

Enterprise resource planning systems: A physical manifestation of administrative evil[☆]

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Abstract

We propose that enterprise resource planning systems (ERPs) inherently embody the tenets of administrative evil. First, we situate the discussion within a critical theory framework. Then, we provide a brief introduction to ERPs. Next, we present the ERP implementation process as a harbinger for organizational change and standardization. Because of the system's power and inclusiveness, the organization is molded in the image of the ERP. Management justifies ERP implementations, and the related hardships, by appeals to instrumental rationality, technological determinism, and capital market demands. ERPs are a physical manifestation, and facilitator, of instrumental rationality within hierarchical control structures. As such, ERPs embody significant potential for administrative evil because of their influence in constituting organizational climate, structures, and roles. Conscience is viewed as inferior to instrumental logic. Morality is recast as following the instrumentally rationalized and legitimized rules. A sense of individual responsibility diminishes as the distance between the object and the action increases. This detachment is greatly enhanced with the implementation of an ERP, and we discuss how this may take place. Ultimately, technical responsibility replaces moral responsibility and the totalizing influence of the ERP facilitates and expedites the process.

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In a society where the distance between actor and action is constantly growing as a result of the progress of science, technology, and bureaucracy, “the effects of human action reach far beyond the ‘vanishing point’ of moral visibility”. (Bauman, 1989, 193).

1. Introduction

Enterprise Resource Planning systems (ERPs) are the physical manifestation of instrumental rationality, the enabling and constraining logic of modernity. This logic facilitates the purportedly value-free development and implementation of the efficient and effective means for accomplishing prespecified ends. The application of instrumental rationality also restricts the formulation and development of metaphysical constructs such as morality, ethics, trust, and professionalism. As a consequence, the logic is implemented through administrative hierarchies, expertise, and the accompanying physical systems disassociated from these metaphysical constructs.

Modern organizations embody the artifacts of instrumental rationality. Administrative hierarchies are the organizing manifestations of instrumental logic. Expertise, represented as professions or experts, is the intellectual manifestation of the logic, and the systems, mechanical or informational, are the physical manifestations (see Fig. 1). In earlier work, we considered the administrative hierarchies that provide the context within which organizational activities are undertaken (Dillard and Ruchala, 2003), and the experts/professionals that facilitate, carryout, and control these activities (Dillard, 2003). Here we consider the “systems” that are created and implemented by the experts/professionals and that reflect, facilitate, and reinforce these administrative hierarchies. We evaluate the implications of advanced information technology (AIT), specifically enterprise resource

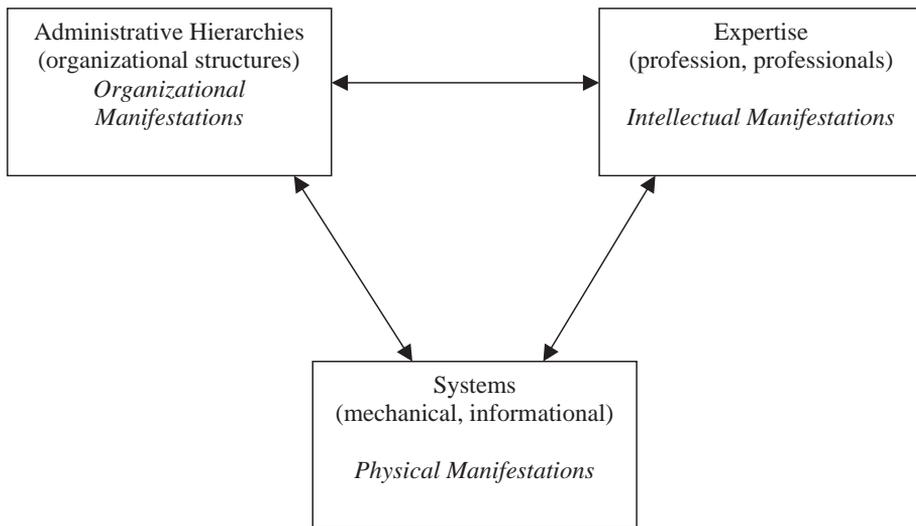


Fig. 1. Organizational manifestations of instrumental logic.

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