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**James March: A Postmodern Perspective on Organization
Without Management Theory**

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James March: A Postmodern Perspective on Organization Without Management Theory

Summary:

In this paper, we look back at James March's main contributions to the evolution of organizations and their decision-making. No other author in management science has been quoted as much. Yet his view on these issues is often far removed from the dominant academic representations. On the basis of an in-depth analysis of his work, we discuss the main concepts to which he has dedicated his life as a researcher. Whether it is for innovation and the process of exploration associated with it, or for the ambiguity that persists in learning cycles, March always shows us the ambivalence of our concepts. While innovation is seen as the ultimate goal of any good differentiation strategy, his research warns us of the negative effects that can be associated with it, and the risks it poses to the organization. The same applies to the notion of ambiguity in learning. While our research would like to exclude it from our decision-making models, it reminds us of its persistence, but also of the potential for creativity that it constitutes. Like a doctor who, in his pathology, weighs all the effects of a disease, his view of organizations goes beyond appearances to get closer to their natural functioning. The strength of March's work is to encourage us to remain cautious in our diagnoses for the development of our companies by not venerating too strongly the notions seen exclusively as virtuous, such as innovation or by not too quickly condemning situations perceived as harmful, such as ambiguity. Concepts are often ambivalent and our knowledge is formed in the course of our experiences. It is therefore subjective and unpredictable, making the idea of a unified theory of management inoperative (Joullié, 2018). March's way of thinking is deeply postmodern in the sense of Foucault (1961) who saw the world as a representation. In March's case, learning is ambiguous and decisions are often far from purely performative logic. In this social game, myths play an important role in organizations and behavior takes on roles that counteract any objective learning based on facts. His teachings remain of the utmost importance for both practitioners and academics in charge of modeling the real functioning of our organizations.

In cosmic history there are no ending, just reconstitutions of matter. But lives end, and so do wishes for novelty.
(J.G. March in "Zen", *Quiet Corners*, 2008, p. 108)

Which professor would try to teach leadership to future business leaders using mainly classics from literature such as Cervantes, Shakespeare or Tolstoy? Who would dare to explain to future Chinese leaders (Rhee, 2010) that, like Don Quixote, we do things not for their consequences or for any reward, but to satisfy our identity and self-realization? Such as this famous knight errant "*we justify what we do, not by a belief in its efficacy but by an acceptance of its necessity*" (March, 1999, p. 372). For what is creativity: to feed with constancy and tenacity the flow of what people expect, or to take the opposite view, and surprise by producing novelty while risking not always being understood. Usually success smiles at the former, but posterity is more frugal and ends up crowning the latter. James March knows that models, concepts and theories are all meant to be replaced one day. Therefore, he does not give them any more importance than they already have. For him, every scientist must be ready to replace these theories, while producing them in the most serious way in the world. Theories are false, but they are useful because they magnify individuals by giving meaning to their actions. In terms of notoriety, few works such as the one he wrote with Herbert Simon (March & Simon or M&S, 1958) at the Carnegie School are still so well known today (Wilden et al., 2019). In it, they propose a form of pragmatic rationality based on constrained decision-making performance programs in which the use of routines and the appropriation of roles in organizations mean a great deal. Bounded rationality is a break with the strong format proposed by the economists who dominated decision theories at the time (Von Neuman-Morgenstern, 1947; then Savage, 1954). His major contribution, with Cyert proposing an alternative theory of the firm (Cyert & March, 1963), continues to animate numerous studies (Garvetti et al., 2012). Human act in social organizations very often "*in spite of consequences rather than because of them*" (March, 1999, p 376). Rhee (2010) draws this interesting parallel between the concepts highlighted in March's work and Chinese thought as is expressed in the classical literature of this immense country. The parallel is indeed striking for conceptions of learning and adaptation, for the place of experience or attention in our human organizations. As a visiting scholar at his side at Stanford in 1992, I would add an additional dimension that would justify this

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3 parallelism of March's thought with the intellectual legacy left by this Asian culture. A nation
4 is often represented by a work that does not characterize it (Don Quixote for Spain or
5 Shakespeare for the English). Nothing is less Spanish than the innocent rationality of Don
6 Quixote or less English than Shakespeare's main characters' extroverted outpouring of
7 feelings. It is astonishing to observe that of the great figures of literature that inspired March
8 (see March, 2003; Augier, 2004; Augier- March, 2005, March, 2005; March, 2006, March,
9 2007) from which he drew heavily in his lectures, none are North American (de Cervantes,
10 Tolstoy or Shakespeare). More generally, the link between management and philosophy (e.g.
11 Kierkegaard) to describe managerial behaviors has often been used by March and other
12 researchers (Segal - Bruce, 2017).

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March is not North American in his thinking, he is just as Scandinavian as he is Latin
throughout his work. March is universal before being American. So obviously he is also
Chinese, particularly when he brings notions such as ambiguity, superstition, risk-taking, or
the logic of appropriateness of roles into the field of management theories. As his system of
thought is ultimately resistant to paradigms and models, March privileges the immanence of
things over absolute truths. In this sense, he is the most Chinese of North American thinkers.
It is precisely for all these incongruities that I suggest you encounter this brilliant
troublemaker.

Through his experiences, first as Dean of Irvine and then within the GSIA group at the
Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburg, he learned the importance of
interdisciplinarity and disruption in the management of organizations (Lambert, 2016;
Kavanagh, 2020). March alone is a considerable work that is highly eclectic with many
contributions in the social sciences, such as political science (thesis in political
anthropology), education and management. The wealth of his contributions makes it
particularly difficult to put his work into a pedagogical perspective. For unlike Simon, March
is a radical researcher. He has little confidence in rational-looking discourses. In this respect,
his work is in line with the mistrust of the construction of a theory of rationality (Cristofaro,
2017) or, more generally, with the utopian objective of building a theory of management
(Joullié, 2018). By emphasizing interpretation and experimentation at the heart of
organizational learning, March proposes to see managerial action as a representation rather
than an objective fact (Bowden, 2021). Whereas Simon describes intentionally rational
behaviors, March considers them as a step towards a more complex conception. For him,
reason and unreason, rational and irrational are inseparable from human behavior. The

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3 decision-maker in our organizations follows a consequentialist logic as well as conforms to
4 a role, acting out of passion as well as calculation.

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6 We will try to propose here a global perspective offered by his work on the concept of
7 organization, which he constantly tried to understand in its evolution, transformation and
8 adaptation to the world around us. In this process of adaptation of our organizations, March
9 looks at the decision-making processes, how they function and transform themselves
10 (organizational change) and how they seek to distinguish themselves through creativity. We
11 will then discuss the future perspectives of March's work and the lessons that can be learned
12 from a life dedicated to research by a workaholic.
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22 THE WORK OF MARCH: DECISION MAKING, REASON AND MADNESS IN ORGANIZATIONS

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25 *“To keep organizations open to exploration, it is necessary to supplement their orderly and*
26 *rational functioning with a dose of ‘disorder’ and/or ‘poetry’ to allow individuals to explore*
27 *new behaviors for which they do not yet have a rational justification, without being*
28 *immediately called to order.”* (J.G. March, extracted from Lambert 1998)
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34 In his work, March proposes that we view decision-making processes not in terms of
35 performativity and strong rationality, but as a deeply human process based on experience
36 and intuition and often constrained by roles.
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41 *The role of experience*

42 Throughout March's intellectual journey, experimentation appears essential. Many of the
43 notions he develops in his work have originate in the heart of lived or observed experiences.
44 They gradually become the researcher's obsessions and provide the breeding ground for his
45 many contributions. This is true for the concept of bounded rationality proposed with Simon,
46 which was initially based on the lessons of an experiment involving local public decision-
47 makers. The importance of time in the structuring of decision-making processes, for
48 example, stems from his fascination with the learning techniques used by gamblers on slot
49 machines in Las Vegas (or Reno) to maximize their chances of winning. His intimate
50 knowledge of how universities operate in terms of decision-making feeds much of the
51 Garbage Can Model (Cohen – March – Olsen, 1972). His approach to innovation, or more
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3 precisely to innovative organization, is no exception to the rule. It stems from the same
4 astonishment at the social behaviors identified here and there, which provide him with fertile
5 intuitions that things do not happen as models and theories have predicted.
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10 While experiential learning theories assume that experiences are discarded because of
11 forgetfulness (Argote, 1999; Argote - Greve, 2007; Baum & Ingram, 1998), some
12 researchers argue that early occurrences can serve as cognitive blindness by limiting later
13 experiences (Levinthal, 2003; Tripsas & Gavetti, 2000). This process of "cognitive
14 imprinting" then produces a bias in experiential learning that partly explains the appearance
15 of behavioral inertia. In fact, experiential learning contains a strong natural tendency to
16 approach problems according to what first attracts one's attention or what one sees during
17 the first representation. Rhee (2010) makes the link between this learning and the Chinese
18 idiom that says "*first impressions are the strongest*" (history of the Han dynasty). This
19 laziness of thought of which Confucius speaks, finds an echo in March's (1991) conception
20 of experiential learning, which he sees as incomplete, partial and based on a limited number
21 of experiments.
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30 March (1981) explains that the ability to adapt to a changing environment depends on the
31 ability to make blocks of rationality and irresponsibility interact. In no case in his work does
32 irresponsibility constitute a deliberate strategy on the part of the leader, but according to the
33 author, it is naturally embedded in the anomalies of the organization, and in the interstices
34 that escape the vindictiveness of rationality. In these folds of the organization, one finds a
35 jumble of *slacks*, symbolic actions, ambiguity or even "loose" organizational links between
36 individuals, leaving room for initiative, and sometimes even improvisation.
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45 March explains the need to maintain a dialogue between rational and programmed strategies
46 with irresponsible and unrealistic options. If there is one text that sums up the richness of
47 our author's developments, the audacity that it often conveys in its reasoning, the rootedness
48 in the world of business and the realism it contains, the false lightness of the concepts
49 through the choice of words that designate them, we cannot end this dive into the analysis
50 of March's work without evoking what is undoubtedly the freest of his contributions: the
51 technology of foolishness (March, 1971). One would almost think that he wrote this as a
52 joke, and yet...
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3 He lays the foundations of his thought or his obsessions as a researcher, if one prefers. March
4 feels that the standard models that he calmly learned in university lecture halls, and that are
5 proposed in most scientific publications, lack the sudden impulse necessary to the
6 understanding of human activity. The intelligence contained in these models seems to him
7 to be far removed from the way in which decisions are made in organizations. He is well
8 aware that the experience we have in our organizations does not reflect what theories say.
9 The world is simplified to enter the ideals of science. March takes obvious, but not
10 provocative, pleasure in making it more complex. On this level, our monk of knowledge
11 knows that he is, like any other researcher, the link of a humanity that above all, produces
12 knowledge and not solutions.

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14 Values in companies are built through experience more than through calculation and
15 optimization. The behavior of decision-makers is guided by the roles in which they feel
16 invested, within the organizations, more than by their personal psychology. Organizations
17 produce solutions that look for problems. Individuals need to act before thinking because
18 most of the time they discover their preferences after acting. As March (1994) explains, the
19 self-resulting from leaders' actions is an opportunity to discover their own aspirations and
20 values. This can be called *self-knowledge* (Patriotta, 2019). This idea is pursued in research
21 on different forms of rationality in managerial decisions in the form of exploratory
22 rationalities based on cases studies (Lambert - Romelaer, 2001). It finds attractive
23 extensions in finance with recent work proposing a *quantum theory* of decision, where
24 preferences are not known in advance, but are revealed by the act of choosing (Swirn, 2009;
25 Le Courtois - Walter, 2016).

41 42 43 *The role of intuition*

44 In his reflection on decision making under ambiguity, March returns to the common ground
45 of managerial approaches and the economic analyses that precede them. Where intuition has
46 been banished from decision-making, he proposes to rehabilitate it. Thus, by catching a
47 glimpse of other possible actions, it enriches creativity by going in search of solutions that
48 are outside of acceptable patterns. Hypocrisy is excluded from organizational mechanisms.
49 He sometimes considers it useful by affirming that a bad man with good intentions can be a
50 man who experiences the possibility of becoming good. Memory is praised in organizations.
51 He thinks it is equally important to forget. In line with his thinking, recent work (Hafsi and
52 Lambert 2013; Lambert 2013) on forgetting in our organizations as a key strategic variable,
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3 shows that the ability to unlearn is just as important as learning. Theory is considered to be
4 the result of a purely scientific approach, emphasizing actions and the analysis of
5 consequences. It proposes an alternative theory, based on experience that is strongly based
6 on the divergent and subjective interpretation of the organization's actors. Co-founder with
7 March of the SCANCOR laboratory in Stanford, Brunsson (1985) develops a similar idea
8 through the notion of irrational organizations where actions are not necessarily related to the
9 choices made. The topicality of such a perspective is surprising, both in the public and
10 private domains of our democratic institutions. For Brunsson, the act of choosing does not
11 necessarily precede every action. Analyzing several famous CEOs, including Jack Welch
12 (CEO of GE), Segal & Bruce (2017) show that he essentially acted during his long career in
13 the company without being sure about the decisions he made; he reacted far from any
14 management theory, but by pure intuition.
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25 *Appropriation of roles*

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27 In other words, decisions follow role-constrained logics rather than rational logics of a
28 consequentialist nature. His work at the institutional level is similar to that developed by
29 March-Olsen (1989) in the sense that the preferences that guide choices are very often
30 formed as a result of the actions undertaken. March (1991, 1997, and with Schultz - Zhou
31 in 2000) have the opportunity to develop this aspect on the level of individual decisions in
32 companies by showing in particular that the rationality of managers is very often constrained
33 by the roles they are invested in or feel invested in (logic of appropriation). This source of
34 ambiguity leads some economic actors to take big risks in the companies that employ them,
35 for example, which is totally at odds with their individual attitudes to risk. An author such
36 as Zhou (1997, and with March - Schultz in 2000) makes this his main argument to explain
37 the subtlety of decision-making in organizations. For him, social institutions which pre-exist
38 decisions such as family, school systems, church and later companies, constitute a social
39 fabric which conditions decisions. They follow roles by making them their own rather than
40 a pure logic of optimization. Managers take risks because they think that is what is expected
41 of them. Yet their personal psychology would naturally lead them to be risk adverse (March
42 1991a and 1994). In the behavioral approach to the firm (Cyert-March, 63), the authors add
43 the overconfidence of managers or the fact that they sometimes act under the pressure of
44 dominant coalitions. These coalitions of managers or stakeholders create pressure groups
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3 whose rationality is difficult to anticipate at the end of the day and place companies in
4 situations of great uncertainty.
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8 FUNCTIONING OF ORGANIZATION
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10 March's work on organization reveals two essential determinants of organizational
11 functioning: organizational slacks or room for maneuver and symbolic actions.
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15 *The role of organizational slacks*
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17 Organizational slacks have often been associated with the idea of excess resources that can
18 be dedicated to original tasks such as technology observation or the circulation of ideas
19 across organizational boundaries. This vision has led to the function of a "Gate-Keeper" role
20 located outside the organization chart and hierarchy in order to foster innovation through the
21 free circulation of ideas. In this case, the slack protects the individual or group from formal
22 control of the organization by allowing them to escape outside the hierarchy with either
23 personal or professional intents. The first definition stems from the collaboration with Cyert,
24 which led to the proposal of a behavioral theory of the firm that notably distances itself from
25 the standard economic approach (Cyert and March, 1992). In an equilibrium mode of
26 economic representation, the resources distributed by the firm to meet the necessary level of
27 demand, are assumed to be managed as precisely as possible. To keep them in the firm, a
28 coalition of members is achieved by providing a minimal level of salary. A balance is then
29 struck between the resources available in the organization and the payments required for the
30 enterprise to function well. From this perspective, there is no organizational slack in
31 breaking the economic balance by overpaying coalition members within the organization. In
32 their modeling of the firm's behavior, the authors take issue with this "lean" version of the
33 firm, which is consistent with the principles of Lean Management today (Jones and
34 Womack, 1996). Indeed, they observe that to keep shareholders loyal, dividends are often
35 paid out beyond what is necessary. Sometimes prices are maintained lower than what allows
36 buyers to preserve their purchasing power, Furthermore, managers are provided with
37 luxurious benefits and services exceeding what would be required to retain them. These
38 observations written in the 1960s take on a special appeal today with the hunt for golden
39 parachutes and other financial magnanimity. While some manifestations of these slacks are
40 remarkable, Cyert and March (1992) consider them to be part of the banal practices of
41 organizational phenomenon. Any member of the organization is likely to perceive this
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largesse, starting with full-time staff. For them, the interest does not lie in focusing on pay differentials, but in making them aware of their indispensable nature to enable the firm to negotiate a radical strategic shift in order to adapt to a new environment. They are all organizational attributes to innovation. In environments that are becoming less favorable, these slacks represent a real guarantee of adaptation and change. According to Cyert and March, they bring both stability and adaptability to the company in two ways:

- by absorbing excessive resources in good times, they delay upward adjustments to the level of aspiration that the company is seeking to achieve;

- by providing a reservoir of easily mobilized resources in unfavorable periods, they make it possible to maintain or achieve a sufficient level of aspiration.

From a management point of view, slacks act outside of any strategic will. Most of the time, the authors tell us that companies are unaware of this. The nature of the change that is supported by this model corresponds to the search for new solutions in response to a problem that the company faces. The role of slacks is less clear if they are technologically driven innovations offering new solutions to the market (Mansfield, 1961). Today we know that the two types coexist.

More recently, in a reflection on the adaptability of organizations conducted with Levinthal (Levinthal and March, 1981), the contours of the concept became more precise and operational. Organizational slacks were defined as the difference between an organization's potential performance and its actual performance. This potential for the creation of value for the firm is close to Tobin's Q (Market Value over Book Value of Assets) or Marris' ratio, both defined in the field of finance and reflecting the gap between the firm's future performance and its past performance. Slacks reflect the fact that energy or resources that should have been dedicated to the pursuit of the organization's standard objectives are going to be used for something else. Examples include obvious inefficiencies in equipment that has been over-designed, over-qualified staff, undiscovered improvements in current equipment, or management relaxation of controls. Obviously, not all of these elements are justified in these terms in the company at the time when they are going to act. However, they contribute effectively to the company's adaptation and innovation. During a passage in his reflection on organizational change (March, 1981), he brings out an interesting category of slack. In it, the author clearly expresses his interactionist conception of the organization, that is to say, a phenomenon resulting essentially from the interaction of its members and not a

Porter-type configuration, well-ordered and implementing the strategy decided upon at the top. Throughout his work, March appears very optimistic about the organization's capacity to adapt and be creative. He does not think that it is as rigid as it is sometimes described, nor that its members offer so much resistance to change. While it is true that organizations sometimes ignore instructions, it is also true that sometimes from time to time, they carry them out with far more force than is expected. The slack here is not the unexpected orientation of the leeway that produces increased creativity, but the fact that some people surpass themselves in order to achieve the organization's objectives (March, 1981, p. 564). This exceeding can notably be due to the symbolic dimension of the actions undertaken, which sometimes pushes individuals to transcend themselves.

Symbolic reasoning

The reflection of the Danish philosopher, Kierkegaard, deeply affects March's thinking, especially his justification of Christian faith. In his time, this thinker fought against the vision of Christianity as an intellectual doctrine. If many French believers and philosophers of the Enlightenment tried to rationally demonstrate the existence of God, Kierkegaard asserted that all religion can only be justified by faith. Under no circumstances can religion be justified by its ethical consequences. According to Kierkegaard, those who seek to be justified in this way are not. This idea is found in the conclusion of March's book on organizational intelligence (March, 1999). For him: *"We can say a similar thing about university education and scholarship. They only become truly worthy of their names when they are embraced as arbitrary matters of faith, not as matters of usefulness. Higher education is a vision, not a calculation"* He also takes up the figure of Don Quixote, a wandering knight, totally disinterested in any kind of recognition and whose madness remains unjustified, as an emblematic figure of leadership. In a similar dynamic, the author considers that knowledge cannot be justified by its consequences, but only for the strong symbolic dimension it conveys. This dimension is that it consecrates our existence and affirms our humanity. Research, and the series of knowledge that it conveys, is no longer seen as an investment, but represents a true legacy for March. This original approach of explaining the characteristics of leadership by drawing on emblematic figures contained in literary works rather than looking for them in companies is similar to the work carried out by Bhabha (2007), who in order to understand postcolonial hybridity, worked on the literary

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3 accounts of authors from immigration (Salman Rushdie or Toni Morrison), which better than
4 anything else, testifies to this postcolonial heritage. The approach is risky, but highly
5 productive, and March has even made a film about it for elite leadership training at Stanford.
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7 The analysis in some MBA classes of figures like Don Quixote, Shakespeare's Othello or
8 the hero of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is rich in leadership experiences and symbolic lives.
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13 This perspective is essential for a proper understanding of the original and rich developments
14 that this author offers us. He often began his lectures at the Stanford Business School, the
15 Mecca of utilitarianism of managerial ideas that are taught, by explaining to his students that
16 it was not up to him to prove the relevance of his remarks. Already in his reflections on the
17 behavioral firm alongside Cyert (Cyert and March, 1963 and 1992), the commercial firm is
18 not only an instrument for manufacturing goods and services, it also appears as a temple and
19 a collection of sacred rituals. This part of his research on business behavior initiated with
20 Cyert in 1963, definitely constitutes the most accomplished part of the renewal of the vision
21 of the company proposed by the Carnegie School (Garvetti - Greve - Levinthal, 2012). Even
22 today its influence on the thinkers in the field remains considerable (Gavetti - Levinthal,
23 2004; Argote - Greve, 2007; Gavetti et al., 2007). While a microeconomic vision of the
24 company based on the market price of products and the quantities produced dominates, the
25 authors put forward the process that takes place inside the "black box" and particularly the
26 decision-making processes. They definitively turn their backs on an economic vision focused
27 on the production of large aggregates, to look at the decision-making mechanisms involving
28 the individual and the group. Alongside Simon who comes from cybernetic science, the
29 richness of March's background allows him to approach phenomena exclusively reserved for
30 economists with a sociology and especially psychology vision. The rational view of the firm
31 supported by the standard economic theory of the firm and axiomatized by Von-Neuman
32 Morgenstern (1947) and Savage (1954), with the work of M&S, finds a more natural
33 perspective, combining logic and psychology or intelligence and intuition. They take the
34 place of decision-making processes of choice carried out in limited spaces where the degree
35 of satisfaction is more often mobilized than optimization. Cristofaro (2017) provides a very
36 detailed analysis of bounded rationality focused on the work of M&S (1958). He shows the
37 way in which this concept is still alive in management work with extensions such as
38 prospect-theory (Kahneman-Tversky, 1979) or with the contribution of neurosciences in
39 management which introduces perception bias. Cyert & March tell us that in order to
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3 understand the functioning of our organizations, it is necessary to take into account the
4 behavior of actors with bounded rationality, adaptive processes, and the existence of
5 unresolved conflicts, as well as decisions that remain ambiguous. In the behavioral theory
6 of the firm, simple solutions are drawn from the reservoir of the company's routines and
7 practices, thus avoiding the use of foresight. We know that the role of foresight is essential
8 for innovation dynamics. In this respect, Cyert & March go further than the proposals of the
9 Carnegie School initiated by Simon in terms of anticipating the future. Instead of long-term
10 strategic anticipation, the authors argue that the company adopts a bounded rationality
11 behavior based on short-term reactions and feedback. Organizational expectations are
12 inaccurate and are often limited to a local search for solutions.

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21 Nonetheless, as a good follower of Kierkegaard's philosophy, March goes even further and
22 thinks that life is not primarily a choice, but an interpretation. The same applies to
23 individuals' involvement in organizations. If they invest so much in organizations, it is
24 because the symbols, myths and rituals that surround their involvement make them valuable
25 and indispensable.

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29 March explains in various passages of his research that choices and decision-making affect
30 certain aspects of modern corporate culture. This is the case, for example, with the notion of
31 change. According to the values of modern organizations the ability to adapt to a changing
32 environment is a strategic option whose persuasive power for managers is often their main
33 reason for being. The role of the manager is to enable the company to adapt in a changing
34 world. Change represents a sufficiently powerful symbolic value for any decision and
35 associated choices to dominate other decision factors. For engineers, doctors or managers,
36 the symbolic elaboration of change processes becomes as important, if not more important
37 than the results that comes from them. The set of symbolic actions attached to the process of
38 change is an essential driver of innovation in companies. Thus, the perception that
39 individuals have of their actions through the distorting mirror of symbols and myths, counts
40 more than their actual impact.

41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 SOURCES OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

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55 According to March, the adaptation to change of organizations will call for learning, which
56 far from being perfect, remains ambiguous and pushes the company to implement risky
57 exploration processes seeking innovation. Where standard organizational management and
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3 managerial efforts seek to suppress these determinants for improving organizational
4 effectiveness, March takes the opposite view.
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8 *Ambiguity in experience*
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10 Individuals in organizations change their understanding through their experiences and
11 interpretations, even if their learning is ambiguous. According to March, this ambivalent
12 organizational learning improves the adaptability of the organization, and thus the capacity
13 to innovate, adapt and create. Understanding the factors that affect learning is therefore
14 essential for him in order to better apprehend the way in which an organization carries out
15 its choices. Ambiguity is essential in organization because it evokes futures that leaders
16 could not have imagined.
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22 According to March and Olsen (1975), organizational intelligence, like individual
23 intelligence, is the result of two radically different processes. The first one is based on a
24 rational calculation that makes it possible to assign a consequence to a decision, with the
25 search for decisions that prove to be optimal. Most of the developments in decision theory
26 are based on this type of process, which optimizes choices and creates knowledge. However,
27 there is a second source of knowledge creation according to the authors. It is essentially
28 based on the experience that the members of the organization make through their actions,
29 their communication, their exchanges of points of view and their presuppositions. Indeed,
30 the individual draws on the feedback of past experiences to make choices between
31 alternatives in the present. This second source of knowledge creation does not exclude, but
32 complements the first one. The book of M&S already showed, through the concept of
33 bounded rationality, that there was no superhuman organization at the service of a strong
34 rationality where all the alternatives of choice would be known in advance, where the
35 consequence of each of them would be apprehensible in all circumstances, moreover, with
36 individual and collective preferences remaining stable over time (Lambert and Romelaer,
37 2001). Rather, bounded rationality reveals organizations that are intentionally rational, but
38 act on the basis of incomplete information and do not know the full range of choice
39 opportunities. In his work with Olsen, organizations adapt their behavior on the basis of
40 experiences that are based on interpretations. In this reflection on ambiguity, it is then
41 appropriate to ask how individuals and organizations make sense of their experiences and
42 how they modify their behavior based on the interpretation they give to these experiences.
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3 Here again, March addresses the problem of knowledge creation from an angle that few
4 authors have explored. Contrary to the perspective of Argyris and Schön (1978), who
5 propose the notions of learning loops (single, double or deuteronomic), March considers that
6 learning is above all "nested" in experience rather than in the announced paradigm shifts.
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8 Argyris and Schön's approach, widely shared by economics and management sciences,
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10 considers that a paradigm shift is imposed on everyone in the organization, and in a rather
11 harmonious and consensual way. For March, this harmony does not exist in organizations.
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13 One thing may seem smart to one part of the organization and not to another. Decisions are
14 intelligent if you take a long-term perspective and can be absurd in the short term. Here we
15 find March's resolutely interactionist vision, which considers decisions as the result of
16 interactions between individuals and groups whose preferences are not necessarily
17 harmonious. The ambiguity that reigns in organizations is one of the keys that allow us to
18 glimpse this alternative view, and even build the premises of a new theory of learning, where
19 myths, fiction, legends, folklore and illusions play their roles in the actions and creativity
20 that sometimes emerge. At the heart of this theory is the human experience and not
21 incantatory paradigm shifts. Simon (1997) speaks of decisions mobilizing reason rather than
22 rational decisions. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) propose a model of knowledge creation in
23 business based on transfer, where the tacit dimension and routine elaboration take an
24 essential place. Experience is at the heart of learning and particularly that of others because
25 very often (March, 1981), the innovator transfers and adapts external solutions. Contrary to
26 a vision oriented towards routines, historical dependence and strategic objectives, March
27 goes deeper into the foundations of a new theory of learning in a publication with Levitt
28 (Levitt and March, 1988). This theory puts forward more complex forms of organizational
29 learning based on experience between individuals whose interdependent actions (mutually
30 dependent ecological structures) seek to simultaneously adapt to the behavior of other
31 organizations in an environment where change is primarily endogenous. These
32 developments allow the emergence of fields of management research, which three decades
33 later, still animate our debates on organization as a privileged place for learning. The field
34 of the organizational learning research program and the resource-based view of the company
35 are largely inspired by them, considering organizational learning as "*encoding inferences
36 from history into routines that guide behavior*" (Levitt and March, p. 320). Concerning the
37 issue of building routines in an adaptive dynamic, Dosi, Nelson & Winter (2000) speak of
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3 building blocks of capability, and decision rules are recognized as central to the development
4 of the concept of dynamic capabilities (Teece, 2007; Felin et al., 2012).
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8 March – Olsen (1975) develop four forms of ambiguity, highlighting incomplete learning
9 cycles. First, role-constrained learning complicates the translation of individual beliefs into
10 individual action. Superstitious forms of learning then disconnect the actions taken from the
11 organization of responses provided by the environment. These are the interpretations of the
12 consequences of the choices made by the organization that play a role in this case. The
13 organization thinks that it influences its environment in some way when it does not. The
14 third form of ambiguity, known as audience ambiguity, appears when individuals learn, but
15 the organization does not act accordingly, the common presuppositions being, for example,
16 too entrenched to be questioned. The last form, simply called ambiguity, is probably the
17 most frequently described in cases of learning in complex situations. It occurs when the
18 cause and effect relationship is not clearly established between the responses of the
19 environment and the lessons learned by individuals within the organization. Learning takes
20 place, but is distorted by misunderstandings of the problems. March and Olsen postulate that
21 even if the presence of ambiguity does not improve the functioning of the organization, the
22 experience provided generates learning. This learning differs from learning that takes place
23 when there is no ambiguity, when all views converge, when everyone adheres to the
24 company's objectives and finds a harmonious place within them. Learning in situations of
25 ambiguity then strongly depends on organizational factors such as the trust or mistrust of
26 individuals among themselves, or the way they feel integrated or alienated within the
27 company. Depending on the perspective chosen or the condition experienced by the
28 individual, learning from the same experience may diverge completely. In a contemporary
29 reflection on this first contribution on ambiguity, March (1978) asserts that preferences are
30 rarely clearly defined in accordance with the premises of strong rationality, but appear
31 ambiguous, imprecise, inconsistent or even unstable over time. The result is a learning
32 process for the actors in the organization that is based on these ambiguous experiences.
33 These widen the scope of the consequences of the actions produced by the organization on
34 the basis of decision-making processes. Reliability is certainly weakened, but the resulting
35 creativity can be multiplied.
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58 *Exploration in organizations: glory and pitfalls of innovation*
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3 While many authors and numerous studies have praised innovation as a strategic option
4 through which the salvation of the company (through performance) comes, few studies have
5 looked in depth at the organizational prerequisites for creativity. March's work allows us to
6 better understand the complex phenomenon of innovation, as well as the handicaps that such
7 a dynamic can entail for the organization that implements it. Early on, he believes that most
8 new ideas claiming to be innovative, turn out to be bad ideas and that it is very difficult to
9 separate the good from the bad. Like the Nietzschean character Zarathustra quoted by
10 Bowden (2021, p. 11) who says '*Man must grow better and more evil,*' March reminds us
11 that in any change we must take the good as well as the bad. His conception of morality in
12 management is inspired by Nietzsche (1918) as it coexists with conscience and self-interest.
13 "*One of the most effective ways of maintaining morality is through the remorse exhibited*
14 *and felt at immoral action,*" he writes about decisions taken under ambiguity (March, 1988,
15 p.287). In this respect he is in line with Foucault's (1961) attack on positivism (on the
16 influence of Nietzsche on Foucault's thinking see Bowden, 2021). For March as for Foucault,
17 the world is an interpretation made of ambiguous oppositions between moral and immoral
18 actions, good and bad ideas, morality and self-interest, exploitation of routines and
19 exploration of new ways. All his thought is crossed by these oppositions.
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34 Certainly, he is the first to recognize the need to infuse creativity and innovation for the
35 survival of our organizations. However, his work in this area is a far cry from the age-old
36 strategic recipes of "ever more innovation" for "ever more performance". As if every
37 company, every organization was ultimately dedicated to producing creativity and
38 generating innovation. Few companies succeed in making the transition from invention to
39 innovation that becomes a commercial success on the market. Socialized invention as
40 defined by Maunoury (1968) is a high-risk activity. Even fewer companies achieve true
41 innovation success, which cannot be limited to a simple short-term profit, but should
42 represent a source of continuous growth over the long term (Tidd, Bessant and Pavitt, 2006).
43 Turning to short-term objectives with bounded rationality, Cyert & March (1963) argue, for
44 example, that companies favor imitating the solutions of others by adapting them if
45 necessary, rather than developing an internal but riskier solution. This is undoubtedly less
46 glorious than a first mover, but more pragmatic. In a collective work on the links between
47 technology and organizations (Goodman and Sproull, 1990), March and Sproull highlight
48 the two opposing attitudes towards innovation and, more specifically, its failures. In this
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3 reflection on the links between innovation and technology, the authors first present the
4 perspective of technology enthusiasts, who tend to attribute the slow adoption of innovation
5 to irrational forms of resistance. They then recount the perspective of skeptics, who tend to
6 focus on the fact that the new technology only weakly responds to identified needs or even
7 addresses a problem that does not exist. Solutions exist, or have been invented, but they are
8 often in search of problems. This theme dear to March is found at the heart of the Garbage
9 Can Model (Cohen, March and Olsen, 1972), constituting one of the pillars of decision-
10 making that he describes as organized anarchies. March asserts in a 1995 Vancouver
11 conference at the Academy of Management, whose script he published the same year
12 (March, 1995), that innovation can have disastrous consequences. Then for March,
13 “*organization are ambivalent toward imagination*” (Patriotta, 2019).

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15 Innovation is never approached head-on in March’s work. There is no text in his work that
16 studies it for itself, for example, through attempts to measure phenomenon economically, or
17 through the reconstruction of stories or monographies of ex-post success stories.
18 Nevertheless, the passages in which he addresses these questions are significant. Wilden et
19 ali. (2019), for example, attribute authorship of the ideas on Open Innovation to the work of
20 M&S (1958). The same position can be observed in a related field that March dealt with
21 extensively in his work, that of rationality and decision-making. Rather than adding elements
22 for reflection to the long list of works on the increasingly sophisticated way of evaluating
23 the consequences of our decisions, he works on the contexts that lead to the adoption of
24 certain forms of rationality.

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27 March is convinced that organizations need innovation and creativity to survive, and more
28 broadly, that we need new ideas in our lives to keep us from deadly boredom. The continuous
29 flow of new ideas gives us hope for a better future. Nevertheless, the author warns about
30 these strategies for change: “*Most heretics are burned, not sanctified; most inventions prove*
31 *worthless, not priceless. Most deviant organizations perish*” (March, 1995, p. 438). Just as
32 a doctor must warn of the risks associated with a treatment, “merchants” of innovation must
33 warn of the risks of belonging to a creative organization and the financial consequences of
34 failure. In what is probably his very first reflection on this question with his co-author Simon
35 (M&S, 1958), innovation is approached from the perspective of a problem-solving process.
36 Cybernetic design is obviously not far off, as innovation is seen as a stimulus that follows
37 dissatisfaction from inside or outside the firm. Although the authors have little experience
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3 with this phenomenon, which is beginning to become a real field of research, they have
4 nevertheless already perceived the importance that organizational mechanisms play in
5 facilitating innovation. The pressure of time and deadlines on innovators and the degree of
6 clarity of objectives are already widely evoked as essential attributes for the success of such
7 a program.
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11 For March, innovation comes from exploration activities in companies. For Segal-Bruce
12 (2017) who observe the behavior of famous managers, they remain outsiders in the inside of
13 the organization. March defines exploration as follows: “*Exploration includes things*
14 *captured by terms such as search, variation, risk taking, experimentation, play, flexibility,*
15 *discovery, innovation*” (March 1991b). But a phenomenon of inhibition supports routine
16 operating activities because “*reason inhibits foolishness; learning and imitation inhibits*
17 *experimentation*” (March, 1991b, p. 74).
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26 The following figure summarizes the backbone proposed by March, starting with individual
27 decisions and moving towards change through the functioning of organizations. For March,
28 an organizational structure is above all the result of the interactions that take place within it.
29 It is never an objective configuration constraining the action representing the invisible hand
30 of managers (e.g. the configurational vision of Chandler 1988), but a reality constructed by
31 the actors who interact there. Secondly, change for March is initiated by perceptions of
32 situations rather than by objective data. As Cristofaro (2017) shows, the role played by the
33 interpretations of managers is already very present in bounded rationality. Obviously,
34 perception will introduce biases that limit the rationality of top managers (Hambrick &
35 Mason, 1984). This bias of perception will figure prominently in the work of Kahneman –
36 Tversky (1979) in the Prospect Theory. They will be demonstrated in neurobiological studies
37 (Mosca, 2000). These biases of cognition will enrich disciplinary fields such as
38 neuroeconomics, neurofinance, and more recently neurostrategy (Cristofaro, 2017). For
39 March, these subjective perceptions are based on ambiguous learning that brings creativity,
40 and decision of exploration constantly challenged by short-term objectives that are more
41 reassuring for top and middle management.
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[Insert Figure]

DISCUSSION: MARCH'S TESTAMENT FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

March's goal has never been the constitution of a unified theory of organization. At the famous UCLA symposium organized by Koontz (1964), Simon's response, assumed by March, was scathing. For them, such an objective was precipitous because it was first necessary to explore the contours of the organizational phenomenon, which was still poorly understood, before hoping to make a science of it. Indeed, by focusing on the complexity of human behavior in organizations, M&S do not propose a theory of organization, but rather they build solid foundations for it because they are close to action. According to Burell & Morgan (1979) management and organization studies since Taylor and Mayo have formed four paradigms: functionlist, interpretivist radical, structuralist and radical humanist. But according to Jouillé (2018): *'These paradigms differ not on the nature of the ultimate substratum of organizational reality (stable, causally effective structures), but on where to locate that substratum and how to study it.'* While the focus of the object of study differs, all remain locked in a performative paradigm. March's work cannot be identified with any of these paradigms, not least because it describes modes of reasoning that depart from any form of optimization, but also because it admits contradictions and ambiguous situations that are incompatible within a general theory. The developments in the Garbage Can model are significant in this respect. In the simulation to which this model gives rise (Cohen - March - Olsen, 1992), the notion of an organization's performance is called into question. Is it a question of responding to as many problems as possible over a given period of time, or is it a question of responding as quickly as possible to those that arise? The simulation shows that the number of problems solved can be increased, but this will be at the expense of decision time. Similarly, an organization can reduce problem latency (the time during which the problem is posed, but not yet processed), but it will do so at the expense of the number of problems solved. Both performances are legitimate and depend on the nature of the organizations involved. This result can be related to the one obtained by Riad (2014), who in a historical perspective, shows that the moral characteristics of leaders are not stable over time. For example, the opulence of leaders does not have the same meaning today as it did in Ancient history. Thus, the fact that in the Garbage Can model, the very notion of performance differs from one organization to another, making any normative temptation of a general theory inoperative.

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3 Some researchers are concerned about the lack of empirical validation of the claims made in
4 M&S Organizations (Anderson & Lemken, 2019). For Bromiley et al. (2019), the
5 contributions of M&S have been underestimated or ignored in management studies. In the
6 second *Handbook of Organization Studies* (1996) following the one coordinated by March
7 thirty years earlier (March, 1965), not only is a tiny fraction of his work commented on, but
8 his contribution is reduced to a neo-rationalist decision-making theory (Reed, 1996).
9 Focusing also on the Organizations of M&S, a more balanced tribute is paid to him by Weick
10 (2017) who considers that his work stands on the shoulders of giants or constitutes a
11 touchstone on which to build a theory of organization. He notes that bounded rationality
12 gives rise to alternative rationalities that allow intuitive actions with ambiguous
13 consequences and often built on incomplete information to be taken into account in
14 organizations. For him, a process of reification is at work which emphasizes the perception
15 of individuals rather than their actual performance. While accepting the importance of
16 developments around bounded rationality to better understand human reasoning, I tend to
17 agree with Cristofaro (2017) that a unified theory remains a utopia “..reaching a general
18 theory of rationality that is able to determine all the unique implications of individual and
19 collective behaviors, is at least utopian; in fact, the totality of variables and their interrelated
20 mechanisms that govern our reasoning are still unknown.” (p.185).
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37 At the end of this investigation, I would add that the strength of what March leaves us with
38 is that his vision of the organization celebrates the life that animates it. Far from any ideology
39 or normative vision, he naturally recognizes the ambiguities, the part played by roles, the
40 flamboyant behaviors (such as Don Quixote or Othello) far from a rational optimistic
41 conception. In March's view, organizational actors often decide without understanding the
42 choice procedures (Garbage Can), individuals sometimes invest themselves well beyond
43 what is expected of them (organizational slack) and may decide against their own value
44 (role-constrained decisions). Centered on the realization of the individual rather than on the
45 collective, this conception of the organization is undoubtedly the one that is the most
46 adaptable to the future evolution of our companies, but the least ductile for forging a theory.
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56 March's ideas are often against the tide, or even provocative, with regard to management
57 paradigms and standards. They are often based on his intuitions, on the results of simulation
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3 models or on the simple observation of cutting-edge literary figures. This is undoubtedly a
4 weakness in terms of the scientific proof that must be provided for them to be seen as
5 perfectly serious and beyond reproach. They should certainly be tested to give them the
6 strength of conviction. This is not always simple, as shown, for example, by the very limited
7 number of applications of the Garbage Can Model to this day (Romelaer - Huault 1996;
8 Cusin 2007). The applications relate almost exclusively to case studies (see Romelaer, 1994)
9 and have not given rise to direct statistical studies. It has been constructed as a model of
10 reality based on case studies. More generally, while March's ideas remain modern and
11 relevant (Gavetti - Greve - Levinthal - Ocaso, 2012), they now benefit from new
12 developments in various fields such as psychology. Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly on the
13 methodological level that progress has been strongest. If March's work, much of which is
14 based on case studies, were subject to the methodological requirements of good qualitative
15 research (Yin, 2008; Goffin et al., 2019), some arguments would probably be less successful.
16 Indeed, Yin would in many passages require transparency of the empirical protocol. If we
17 take March's contribution to the Garbage Can Model as an example, the case study
18 dimension is barely sketched out at the beginning of the article (and yet a lot of field work
19 on university governance has been done with his co-author, Mickael Cohen). In terms of
20 case-study-based innovation research, Goffin et al. (2019) lay the groundwork for what
21 should be unassailable academic research. With the criteria they propose in terms of research
22 design, data collection and data analysis in particular, they point out that most research on
23 this topic over the last two decades would no longer pass the threshold of editorial
24 acceptability. Even so, we can also agree that with these requirements, many ideas and
25 concepts would never have reached us. March (2005), using his sense of his own formulas,
26 considers that a piece of writing often flows beyond its author by suggesting meanings to
27 the reader that he did not foresee. The text thus escapes the author's control a bit like images
28 suggested in a poem.

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48 More generally, there is a wide and sometimes confusing variety of methodologies employed
49 by March. They range from mathematical models, to econometric simulations, to pure
50 speculation drawn from famous literary figures or great myths. This pluralism of methods
51 (see the chapter on these methods in Weil's 2000 book) has been present in his work since
52 his thesis where he already uses several econometric models to confirm a correlation. This
53 is an obvious weakness of March's work, if we place it in the perspective of constructing a
54 theory of management. However, this culture of interlocking methods also demonstrates the
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3 infinite respect that this researcher has for human reasoning. In his supervision of doctoral
4 research, March never imposed a method. He always left the choice of weapons open. But
5 once chosen, he remained uncompromising about the rigor of the arguments used in
6 coherence with one's choice. Travelling through the work of this author, or rubbing
7 shoulders with him in the construction of academic research, always privileges creativity
8 over the pretension of modeling our world. In search of some kind of academic recognition,
9 March favored the emergence of new ideas in his work. This is undoubtedly his sense of
10 play that he acquired throughout his experiences. It also privileges the understanding of the
11 causal shades underlying particular phenomena that account for a complex reality compared
12 to the proposal of general paradigms. If one accepts that in management science there is a
13 multiplicity of methods referring to the opposition between Cartesian and experimental
14 approaches, between positivism and constructivism, March's work is a perfect illustration of
15 this. In management, a plumber can become a scientist. However, they never fall into the
16 excesses of "*blind technique, pure ideology, generalized sophistry and mutilating scientism*"
17 (Martinet, 1990).
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31 A business school student discovering March's work could easily be disconcerted by the
32 insufficiency of management methods proposed and by the lack of operability of the
33 concepts developed. The shortage of reassuring certainties may disturb a student when, like
34 a doctor, one is looking at all the forms of pathology developed by an organism in
35 transformation. In his teaching, March avoids the utilitarian temptation that often makes the
36 reputation of these schools claiming to train the managers of tomorrow. Throughout his
37 teaching involvement in these institutions, he has never considered a student as a consumer
38 thirsting for directly operational managerial solutions. For March, neither consultants nor
39 professors can claim to say what should be done because, unlike managers, they do not know
40 the context of the decision. Therefore, when reading his work, students and young
41 researchers will perhaps have the feeling of a greater lack of understanding of organizational
42 phenomena. This is because for March, the social scientist must help to understand rather
43 than trying to produce effective actions. Generating empirical knowledge is perhaps a
44 modest vision of science compared to the objective of wanting to produce operational
45 solutions or theoretical paradigms (Kuhn, 1970), but it is a necessary step in the construction
46 of our social sciences.
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3 March did not believe in the transposition of the scientific paradigm into the field of social
4 sciences. He demonstrated this in his early research in the 1960s alongside Simon by
5 defending the concept of bounded rationality. He confirmed his intention a little later with
6 Cyert (1963-1992) by proposing a behavioral theory of the firm, i.e. a theory based on the
7 observation of actors' behavior. Essentially, he could not conceive that at the social level our
8 organizations are driven by well-controlled cause/effect relationships. His conception is
9 closer to that of engineers who, in order to obtain a state in a system, simply specify the
10 minimal conditions. The realization of a desired effect results from the implementation of
11 sufficient conditions without claiming to master the interactions between the different parts
12 of the system. In all his research, he tries to leave behind the positivist paradigm to go
13 towards the real behavior of companies. As Segal-Bruce (2017) explain about the practices
14 of Welch at GE, it is about imposing an ethics of authenticity instead of scientific
15 management.
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28 A complete reading of his work shows us that everything he has undertaken is dedicated to
29 theories of adaptation. In doing so, he touches upon an essential problem of our human
30 societies, which conditions their survival. Within this very broad framework, March was
31 more specifically interested in the theories of the diffusion of experience, decision making,
32 innovation and organizational change. In March's world, economic agents do not maximize
33 profit or utility in comfortable time horizons where they take time for rational calculation
34 and anticipatory foresight. For him, the reality of organizations is more rudimentary. It is
35 made up of trial-and-error processes integrating behavioral variables where the attention of
36 the agents in action is limited and where the absence of an optimization objective is explicit.
37 This realism comes partly from the fact that organizations are, most of the time, confronted
38 with very short decision time horizons where ambiguity is the order of the day rather than
39 the control of cause/effect relationships.
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49 But it is not enough to refer to bounded rationality or to mobilize the concept of trust in a
50 model to follow March's ideas. Vigilance is necessary, and March himself was aware of the
51 possible drifts resulting from an essentially "utilitarian" use of his research. Some economic
52 research has, for example, has integrated the idea of bounded rationality, but it is rendered
53 meaningless in models that are more rational than bounded. The same applies to the concept
54 of trust, which in some developments of decision theories is reduced to a simple reputation
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3 effect in repeated dynamic games. In order for this pragmatic and more natural than rational
4 conception of science to endure, and for our much-needed troublemaker never to die, we
5 must remain vigilant against these sterile utilitarian drifts.
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10 This behavioral theory of the firm has already borne fruit by irrigating, in the decade
11 following its publication, numerous fields of research such as the theories of teams
12 (Marschak - Radner, 1972), of incremental adaptation (Di Maggio Powell, 1983), of
13 transaction costs (Williamson) or of agency theory (Fama, 1980). The adoption of a
14 deliberately normative approach to the firm, as close as possible to real behavior, is what, in
15 our opinion, gives March's research its strength and the reason for its continued relevance.
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21 CONCLUSION

22 It is not difficult to show that March's work is in line with a postmodern intellectual approach
23 (Donaldson, 1996), given the organizational functioning he gives us to see. It is full of
24 reasoning that welcomes complexity and ambiguity, sources of interpretations of a social
25 object that looks more like a construction than an objective reality. In this social object,
26 individuals circulate who are animated as much by reason as by madness, attitudes that are
27 far removed from a ideal phantasized world of normative behaviors with an essentially
28 performative purpose.
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36 Our contribution proposes a logic that the author did not necessarily follow linearly during
37 the course of his thought over several decades and which would translate his contributions
38 at each stage of what we characterize as the organizational phenomenon. This path starts
39 from the individual who is at the origin of the action and the decision. What March says in
40 various passages of his writings is very different from the image given by the economic
41 notion of homo economicus and has its roots in the work initiated with Simon, more
42 particularly in the GSIA experience which gave rise to the notion of bounded rationality.
43 This concept, which Simon constantly enriched throughout his academic research by giving
44 it dimensions that were further and further removed from standard performativity, was a
45 useful stepping stone for March to go even further by incorporating organizational
46 dimensions relating to the functioning of structures and their desire for change. By delving
47 into the logics of exploration that are at work in organizational structures, he has brought out
48 concepts that have gone largely unnoticed and that reinforce the postmodern roots of March's
49 thinking. These central concepts in organizations push their mode of operation far beyond
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3 normative representations by showing the importance of organizational slack resources,
4 references to myths in action, ambiguity of knowledge and the great leap into the void that
5 the innovation process sometimes involves. The model we propose is obviously not a theory.
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7 It is in keeping with the idea of presenting a compass that will allow us to better orient
8 ourselves in March's work and in this social concept of organization that has been the object
9 of all his attention.

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11 Thus, March cannot be reduced to M&S. The use of literary figures allows him to detach
12 himself from neo-rationalist forms of decision making that are always in search of coherence
13 and decisions that appeal to reason. According to Jouillé (2018), structural-functional-
14 Positivism frameworks tend towards performativity, but if we accept that social phenomena
15 are non-predictable, they cannot be finally performative. As in real life, leaders can make
16 decisions far removed from the consequentialist concern with maximizing profits or seeking
17 rewards for action in the form of utility. Characters in novels or plays better reflect this
18 human part of the decision where the pleasure of daily action simply allows us to assert our
19 social identity.

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21 March is difficult to grasp in his entirety because he is on all fronts of the organizational
22 phenomenon, from decision making, to learning and change, to conflict management. The
23 strength of what he highlights is that he has tackled all the stages of the organizational
24 dynamics of the microeconomic decision-making process, its routine functioning, its
25 transformation and innovation. One comes away from this dive into the world of March with
26 the feeling that one has a better understanding of these organizations because the decisions
27 that are made and the behavior that is observed are in line with what one perceives of reality.
28 Individuals are rational, but sometimes act without calculation in accordance with an ideal.
29 Leadership is a balancing act between these opposing elements according to March
30 (Patriotta, 2019). They have values they believe in, but the theatre of decision-making forces
31 them to play roles that deviate from them. March honored life too much not to try to keep
32 science from straying away from it.

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34 In this article we have chosen not to confine March, as is often the case, to his early
35 collaboration with Simon through his participation in the GSIA. A broader look at March's
36 work clearly reveals a distancing from this successful offensive against the proponents of
37 strong economic rationality (Von Neuman - Morgenstern 1947; Savage 1954) and which led
38 to the concept of Bounded Rationality. In various works after M&S (1958), March went
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3 beyond the framework of bounded rationality, which had certainly broadened what could be
4 considered rational, but remained clearly inscribed in a performative perspective of
5 management whose intention is to control decisions and predict their results. With other
6 authors with whom he associated, he explored different forms of rationality, such as when
7 decisions are made as role based (March - Olsen, 1975). In the Garbage Can model, he broke
8 with the performative objective to describe indeterminate decision behavior based on logics
9 of temporal proximity with past decisions and on processes of exploration by trial and error
10 (Cohen - March - Olsen, 1972). In so doing, he renders impossible any prospect of a unified
11 theory of management, a chimera in which he never believed. For he admits that
12 organizational phenomena are neither predictable, nor therefore determined in advance
13 (Joullié, 2018). If the actors in the organization lose the idea of optimizing in the Garbage
14 Can, they gain a freedom of action from experiential learning. This is in line with the
15 managerial proposals outlined by Peter Drucker (1986) who proposes managerial freedom
16 instead of a management theory.
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29 Although it does not seek to achieve a theory of management, March's work is nonetheless
30 a major guide to understanding managerial decisions and organizational behavior. His
31 developments on the role played by experience, intuition, resource slacks and myths are all
32 compasses for understanding the human reasoning behind decisions. In order to identify his
33 contributions, we have divided March's work into three parts, from individual decisions to
34 the collective dimension of organizational functioning and its reinvention. We first analyzed
35 his contributions to the premises of decision making, highlighting the influence of
36 experimentation on learning, intuition in the modes of reasoning and the logic of
37 appropriation through roles. Secondly, through the interactions of individuals in
38 organizations, March's various works reveal two dimensions influencing the functioning of
39 the organization. On the one hand, these are the generation of slack resources that accelerate
40 certain processes and orientate behavior (such as the primacy of business over engineering
41 in certain situations), and on the other hand, the inspiring role of symbolic actions for the
42 actors, making it possible, for example, to obtain support for change. Finally, faced with the
43 need to transform themselves, organizations will, for March, go through processes suggested
44 by ambiguous knowledge and through the highly risky exploration of unknown territories
45 by seeking innovation and creativity. It should be noted that in this attempt to articulate
46 March's contributions to management, neither the interactions within organizations, nor the
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3 perception of change are predetermined. They appear spontaneously in the course of action
4 and are the result of it. March's work is rooted in postmodernity because it describes a
5 management where reason and foolishness coexist (March, 1981), free from any unifying
6 theory that is necessarily false and simplifying (Soullié, 2018).
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11 One hundred years after its inception, the management literature is still far from a unified
12 theory of the organization or management. However, we can say without too much confusion
13 that in a large number of his works, he has laid a solid foundation (Weick, 2017) for
14 understanding the organizational determinants that would enable such a change to be
15 envisaged without too much disruption. March's work promises us many extensions. Today,
16 for example, we may have more need for a inter-firm behavioral theory (Garvetti et al., 2012)
17 given the evolution of business networks and the openness of innovation. But in this
18 perspective, he leaves us the accuracy and attention necessary to produce concepts that do
19 not betray the shortcomings of reality.
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29 The limitation of our work is that it remains essentially speculative as to its influence on
30 future research. Recent concepts such as the notion of effectuation (Sarasvathy, 2001) in
31 entrepreneurship seem very promising to characterize original, but reason-based managerial
32 behavior as stated by Simon (1997). However, historical hindsight may not be sufficient to
33 measure the robustness of the concept. As we have said, March is very inspiring, he is much
34 quoted by researchers and a theoretical filiation of new approaches should be done. We have
35 not been able to do this here.
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43 March wrote about organization, "*There is a bit of magic in the world and madness in human*
44 *beings yet organization is one of the many things that fail to produce miracles*" (March,
45 1971). It is undoubtedly in his poetry books he wrote that he found the beauty he was looking
46 for, more than in the academic concepts where beauty is often lacking. What fascinates
47 March about the beauty produced in poetry is that it says more than the poet knows. The
48 same should be true of the vision produced by leaders. If March seeks eternity in his poetry
49 and accepts an expiration date for the concepts he has highlighted in his research, we believe
50 that his traces will be lasting because they are close to real behaviors. By pointing out the
51 dark side of our organizational behavior in our decision-making, in our learning and in our
52 efforts to innovate, he does not exclude consequentialist. However, he reminds us that rule-
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based decisions and ambiguous learning are as much a part of our behavior as are more compliant forms.

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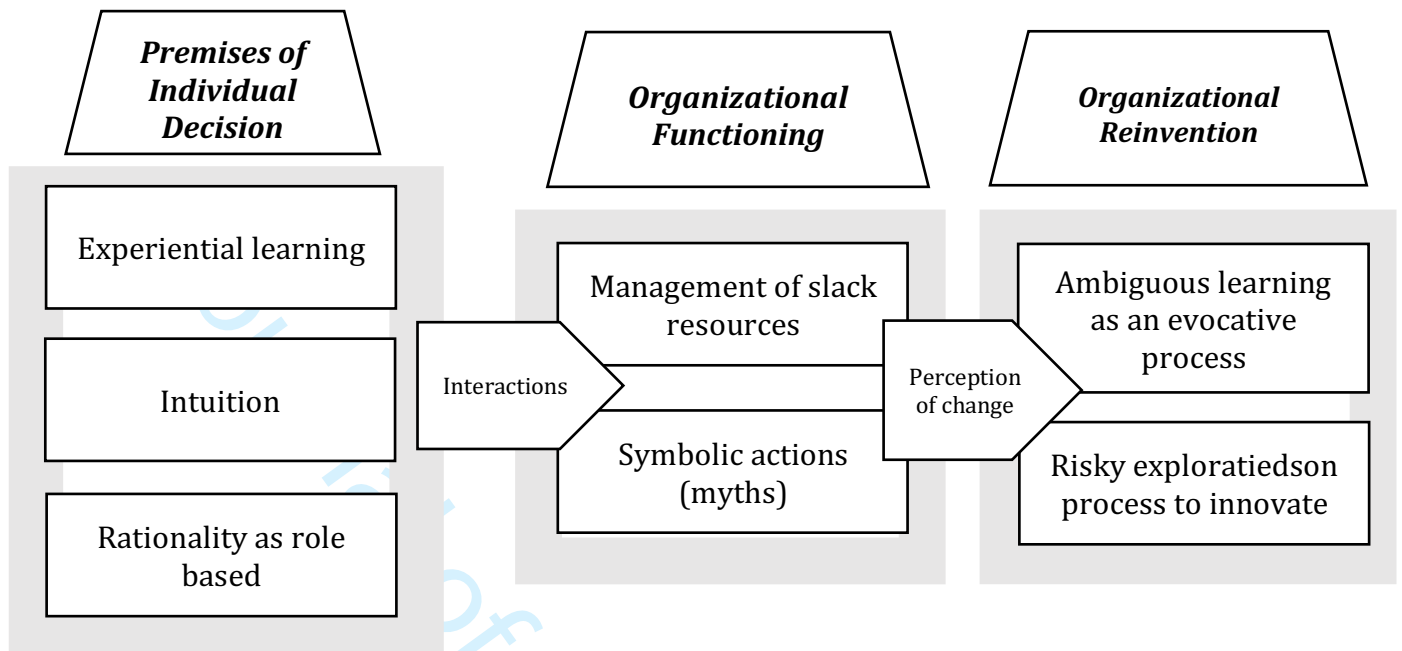


Figure : Guides for organizational functioning and adaptation according to March (source: the author)