The delusion of academic ranks

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Abstract

To academia, which is dedicated to knowledge and education, power structures fit like someone else's clothes — for instance, vestments or uniforms.

1   Introduction

One of the manifestations of the Peter principle (Peter and Hull, 1969) reveals alarming perils associated with promotions in the academic *métier*: faculty promoted to higher academic ranks on the grounds of excellence appear to be less able after their promotion — for instance, their 'productivity' (e.g. number of published papers per year) drops significantly, and it appears as if they had met their 'level of incompetence' (Lazear, 2001). So, why should productivity-minded academic administrations ever *promote* their faculty?

2   Promotions

A promotion, or 'upward mobility' within the same organisation, can be seen as sign of an employee's personal evolution recognised by the administration to represent experience or 'value'. It may be used by administrations (a) *ex-ante* as an incentive[1], (b) *ex-post* as a reward[2], or (c) abusively, as an exchange to 'make friends', gain loyalty, or pay favours (Fairburn and Malcomson, 2001). In return, a promotion is expected to be overall advantageous for the employee (e.g. higher salary, better office, more benefits), even though higher posts may require more effort (e.g. solving more demanding problems, working longer hours). And if the employee fits well into the new post, which is exactly what the Peter principle doubts (Lazear, 2001; Fairburn and Malcomson, 2001), then the organisation should also benefit from the returns of the extra effort. The *sine qua non* condition for a promotion is the existence of ranks[3], which implies *hierarchy*[4] — the crux of the matter.

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[1]Colloquially known as the 'carrot on the stick'.
[2]Somewhat more substantive than a 'pat on the back'.
[3]i.e. positions in a *hierarchy* — also known as echelons, levels, grades, tiers, or simply 'positions'.
[4]From ιερός [Gk], sacred, and άρχων [Gk], ruler.

3 Hierarchy

Literally, as much as historically, hierarchy indicates the ranks of sacred beings, starting with heavenly entities such as angels (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2010) and extending to the government of church (Webster's, 1913; Perdicoúlis, 2013b). Large institutions such as the church have crucial needs for efficient coordination of their activities across the territory of operation, and this gave rise to the *diocese*[5] as a unit of administration — equivalent to the posterior *precinct*[6] used in the military and/ or civil context. As a key feature of the diocese, hierarchy defines static relationships among the members of the institution[7], including ranks and communication pathways (Perdicoúlis, 2013b). Perhaps the most common graphical representation of hierarchy is the organisational chart, which often takes a pyramidal structure, with fewer elements at the top and more at the lower ranks — Figure 1.
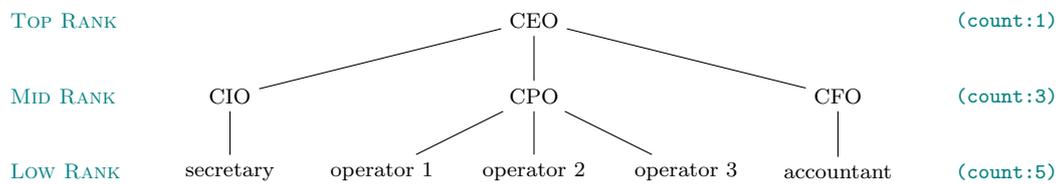

FIGURE 1   Hierarchical structure of a small company

Despite its religious origins, *hierarchy* is the term of choice to identify static organisational structures in many contexts, from the military to academic institutions, to civil society, to information technology (Perdicoúlis, 2013b, e.g. filesystem structure). Combined with procedural instructions or protocols[8], hierarchy provides a public and easily recognised reference for the controlled function of institutions and machines alike.

4 Pool

A recent reminder that order may indeed exist in amorphous or non-rigid configurations (Figure 2) comes from a computer operating system without a hierarchical filesystem: the 'iOS'[9].
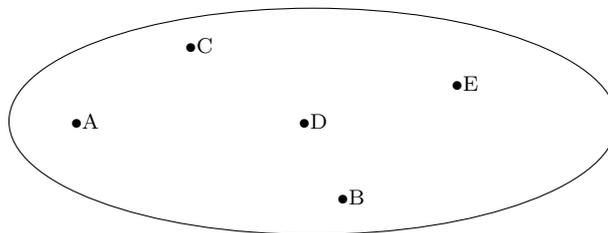

FIGURE 2   'Pool' structure of a team of five members; mathematically, this represents a *set*

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[5]From διοικεῖν [Gk], to keep house, to manage, to administer.
[6]From *prae* [L], before + *cingere* [L], to gird, to encircle.
[7]*cf.* υπάλληλος [Gk], employee — from υπό [Gk], under + άλληλος [Gk], another (person).
[8]Prominently placed on the 'first page' of the book of rules — from πρώτος [Gk], first + κόλλα [Gk], glue.
[9]Trademark licensed by Cisco to Apple, for devices such as the iPad® and the iPhone® (Apple, website).

'Pool' structures such as that of Figure 2, also known as 'flat hierarchy', are in essence mathematical *sets* — i.e. collections of distinct objects, but considered as objects in their own right[10]. All members of pool structures are equal to each other in terms of traditional hierarchy. In other words, no member has more *authority*[11] than another. This is the familiar concept of 'peers' in the academic *milieu*.

The members of the pool have distinct identities and corresponding attributes, which can be the result of specialisation or intrinsic capabilities. Attributing *relations* between members of the pool, for whichever purpose (e.g. a particular function), turns the set into a *system*. Contrary to the static relations of hierarchical structures, relations emerging in pools are *dynamic* — i.e. they change as a result of the associated activity.

Function in pool structures can be secured by various means, such as (a) nomination or assignment to members according to their attributes, (b) public selection (e.g. elections) also according to their attributes, or (c) sortition if members are equally capable. In the case of the iOS™, for example, files are retrieved from the pool by a 'tag' or keyword search, as defined by the needs of the user. As another example, in the Athenian *demos* of the Periclean era[12], where 'pooling' the social classes became the foundation for *democracy*, citizens[13] had the same rights despite their class, specific skills, and occupation (Plato, ca. 360BC), so their participation to civic duties was drawn by lot (Aristotle, ca. 330).

5   Academia

Due to its relative small size and early stages of scientific knowledge, the original academia (Perdicoúlis, 2013a) did not have the need for divisions, neither by volume or work nor by subject. Also, its spatial and temporal proximity to the democratic organisation was favourable to the 'pooling' of knowledge in a collective educational system.

The experience and facility of the teachers and schools was associated to their individual fame, and differences in style or content were taken into account by students when selecting their teachers and/ or institutions. The struggle for recognition in the growing academic panorama was naturally resolved through *debate*, as captured in Plato's dialogues, and also befits the nature of the profession — notwithstanding the commercial aspects of recruitment that always follow the ways of the market.

In the meantime, modern-day academia forged many of its features in the middle ages alongside the ecclesiastical environment (Rashdall, 1895; Norton, 1909; Rait, 1918), which features prominent ranks of power (e.g. status or authority): the famous and all-important *hierarchy*. At least by infiltration, it was almost inevitable that academics also established ranks among them, to mark relative authority. However, the introduction of ranks of authority[14] suppresses the confrontation of ideas and debate, which subtracts from the academic mission and moves towards power models (e.g. church, military).

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[10]The meta-level of the set is perhaps the only aspect of hierarchy in the pool structure.

[11]i.e. the power or right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience.

[12]Approximately in the the third quarter of the 5th C. BC — between 461 and 429 BC.

[13]Viewing this in modern times, the issue of fairness would be in the definition of the 'citizen'.

[14]The original intent and/ or justification for the ranks may be 'experience', but the practical use is 'power': who is right and whose will should be satisfied.

6   Discussion

For being founded on knowledge and the principles of education, promulgating autonomous and critical reasoning, academia is not a natural match for ranks of authority. A democratic, 'pool' model seems more appropriate for a space of debate, such as academia. On the contrary, hierarchy maintains its appropriate function in faith-based organisations such as church, or command-based organisations such as the military.

In addition, professionals whose domain of knowledge is holistic and multi-dimensional, such as academics [15], are not adequately represented by uni-dimensional rankings. Between the hierarchical and the pool models (Figures 1 and 2 respectively), academics maintain their multi-dimensional entities (e.g. interests, capabilities, experience) far more naturally in the pool rather than in the fixed structure.

Academic ranks may provide an easy recognition for their holders, complemented by the 'prestige' of the asssociated titles (e.g. associate professor with habilitation), but they also have a *verso* or 'flip side' with obligations or even potential embarrassments — courtesy of the Peter principle again. For instance, an academic promoted to a high rank must demonstrate capacity, composure, and knowledge in all public functions, and a *faux pas* (e.g. a sexist comment[16]) is capable of marring one's reputation and even career for ever — whereas a low-rank academic would probably escape unscathed.

Besides the risks associated with the 'heights' of promotion, the selection itself presents yet another lowlight in the academic *métier*: choosing for the wrong reasons — Figure 3. The promotion of good researchers and/ or teachers to administrative posts is notorious, and perhaps the most habitual pathway — this time as a potential *explanation* for the Peter principle.
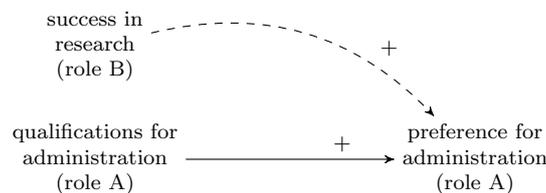

FIGURE 3   Choosing for the wrong reasons: direct reasoning: ⟶; indirect reasoning: - - -▸

7   Conclusion

Academia uses ranks of hierarchy, but it is too 'free' and democratic of a *milieu* — indeed, the *par excellence* bastion of intellectual freedom — to be adopting an unsuitable practice. Hierarchy defeats reasoning, debate, and the search of the 'truth', which are the hallmarks of academia. The best possible promotion in academia is the advancement of its members (and the pool, collectively), and this is not expected to be noticed in any ranks.

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[15]Excluding *fractional* profiles — i.e. when one's knowledge amounts to their 'specialisation'.
[16]*v.* the case of Sir Richard Timothy Hunt (McKie, 2015).

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