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Disjointed Incrementalism: The Overture to a Full (and Unfinished) Symphony¹

Roger A. Lohmann

Charles Lindblom's "disjointed incrementalism" and the 1959 article in *PAR* with that famous (some might argue infamous) title (*The Science of Muddling Through*) is a study in contrasts at the celebration of its first half-century: Incrementalism, or strategic choice, is arguably one of the 2-3 most important American contributions to the understanding of public choice in the 20th century – replete with implications for the study and practice of administration, planning, policy, organizations. Yet in Lindblom's famous 1959 article, the basic idea was wrapped in a dense, almost impenetrable, blanket of words which students required to read it may rightfully regard more as punishment than enlightenment.

The 1959 article is the work of a youthful scholar: An overture full of promise of things to come, and yet an undisciplined presentation tending toward the obtuse. The concept of incrementalism which it presents, fortunately survived the presentation and became increasingly clear in Lindblom's later publications. But what of that terrible, arcane adjective "disjointed"? Without joints? Disconnected? Incoherent? What exactly was the point of that adjective, anyway? With or without its joints, the concepts of the increment and of incremental change are immediately (and crystal) clear to anyone who has ever experienced organizational decision making and change, whether or not they think it a good way of doing things.

Lindblom's increments offer a participants-eye view of history, as he himself showed in *The Intelligence of Democracy* (1965). Even revolutions are not cut from the whole cloth (or blueprints or plans) their makers would have us see, nor do they emerge transcendently from the minds of revolutionaries. Even the most carefully planned revolutions must unfold incrementally in the day-to-day judgements, decisions and at times rash actions of their makers, with full measures of information scarcity, doubt, uncertainty, hesitant decision making. Lenin's fateful decision to allow the local Soviet to "execute" the Czar's entire household unloosed a string of fateful choices each of which was partial in scope, serial in order and remedial in effect, in ways Lindblom's model clarified in *A Strategy of Decision* (1963). The very latest permutation of these choices was only evident quite recently in the decision by the Russian Orthodox Church to finally allow the burial of the identified skeletal remains of the Czar's family and the last-minute decision of President Yeltsen to attend the ceremony in hopes of shoring up his own sagging

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political agenda. So it is, as Lindblom showed us as clearly as anyone ever has, that strategic choice seeks to spell out the distinctive logic which political decision-makers employ to reconcile the historical heritage they have been left with the future legacy they seek to leave behind within the constraints of an all-too-real present. Rene Descartes several centuries earlier had shown us the more idealized version of how god-like creatures in full command of their facts and knowledge *should* do it and Yeheskel Dror (1963) was among the chorus of many who allowed that even if we can't do it Descartes' way, we owe it to him (or the model of science he instituted) to try.

But why was Lindblom's 1959 argument so obtuse, anyway? It may just have been relative youth and scholarly innocence. More likely, it was because in the 1950's an expression as radical as this one was hemmed in on all sides by a world unwilling to acknowledge, or even allow full expression of any of his essential points. Just a year or two after the death of the infamous Senator from Wisconsin and in a nation already deeply locked in the grip of the cold war, at the height of the Beaver Cleaver conventionality of popular culture, and the corporate world of organization man, how could one accurately confront a notion of change as radical as this and yet be clear about it?

To be clear about change at all was to risk provoking the forces of conventionality and the status quo on the right, and just as surely not to speak of change in the banal clichés of the revolutionary cant of the left also possessed its risks. Later in the 1960's as the winds of political fashion shifted, Lindblom's position was viewed very differently. Because of its careful, controlled, limited presentation, numerous critics throughout the very different 1960's and later, mistook the whole argument as an expression of conservative ideology; and a commitment to the status quo.

Yet the model itself was (and is) anything but conservative: It was an offshoot of the Deweyan embrace of a model of continuous change through inquiry in an age when Dewey went from a national icon to the dungeon of the all but forgotten. It was a theory of bourgeois revolution for social science and practice disciplines lacking any firm sense of history; a theory of practical paradigm shifts in policy fully equal to Thomas Kuhn's later model of paradigm shifts in science.

Although Lindblom himself did much to confront and counter the mistaken ideas about incrementalism which appeared in later publications, and to clarify the notion that changing circumstances always occur within changing contexts, one still hears many of them repeated today; particularly the false contrast of incremental change with the contextless (and largely fictional) "large-scale planned change".

America in the 1950's may not be the full explanation. It might also have been that Lindblom felt hemmed in at the time by the dominance of political behaviorism in which there was little place for mind or mental activity. Descartes and the resulting synoptic rationality of economics and politics which Lindblom so brilliantly dissected just four years later in *A Strategy of Decision* were still firmly

in the driver's seat in 1959. And there may, of course, be other explanations as well.

Whatever the reasons, social and political theory of a lasting kind requires a kind of maturity, experience and wisdom of perspective which are largely lacking in the 1959 article, but which Lindblom supplied in abundance in his later work. Nonetheless, the PAR article will continue to be important as the “announcement” of a genuinely novel and important approach to strategic choice or public decisions which only reached mature expression in later publications.

More's the pity for those who are familiar with incrementalism, or strategic choice, only through its 1959 overture in PAR, and who have yet to embrace the full symphonic resolution of its themes to be found throughout Lindblom's oeuvre: *The Intelligence of Democracy* (1965), *A Strategy of Decision* (1963), *The Policy-making Process* (1968), *Politics and Markets* (1977), “Still Muddling, Not Yet Through” (1979), *Usable Knowledge* (1979), *Inquiry and Change* (1990), and assorted other contributions.

These later works develop more fully, refine and elaborate an elegant, on-the-mark, and ultimately practical theory of strategic choice which allows a public administrative practice which is richer, deeper and far more self-aware today than it was 50 years ago when the overture was first heard.

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