lehrer, the guy who used to sing all these off-color songs. It is about the Spanish Civil War: "They may have won all of the battles, but we had all of the great songs." Songs aren't going to win this.

G: About becoming more individualistic and the role of technology. If we look at traditional communities and the development of different societies, they all started being very communitarian because people depended very directly on each other. And the connection was not just among people, but also to nature because they depended so much on it and needed to be in harmony with nature. These trends that you've identified, they point to the direction of alienation from one another and from nature. Which is consequently destructive. How do we reverse it?

H: It is not that we don't want individualism. It is needed. But it has to be balanced with collectivism and citizenship—with what I call communityship [see Mintzberg, 2009]. This needs to be balanced with ownership. I have two responses to your question. If we don't change course, we are finished. The answer to that questions is that maybe we are in the process of self-destructing, and we can't stop. But the second is that we are intrinsically as community oriented as we are individualistic. It is just that we have been so

captured by all these technologies. There is a natural sense of community everywhere. We will wake up, we are waking up. Life can only be so empty. But people who are promoting greed are directly responsible for the breaking down of society. Because—and this is a new thought I had, which is not in the book—as soon as you start to squeeze and pressure people more and more in terms of income and work, you create more and more angst, alienation and negativity in society. Then, guess what: people are out in the streets, and voting for Brexit and Trump.

G: Are you concerned that people who are stuck in the rat-race of greed, consumption, and pleasure will not be motivated to change by the arguments that you make in the book?

H: I think that anybody can go either way. Anyone can say: hell, it is me alone, or me and my kids, my family, my spouse, and screw everybody else. Or anybody can just say: I've been greedy for long enough, I really need to act on it. There will always be some people at the extremes. But there are a lot of people in the middle who are starting to say: I can't keep living like this. Or their kids are starting to say: why are you living like this? The question I keep getting about the book is: yeah, but what can I do about it. People say: I agree with that; but what can I do now? And every time I come with a new idea, like a progressive protest,³ the answer I get is: yeah, but what do we do now? There was a time when I was trying to come with new ideas, and I came up with some, but at a certain point, I realized: wait a minute, it is not my responsibility to come up with all the new ideas. I'm trying to lay out a framework where people can get together and come up with new ideas. We are all capable of coming up with ideas that can change the world.

A: May we perhaps talk a little bit about how you may able to foster and engage young people in plural sector activity...

H: The younger generation is easy. And they want that. Not all of them, because there are all kinds of people in all generations. But it is much easier with Millennials, who in turn can be influencing their parents. So, at some point, I think, it is going to get easier. This book hasn't sold particularly well. The people who read it like it and I'm getting more and more people saying: wow, this is important. My other books do fine. This is not

losing money for the publisher, but the fact that we made it free from my website, and anyone can go at www.mintzberg.org and download the entire book for free, is the reflection of a wonderfully benevolent publisher. It is now two-years old and I think its time will come, in the sense that it lays out a framework that says: hey wake up. What I want to do in a follow-up pamphlet is to say these things much more stridently.⁴

G: When we started working together in 2005, this project was already very advanced. But at that time most people didn't get the point. They didn't even think there was a problem of lack of balance. And, yet, we've lived long enough to see the world becoming so out of balance that it looks like you wrote the book only a year ago...

H: Funny... just to tell you a little story, I was in Prague in 1991, which was two years after the Velvet Revolution and the fall of the Berlin Wall, and right then and there I wrote a piece. I'm happy that I published that [Mintzberg, 1992], because I have a record to myself. I was surprised when I re-read it because I was basically discussing three sectors—although not using the word plural—and that they have to be balanced.

G: And when you say that you trust that the time for the book will come. That this is going to happen...

H: I have a very thick skin. You know, they say, they spit in your face and you say it's raining. I don't give up.

G: This also relates to something I would like to ask. Of course, there is a huge and vast sort of things you've brought to different parts of society and also to academia. But I have the impression that the academic community has not yet given this book the attention that it deserves...

H: Well, there are all types of academics. And you guys are here, so it is not all lost [laughing]... There were lots of people right from the beginning who were enthusiastic about it. But there are lots of people who well... when people are negative they don't tell you. When someone gives a speech and says that it was a great success because all these people came up and told me how wonderful it was, I always say: you would better find out about all people who left muttering, because the people who don't like it, they don't come up and

tell you. I think that many just ignored the book because they are not interested. They are working in marketing, or finance, or whatever, so, they are not really interested in that kind of stuff. People are busy, they have a lot of things to do, and writing a book is a very arrogant act. You write an article, you're saying: I want 20 minutes of your time. You write a book, and you're saying: I want several hours of your time. It is also very individualistic because books are usually written by individuals. But I think that people will come back to it. I really do. There is a word that interests me now, which is groundswell. A groundswell is the idea that a movement just has its time and suddenly appears and rises up. I think we're due for a groundswell concerning balance in society. I think that the Brexit vote was ill-conceived, just like the Trump vote was ill-conceived, but there was a groundswell of people saying: I'm fed up, I want something different.

A: One of the challenges with the plural sector is question of power. I think that in your book you suggest that change is not likely to come from either the private sector or the public sector because of just the way they are set up. In fact, I may even suggest that, in a way, in the US the public and the private sectors are almost one in many instances. They hold the cards of power. You've mentioned groundswell to make changes. And there is a need for legal changes, for resources... Is it realistic to assume that the plural sector will have the types of resources it will need in order to make change? Effective change?

H: Who had resources at the Boston tea party? Who had resources when they stormed the Bastille in France? Who had resources when millions of women in Quebec, in 1960, turned their back on the Church and said: enough of this? No resources. Just an immediate, unbelievable shift in social behavior. In Quebec, it was called the Quiet Revolution. There was no leadership. There was a leadership that followed it, of course. But it wasn't driven initially by leadership. Imagine if all of people who voted Sanders, and voted Brexit, and voted Trump had a framework that said: hey, wake up, this is about the plural sector, about imbalance. Let's be clear. They were against Hillary because that was old politics. So, they went to Trump and they shifted out of the frying pan into the fire. They shifted from this conventional staid view of the government to a maniacal businessman, a failed businessman, who just reinforces what has been going on. What has been going on is that American business has co-opted American government. The U.S. does not suffer from too much

government; it suffers from too much business—all over government. Trump is perpetuating that, with a vengeance. So, you say to these people: there is another sector here. There is something else going on here. We need balance. It is not about business versus government. It is about business and governments and communities cooperating with each other to change things. And now, there is certainly no shortage of people in government who care about that, including Trudeau and Merkel, and the Pope. And there is certainly no shortage of people like that in business who really do care.

G: I remember—and I don't mean this as a provocation—that during the research and process of writing this book, you joked about this being your megalomaniacal period. What did you mean? And how do you see it now?

H: Yes. I joked about this being my megalomaniacal period [laughing]. Like Picasso had his blue period. I said it as a joke. There is this story that Karl Marx learned how to ride a horse, so that he could lead the revolution. I am not learning how to touch type so that I can lead the revolution. I refer to it as megalomaniacal in a sense that it is so broad and so ambitious. But, of course, writing books does not makes me a megalomaniac. Many people write books; they do broad books and narrow books. I wrote a broad book. I wrote it because, as I thought in 1991, this conclusion that capitalism had triumphed, and that Fukuyama's claim that history had ended—as if we had reached perfection thanks to our greed—was sheer nonsense. That's why I wrote the book. Because I didn't see an argument being made and it seemed so crystal-clear to me. And I went to a conference here in Montréal and I presented the framework. The book was just being worked on and I needed a label. I didn't want to call it civil society, or not-for-profits, or NGOs, or the community sector. I began calling it the social sector, but that goes with political and economic, not with public and private. And someone said: what about pluralistic? And I said: wow, that's it: the plural sector! And once that fell in place, there was a question of writing it down. Every word in this book was rewritten and rewritten... I wanted every sentence to be perfect. There is not one casual sentence. It may look casual, but I don't think there is one casual sentence in this book.

G: And—also because we mentioned Picasso and the metaphor of periods for painters—I really see it as part of what this book is. It is so hard and so difficult. It takes such a long time. It may take a life of writing to be able to write things that are so perfect and, yet, sound so simple.

H: Well, [laughing] I'm not going to comment on that. But when I converted my thesis into my first book, a very close friend, Bill Litwack was tearing it apart and correcting everything. He thought that I was writing horribly; and he was right. I learned how to write the hard way. I think that, at this point, I know how to write. But even now, when I do one of my twogs⁵, I do five, six, seven drafts. I keep redoing it, and redoing it, and redoing it... and, finally, I like it.

G: To conclude, I wish to ask you a very specific question. Part of this interview may be published in the *Journal of Management Inquiry*. What message do you have for the readers of that journal?

H: Wake up. The world is going to hell and you have got kids, you have progeny, you are living in this world; you are responsible. I am responsible, you are responsible. Don't say that you are busy with other things. I am not saying: give up your life and just do this. But I am saying: we are all responsible for the kind of world we are leaving to our children. And if we do nothing, we are part of the problem.

Notes

1. The interview was held in Henry Mintzberg's home, in Montreal, on June 3, 2017. As preparation, the authors have also organized a speech he delivered at ASAC's (Administrative Sciences Association of Canada) 2017 conference, on June 1st, that was entitled: "My journey in pursuit of a rebalanced society."
2. Referring to a maneuver orchestrated by Goldman Sachs to exploit Aluminium pricing regulations, which ultimately increased the costs to consumers. See, for instance: Kocieniewski, D. (2013) A Shuffle of Aluminum, But to Banks, Pure Gold. *The New York Times*. (July 21): A1.
3. Henry describes a *progressive protest* as a grassroots pressure tactic. It would start with people leaving their work en masse for a short period of time, say for an hour. Each subsequent day people would leave work for one hour longer, thereby increasing the pressure for change.
4. Henry Mintzberg initially published *Rebalancing society: Radical renewal beyond left, right and center* as a pamphlet, in 2014, following on the tradition of pamphlets like Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*. After publishing it as a book, he plans to release another version, again in pamphlet form.
5. Referring to his series of "Tweet2Blog," see: www.mintzberg.org/blog.

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