PUBLIC SECTOR, PRIVATE SECTOR: JANE JACOBS'S NON-IDEOLOGICAL IDEAS ON WHAT BELONGS WHERE

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> [B]efore embarking upon analytic work of any kind we must first single out the set of phenomena we wish to investigate, and acquire 'intuitively' a preliminary notion of how they hang together ... [However,] in practice we mostly do not start from a vision of our own but from the work of our predecessors.
>
> Joseph Schumpeter (pp. 561 – 562)

Introduction

In Joseph Schumpeter's words, this paper is a "preliminary notion" of how certain "phenomena" in the grain industry (where the author has spent most of his career) and in transport (which has been his professional specialty) "hang together" when viewed through the lens of one of "our predecessors," Jane Jacobs. Accordingly, the paper is not, in one sense, heavily researched and carefully documented. On the other hand, it is based on the author's almost three decades of accumulated experience in the western grain industry, coupled with a lifetime of eclectic reading aimed at understanding economic and political life. The research, in short, is pragmatic not academic.

It is regrettable that Jacobs is largely unknown outside the realm of urban studies because her ideas can be powerful tools to help us sort through, as she puts it, "the startling contradictions in working life." The objective of this paper, therefore, is to introduce her concepts to colleagues in the transport and supply chain sector, and to illustrate the way they can help us think more clearly about what does, and does not, belong respectively in the private and public sectors, and more importantly, what happens when we get it wrong. To do this, the paper shows how her ideas explicate some of the "contradictions"

in the grain business – which has been much damaged by "getting it wrong" – and then speculates about how they may apply to transport in general.

Some Representative "Contradictions"

Anyone who became involved in the tangled world of western grain transportation in the last three decades of the 20th century – and particularly someone who, like the author of this paper, had had no prior exposure to western grain politics and who was generally on the right of the political spectrum – would have soon encountered a number of puzzling questions – or, to continue with Jacobs's terms, behaviours and beliefs that seemed to "contradict" common sense.

- Why did the grain companies – particularly the prairie Wheat Pools – not recognise that their elevator system was 30 years out of date, and vastly inefficient?

- Why did they seem oblivious to the fact that it was far more efficient to move bulk commodities like grain in blocks of 50 or 100 cars at a time? Why did they retain small wooden elevators that could only load only 6 or 7 rail cars at a time?

- Why did farmers and the grain companies (especially the Pools) adamantly oppose the abandonment of low traffic density branch lines when it was apparent that they were paying for them in inefficiency, poor service and wasted subsidies?

- Why did farmers not accept that the railways had to be losing money carrying grain when the freight rates were frozen at 1899 levels?

- Why did they support paying subsidies for storing wheat when the carrying costs ate up the value of the product, and the stored stocks depressed its price?

- Why did the Pools allow the Canadian Wheat Board (CWB) to control grain logistics when their operating people were well aware that a central bureaucracy in Winnipeg could not do that job as effectively as their own professionals?

While all the above are transport related, similar questions arose in grain marketing. Why did farmers continue to believe that the CWB could extract a monopoly price from world markets when Canada's share of world markets was only about 25%? And why, as critics began to show that the CWB did not get a better price (Parsons; Carter and Loyns), did farmers continue to believe that it did?

The same questions were, of course, raised by some people within the grain industry, but grain policy was dominated by the three provincial Pool organisations and the CWB, all of which embraced an interventionist philosophy that was not friendly to market-oriented solutions to economic problems. Meaningful public debate on such questions was therefore largely stifled until the mid-1970s, and such debate as did occur was characterised, as sociologist Karl Mannheim put it, by people "talking past one another," and not realizing that their opponents differed from themselves "in [their] whole outlook." (p. 280) Vernon Fowke noted the same phenomenon in his classic study, *The National Policy and the Wheat Economy,* describing the participants in the interwar Royal Commissions on grain issues as "talking about different things while apparently convinced they were talking about the same things." (p. 195)

The author tried for many years to answer these questions, and had many conversations with people in and out of the grain business who were equally puzzled, but it was not until encountering Jacobs's *Systems of Survival* that a clearer answer emerged. So what does Jacobs say?

Jane Jacobs: A Summary

Jacobs takes, as she puts it, "an unconventional approach to moral understanding," not analysing "the virtuous life for individuals," but rather "explor[ing] the morals and values that underpin viable

working life." (p. xi) To do so, she starts by pointing out that, in order to get what they need to live, societies both take from the environment (as in farming and mining) and trade with each other. Interestingly, she observes, we are the only species to do so. All others simply take, by hunting, grazing or scavenging. Human beings, however, both take and trade – the latter growing as societies grow more complex. Because of this, she says, working occupations, even in simple societies, tend to fall into two broad categories respectively related to trade and commerce on the one hand, and to protection of territory on the other – i.e., related to guarding the resources that give us our living from our surroundings. The latter occupations she terms "guardian" activities, and while these are normally associated with government and the public sector, there are sufficiently important nuances to retain her "guardian" terminology.

Jacobs argues that each class of occupation is governed by its own moral precepts, and that many otherwise puzzling aspects of working life can be resolved by determining which class of activity is involved – guardian or commercial; government or business – and therefore which set of values governs behaviour for that function. She identifies a total of fifteen moral precepts (see Table 1 at the end of the paper) that govern activities in each of the two spheres, and while the two sets do not constitute strict opposites, the precepts in each tend to be contradictory to those in the other. At first blush, her moral precepts can seem a little odd. It seems strange, for example, why "deceive for the sake of the task" is a moral precept for guardians, until one thinks of police sting operations where deception is both necessary and laudable. However, the more one works through her ideas, the more sense they tend to make.

Her ideas can be illustrated by considering a simple example of two primitive communities, one by the sea that gets its living by fishing and one inland that is agricultural. Each community will have certain goods in abundance that the other requires – say sea shells for tools owned by the fishing community and corn by the farmers – and each has two ways to satisfy its needs, namely taking from, or trading with, their neighbours. If they are to trade, they must strike a bargain as to the relative value of seashells and corn. From a simple example like

this come two of Jacobs's commercial precepts: "collaborate easily with strangers," and "come to voluntary agreements."

Each, however, must also protect itself lest the other try to take rather than trade, and hence each has warriors to protect its territory. These warriors must induce a healthy respect for their military might, and like soldiers in all societies, they must put their skills solely at the disposal of their own society. Jacobs therefore identifies "exert prowess" as the guardian precept which corresponds, yet is contradictory, to "come to voluntary agreements" and "be exclusive" which contrasts with "collaborate with strangers."

This rather simple example can also show how virtue can be become vice when commercial principles are applied to guardian activities or conversely. If, for example, the farmers' warriors were to engage in commerce, their stock-in-trade is either their knowledge of how the farmers' defences can be penetrated, or their fighting skills. However, "collaborating with strangers" to sell these goods is treason. It follows that the first of Jacobs's moral precepts for the public sector is "shun trading", because trading what public sector workers have to sell is dishonourable. Similarly, if the ocean community "exerted prowess" in its trading activities, it would then force the farmers to give up more ears of corn per seashell. Accordingly, the exchange would no longer be voluntary, and the activity no longer trading but taking.

This simple example illustrates Jacobs's approach, and from it she develops the 15 precepts in each of her two categories. Arguing that the moral principles of each occupational class cluster together, she calls the two categories "moral syndromes," using "syndrome" in the sense of its Greek root, "to run together." Jacobs does not extol one syndrome above the other, nor speak of the evils of private enterprise and the virtues of the state or vice versa. On the contrary, she argues that advanced societies require both occupational sets and syndromes to function effectively.

Jacobs also contends that when organisations "confuse their own appropriate moral system with the other" – which is to say, when

either businesses adopt guardian values or guardians try to live by commercial values – they fall victim to a "systemic moral corruption" which leads them into "functional and moral quagmires." (p. xii) She illustrates this point with mergers and takeovers many of which, she says, were undertaken by "ruthless acquisitors [who] cared nothing about voluntary mutual agreement" and whose "aim was to take what they coveted regardless" and who thereby crossed the "portentous line ... between trading and taking." The result, she claims, is that "American industry ... has come under the control of people with a taking cast of mind, conquerors as unfit for guiding commercial life as Castro." "How deeply our economic life has been wounded ... by this grand exercise in restructuring," she questions, "we have yet to see." (pp. 140, 141, 146)

Perhaps we are beginning to see the damage Jacobs envisaged. Because the precepts tend to run together, one moral compromise tends to follow another, and thus it is not surprising, in the wake of this predatory behaviour, to see other elements of the guardian syndrome introduced into commercial life, and elements of the commercial syndrome similarly abandoned. Thus "be honest" tends to be compromised, while things like "deceive for the sake of the task" (for example, the task of selling mortgages to people who cannot afford them, or peddling toxic "asset backed commercial paper" as a sound investment) become more frequent practice. Thus too, as the current financial crisis unfolds, we simultaneously read of the head of Merrill Lynch spending $1.2 million renovating his office ("be ostentatious"), of Wells Fargo, which received $25 b. in bailout money, giving its traders a trip to Las Vegas ("make rich use of leisure"), and egregiously generous bonuses given to CEOs on whose watch their companies have failed ("dispense largesse"): all behaviours that, as Margret Wente recently observed in the *Globe and Mail*, are comparable to the behaviour of the quintessentially guardian French aristocracy in the early 1790s. (Wente 2009)

It is indeed worth questioning whether this kind of Jacobian "systemic moral corruption" is a function of a financial system which no longer primarily serves the business goal of "investing for productive purposes" but instead, the speculative goals of "investors"

who have no particular interest in the company whose shares they own. (See Kelly 2001.) Scholarship awaits a rigourous application of Jacobs's ideas to today's financial world.

With this brief introduction, we can now examine the grain business which is rich in illustrations of her ideas.

Jacobs Illustrated: "Systemic Corruption" in the Grain Industry

The first illustration is a historic one. When the three provincial Wheat Pools were formed in the 1920s, one of their promises was to eliminate what they thought was a widespread practice of short-weighing and undergrading at country elevators. In 1931, however, Manitoba Pool Elevators (MPE) was accused of cheating its members on weights and grades, and the charges were proven to be valid by a provincial Royal Commission. The company was outraged, claiming it had done nothing wrong. Moreover, the members – the victims of this shady practice – agreed, completely exonerating the board and management from any wrongdoing. The core of the directors' defence against the Commission's findings was that the Pool and its critic "represent different and irreconcilable attitudes towards the whole question of grain handling and grain marketing." "We simply do not agree," they said, "that Pool Elevators are to be judged exclusively by the standards of the profit-making elevator system." (See Earl 2007 for a complete description of this example, together with the sources of all quotations.)

In fact, the Pool directors were quite right. To both their accuser and the Commission, money was taken dishonestly from the farmers and invested wastefully in inefficient and lavish elevators that were intended to falsely impress members with the benefits of Pool membership, and thus entice more farmers to join. Moreover, the binding contract that required members to deliver all their grain to the Pool left them without competitive opportunities, and so concealed the impacts of these practices on the prices their members received. To the Pool, on the other hand, what the critics saw as wasteful was simply the provision of superior facilities which, if somewhat ostentatious, were a way of serving farmers well, and presenting a

fitting image of the organisation. While they were a little embarrassed about deceiving their members, both the company and the customers felt that the deception was in a good cause and therefore excusable. The customers, moreover, trusted the Pool's hierarchy to act honourably, and were correspondingly loyal to it. Belonging to the Pool gave them a feeling of exclusivity and power against the railways and private grain companies that had for so long exploited them, and these things were well worth the price of a few inefficient and overbuilt elevators.

Through the lens of Jacobs's construct, this event becomes a clash between the opposing values in her two syndromes. To the Pool's accuser (a grain company executive) the Pool had violated five of Jacobs's commercial standards: be honest; compete; invest for productive purposes; be efficient; be thrifty. The Pool, on the other hand, despite its commercial activities, was primarily a "guardian" (rather than "commercial") organisation that existed to protect members' interests. As such, both it and its members adhered to guardian principles: exert prowess (or power); respect hierarchy; be loyal; deceive for the sake of the task; be ostentatious; be exclusive.

Another example of conflicting values is provided by the Canadian Wheat Board, which, as former Supreme Court Justice, Willard Estey pointed out, has two roles, each "contemplated" in "[l]ong standing statutes." "In addition to ... the sale of Board grain," he said, "the Board is concerned with the welfare, financial and otherwise, of the producers." These two roles, he very incisively observed, "are differently interpreted, understood and appreciated by the stakeholders." (p. 14) The CWB's goal of "equity," which is a form of "largesse" variously administered at different times by delivery quotas and contracts, price pooling and so-called "car allocation," illustrates, quite vividly, the differing "interpretations" and "understandings" within the grain industry. To the CWB and its supporters, equity ensures fair prices and access to market. To its opponents, it stifles innovation and initiative.

Opponents of the CWB contend that its guardian role trumps its commercial role in its operations, to the detriment of the grain

handling and transportation system. They cite as evidence such things as the way the CWB's control of transportation helped delay modernisation of grain handling and transportation. (Canada Grains Council; Earl 2000) Certainly the primacy of the CWB's guardian role is inherent in its claim that its existence rests on the "three pillars" of single desk selling, price pooling and its relationship with government. (CWB 2003, 3) The single desk is portrayed as an instrument of market power or "prowess" against grain companies, railways and the international market. Pooling and the relationship with government are actually forms of "largesse" that respectively level returns among farmers and protect the CWB (and hence farmers) against commercial risks such as buyer defaults. Being a guardian organisation, also means that its supporters exhibit "respect for hierarchy" and "obedience," so it is not surprising that they do not question the CWB's claims of higher prices, nor that they close ranks ("be exclusive") against critical outsiders.

Jacobs's theory also provides a perspective on the puzzling questions posed above. Inefficient elevators were retained because "be efficient" is a commercial, not a guardian, value, and retaining small local elevators and branch lines keeps farmers' trucking costs down: a form of "largesse." Developing multi-car shipments would require valuing "efficiency" above convenient local service, and applying "inventiveness and novelty" to make multi-car shipments work. These values are in short supply among guardians. At the same time, legislating freight rates effectively exercised "prowess" against the railways. Nor was there any concern about the government buying rail cars or subsidizing storage as both are forms of "largesse" which is perfectly acceptable from a guardian point of view.

With this brief and inadequate illustration of how Jacobs's theories can help make sense of the often puzzling world of the grain business, let us now look at transportation issues.

The Relevance to Transportation Issues

It is, of course, the grain business itself that provides one of the most outstanding examples in Canadian transportation and supply chain

policy of Jacobs's concept of "systemic moral corruption," as the previous section shows. The various public and corporate policies that were designed to help farmers – storage subsidies, freight rate regulation, branch line abandonment restrictions, retention of small local elevators, car allocation, CWB control of grain movement – were all pursued in accordance with Jacobs's guardian principles, and all sought to benefit farmers. However, their net impact was perverse. The massive inefficiencies that these policies brought all cost farmers dearly in terms of system inefficiencies and poor performance. It represents a classic and vivid example of an entire industry suffering from a "systemic moral corruption," operating a fundamentally commercial system by guardian precepts.

At the same time, transportation in general does pose special challenges because it is quite frequently and legitimately used to achieve socio-political goals. Examples abound. The Canadian Pacific Railway was built as an instrument of national policy designed to establish and maintain sovereignty. The Crows' Nest Pass Agreement with CPR – the one that managed to smuggle grain freight rates into its provisions – was concluded to ensure the Kootenay area of B.C. was not annexed by the United States. The U.S. interstate highway system was constructed as much for defense as commercial purposes. China's current Five Year Plan is said to include a rail line to the north and west that is intended to re-create the silk road and, along with other initiatives, "to reshape international trade logistics." (Deglio 2009) In Manitoba, each winter, a series of "ice roads" are created by the province to bring in supplies to isolated communities. The list is endless. Moreover, as with railways historically, and air traffic control currently, some transport functions are "natural monopolies" and some provide services which are in the public interest to maintain regardless of commercial viability. Perhaps the intimate relationship that transport has with social and political issues makes it particularly vulnerable to "getting it wrong," as we did in the western grain industry.

Are there other examples in transport of "syndrome confusion" that do, or may, create the "functional and moral quagmires" that Jacobs speaks of? There is very likely none that has yet caused anything like

the level of the grain industry's dysfunctionality, but two additional cases will suffice to show that the pitfall into which the grain handling and transportation system fell is an ever present danger in transport. As noted above, the following comments do not reflect any deep research into the areas discussed; rather they represent two examples of Schumpeter's "preliminary notions" of how two other features of the transport sector appear when viewed in the light of Jacobs's "vision." Those who are expert in these and other areas of the transport sector are invited to comment and to do their own assessments. To repeat: the objective of this paper is simply to introduce a new way of looking at the interplay between private and public activity in transport.

The first case is airport policy. The process of privatising airports began in Canada in 1994. (Flemming *et al.*, p. 152) However, airports lack some key qualities of private sector organisations. For the most part, they face no effective competition, and do not, in any meaningful way, risk economic failure. There is no possibility of Pearson International Airport declaring bankruptcy and liquidating its assets. Moreover, in many ways airports are guardian organisations. They are gateways to our countries and cities and present our face to the world. Certainly air travellers do not see Airport Improvement Fees as a "voluntary agreement," and the authors of *Vision and Balance* pointed out that "the market power of [the new Local Airport Authorities] was underestimated, and checks and balances have not operated as expected." (*Id.*, p. 152) Following Jacobs, if airports are more guardian than commercial in their nature, then it can be expected that these bodies, like MPE over the late 1920s, will slowly abandon the commercial values they were intended to bring (efficiency, innovation, thrift, industriousness) and begin to operate under the guardian syndrome (ostentation, prowess). Perhaps, therefore, airport privatisation represents a "systemic moral corruption" that is doomed to fail in the long run. Note that the same questions surround the privatisation of sea ports. That marine ports are much more than free market enterprises, and that "guardian" considerations bulk large in their operation, was well illustrated by the controversy a few years ago over the management of U.S. ports by a Dubai company.

The second case is Private Public Partnerships, or PPPs. Adam Smith defined internal and external security, and the provision of "certain public works and public institutions" which cannot be profitably provided by private as the three functions that remain to the state in a capitalist economy. (Heilbroner, p. 53) The latter can be viewed as "merit goods" that are freely available to all citizens, and therefore a form of largesse – which incidentally illustrates that the term "largesse" does not always carry pejorative overtones. Government fiscal constraints, however, have driven governments to move into the quasi-privatised arrangement referred to as PPPs. Looked at through the lens of Jacobs's theory, are PPPs a viable arrangement or not? One analysis of PPPs, which cited but did not explicitly use Jacobs's concepts (Van Ham and Koppenjan) suggests that they may not be. Governments, the authors say, find partnerships "difficult" because "as guardians of the public interest they see themselves more in the role of principal" (p. 606) In other words, a partnership implies equality which is contrary to "hierarchy," and a PPP requires reaching a "voluntary agreement," a commercial way of doing business which differs from the exertion of "prowess" which is the normal modus operandi of the state. They also list one of the risks of PPPs to the private partner, namely that "government is a capricious partner: with an appeal to political primacy it simply reneges on earlier agreements." (p. 600) This observation echoes a comment by a grain industry colleague, with many years of operating experience, who said, "The railways may be tough negotiators, but with them, a deal is a deal. With the CWB, you never know." These comments are not surprising from Jacobs's point of view, because "respect contracts" is a commercial, not a guardian, value. The basic question, then is whether or not PPPs will prove to be fatally flawed by the fact that the contracting parties operate under such widely divergent moral principles.

Conclusions

Robert Heilbroner points out that "the immediate central issue in capitalism, the issue that takes on an often obsessive prominence in every capitalist nation ... is the relationship between business and

government, or from a somewhat more distant perspective, between the economy and the state." (p. 50) His observation applies with particular force to transport issues where the division of responsibility between the private and the public sector, and the debate as to what does, and does not, belong in the marketplace, has been particularly contentious and difficult. Dispassionately stated, we could say that those on the left tend towards a broad inclusiveness; those on the right seek to narrow the interpretation and restrict the role of the public sector. Rhetorically, the language is more dramatic.

Jacobs brings a new perspective to this debate. To begin with, she cuts through the rhetoric of left and right, framing the debate not as one between "business and government" or "the economy and the state" but between the ways human societies get what they need: taking and trading. In doing so, she introduces new terms to describe the dichotomy – "commercial" and "guardian" – and traces this division back to the beginnings of human history.

Secondly, she provides a comprehensive list of the precise values, or moral precepts, that respectively govern guardian and commercial activity. It must be stressed that these values are not to be obeyed as if they were absolute black and white rules. Her construct does not imply, for example, that business people need not be honourable, or that companies do not require a hierarchical authority structure, or that governments should invest for unproductive purposes, or that government employees should be lazy rather than industrious. It is a question of balance and priority. (See Stern for one assessment of a very unbalanced situation, where one of Jacobs's guardian principles, "treasure honour," is given an egregiously high priority.)

Lastly, she provides a penetrating analysis of what happens when organisations "get it wrong" and begin to "confuse their own appropriate moral system with the other" – the condition she refers to as "systemic moral corruption."

Jacobs is not easy to follow on a first encounter. The moral precepts in her two syndromes do not look much like what we usually think of as ethical principles, and, as noted above, cannot be viewed as black

and white absolutes. However, the author of this paper has found her construct to be exceedingly valuable in understanding a broad range of social, political and economic issues, and highly commends their study to his colleagues.

TABLE 1
THE TWO SYNDROMES

Commercial Syndrome	Guardian Syndrome
1. Shun force	1. Shun trading
2. Come to voluntary agreements	2. Exert prowess
3. Be honest	3. Be obedient and disciplined
4. Collaborate easily with strangers	4. Adhere to tradition
5. Compete	5. Respect hierarchy
6. Respect contracts	6. Be loyal
7. Use initiative and enterprise	7. Take vengeance
8. Be open to inventiveness and novelty	8. Deceive for the sake of the task
9. Be efficient	9. Make rich use of leisure
10. Promote comfort and convenience	10. Be ostentatious
11. Dissent for the sake of the task	11. Dispense largesse
12. Invest for productive purposes	12. Be exclusive
13. Be industrious	13. Show fortitude
14. Be thrifty	14. Be fatalistic
15. Be optimistic	15. Treasure honour

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