

REVIEW

THE ORGANIZATION MAN. By William H. Whyte, Jr. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956. Pp. 429. \$5.00.

NICHOLAS BERYDAEV wrote somewhere that there is nothing ontological about individualism. In modern industrial society the individual has—as many an individual believes—tended to wither away. His choice of paths, he thinks, is hedged in ever more narrowly. He is jostled by his fellows, hectored by the state, “conditioned” by his school, “motivated” by his merchants, “propagandized” by his publicists. The voice is passive; the terms, barbarous. Worst of all, he begins to suspect that he is losing not only the power to resist but even the power to discern whether and what he ought to resist. Don Marquis’ worm hated robins until he was swallowed by one, but he changed his mind as his worm-person was transmuted into robin-tissue.

The Organization Man, by William H. Whyte, Jr., is addressed to this problem, the seriousness of which may be measured by the book’s swift climb to a place near the top of the list of best-selling non-fiction. According to the end-papers, Mr. Whyte, who is Assistant Managing Editor of *Fortune*, “spent three years of original research and study” in an “attempt to trace the long-range shift . . . [that American organizational] life is bringing about in Americans’ personal values.” Parts of the book were published from time to time in *Fortune*. Thus the robin indulges the worm.

Mr. Whyte’s book comprises a series of journalistic reflections, garnished with wisps of social science. He opens with the thesis that America used to set great store by “the Protestant Ethic,” of which his closest brief definition seems to be “the thought that pursuit of individual salvation through hard work, thrift, and competitive struggle is the heart of the American achievement”¹; and that that ethic has declined, faster in fact than in myth, to be replaced by “a Social Ethic” explicitly defined as “that contemporary body of thought which makes morally legitimate the pressures of society against the individual.”² He attributes the decline of the Protestant Ethic to the growth in size and inertia of organizational bureaucracy, especially in private corporations, and to the attacks leveled by pragmatists and muckrakers on nineteenth-century traditionalism.

The Social Ethic—pervasive, elastic, not always explicit—is “bound,” says Mr. Whyte, by three interrelated “denominators.” The first is scientism, “the promise that with the same techniques that have worked in the physical sciences we can eventually create an exact science of man.”³ The second is “belonging-

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1. P. 4.
 2. P. 7.
 3. P. 23.

ness," teaching that a man's first loyalty should be to some group—larger, presumably, than the family—within which he can dilute or purge his conflicts and tensions. The third is "togetherness," which is the systematic illusion that groups, and in particular groups meeting face to face, can create new ideas,⁴ and that spontaneous cooperation dispenses with the need for leadership. Each of these "binding denominators" appears to be a corrupt, or perfected, form of a discipline that Mr. Whyte respects in its fit place: scientism is what the social engineers have made out of Social Studies, belongingness is a perversion of the findings of Human Relations, and togetherness is a vulgar form of Group Dynamics.

While Whyte has collected many fatuous and sometimes outrageous examples of the worst of the thought behind the Social Ethic, he does not let his evidence speak for itself; he pounds home his condemnation lest the reader be seduced by the foe. His ultimate purpose is propagandistic, as he is candid enough here and there to admit, and his main thrust is limited to what he thinks is the propaganda need of the moment:

"To turn about and preach that conflicting allegiances are absolute virtues is not justified either. But *at this particular time* the function they perform in the maintenance of individual freedom is worthy of more respect."⁵

The shift that Whyte discerns from Protestant Ethic to Social Ethic roughly parallels the shift from inner-directedness to other-directedness, described by David Riesman. Whyte looks at the Protestant Ethic, and Riesman at the inner-directed man, almost as the heroes of Disraeli's novels used to regard their heroines: "with a glance blended of mockery and affection."

After this framework of "ideology," Mr. Whyte proceeds to consider the Organization Man's training and testing. The section on training begins with a sharply etched description of the prevailing attitudes of college seniors toward work in these good times. "Come graduation, they do not go outside to a hostile world; they transfer" to training programs in corporations.⁶ They prefer sheltered big business to risky small; technique to content (Mr. Whyte is not troubled by the twilight zone between contrasted terms); staff work to production; teamwork to leadership. These attitudes, we are told, were produced by vocationalist, non-"fundamental" education—the subject of one of Mr. Whyte's angriest and least successful chapters.

Readers may wish that college students took more good courses in English, philosophy, languages, history and economics (not that such courses must be good), and fewer mediocre or poor courses in business, chemistry, engineering, personality development, mental hygiene, advertising and public relations (not

4. They sometimes can. Whyte, trying to impart vehemence to his denial that groups can supplant the individual, comes close to saying that persons in groups can never create better than (or differently from) individuals out of groups.

5. P. 46. (Emphasis added.) Other examples of this self-conscious pamphleteering may be found at pp. 12, 48-49, 58, 396.

6. P. 63.

that such courses must be mediocre or poor). In this book they will find their prejudices applauded, rather than confirmed.

Mr. Whyte chides businessmen for recruiting specialists in preference to generalists, even though some businessmen in high places still have kind words for liberal education. Does this preference reflect only the recruiter's predispositions or training, or also the recruiter's belief that much generalist training is inferior, even at the collegiate level, to much specialist training? If the choice lies between two applicants who have just been graduated with similar grades from mediocre colleges, it may make sense to pick the man who has taken many scientific and technical courses over the man who has had only an exposure to what passes there for the liberal arts. Mr. Whyte concedes that graduates of "the Ivy League universities and some of the smaller liberal arts colleges . . . remain in great demand" and that snobbery is not the whole explanation.⁷

Mr. Whyte has nested into the section on training a seven-page anecdote on his own experience in the Vick Chemical Company in the late thirties. The Protestant Ethic still prevailed, and aspirants like Mr. Whyte were sent out on the road to sell Vick's products to grocers and druggists. They battled with the customers, their fellow-trainees, and their prior notions of (may one say?) the Christian Ethic. It is a very funny set piece, and it shows Mr. Whyte at his reportorial best. His nostalgic admiration for the Protestant Ethic may contribute to the liveliness of the account.

Personality tests stir the author to particular rage. He finds their precision spurious and their assault on privacy intolerable. He has attached an appendix, prominently advertised by his publishers, entitled "How to Cheat on Personality Tests." The advice seems to have been meant half-satirically, half-practically. (Give conventional answers when in doubt; remember that you loved your father and your mother but your father a little bit more, that you like things pretty well the way they are, that you never worry much about anything, that you don't care for books or music much, that you love your wife and children but don't let them get in the way of company work; stay in character; be empathic to the values of the test-maker; if you must own to some neurosis, choose hypermania; don't be too dominant; incline to conservatism; don't split hairs; match your answers to the company and the job.) One wonders how many copies of this best-seller are bought by Organization Men hoping to improve their scores on their next test, and how many are bought by testers hoping to revise that next test to trap readers of the book. Even if the tests are not revised, expressions of conformity to the ideals of the testers may serve the ends of the Organization, or at least what the Organization believes to be its ends, by disposing those who have expressed them to believe in them.⁸

7. P. 99.

8. Cf. BAUER, INKELES & KLUCKHOHN, *HOW THE SOVIET SYSTEM WORKS* 166 (1956):

"It is a commonplace of psychology that the outlook of any group upon the world and experience is determined and reflected to an important extent by the clichés they

Misled by the ads, the blurbs, and the title, the reader may have come to *The Organization Man* in the belief that it would give him some insight into the work done by the organization man. Such a reader (as Time, Inc., would put it) errs. For all that the author has to say of that phase, the Organization Man might almost as well not work at all. Mr. Whyte repeats some overdone and familiar comments on the sterility of most committee work;⁹ he alleges that most corporations are slowing the march of scientific research by the application of the Social Ethic, which blunts the sharp corners of creative genius. Aside from this and the chapter about on-the-job training, there is almost nothing on the Organization Man's life in the Organization: how he operates, whom he sees and talks to, what memos he reads and writes; what decisions he makes or ducks or defers, or tries to persuade others to make or duck or defer; how he defends himself; what goals he aims at, for himself and for his organization; how he guides or leads his juniors and advises his seniors; how he deals with competitors, customers, suppliers, labor, government, stockholders. There are several vague references to the effect that the Social Ethic must have on the character of these activities, but without a descriptive base the comparison between its effect and that of the Protestant Ethic does not reach deep and the analysis churns with small yield.

Not much space is spent on the top executive. In skimping his attentions to the men at the top Mr. Whyte may have been influenced by the attitudes of the younger Organization Men who, he says in a happy metaphor, have come to think of the Top not as the apex of a sharply converging pyramid but as a misty cloudland with lots of room, reached by roughly parallel ladders of promotion. Or he may have been influenced rather by the fact that the editors of *Fortune* have recently put out another book devoted wholly to the executive life.¹⁰ In Mr. Whyte's book, top executives appear in detail only in two chapters under "The Neuroses of Organization Man," which document the assertion that they, unlike the majority of Organization Men, are "fundamentally . . . motivated by the Protestant Ethic."¹¹ The assertion may perplex one who has just read Mr. Whyte's statement to the opposite effect:

"Within business there are still many who cling resolutely to the Protestant Ethic, and some with as much rapacity as drove any nineteenth-century buccaneer. But only rarely are they of The Organization. Save for a small, and spectacular, group of financial operators, most who adhere to the old creed are small businessmen, and to group them as part of the 'business community,' while convenient, implies a degree of ideological kinship with big business that does not exist."¹²

continually use, by the habitual premises which they accept. No group which over many years preaches a doctrine, however much with tongue in cheek, has its thinking uncolored. If a person says something often enough and consistently enough, he will come to believe or half believe it himself—whatever his initial motives of expediency or cynical manipulation."

9. *E.g.*, pp. 46-53, 220-25.

10. EDITORS OF FORTUNE, *THE EXECUTIVE LIFE* (1956).

11. P. 141.

12. P. 19.

The two statements taken together seem to mean that most members of an Organization are not top executives; and that the Protestant Ethic still "motivates" many small businessmen, a few Organization Men below the rank of top executive, most top executives, and a small group of financial operators. That still adds up to a lot of (ethical) Protestants.

The profile of the top executive stresses the dominance of work in his personality and interests. He works between fifty and sixty hours a week, four out of five week-nights; when at home he does his business reading and some business telephoning. He would work no harder if his taxes were lower. He works because he feels he must, because he wants to express himself. (Mr. Whyte is reporting on interviews, and takes the responses more or less at face value, a refreshing throwback to the days before psycho-Genesis when the earth was without Fromm, and Freud.) His work means more to him than does his family or his leisure. He does some civic work when he cannot shirk it. Like non-executives, he laments that he has too little time for non-business reading, for non-deductible music, for non-therapeutic hobbies. The new Social Ethic, with its involvement in group work, committee discussion, official entertainment, non-directive persuasion, and conformity upward and downward, creates tension and frustration for the executive. He is caught between the old way in which he believes and the new way with which he must make his peace. Mr. Whyte raises, only to dismiss, the question whether the difference between the attitudes of his Organization Men at the lower levels and the attitudes of his top executives is a difference of stages in the life-cycle, more than a difference of the generations.

The last main section of the book is a long, specific, first-hand, first-rate social report on the new suburbia. Its core is research done by the author and some assistants on Park Forest, outside Chicago, in 1952-53, 1955 and 1956, but comparisons are drawn to other new suburbs near San Francisco, Philadelphia and elsewhere, as well as to California mining camps of the forty-niners and Israeli kibbutzim. Mr. Whyte reports on the effect of mobility, both vertical and regional; on gregariousness, trends to conformity, lack of privacy, mutual helpfulness; on patterns of consumption, taste, and debt; on the pressure to civic participation; on the orientation of social activities toward the children. His keen perception, his ear for representative conversation, his sympathy for the subjects of his study, and above all the wealth and immediateness of his observations make this section a delight. Mostly. One can afford to overlook the pretenses to universal validity, the ostentatious maps, the ragged statistics, the general statements supported by single illustrations. It still is the best part—the last of Whyte, for which the first was made.

Much of the book is written in high-flying journalese. Mr. Whyte celebrates the uses of "Lamb and Swift and Shakespeare" as models of business English,¹³ but he is writing about the general, not the particular, training of the Organization Man. His precept compels more respect than his example. What would

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happen to him, one wonders, if he began to write in the language of Lamb and Swift and Shakespeare for *Fortune*? Would he still be able to indulge his quaint practice of backing into his sentences,¹⁴ familiar to lawyers in the Cardozo Inversion¹⁵ but perhaps here to be laid to Luce Usage?¹⁶

Beyond this and other infelicities, the style hops from the familiar to the hortatory to the tractarian and back again. Is the book to be read as humor, as reporting, as social comment, as social philosophy, as a sermon, as social science or as a mixture? One would not find fault with a writer for defying classification, but I wonder whether the book straddles in order to claim the prestige of several categories while evading the standards applicable in each.

For instance, Mr. Whyte builds his effects by accumulated illustration, apt association and repetition, rather than by precision, depth or deliberation. Partly for this reason, much of the book is strangely fungible; the reader may often fear that he has lost his place, only to find that it does not much matter. It is a little like dropping in from time to time after work at a businessmen's bar and hearing snatches of a monologue delivered daily, with variations, by one of the regular customers. Yet parts of the book pretend to a more austere achievement and invite a more rigorous appraisal.

The author often covers himself, as reporters often do, by recording a series of facts, or clusters of facts, in matching pairs; the set that fits the conclusions is played forehand, and the set that conflicts is played backhand. ("Although P, yet it is highly significant that Q." "Some observers have commented on P-1; this may be true, but I find it ominous and disturbing that Q-1." "The dominating attitude in this respect is P-2; one may see now and again some Q-2 fast fading away.") At times he acknowledges the process:

"In citing the amount of moving around as evidence that many executives are resisting the organization, I recognize that I thereby have somewhat undercut my argument about the long-range trend. I can only say (1) I am happy that the facts show the resistance; (2) I hope that they continue to. But it is hard to be persuaded that trends will automatically keep on balancing each other out."¹⁷

How reliable are these frequent judgments of comparative significance?

Whyte's mode of proof makes free use of semi-statistics: figures which, if they were combined with other figures not given, might prove something. An

14. *E.g.*, "Vital they are to executing ideas, but not to creating them" (p. 52); "But an inclination there is" (p. 112); "But a shift there will be for all that" (p. 128); "Tensions they suffer for the suppression of their differences" (p. 357); "for all the differences in particulars, dominant is a growing accommodation to the needs of society" (p. 7); and, oddest of all, "Counter-trends there are. There always have been, and in the sweep of ideas ineffectual many have proved to be" (p. 9).

15. *E.g.*, "Many cases there are in which . . ." *Marks v. Gray*, 251 N.Y. 90, 92, 167 N.E. 181, 182 (1929); "Something, however, there must be . . ." *Kerr S.S. Co. v. Radio Corp.*, 245 N.Y. 284, 291, 157 N.E. 140, 142 (1927); "But timely too is the reminder, . . ." *Jones v. SEC*, 298 U.S. 1, 32 (1936).

16. *Cf.* Wolcott Gibbs's profile of Time, Inc. come years ago: "Backward ran sentences until reeled the mind." *New Yorker*, Nov. 28, 1936, p. 21.

17. Pp. 165-66. Other examples may be found at pp. 128, 129.

example is the way he deals with the assertion that the decline in the study of the humanities is relative but not absolute because "the increase in vocational training has accommodated those who previously would not have gone to college. . . ."¹⁸ He attacks this assertion, not by comparing different periods but by presenting a snapshot taken of percentages of fields of concentration at one particular time. To conclude from the snapshot that "the rate of decline has been so steep that it has not been offset by the increase in the numbers of people going to college" seems casual.¹⁹

Again, he deplores what he says, perhaps rightly, is the low quality of students in the field of education. He seeks support for his position in a study of IQ scores for graduate students in various fields. "Graduate students of education score abysmally: of the people in the bottom fifth of graduate students in all fields, students working for advanced degrees in education account for 46 per cent."²⁰ Is it possible that the reason so many students in education made low scores was the large percentage of students in education? Mr. Whyte does not say how large that percentage was. In 1955, the number of master's, other second professional, and doctor's degrees granted in education was 43.4% of the total number of such degrees granted in all fields.²¹ Unless the number of students enrolled in the field at the time of the sample, a few years earlier, bears a very different ratio to the total than does the number of degrees granted in the field in 1955, the 43.4% suggests at least that the author has not adduced evidence of marked disparity between the scores made by students in education and those made by students in other fields. More automobile accidents are caused by two-legged drivers than by one-legged drivers; does it follow that two-legged drivers are more careless?

Mr. Whyte seems to have sighed over 46 per cent without considering whether the scores in the lowest fifth were *too* low by some relevant standard, as they may or may not be, and without mentioning the much discussed vulnerability of IQ scores as a measure of any ability other than the ability to do what is done in answering the tests.²² He makes this last point elsewhere in the

18. P. 80.

19. *Ibid.* Nor is the use of airy words like "it is obvious that" and "quite clearly" justified by the explanation that "precise comparisons with former years are not possible" (pp. 81, 82).

20. P. 84 n.

21. See UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, BUREAU OF THE CENSUS, STATISTICAL ABSTRACT OF THE UNITED STATES 1956 131.

22. Whyte's source appears to have been Wolfe & Oxtoby, *Distribution of Ability of Students Specializing in Different Fields*, 116 SCIENCE 311-14 (1952). Their data on graduate students related to a limited sample of 4500, enrolled at uniform dates, and the numbers enrolled were not broken down by fields of study though their scores were. The authors share Whyte's concern over the scores in education but point out among other things (a) that there are many more graduate students in education than in any other field, (b) that every field draws some of the top quality students and (c) that 10 per cent of the graduate students in general (not physical) education in their sample scored 139 or better on the AGCT scale, which is superior to all but two per cent of the general population. Their 46% figure may include graduate students in physical education, whose scores

book, where it happens to fit his argument about the comparability of tests on aptitude and intelligence with tests on personality, but he does not apply it retrospectively.

If it is judged as a contribution to social science, *The Organization Man*, suggestive and stimulating though it is, suffers from a poverty of theoretical foundation. To mention but one simple example: once he has set up his two ethics, Mr. Whyte allows for intermediate points along the line between his two poles, but he neglects other relevant axes. As Chester Barnard suggested nineteen years ago in a book to which Mr. Whyte owes a large unrequited debt, the behavior of any one individual in an organization is affected by many factors, including numerous codes of morality. Each code is derived from and professed by some group of which he is a member, and each acts intricately upon the others. Barnard illustrated his point by the example of "a citizen of Massachusetts, a member of the Baptist Church, having a father and mother living, and a wife and two children, [who] is an expert machinist employed at a pump station of an important water system."²³ This man, whether we call him a New Englander, a Baptist, a son, a husband, a father, a machinist, or an employee, is constantly balancing and selecting among his codes at or below the level of consciousness. (To forget or ignore is, in this matter, but one of the ways in which choice is exercised.) There is always an overlap, often a large overlap, among most of the codes; but there is never a total identity among them all, or probably, even between any two of them.

To isolate the Protestant Ethic and the Social Ethic from this rich fabric of motives and influences is like displaying one strand of a carpet as if it were the only clew to the whole design. Mr. Whyte is so solicitous for the salvation of the autonomous personality, sacred and beleaguered, that his conclusions tend to ignore the complex interaction between individuals, between groups, and between the individual and the group, which his reporting illustrates so abundantly. It is one thing to show a modish awareness of feedback,²⁴ but it is something else to follow it through.

Even along the Protestant-Social axis, almost nothing will be found in the book, except a come-on in the introduction, on "the seminary student who will

were far below those of students in general education and thus would have brought the average down. As with many of the comments in Whyte's book, the conclusions recommend themselves, and the facts may coincide with the assertions, but the evidence is unimpressive.

23. BARNARD, *THE FUNCTIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE* 267 (1938).

24. The password seems to be the word "very," used as an adjective. *E.g.*, ". . . the very industrial revolution which this highly serviceable Protestant Ethic begot in time began to confound it" (p. 16); personality tests when used for selection "*become a large factor in the very equation they purport to measure*" (p. 194); "*the foundations' own practices are creating the very lack they decry*" (p. 234); "The foundations, the Universities, and the government have not actively conspired to change the climate of scientific research, but merely by riding with the trends, they have created a growth that can stifle the very progress they seek" (p. 239); "For it is not the evils of organization life that puzzle [the organization man] . . . , *but its very beneficence*" (p. 12).

end up in the church hierarchy, the doctor headed for the corporate clinic, the physics Ph.D. in a government laboratory, . . . the young apprentice in a Wall Street law factory."²⁵ He has confined his examples in the main to the private corporate world, without seeking the light that might have been shed from a comparative study of similar features in service in the federal government, in large law firms or in ecclesiastical bodies—not to mention universities or corporate journalism. It is a pity, by the way, that modern observers of organization have paid on the whole so little attention to the history and present operation, viewed with a secular and impartial eye, of the Roman Catholic Church.

What "ethic" will determine the behavior of "the young apprentice in the Wall Street law factory" towards clients and colleagues? Let us, like Mr. Whyte's social engineers, look at a "model." The young apprentice probably comes from a law school where the main object of study has been the opinions of appellate courts. His adroitness and keenness in analyzing these opinions, his facility in reaching rapid conclusions about the problems treated in them, and his gift for expression in class or on examinations have thrown him to the top of a struggling heap. The style of the cases, the dialectic of the classroom, the academic rewards paid for fluent contentiousness, and some of the traditions of the bar so newly learned have contributed to inculcate the adversary spirit. Yet other traditions, some of the canons, and (perhaps) the example of his instructors suggest an ethic of service, of cooperation, of professional self-restraint. He may have learned, but probably does not yet know, that these tendencies do not necessarily contradict each other and that indeed the adversary system cannot work except on a great common base of mutual tolerance and shared purpose. He may have heard something about the recent shifts in the focus of a lawyer's activity from courtroom to law library, from library to telephone, and even from the lawyer's office to the client's office. He may carry with him some epigrammatic partial definitions of the modern lawyer as an expert in structure, as a practitioner of preventive verbal medicine, as a man who applies formal techniques to social purposes, or as a man who helps people. How does he fit all these pieces into his work situation and into the network of his own extraprofessional codes? How does he learn the right and wrong occasions, and the right and wrong doses, for contention and cooperation? For that matter, what do "right" and "wrong" mean here, if anything?

Now suppose our model were twins; one twin stays in the firm, the other after a time goes into the legal department of a corporate client of the firm. Will the latter become an Organization Man in a sense in which his twin does not? Will the independence of his advice be tainted by considerations of his career within the corporation, or will his realism be enriched by his proximity to the sources and data of business judgment? How purely "legal" should house counsel try to keep his legal advice, and how crisply should he seek to segregate his rôle from that of his fellow-executives? What special strains—

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ethical, personal, organizational—are created by the coexistence of a professional code and a business code? Research into such questions of fact and policy might show, among other things, how the clash of Mr. Whyte's two ethics is modified or superseded by the habits, traditions, and doctrines, themselves in flux, of a specific vocation.²⁶

Mr. Whyte's book throbs with an urgent message, but the content of the message is not so clear as its existence. At times he takes on the accent of a civic prophet indicting the inevitable. At times he entreats his readers not to turn the clock back, or forward, but simply to be aware and indignant that the hands of the clock have moved. He wants us to preserve individual autonomy by recognizing the inevitability of conflicts and tensions; he would have us plug our ears against "what is often construed to be the sweet jazz of 'adjustment.'"²⁷ He recommends research on fitting the group to the individual, new emphasis on individual initiative, enlarging the job assigned to the individual, reducing the time spent in conference, letting professional employees alone, and stressing "fundamentals" in education. At bottom, however, he exhorts us not so much to act as to strike an attitude. He would equip the Organization Man to best the Organization by the sheer Power of Negative Thinking.

In his acknowledgments, tucked away between the appendix and the index, Mr. Whyte pays tribute to his colleagues on *Fortune* for help and for the opportunity "to work on this as a book rather than a collection of articles. Where it lacks the cohesion I was aiming for the failing is mine and not the importunings of journalism."²⁸ He should pay more heed to those importunings. Where his book straggles away from journalism, it often falls into a dim, reverse social scientism; where it sticks to reporting, it presents some acute and provocative comment, none the less valuable for being impressionistic. His gallery of characters and attitudes will populate a chamber of horrors; his anthology of the Wit & Wisdom of second-rate modernity will enrich our literate folklore. To future analysts he has contributed much valuable material, not including the analytical part of the book.

LEON LIPSON†

26. It is rumored that one large law firm in New York is even now playing host to a social scientist who has been studying the firm as a community. Bravo.

27. Lasswell, *The Normative Impact of the Behavioral Sciences*, 67 *ETHICS* No. 3, pt. II, at 1, 23 (1957).

28. P. 411.

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