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BETWEEN CRITIQUE AND CONSERVATISM: ELTON MAYO'S METHOD, POLITICAL THOUGHT AND APPROACH TO MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Although often regarded as an innovative administrative thinker, Mayo's books and research reveal a distinctly conservative stance. This conservatism has become so embedded in contemporary social sciences that it often goes unnoticed. The aim of this study is to demonstrate how Mayo could be both conservative and, at the same time, innovative and critical. A qualitative–interpretive research design is employed. The analysis draws primarily on Mayo's major works alongside key secondary literature. To complement the interpretive thematic analysis, a content analysis based on the frequency of words in Democracy and Freedom (1919) and The Social Problems of an Industrial Civilization (1945) was conducted. The study reveals Mayo's conservative outlook, which prioritized spontaneous social developments and regarded abstract, intentionally designed concepts with skepticism. It also shows that, despite his resistance to abstract formulations, Mayo consistently relied on certain ideal concepts that shaped his intellectual journey.

Keywords: *Elton Mayo, Conservatism, Industrial Civilization, Spontaneous Cooperation, Informal Organization*

Jel Codes: *J53, P16, Z13, M54.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The primary aim of this study is to demonstrate that Elton Mayo—frequently portrayed in the literature as more modern than Taylor because of his seemingly innovative approach—was in fact a conservative thinker in a deliberate and systematic sense. His reputation as an innovator derived not from a genuinely progressive orientation, but from his ability to employ previously unexplored methods and concepts in order to critique modernity from a conservative standpoint. By reconstructing this intellectual posture, the article situates Mayo within his proper historical and theoretical context and highlights the depth of his interactions with, and enduring influence on, the wider social science literature—an influence far more significant than is commonly recognized.

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The scope of this article is not confined to management thought alone but extends to Mayo's engagement with broader currents in the social sciences, particularly political science. Rather than offering a comprehensive biographical account, the analysis focuses on Mayo's major works and the core concepts he introduced—such as spontaneous cooperation, informal organization, and the therapeutic manager—while also tracing their resonance in debates about authority, democracy, and civic life. By situating these contributions in relation not only to classical scientific management and later organizational theory but also to wider discussions in political and social thought, the article demonstrates how Mayo's ostensibly modern ideas were rooted in a conservative framework. In doing so, the study underscores the extent to which his intellectual stance shaped subsequent debates across both management and the social sciences more broadly.

To provide a comprehensive view of Mayo's intellectual contribution, this article is organized as follows. The study first presents the methodological framework and analytical strategy, accompanied by illustrative empirical outputs consisting exclusively of graphical results derived from Python-based word frequency analysis of Mayo's two books. This is followed by an examination of Mayo's Method and Core Assumptions, focusing on how he applied his analytical tools, methodological approaches, and modes of reasoning in his intellectual and scientific work. The subsequent section, titled Mayo: From Critique to Normative Vision, is divided into two subsections. The first subsection analyzes Mayo's critiques of modern theories and concepts, while the second examines the idealized principles and normative standards to which he repeatedly returned in articulating and sustaining his intellectual vision.

2. THE METHODOLOGY EMPLOYED IN THIS STUDY

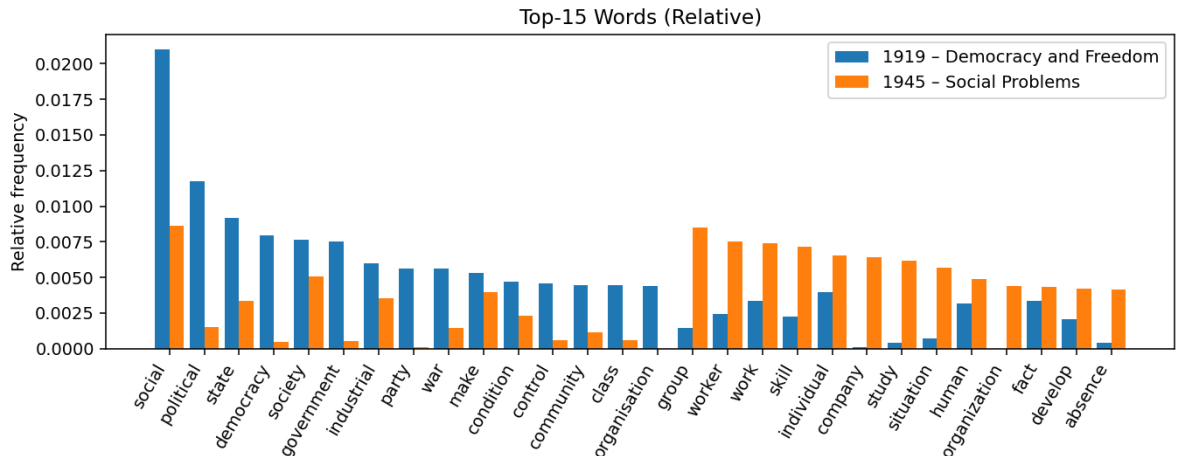
This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research design. The analysis draws primarily on Mayo's major works—*Democracy and Freedom* (1919), *The Human Problems of an Industrial Civilization* (1933), and *The Social Problems of an Industrial Civilization* (1945)—in conjunction with key secondary literature (Muldoon, Bendickson, Bauman and Liguori, 2020; Trahair, 2009; O'Connor, 1999; Fry, 1989; Trahair, 1981; Smith, 1974, 1975; Bendix and Fisher, 1949).

To complement the qualitative analysis, the frequency of words in *Democracy and Freedom* (1919) and *The Social Problems of an Industrial Civilization* (1945) was calculated using Python (SpaCy library). These data were then used to support the interpretation and to generate illustrative graphs. The purpose of this procedure is not to provide quantitative measurement in a strict sense, but rather to enrich the reinterpretation of Mayo's assumptions, concepts, and ideals and to situate them within the broader trajectory of management and social thought. Accordingly, the study undertakes a critical examination of Mayo's writings, focusing on how his underlying philosophical commitments and personal beliefs informed his central concepts—such as cooperation, authority, and the role of the manager—and how these, in turn, shaped subsequent developments in management and the social sciences. The results and

their preliminary interpretations, derived from the analysis of the aforementioned books using the Python programming language, are presented below.

The bar chart in Figure **1** reports the Top-15 words by relative frequency in each book. The 1919 text is dominated by political terms—social, political, state, democracy, society, government, party—whereas the 1945 text leads with organizational and workplace vocabulary—worker, work, skill, individual, company, study, situation, human, organization. Notably, social remains the single most frequent token overall, but its share drops markedly in 1945.

Figure 1. Comparison of Mayo's early and late works: Democracy and Freedom (1919) and The Social Problems of an Industrial Civilization (1945)

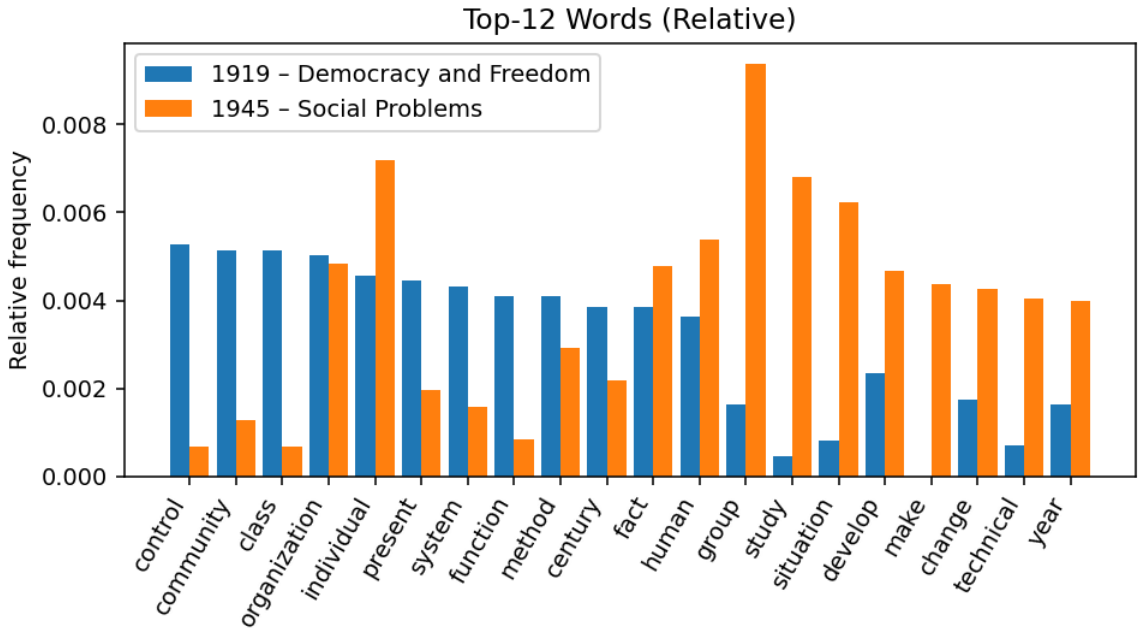


In this study, since the aim was to identify the guiding ideal concepts underlying Mayo's thought, an additional analysis was conducted to minimize the impact of differences in the subject matter of the two books on the comparison. For this purpose, from the word list of the 1919 book, the following terms were removed: *word, social, political, state, democracy, society, government, industrial, war, party, make, industry, democratic, problem, politician, far, economic, politic, civilisation, freedom, worker, economic, work*; and from the word list of the 1945 book, the following were excluded: *social, worker, work, skill, company, society, absence, problem, say, economic, industrial, state, give, seem, chart, management, say, take, industry, point, find, department*. The results of this analysis are presented in Figure **2**.

Figure **2** indicates that at the outset of his career Mayo employed macro-level social terms such as *control, community, class*, and *system* with greater frequency, although his emphasis on these declined in the 1940s. In contrast, terms such as *organization, individual, fact*, and *human* were used consistently and extensively throughout his career. By 1945, new terms not present at the beginning had entered his vocabulary of interest, including *group, study, situation, development, change*, and *technical*.

Figure **2** highlights the evolution of Mayo's intellectual focus. In his early career, his attention leaned toward broad societal categories, but by the 1940s this emphasis had diminished. What remained consistent was his concern with the relationship between people and organizational settings, while later years brought new themes connected to empirical research and psychological inquiry. Overall, the figure illustrates a movement away from systemic concerns toward practical and human-centered approaches, guided in the background by idealized concepts that shaped both his early and later work.

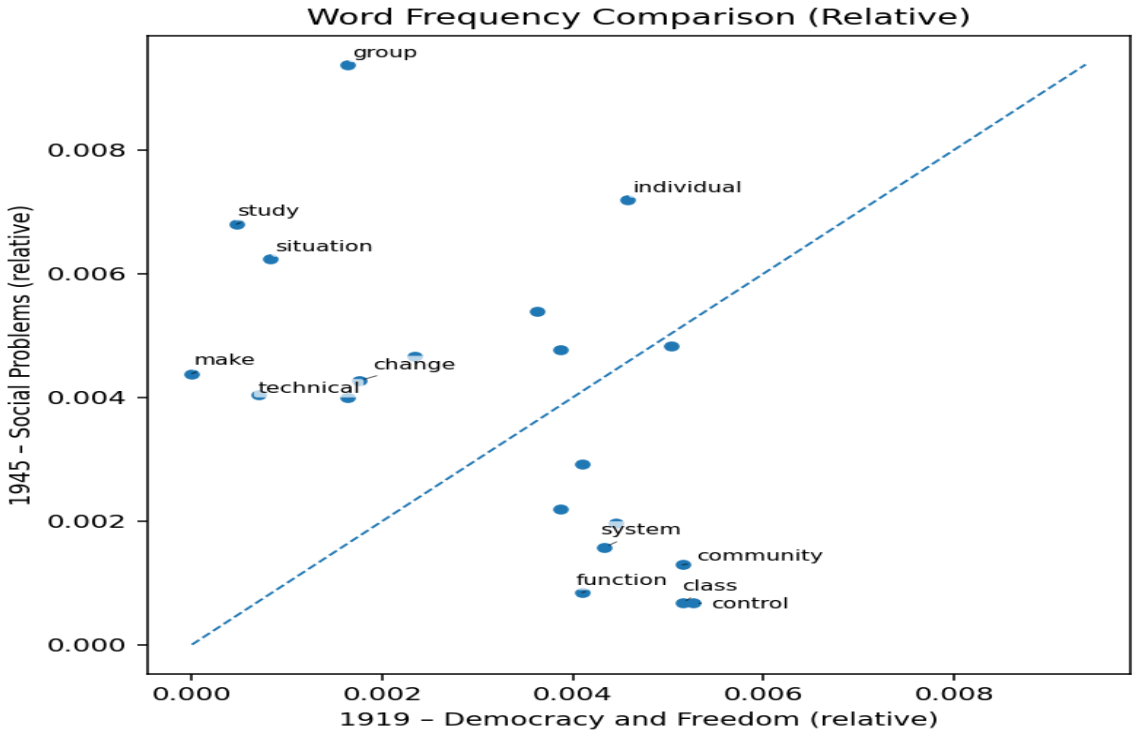
Figure 2. Comparison of Mayo's early and late works—Democracy and Freedom (1919) and The Social Problems of an Industrial Civilization (1945)—after the removal of words closely related to the books' subject matter



In addition to the graphs presented above, a scatterplot was prepared in order to display the results more concretely. Figure **3** visualizes the relative word frequencies between the two books. For each term appearing in both corpora, the x-axis represents its relative frequency in *Democracy and Freedom* (1919) and the y-axis its relative frequency in *The Social Problems of an Industrial Civilization* (1945). Frequencies were normalized by total token counts, and a 45° reference line indicates equality across texts; points above (below) the line indicate higher relative usage in 1945 (1919). The scatterplot format was chosen because it clearly and succinctly conveys both the direction and magnitude of lexical change.

As noted above, the content analysis based on word frequency in Mayo's works was used in this study as a supportive tool alongside thematic analysis, which was primarily aimed at interpreting the content of the texts. The graphs presented above are not intended to direct the research. Therefore, rather than developing the discussion around the figures, priority has been given to a debate organized around themes.

Figure 3. Lexical Shifts Between Mayo's 1919 and 1945 Works, after the removal of words closely related to the books' subject matter



3. MAYO'S METHOD AND CORE ASSUMPTIONS

According to O'Connor, philosophy exerted only a weak influence on the development of twentieth-century management thought. This connection was further severed, particularly under the impact of Simon (O'Connor, 1990: 224). One author who stands apart from this general trend, however, is Mayo. He not only attached importance to philosophy but also made a significant contribution to the expansion of the scientific method within the social sciences.

In the social sciences, the methods employed by researchers are often shaped to a considerable extent by their underlying assumptions about the human being or the individual. Many of these assumptions are not grounded in empirical evidence, yet they nonetheless exert a significant influence on the course of research. It is therefore appropriate to begin by examining Mayo's views, interpretations, and assumptions concerning human nature and the individual.

It should first be noted that Mayo offered significant criticisms of the prevailing assumptions about human nature in the social sciences of his time. He rejected nineteenth-century *utilitarianism* and the notion of the *economic man* (O'Connor, 1990: 224). He characterized nineteenth-century *individualism* as excessive, arguing that it depicted individuals as isolated and unchanging units (Mayo, 1919: 4). In his view, from the thought of J. S. Mill and Jeremy Bentham emerged an imaginary concept

of "the people". This, Mayo suggested, was a fictitious construct, possibly intended to denote the nation as a modern political abstraction, toward which he adopted a skeptical stance (Mayo, 1919: 4, 10, 72).

The perspective that regarded the individual as an isolated and independent unit was, unsurprisingly, reflected in various ways in the management practices of the time. One illustrative example can be found in industry through the concept of the division of labor, implemented in the form of extreme job fragmentation. Practices such as piece-rate payment, which fostered competition among workers, also stemmed from this outlook (Fayol, 1949/2016; Taylor, 1911/1998). Instead, Mayo later criticized this approach for neglecting the social needs and group dynamics of workers, emphasizing that cooperation and morale were as crucial as technical efficiency (Mayo, 1945).

This view of the individual was underpinned by a broader conception of human nature. O'Connor argues that Mayo's fundamental views on human nature were not grounded in an Aristotelian conception that seeks balance between reason, emotion, and desire, but rather in a Hobbesian and Machiavellian outlook that emphasized the role of *passion* and impulse (O'Connor, 1990: 227–228). According to Mayo, everyone is subject to oddities of mind and minor irrationalities (Ionescu and Negruşa, 2013: 673). If human beings were entirely rational, administration might be able to define this rationality and predict human behavior in advance.

Building on this understanding of human nature, Mayo's worldview also rested on a set of constructive assumptions about social cooperation and organization. Sarachek identifies two basic assumptions underlying Mayo's worldview. First, human beings, by their very nature, seek ways to establish social unity and productive cooperation. Second, this inclination toward cooperation, along with individual mental health and levels of satisfaction, can be enhanced through appropriate improvements in the surrounding environment (Sarachek, 1968: 189). Drawing on Mayo's later work *The Political Problem of Industrial Civilization*, Sarachek concludes that Mayo assumed conflict was not an inherent feature of human nature but rather the result of defective social organization.

In Mayo's view, human beings are not consistently rational but are inherently social and inclined toward cooperation. The question, then, is where one should look in order to understand human behavior. According to Ionescu and Negruşa, Mayo believed that the key to understanding the individual lies in examining the surrounding environment. For him, analysis should focus on the group to which the individual belongs. He emphasized how individuals form groups and how groups, in turn, influence individuals. To capture the way groups develop their own culture, he introduced the concept of the informal group (Ionescu and Negruşa, 2013: 671).

Although Mayo's thought and research often focused on groups and individuals, he consistently kept broader social units in view. This is evident even from the titles of his works: three of his books include the phrase industrial civilization in their titles, The Human Problems of an Industrial Civilization (1933), The Social Problems of an Industrial Civilization (1945), and The Political Problem of Industrial

Civilization (1947). For Mayo, "industrial civilization" referred to the society in which he lived, one confronted with challenges such as democracy, political parties, class divisions, and polarization. He believed that scientific inquiry ought to address these issues directly. As Smith observes, Mayo argued that knowledge should be purposive, aimed at solving such macro-level problems (Smith, 1974: 287). Supporting this claim, Mayo also lamented the prevalence of secondary studies in the social sciences and the relative neglect of research grounded in fresh, firsthand data. For him, knowledge must originate in direct observation, and method should never lose sight of its connection to purpose (Smith, 1974: 287).

Henderson, who played a major role in Mayo's appointment at Harvard, was an admirer of Machiavelli and valued his ability to analyze facts without reference to normative judgments (O'Connor, 1990: 227–228). This orientation influenced Mayo in his adoption and practice of scientific research based on primary data. As noted earlier, Mayo attached great importance to firsthand observations, but he did not employ them merely for descriptive purposes. Rather, he used his observations to understand and address the problems of both industrial organizations and industrial civilization as a whole.

In this regard, Mayo did not favor abstract concepts or studies confined to the intellectual frameworks of other writers. Instead, he sought to translate theories and claims developed in the realm of ideas into the real world, while also linking observations drawn from the real world back to the world of thought. Through this vertical movement, he simplified abstractions and stripped them of their mystique. For this reason, Mayo sometimes appeared to some as a shallow thinker. In a 1975 interview, Lasswell remarked that Mayo was not a profound intellectual and that much of his thought had been derived from Sir William Mitchell (1861–1962) (Trahair, 1982: 181, 187).

The method Mayo employed most frequently was the interview. Smith suggests that this emphasis may have stemmed from his early training in medicine and clinical psychology (Smith, 1974: 287). The intellectual sources of his thinking in this respect were Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud. Their influence was decisive in shaping Mayo's belief that the inner life of the individual contains irrational and emotional elements. Psychology also provided the techniques for assisting individuals with such deficiencies. Inspired by psychoanalysis, pioneered by Janet and Freud, Mayo adopted the *counseling interview method*, designed to uncover and address the "flawed" aspects of workers (O'Connor, 1990: 224–225, 227). As early as 1924, Mayo was already using this approach, assigning to managers the role of listening to the worker's experience and offering a new and more accurate interpretation of that experience (O'Connor, 1990: 236).

Mayo subsequently applied his method to the Hawthorne studies, where his involvement led to several important refinements. The research began in 1924 at the Western Electric Company's Hawthorne plant, though Mayo himself did not join the project until 1928 (Bruce, 2006: 177). His contributions transformed the studies into a body of work that laid the foundation for what became

known as the Human Relations School, which exerted a lasting and significant influence not only on public administration but also on business and management studies. In addition to Mayo, other major contributors who wrote about the experiments included F. J. Roethlisberger, W. J. Dickson, and T. N. Whitehead (Hart, 1943: 150).

The Hawthorne studies were initially designed to measure the effects of changes in physical conditions—such as increased lighting—on worker productivity. During the course of the research, however, important methodological problems were identified. To highlight these issues, management literature commonly refers to the so-called *Hawthorne effect* (Wigfall and Kalantari, 2001: 98). In the experiments, groups of workers were subjected to special treatments for research purposes. As a result, participants felt that they were being given particular attention and responded positively (Levitt and List, 2011: 225). Consequently, it proved difficult to separate the impact of physical improvements from that of social and psychological factors, and the concept of the Hawthorne effect underscores this challenge.

The significance of the Hawthorne effect lies in its demonstration that experimental attempts to measure human behavior can never be flawless enough to yield generalizations with a minimal margin of error. In experimental settings, the very procedures introduced for the purpose of research generate changes within the group under study. As a result, the experiment and its instruments themselves become factors that activate social dynamics, thereby altering parameters beyond those initially targeted.

From a broader perspective, the use of experimentation in the Hawthorne studies represented a major contribution at the very foundations of administrative science. Yet the concept of the "Hawthorne effect" may have inadvertently trivialized this contribution by reducing it to a methodological artifact. The fact that experimental methods in management and administrative research still receive only limited attention suggests that Mayo's pioneering role has not been fully recognized. His work demonstrated that experimental inquiry could open new avenues for understanding organizational behavior, a potential that remains underappreciated to this day.

Another central theme highlighted by the Hawthorne studies was the phenomenon of the *informal organization* (Henderson, Whitehead and Mayo, 1937: 154–156). Mayo and his colleagues argued that workers' behavior was shaped less by rational decision-making, individual interests, or the physical conditions of the workplace than by the spontaneously formed informal organization that emerged among workers—often without managerial involvement and sometimes even in opposition to it. The functioning of the informal organization was not guided by a conscious program but by the norms, rules, and standards that developed within the group. According to Mayo, the informal organization determined, and when necessary restricted, the amount of work each member performed. Individual characteristics such as attitudes, abilities, or intelligence were therefore not decisive factors. From the Hawthorne studies, Mayo drew the conclusion that output was essentially a function of job satisfaction,

and job satisfaction in turn depended on the way the work group was informally organized (Bendix and Fisher, 1949: 315).

Did Mayo simply use the Hawthorne experiments as a vehicle to communicate his own ideas? The studies that became so closely associated with his name were in fact neither designed nor initially directed by him; Mayo joined them at a later stage (Mayo, 1949: xiv). The experiments at Western Electric's Hawthorne plant were launched in 1924 under the auspices of the National Research Council (Levitt and List, 2011: 224). At the outset, the central question was whether increases in lighting would enhance productivity. The hypothesis to be tested was that material conditions and physical improvements would yield a positive relationship with worker output (Hart, 1943: 152–153). Yet this hypothesis could not be confirmed, resulting in what amounted to a scientific crisis. Mayo responded to this impasse with a concept drawn from his own intellectual framework, applying the idea of *spontaneous development* (Mayo, 1919) to organizations and thus resolving the crisis. To substantiate his interpretation, he insisted on conducting individual interviews with workers and presenting these as scientific evidence.

4. MAYO: FROM CRITIQUE TO NORMATIVE VISION

Mayo's *Democracy and Freedom*, written while he was still in Australia and published in 1919, reads almost like a work of political philosophy. As shown in the Figure 1 , the most frequently used word is "social", followed in order by "political", "state", "democracy", "society", and "government". Composed at a time when democracy was still in the process of being established globally, the book's central concern was that prevailing conceptions of democracy in advanced countries were not compatible with "human liberty" and "social integration". In this work, Mayo offered striking critiques of the modern understanding of democracy as merely a matter of political parties, electoral systems, and representation—criticisms that were echoed throughout the twentieth century and continue to be debated today (Mayo, 1919). Smith argues that, although written three decades later, *The Social Problems of an Industrial Civilization* may be read as a continuation of *Democracy and Freedom*. As he notes in the 1975 foreword, it represents Mayo's final statement on themes raised earlier (Smith, 1975: xxxvii). Figure 1 suggests shifts in Mayo's research interests, but this is convincing only if Smith's point is taken to refer to the idealized concepts illustrated in Table 1.

When the major themes on which Mayo reflected and wrote are listed, it becomes evident that he was, above all, a critic. Indeed, three of his six books contain the word problem in their titles: *The Human Problems of an Industrial Civilization* (1933), *The Social Problems of an Industrial Civilization* (1945)1 and *The Political Problem of Industrial Civilization* (1947). This indicates that Mayo was primarily a problem-oriented writer. Yet in discussing problems, he also offered solutions. His solutions, however,

[1] This study uses the 1949 edition

were usually framed in the form of idealized concepts. In his works, discussions of problems are generally more explicit, while his reflections on ideals tend to appear between the lines and in a more implicit manner. The following sections will first examine the problems Mayo addressed and will then turn to his ideals and proposed remedies.

4.1. Mayo as a Social Critic: Problems, Institutions, and Ideologies

A distinctive feature of Mayo's thought is his critical stance toward the accepted concepts, institutions, and ideologies of modern society. The discussion will address, in turn, his views on workers, labor institutions, political parties, the state, modern ideologies such as liberalism and socialism, and finally modern society as a whole. In formulating these critiques, Mayo often relied on certain idealized concepts, which he used as normative benchmarks to guide his evaluations.

First, Mayo turned his attention to the condition of workers, a theme that would remain central throughout his career. As shown in Figure 1, worker, work, and skill are among the five most frequently repeated words in the 1945 work. Mayo's early reflections on labor highlighted his concern that nineteenth-century economic theory had legitimized the treatment of labor as nothing more than a cost of production, reinforcing the view of industry as primarily a profit-making mechanism tied to employer class traditions. While the twentieth century brought some improvements, Mayo argued that the underlying perception of workers had changed little: they continued to be regarded as equivalent to the machines they operated, and no increase in wages or improvements in working conditions could compensate for the loss of genuine freedom or a sense of social function (Mayo, 1919: 41). These ideas, expressed in his 1918 book *Democracy and Freedom*, foreshadow the very issues that later re-emerged in the Hawthorne studies.

Second, Mayo's views on labor unions reveal one of the most debated aspects of his thought. Rather than being openly opposed to unions, he regarded them critically, portraying them as a stabilizing yet restrictive force that tended to preserve established arrangements (Smith, 1974: 291). At the same time, he stressed that societies cannot be considered civilized if the majority is subjected to exploitation by a privileged minority (Mayo, 1919: 60). Smith's account, however, conveys the impression that Mayo treated unions as a marginal issue. This interpretation seems incomplete, for as Muldoon and colleagues point out, labor strikes were among the most pressing concerns in the United States during that period (Muldoon et al., 2020: 169). Instead of focusing on unions as collective actors, Mayo placed greater emphasis on the dynamics of informal groups within organizations, which he believed more directly shaped worker behavior and satisfaction (Ionescu and Negruşa, 2013: 671).

Mayo opposed not only unionization but also the core functions of unions, such as collective bargaining. He believed that collective bargaining would turn the redistribution of resources into a contentious issue and thereby intensify conflicts of interest between management and workers (Muldoon et al., 2020: 169). Instead, he supported the system of internal bargaining promoted at the time by leading

corporations such as DuPont, General Electric, and Goodyear, as well as by John D. Rockefeller. Under this arrangement, wage-related matters were to be handled within the company, with workers electing their own representatives by secret ballot (Muldoon et al., 2020: 169).

Mayo's skepticism toward unions was part of a broader distrust of formal collective organizations, which also extended into the political sphere. For this reason, as a third step, Mayo's views on party-based political systems warrant closer examination. He argued that such systems encourage division and conflict within society, whereas genuine consensus and cooperation are not achieved through will but emerge organically within traditions (Bendix and Fisher, 1949: 314). In his 1919 work *Democracy and Freedom*, Mayo expressed strong doubts and distrust toward party politics, suggesting that public fascination with political parties was hardly a sign of a healthy society. For him, the party system contributed little either to solving the problems of industry or to fostering in individuals a sense of meaningful social function (Bendix and Fisher, 1949: 313). This suspicion of party politics was closely tied to his broader conception of democracy as a form of social integration, rather than a mere aggregation of competing interests.

In Democracy and Freedom*,* Mayo criticized the prevailing political climate in Australia for transforming every economic issue into a partisan conflict, thereby preventing the formulation of genuine solutions to industrial problems. He argued that political organization had been mistaken for political education, and that the party system not only diverted attention from urgent social issues but also aggravated existing industrial difficulties. For Mayo, existing form of democracy had failed to provide society with cohesion or to instill in individuals a sense of social function. Instead, under its influence, social development had drifted into a state of dangerous instability, which existing democratic institutions appeared incapable of remedying (Mayo, 1919: 43–44).

Mayo believed that political parties manipulated public opinion. In his view, the claim that government is conducted by the people was little more than a rhetorical assertion. In practice, the public was consulted only at election times, and even then the party system primarily served to enable politicians to shape and control public opinion (Mayo, 1919: 4). This critique illustrates Mayo's deep skepticism toward party politics, a theme that marked his broader doubts about the capacity of democratic institutions to address social and industrial challenges.

Fourth, Mayo's reflections on the state reveal a persistent skepticism toward political authority that runs across his broader social theory. Rather than locating social order in formal institutions, he consistently privileged organically emerging forms of cooperation, especially in the domain of industrial relations. As discussed by Bendix and Fisher (1949: 313–314), Mayo regarded state-led interventions in industrial conflict not merely as ineffective but as conceptually misguided, since externally imposed regulations could not generate the kind of mutual adjustment required for genuine cooperation. In his view, rules and prohibitions were capable only of stabilizing existing arrangements, not of cultivating

the shared commitments necessary for social integration. From this perspective, social cohesion depended less on administrative coordination than on the gradual alignment of interests across social groups, an alignment that could emerge only when political expediency and short-term regulatory solutions were set aside. Mayo thus treated human sociality itself—not institutional design—as the primary source of durable social order.

Thus, Mayo consistently portrayed government as closely associated with the coercive power of central authority, a force that undermined rather than fostered genuine cooperation (Bendix and Fisher, 1949: 314). In this reading, the role of the state was confined to maintaining and codifying existing moral relations and traditions rather than creating new ones or reshaping those that had emerged organically. Social development, Mayo maintained, should advance through spontaneous processes, and industrial relations likewise were expected to rest on organic interactions rather than state intervention. Bendix and Fisher emphasize that Mayo drew a sharp contrast between "spontaneous cooperation," which he regarded as the foundation of social health, and political or governmental action, which he viewed as corrosive of the will to collaborate. On this basis, they interpret Mayo's rejection of state intervention as extending beyond industrial relations to a broader skepticism toward modern political ideologies, whose reliance on deliberate organization and centralized authority conflicted with his understanding of social order.

Fifth, Mayo's reflections on modern ideologies such as socialism and liberalism further illustrate his critical orientation. He opposed socialism for several reasons, the most significant being his belief—somewhat inconsistent with other aspects of his thought—that collective ownership would eliminate personal responsibility (Fry, 1989: 131). He also rejected the socialist view that capitalist society is fundamentally divided into classes, arguing that this thesis failed to capture the complexity of social relations in industrial society. His concern, however, lay less in its descriptive inaccuracy than in the class consciousness it fostered and the conflict it inevitably produced (Fry, 1989: 131). Moreover, Mayo noted that socialist demands for the nationalization of industry would transfer control to politicians, a prospect he found deeply troubling (Mayo, 1919: 47).

Although the Soviet system emerged as a purported solution to the problem of labor relations that had long preoccupied him, Mayo regarded it as both radical and excessively statist, and therefore openly rejected it (Muldoon et al., 2020: 169; Mayo, 1951: 15). Consistent with his skepticism toward the state, he feared that such a system would endanger the autonomy of free institutions (Smith, 1974: 291).

Mayo often interpreted the active proponents of socialism and the working class, both during his time in Australia and later in the United States, through a psychological lens. He suggested that such individuals might reflect unresolved emotional difficulties originating in early life. In 1922 he described them as "agitators," a characterization he retained for much of his career, though in his final years he came to prefer the term "destroyers" (Trahair, 1982: 171–173).

In addition to his critique of socialism, Mayo also challenged the premises of liberalism, particularly its conception of the individual and its institutional arrangements. As he argued in *Democracy and Freedom*, liberal thought had effectively severed the industrial order from society at large, reducing industry to an autonomous sphere governed by laissez-faire principles (Mayo, 1919: 45). Yet, in his view, the evolutionary logic of "survival of the fittest" did not apply to commerce: it was not always the most competent or socially responsible actors who endured, but often those most willing to deceive consumers and to exploit labor ruthlessly. Competition, therefore, rewarded unscrupulous practices rather than excellence, undermining both industrial integrity and social cohesion. This line of critique fed directly into Mayo's broader reflections on modern society, where he saw industrial civilization as deeply troubled by the erosion of moral bonds and the dominance of narrowly economic interests.

Sixth, Mayo's writings reveal his broader concern with the trajectory of the society in which he lived. Drawing on Bendix and Fisher's (1949: 313) interpretation, one can say that Mayo perceived nineteenth-century civilization as grounded in individualism, whereas the twentieth century was increasingly marked by the political mobilization of class divisions and the intensification of class conflict. Importantly, Mayo did not interpret these conflicts as the expression of an underlying class structure, but as symptoms of a dangerous social dynamic that threatened cohesion. He feared that these struggles among classes and castes might ultimately drive society toward a form of civil war. Bendix and Fisher (1949: 312) further argue that throughout both his early and later works, Mayo was animated by a persistent sense of imminent danger. His preoccupation with social conflict can thus be seen as an extension of this broader anxiety. Through his research and publications, Mayo sought in his own way to mitigate what he regarded as the looming threat of social disintegration. At the same time, his work also pointed toward an underlying social ideal, a theme that will be examined in the following section.

4.2. From Problems to Ideals: Mayo's Concepts of Democracy, Freedom, and Spontaneous Cooperation

The preceding sections have examined the problems Mayo addressed. To reiterate, his strength lay more in his skill as a critic than in the construction of systematic theories. Yet in formulating his critiques, Mayo did not rely solely on empirical observations; he also invoked a number of *idealized concepts* as standards of evaluation. These ideals can easily be overlooked, for Mayo sometimes criticized the very same notions in their contemporary application, while at the same time retaining in his imagination a purified and more perfect version of them. In other words, he rejected the forms in which certain concepts were realized in his own era, but simultaneously preserved an idealized vision of what they might represent.

Mayo's intellectual trajectory shows that he did not merely propose isolated concepts, but rather idealized them and continuously returned to them throughout his career. As early as *Democracy and*

Freedom he asserted that "prohibitions can do nothing to bring about a condition of whole-hearted and spontaneous co-operation" (Mayo, 1919: 50), making "spontaneous organization" a normative ideal long before the Hawthorne experiments. Nearly two decades later, this same idea reappeared in empirical form when he and his colleagues observed that "The group had so organized itself — in a purely spontaneous fashion — that the intentions of the engineer organizers were defeated" (Henderson et al., 1937: 153–154). Read together, these passages demonstrate that Mayo consistently elevated the notion of spontaneous cooperation as a guiding principle of industrial life, first articulating it theoretically and subsequently reaffirming it empirically, thereby exemplifying his broader tendency to idealize and repeatedly reference his core concepts across all of his works.

Mayo (1919) sharply distinguished between abstract and ideal concepts. As shown in Table 1, he rejected abstractions like democracy, the people, or class-war as empty ideological slogans rooted in liberal or socialist thought. By contrast, he idealized notions such as spontaneous co-operation and social will, reflecting a conservative emphasis on organic unity, tradition, and social cohesion. Thus, for Mayo, abstract concepts remain detached formulas, while ideals are grounded in lived social experience. The following section will consider these concepts in Mayo's thought.

Table 1. Abstract Concepts and Ideal Concepts in Mayo (1919)

Abstract Concept	Ideal Concept
democracy (as political slogan)	spontaneous co-operation
freedom (as empty catchword)	social growth
the people (fiction of sovereignty)	freedom of growth
general will	social will
popular sovereignty	conscious social unity
self-determination (absolute/nationalistic)	sense of social function
State control (as universal solution)	intelligent collaboration
class-war	collaboration between intelligences
competition / survival of the fittest	skilled communal functions / conserve social skill
League of Nations / static peace	full publicity and moral control by the people

First, it is necessary to consider Mayo's understanding of *democracy*. *Democracy and Freedom* was essentially a critique of contemporary democracy, in which he attacked the emerging model of representative democracy, sometimes directly and sometimes through its institutions and actors. At the same time, however, Mayo consistently upheld an ideal conception of democracy that informed nearly

all of his writings. This was a form of democracy that emerged to ensure liberty and autonomy, realizable only after a critical rethinking and purification of dominant social and political philosophy (Mayo, 1919: 13). In this conception, state control disappears and a common social purpose is achieved through cooperation among communities (Mayo, 1919: 71-72).

Second, Mayo's treatment of the concept of *freedom* deserves attention, particularly in relation to how it shaped his understanding of managerial responsibility. To grasp what Mayo meant by freedom, one must examine it on three levels: individual, group, and society. He invoked "personal freedom" in his discussions of democracy, linking it to his analysis of labor, and criticizing the design of industrial organizations that, in his view, disregarded the worker's liberty. At the same time, Mayo acknowledged that an individual's behavior is conditioned by the group, which generates its own norms and cultural standards. As noted above, he stressed that individual actions ought to remain compatible with this group culture, whereas those who defied it were seen as agitators or destroyers (Trahair, 1982: 171–173).

Mayo's managerial philosophy may be interpreted as a response to such disruptive individuals or workers. The two terms—agitator in his earliest writings and destroyer in his later works—refer to the same phenomenon (Trahair, 1982*:* 171-173). In Mayo's view, the choice of opposition rather than participation in the group's culture could arise from many factors, but underlying this was his broader assumption that human beings are not purely rational but also driven by *desires* and *impulses* (O'Connor, 1990).

Faced with the challenge of the "troublesome" individual, what role does management science—and the manager—assume? For Mayo, management would eventually rest on scientific laws that uncover causal relationships, enabling the prediction of future developments. Such knowledge, he argued, could then be applied to the adaptation of individuals to organizational life. In this framework, the manager assumes a role akin to Hobbes's Leviathan or Machiavelli's Prince: a figure charged with reconciling inherently unstable human nature with the requirements of the organization, thereby safeguarding social order (O'Connor, 1990: 227–228).

Mayo also conceived of managers as belonging to an elite stratum. In *The Human Problems of an Industrial Civilization*, he referred to Pareto's notion of the *circulation of elites* (Mayo, 2003: 167, 180). What distinguished Mayo's use of the concept was his confinement of it to the workplace: unlike other theorists who applied the idea to society at large, Mayo located the elite in the sphere of managerial authority within industrial organizations (Muldoon et al., 2020: 172). Therefore, it may be concluded that Mayo sought to apply the idea of social freedom to work organizations, regarding it as a socially defined concept.

Third, Mayo's conception of society deserves closer attention. In his view, every social group—regardless of its level of cultural development—faces two fundamental managerial problems: the provision of material and economic needs, and the cultivation of spontaneous cooperation across the

entire community. While the first objective could often be achieved with some success, Mayo lamented that the continuity of spontaneous cooperation was far less effectively maintained (Mayo, 1949: 9).

Perhaps the most powerful idea in Mayo's social thought is the notion of a self-developing society. Such a society, he believed, would be one free of castes and classes, in which purposes and norms emerge organically rather than being imposed externally. For modern society to evolve toward this ideal, all artificial barriers to the natural development of human capacities would need to be removed (Bendixand and Fisher, 1949: 313, drawing on Democracy and Freedom). In this context, the opportunity for cooperation and organization based on spontaneity should be open to all members of society (Bendixand and Fisher, 1949: 312).

To grasp Mayo's conception of society, it is essential to focus on his frequent use of the term *spontaneous*. Bendix and Fisher (1949: 312–313) emphasize that Mayo distinguished spontaneity from *voluntarism*. Whereas voluntary organization is the product of conscious choice, spontaneous organization, as Mayo understood it, is rooted in the binding force of tradition. For him, the key issue was whether the individual could establish a meaningful connection between work and society, since only through such a link could work acquire genuine significance. Yet the organizational patterns of modern society, he argued, had severed this crucial bond.

In a healthy society, Mayo contended, the purposes of individuals are defined by the communities to which they belong, ensuring that individual aims and collective aims coincide. Cooperation thus emerges not from deliberate debate or conscious decision-making but from traditions that evolve organically. Indeed, Mayo regarded voluntarism itself as insufficient for securing authentic cooperation (Bendix and Fisher, 1949: 314).

Importantly, Mayo did not value every form of cooperation, but only that which was sustained by interpersonal communication. However, he believed that material and technological progress disrupted such communication, creating blockages that undermined the possibility of spontaneous cooperation. He associated these disruptions with authoritarian centralization, which he viewed with deep concern. For Mayo, compulsion from a central authority ultimately destroys the desire to cooperate (Bendix and Fisher, 1949: 314). Consequently, he turned his attention to traditional values, lamenting that modern rationality had displaced them. As Fry (1989: 131) notes, Mayo believed that logic could never substitute for the integrative functions served by socialization. In this sense, the idea of spontaneous cooperation was not simply one concept among others in Mayo's work, but the guiding ideal that shaped his entire vision of social order.

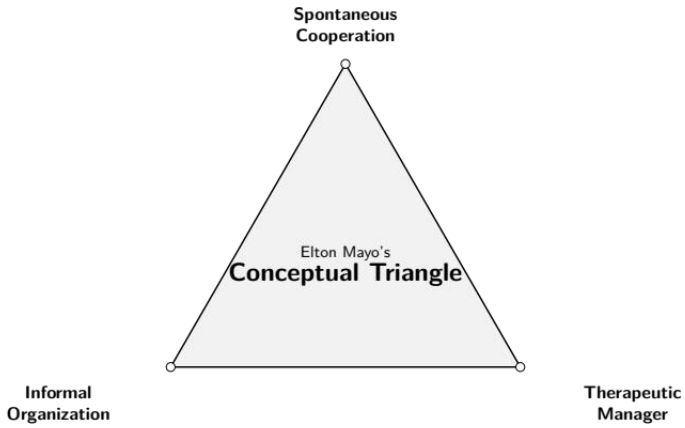
Mayo consistently valued spontaneous social cooperation over forms of cooperation achieved through political means, preferring the former to the latter (Bendix and Fisher, 1949: 314). He regarded political action as inherently prone to negative outcomes, producing only artificial forms of cooperation (Bendix and Fisher, 1949: 314). In this respect, Mayo rejected many practices now considered

indispensable to democracy. As discussed earlier, he was critical of collective bargaining, competition, class struggle, election campaigns, and political engagement more generally (Bendix and Fisher, 1949: 314). For the sake of social harmony, he opposed trade unionism, which he believed rested on the false assumption that labor and management could never be reconciled (Fry, 1989: 131). He also expressed concern that democratic selection of managers in the workplace would allow individuals lacking the necessary skills to assume leadership roles (Fry, 1989: 131).

Mayo's critique of many institutions of modern society often implied their outright rejection, but his criticisms of industrial organization were oriented toward reform and improvement. As Fry (1989: 128–129) observes, Mayo regarded the industrial organization as the foundation of society, and therefore concentrated his research on it. Unlike many social scientists who studied organizations, however, he did not confine his attention to the workplace alone. Instead, he sought harmony both within and beyond the organization: within, between labor and management, and beyond, between the organization and society. For him, both labor-management conflict and the separation of industrial organization from society represented forms of pathology.

Mayo also extended his concept of spontaneity—so central to his vision of society—to the field of industrial relations. What later came to be identified in the Hawthorne studies as the phenomenon of the *informal organization* was, in essence, an application of his broader idea of spontaneous cooperation to the industrial setting. This reveals once again Mayo's distinctive ability to develop and employ concepts that could be analyzed across the individual, group, and societal levels. As illustrated in Figure 4, Mayo's conceptualization of organizational dynamics can be represented by a triangle comprising spontaneous cooperation, informal organization, and the therapeutic manager.

Figure 4. Elton Mayo's Conceptual Triangle: Spontaneous Cooperation, Informal Organization, and the Therapeutic Manager



Mayo's emphasis on the informal organization resonated strongly in subsequent management and organizational research. Building on his ideas, Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939) provided detailed empirical accounts of worker interactions at the Hawthorne plant, showing how group norms and social ties shaped productivity. Later scholars confirmed that informal structures often exercised more influence over behavior than formal rules or managerial directives, highlighting the enduring significance of Mayo's insight. The concept became a cornerstone of the *Human Relations School*, underscoring the idea that organizational effectiveness depends not only on technical efficiency but also on the cultivation of cooperative group relations.

Mayo's work occupies a distinctive place in the history of administrative and social thought. His method combined close empirical observation with a normative search for social harmony, while his concepts—such as spontaneous cooperation and the informal organization—sought to reconcile the tensions between individual, group, and society. Critical of both socialism and liberalism, as well as of the political institutions that sustained them, Mayo, however, envisioned an ideal of democracy grounded in personal freedom and community cooperation rather than in political mechanisms.

At the organizational level, he regarded managers as an elite responsible for maintaining stability and fostering collaboration, while at the societal level he remained deeply concerned about the dangers of conflict and disintegration. Although many of his views reflected the anxieties of his time and have been contested in subsequent scholarship, Mayo's insistence on the centrality of *human relations* to both industrial organization and social life ensured his lasting influence. His work thus stands not only as a critique of modern institutions but also as a continuing reminder of the importance of human cooperation for the preservation of social order.

5. CONCLUSION

Mayo was not a writer who simply gathered information about his objects of study and then presented them "as they were." From the outset, he adopted a normative standpoint: he carried with him an ideal of the good society, a harmonious civilization, and the well-adjusted individual, and he consistently examined empirical cases in light of their compatibility with that vision. The subjects of his observations and analyses included workers, political activists, social groups, political parties, corporations, the state, and public institutions. Most often, his stance toward these actors and structures was critical. Above all, then, Mayo should be seen as a critic. Yet his intellectual outlook was marked by a duality: alongside his critiques, there existed conservative and idealized versions of the very actors and concepts he criticized. Moving analytically from the individual to the group, from the group to the institutions of modern society—such as political parties, trade unions, and industrial organizations—and ultimately to society as a whole, Mayo continually drew upon these idealized versions as reference points for his evaluations.

Mayo was, above all, a careful reader of the thinkers of his own time and of those who lived in eras close to his own. He frequently drew upon the frameworks he developed himself or borrowed from others, employing them as tools to connect the specific phenomena he observed to the broader picture in his mind. In the end, however, one must conclude that Mayo was never captive to the concepts, perspectives, or theories of those he read. He treated them as analytical instruments, while never losing sight of the fundamental problems that concerned him most.

Although Mayo is sometimes presented as an innovative thinker, he is perhaps more accurately described as a conservative writer. A key feature of conservative ideology is its tendency to reject autonomous subjects and to grant primacy to society as a whole. In this sense, Mayo did not trust modern subjects such as the individual, political parties, or trade unions. To him, individuals were unstable beings prone to irrationality; political parties fostered social polarization; and unions perpetuated conflict between workers and employers. One might ask why, then, Mayo sometimes appeared innovative or even liberal—particularly since some scholars have described the Human Relations School he inspired as a form of neo-classical management thought. The answer is that Mayo, from a essentially conservative standpoint, sought new solutions to the pressing problems of his society. These solutions were indeed novel, at least in the short term. His critiques of Scientific Management, his formulation of the concept of the informal organization, and his notion of the manager as a therapeutic figure were innovative, yet they ultimately emerged from a conservative vision of social order.

This study highlights Mayo's dual role as both a critic of modern institutions and a conservative innovator seeking new solutions to enduring social problems. While the analysis has focused on his writings and their intellectual context, further research could explore how Mayo's ideas were reshaped by later generations of scholars and practitioners. In doing so, future work may better situate Mayo within the evolving history of management and social theory.

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