In the historical development of management literature, Mary Parker Follett belongs to that ardent group of thinkers who have identified themselves with the study of "organizational universality" and human relationships rather than with closely-defined administrative techniques or narrow business policies. As such, she appears both as a social philosopher and as a business institutionalist. The first trait reveals itself in her repeated assertions about "the problems of establishing and maintaining human cooperation in the conduct of an enterprise." And, the second element is clear in her emphasis on the "experimental nature of business" and the significance of industry in the field of human activity." But, being a great believer in the all-embracing virtue of coordination and integration, she avoided rigidity in her management thinking. To her, business represented a great institution and the sociological system of individual-cooperation a great structure of managerial importance. Collaborating on this framework, she developed her theory of human action which expounded "the basic human emotions and forces that underlie the process of organization."

As a matter of fact, Mary Parker Follett was not a "business woman." She was initially interested in political institutions and the organism of the governmental machinery. She had written on various political ideologies and had gained acclaim as a "distinguished political scientist." It was, indeed, rather late in her creative years that she turned her attention toward business writings and industrial lectures. This phenomenon might lead one to perceive a good deal of contradiction and paradox in her writings. But, fortunately enough, such is not the case. She had developed a broad perspective in her socio-economic and political statements and as Urwick says, "a lifetime's contact with practical social work and a profound interest in modern psychology had given her mind a practical simplicity." Thus, both by practical erudition

---

2 Ibid., pp. 18-19 "one of the most interesting things about business to me is that I find so many businessmen who are willing to try experiments."
3 Ibid., p. 18.
5 Ibid., p. 50.
7 Urwick and Brech, op. cit., p. 12.
and by intuitive state of mind, she was well equipped to analyze modern business situations even while she was engaged in her political writings. Further, it can also be shown that her acute philosophical grasp of business administration was present in an embryo form at this stage of her creative life.8

The Inner-Organic Continuity

Her initial pre-occupation with political subjects and doctrines did not distort her vision because she did not allow her political overtones to get the better of her objective analysis. We do, however, find enough instances in her later business writings that show beyond doubt the writer's initial love and devotion for political topics, but the politics there is not that of groups or of a particular time, but, it is of the mankind, and for all times.9 She greatly extended her interests and energies and her managerial writings take the entire mankind and the whole universe as their action-centers.10

Though her writings are marked by an inborn simplicity of approach and a common frame of reference, she was by no means a believer in the accepted and the overly traditional modes of managerial behavior. She took her illustrations from everyday common occurrences and adapted the same to business situations.11 She breathed a new vigor in these common incidents and translated these into something of sustained importance to business. It was this experimental character of her writings that symbolized her ‘social experiments.’12 And, again, she was a pioneer in her emphasis on the ‘human factor’ in management. The traditional mode of thinking up to her day was more in tune with a limited, technique-oriented management. She opened up the field and broadened its dimensions to a certain extent. Her strong upholding of the individual behavior-pattern, group thinking, continuous decision-making, etc., are some of the salient aspects of her anti-traditional beliefs.13

8 For example, even in her first two published works, The Speaker of the House of Representatives (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1909), and The New State (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1920), she often cites analogies from the business world and the industrial community to validate her propositions about the political behavior of human society.

9 Perhaps this may be one of her weaknesses. Her emphasis on the broad, on the universal, and on the all-embracing concepts might take away somewhat from her ‘focus.’ Only subsequent research can examine this important point.

10 Metcalf and Urwick, Dynamic Administration, op. cit., p. 24–25:

"Simply put, Mary Parker Follett’s universal principle means that business management is not something which is of significance only to those who seek a competence in the conduct of some competitive, profit-making enterprise. It is a part, and a significant part, of the wider field of human government."


"Her intense interest in human beings, coupled with what amounted to a genius for relating individuals experiences, however humble and obscure, to general principles, made her an all-together exceptional research worker."


13 An illuminating insight into this aspect of Follett’s pioneer thinking can be had by studying some of her major beliefs in conjunction with the then accepted theories of managerial organization held, for example, by Oliver Sheldon and others. A subtle comparison of Follett’s ideas with most of her contemporaries can provide us with an added testimony to the underlying originality of her viewpoints.
It is, indeed, an irony of modern management scholarship that relatively little critical attention has been paid to her writings. In spite of the almost prophetic viewpoints that she developed and in spite of the advanced state of her thinking, modern critics have on the whole, paid scant attention to her rather limited output. It seems that management writers have paid greater attention to less creative persons than Follett. And, it is we, indeed, who are the losers for it. A study of her writings, analyzed in a two-dimensional sequence of historical importance and modern application, can perhaps reveal not only the greatness of her approach but bring us nearer to a clear perception of some of our own follies and drawbacks in our management themes.

Essential Themes

Merrill has remarked about the profundity of Follett's writings and has indicated the extreme directness characterizing her approach that makes "making selections from it a major problem." Yet there were certain recurrent themes which she emphasized in her writings. Here, we will present some of her original viewpoints and essential themes.

Coordination

Follett's intense belief in coordination and integration led her to emphasize the following four main principles of organization:

1. Coordination by direct contact of the responsible people concerned.
2. Coordination in the early stages.
3. Coordination as the reciprocal relating of all the factors in a situation.
4. Coordination as a continuing process.

Urwick has studied these four principles at length and devoted a great deal of attention to various outer forces that led Follett to establish this frame. However, he has called these as the "four kinds of coordination" while they, in fact, constitute only four degrees of coordination. Conceptual and internal differences between these do not exist; they only reveal the four different stages that coordination can achieve in "a scheme of self-adjusting interests." Follett has also distinguished between collective control and collective self-control. Self-control implies the generation of control from within, rather than imposed by an outer body. To her, the process of coordination is one of "interpenetration" which cannot be enforced by an outside body.

---

16 Metcalf and Urwick, Dynamic Administration, op. cit., p. 297.
19 Metcalf and Urwick, Dynamic Administration, op. cit., p. 296.
20 Ibid., p. 297.
21 Ibid., p. 301.
aim of "organizational engineering" is to achieve control through effective unity. The nature of this unity is also termed as "total relativity" by Follett in a later study. Follett conceptualized the process of control through coordination as an all-integrating organism which fuses the various aspects and components in a single unified entity. The concept of total relativity or effective unity, which occurs rather often in her writings is a major contribution to the advancement of our thinking about the organizational processes.

Secondly, Follett believed very strongly in the ever-changing and revolving aspect of our life. To her, the dynamic process of change was the sole reality and everything was subject to this phenomenon of change. She emphatically says, "Decision is only a moment in process." It is in this interpretation of decision-making and the impact of "change" on it that the psychological character of her writings becomes at once clear. She carried this thought consistently and adapted it well to her later industrial writings and lectures.

Conflict

Though she gave a great deal of attention to the integrative unity of business institution, she did not ignore the paradoxical nature of "conflict." Her thesis is that the role of conflict can be functionalized by positive measures and that its negative implications can be minimized by "setting it to work for us." She suggests three main ways of dealing with conflict: domination, compromise and integration. She examines the pathological issues arising out of conflict and its antidote, namely, integration. The theme of "progressive differings" that she suggests has a great managerial potential. Not only on the social level, but also on an international level, the concept of non-aggressive, peaceful, progressive differings provides us with a significant tool for human relationship and adjustment. She also examines the relevance of symbology in conflict and adjustment and in doing this, anticipates much of the present work in this area. Follett's contribution in the study of "constructive conflict" merits special attention both in its social dimensions as well as in its

---

22 Ibid., p. 184.
24 Ibid., p. 1.
26 Ibid., p. 30.
27 Ibid., p. 31.
28 Ibid., p. 35. cf. "we become spiritually more and more developed as our conflicts rise to higher levels."
29 Ibid., p. 41. Symbology in public relations, conflict-solving, and communication has become an advanced topic in the present management literature. See, for example, Sethi, Narendra K., A Managerial Critique of Public Relations, New York University Graduate School of Business Administration, Unpublished Master's Thesis, 1961, Passim.
30 Metcalf and Urwick, Dynamic Administration, op. cit., Chapter I, pp. 30–49.
industrial implications. The apparent social issues emanating from conflict are organizational disharmony, ill-defined communicational pattern and disintegration of the information-flow. And, the obvious industrial aspects are the increased hostility between power groups, authoritative direction and overly zealous reliance on control. By her conscious emphasis on the constructive aspects of conflict, she has enabled the business administrators to view these socio-industrial factors in a process of "revaluation," whereby the managerial values underlying these issues can be fully examined. Follett stresses "the significant rather than the dramatic features" of the issues and thus comes very close to a clear perception of the so-called "industrial paradox."

Consent

Thirdly, she offers a striking insight into the realm of human relations by exploring in depth the concept of "organization engineering" especially in its consent-oriented overtones. What is consent and how does it differ from passive participation? Is it the sole answer to the dilemma of conflict? She conceptualizes consent as an inactive statement of faith and says that, "consent of the governed (is) not an adequate expression of democracy." On the other hand, she defines participation as a process "relating the parts so that you have a working unit" and then goes on to distinguish more vividly between consent and participation. This is an important contribution to the modern behavioral science of "consent engineering" and the allied fields of communication theory and human relations in management.

Another of Follett's major contributions to the study of modern administrative behavior is that she presented a strikingly original concept of power and its relationship to authority. By the very nature of its meaning and rather dubious semantical implications, power creates disturbing illusions in the minds of most students. Is power a destructive phenomenon or is it a fundamental concept in administration? Follett believes that power is "simply the ability to make things happen, to be causal agent, to initiate change." A significant

---

31 Ibid., p. 38.
32 Ibid., p. 40. "To find the significant rather than the dramatic features of industrial controversy, of a disagreement in regard to policy on board of directors or between managers, is essential to integrative business policies." (Italics are in the original study.)
33 For a stimulating study on this point, see, for example, Stagner, Ross, Psychology of Industrial Conflict, New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1956, pp. 550.
34 This phrase is often used by Follett in her writings. Here, see especially, Metcalf and Urwick, Dynamic Administration, op. cit., p. 229.
36 Ibid., p. 212.
37 Ibid., p. 223. "One of the fundamental differences between consent and participation is that consent is not part of the process, it comes at the end of or after the process. Participation is not only part of the process; it should begin with the beginning of the process."
38 See for example, Bernays, Edward L., (Editor), The Engineering of Consent, Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1957.
39 Metcalf and Urwick, Dynamic Administration, op. cit., Chapter IV, (pp. 95-116) and also Follett, Freedom and Coordination, op. cit., Chapter I (pp. 1-15) and Chapter III (pp. 34-46).
40 Metcalf and Urwick, Dynamic Administration, op. cit., p. 99.
point is made when she makes a distinction between power and strength. Power need not necessarily be the sole function of strength; it might generate even from one’s weakness. In other words, power as a functional concept is not relative to or dependent on one’s strong points and high position. She makes it clear when she identifies the ‘urge to power’ with the satisfaction of being alive. Power, in Follett’s perspective, becomes an accompaniment of our very existence; both the strong and the weak can exercise it and thus benefit from its application. This wide approach to power opens up newer dimensions and bigger aspects of this concept which might prove to be advantageous in a business society.

Control and Authority

The question of control and authority, too, has been treated in an experimental nature in her writings. The idea of a supreme control or a final authority is foreign to her thinking. Her faith in functional authority and functional responsibility leads her to appraise the environment where “each individual has final authority for his own allotted task.” She emphasizes the weaknesses inherent in a process where “the president delegates authority.” The phrase “delegated authority” would imply that “your chief executive has the ‘right’ to all the authority, but that it is useful to delegate some of it.” In her concept, authority belongs to the job and stays with the job. And then, she expresses in clear terms that “delegation of authority should be an obsolete expression.” What did she actually mean by this? Did she stand for a centralized mode of enterprise? No. She suggests a functional breakdown of authority whereby each person doing a particular operation would command full authority over the phase of the job. She brings the point to its logical rationale by terming authority as “a matter of interweaving” in

---

41 Ibid., p. 99. “And we should remember in this study that power and strength are not always synonymous; it is sometimes through our weakness that we get control of a situation.” She also makes a distinction between “power-with” and “power-over.” Ibid., p. 101.

42 Ibid., p. 99.


44 Ibid., Chapter IX (pp. 183-209) and also Follett, Freedom and Co-ordination, op. cit., Chapter I (1-15); Chapter III (34-46) and Chapter VI (pp. 77-89).


46 Follett, Freedom and Co-ordination, op. cit., p. 3.

47 Ibid., p. 3.

48 Ibid., p. 4.

49 Ibid., p. 4.

50 Ibid., p. 7., cf. “I say that the tendency is to decentralize. I have heard it said twice at this conference that the tendency is to centralize. Both statements are true, for centralization and decentralization are parts of exactly the same thing.”

keeping with the essence of organization which is the interweaving of functions. She suggests two significant points of departure by introducing the concept of "cumulative authority" and "the system of cross functioning." In this framework, her analysis of power, control and authority reaches deeply into the realms of sociology, psychology and political disciplines which in turn impart new dimensions to the knowledge of management.

Leadership

Follett has treated the process of leadership at length in her various papers. Leadership constitutes an area of inquiry where the various disciplines of human learning come together in a unified concept. Follett's analysis of leadership offers an eclectic approach to the study of this idea. She invalidates most of the current thinking about the functions of the chief executive and a leader. Her definition of a leader as "the man who can show that the order is integral to the situation" merits great attention. Her emphasis on the "law of the situation" makes leadership a functional concept and not an authoritative dogma. Her idea of a leader is one who "can see it whole" and "to whom the total inter-relatedness is most clear" and this is one more valid extension of her theory of business integration.

She distinguishes between the three positive aspects of leadership, namely, the leadership of function, the leadership of personality and the leadership of position. The visionary aspects of sound functional leadership are paramount in her concept when she says that, "the most successful leader of all is one who sees another picture not yet actualized." In a later paper, she introduces a new aspect of leadership entitled "multiple leadership" by which she refers...
to the role of lesser leaders in the industrial perspective. Intertwined with her detailed exposition of the various forces comprising the concept of leadership is the thread of "the common purpose" which runs throughout her writings. Follett carried her point of coordination and integrative unity in almost every phase of business operation and her statements on leadership too, are no exception to this rule.62

We have examined the essential themes of Follett's writings in this section of the study. Her ideas on coordination, conflict, consent engineering, power, authority, organization and leadership offer a striking consistency of thought and continuity of logic. In fact, her new rationale on social judgment and managerial values is so novel in its scope that Urwick has termed it a "mental revolution." This opinion, however, is not shared by two critics, Merrill and Hopf, respectively. The former concedes profound truth and convincing realism to her but still finds the "influence of Fayol, Taylor and Gantt" in her papers. The latter, though willing to call her a "distinguished political student, philosopher, and student of business administration" is against assigning her a position as "a pioneer in scientific management."

Conclusion

The earlier socio-political and the later managerial themes, as reflected in the writings of Mary Parker Follett, display a striking sequential development of her business ideologies. She remains, in essence, a statesman among business thinkers and a perceptive politician among organizational experts. Her pioneering ideas in the realm of coordination, conflict, consent, control and authority, and leadership, convince the modern scholarship about the validity and justification of the multi-dimensional focus of her universalist approach.

Her deep-seated theories of managerial organization, creative integration and circular behavior are as much true today as they were novel when they first appeared. The present age, with all its research-centered intellectual curiosity, psychological innovation and automated wisdom can still distill a good amount of practical thinking and sound conceptual business advice from Mary Parker Follett's writings. They may lack in the modern overly anxious "particularistic" notions, but they abound in visionary judgment and universal concepts—the real integral management view.

"Ibid., p. 55. Cf. "Leader and followers are both following the invisible leader—the common purpose... Loyalty to the invisible leader gives us the strongest possible bond of union, establishes a sympathy which is not a sentimental but a dynamic sympathy."


"Merrill, op. cit., p. 16. Cf. "Fayol's influence is evident in the papers of Mary Parker Follett; so is that of Taylor and of Gantt. She is, in fact, the point of convergence of the three broad channels of management philosophy which have been described here."

"Hopf., op. cit., p. 6-7."