



Time to fix our teaching materials?

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review of

Cummings, S., T. Bridgman, J. Hassard and J. Rowlinson (2017) *A new history of management*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (PB, pp 380, £28, ISBN 9781316481202)

Why this book?

Why do we need a new history of management, or better, *new histories* as the authors explicitly argue in the preface? According to the authors of this book, it is due to the surprising fact that handbooks of management have been passing on inaccuracies for decades. It is a pleasure to read the book as, despite the multiple authorship and the myriad topics investigated, there is a continuity and a common style. A common feature is the historical sensitivity of the authors. This book is an important contribution to critical management studies (e.g. Alvesson et al., 2009) because it reflects on the dynamics that have shaped the nature of management and organization.

The authors historically contextualize the development of management ideas. By doing so they correct some common inaccuracies and they enrich our knowledge of management theories, providing such detailed backgrounds that are usually omitted. Did Abraham Maslow actually ever draw a pyramid of needs? Did Kurt Lewin devote substantial work to the

development of a change-management theory? Are important features of the work of Adam Smith, Max Weber, or Frederick Winslow Taylor often omitted or misrepresented? What are the forgotten origins of the Harvard Business School case method? These are just some of the important questions asked and answered by the authors in the nine chapters that make up the monograph.

Over the past twenty years, organization scholars, economists, and sociologists have increasingly looked back at history as a source of inspiration, a source of data and methodological innovation (Clark and Rowlinson, 2004; Rowlinson and Hassard, 2011; Rowlinson et al., 2014; Bucheli and Wadhvani, 2014; Mills et al., 2016). In organization studies, this turn was triggered by Gherardi and Strati (1988) who argued that organization theories were predominantly based on ‘time-free statements’. The contemporary interest in history among organization scholars can be seen in the recent special issues published by *Organization Studies* (2017) and *Academy of Management Review* (2016). This book is not the first in its genre but represents a very good addition to this scholarly field. I struggle to find limitations. Possibly, the concluding section [331-333] could be longer and could provide a better synthesis and integration of the chapters. I am not sure that the book could be used as a core text for teaching. It does not provide a complete and systematic history of management, but it would be an excellent additional reading to complement a more traditional text. Perfection would be to have a standard textbook of management and organization written with the same historical attention.

A call to enrich management and organization’s textbooks

The message from Cummings, Bridgman, Hassard, and Rowlinson is pertinent to all aspects of our profession (research, pedagogy, and organizational practice) for it is concerned with both teaching and research and describes handbooks and textbooks as primary artefacts that shape disciplines, their boundaries, and their nature. Textbooks are the connection between our profession as teachers and our profession as researchers. They play a role in defining both aspects of our academic life and our disciplines.

They are artefacts because they represent a shared knowledge and an agreed definition of the academic field. Being artefacts, they are socially constructed, and dominant ideologies play a role (Cooke, 1999), often hidden behind the scientific ambitions of the text. They contribute to define what is in and what is out (Cooke, 2003), what is orthodoxy and what is heterodoxy, what is agreed and what is contested. The bibliographical study of books and textbooks allows the authors of this book to trace back in time inaccuracies, oversights, biases, and emphases. The history of management that dominates today is made of 100 years of such little or big misrepresentations, some of which were deliberately added to shape the nature of the discipline in support of this or that managerial orthodoxy; for instance, uncritical support of leadership and managerial prerogative, strict division of labour, unitarist perspective on industrial relations, performance management, control, standardization of professional work and organizational inequality (Bernardi and Tridico, 2020).

In Chapter 1 the book provides empirical data to show how much management studies are based on contributions that are very much concentrated in space and time. This is to say that publications from the 20s, 30s, and 40s have played a major role in setting undisputed foundations, while contributions from the US, the UK, and certain other countries are disproportionately represented. What has happened in management and organization studies has no equal in other disciplines such as architecture, medicine, or philosophy. The debate that occurred in 2018 within EGOS about the handling of LAEMOS (the Latin American conference of organization studies) is a good representation of this tension.¹ Equally, beside this geographic concentration, there is a concentration in time. The authors claim that some management scholars have been over-representing and emphasizing the contribution of the classics from the beginning of the past century:

1 LAEMOS, the Latin American chapter of the most important scholarly association of organization studies (EGOS), accused the board of EGOS of Eurocentrism and of neocolonial attitude toward the Global South business and management academia.

Existing narratives about how we should organize are built upon, and reinforce, a concept of 'good management' derived from what is assumed to be a fundamental need to increase efficiency. But this assumption is based on a presentist, monocultural, and generally limited view of management's past. [81]

The awareness of this and other problems described in the book should inform our teaching and research work henceforth. I see potential theoretical implications of the book as well as implications for pedagogy and organizational practice.

Time's up for time-free statements in management and organization theories

In his famous essay, Jeffrey Pfeffer (1993) argued in favour of some form of mainstream in organization studies as a protection and institutionalization of the discipline in relation to other social sciences. The case he made, which he himself subsequently retracted, was not followed through by organization scholars. But a mild orthodoxy in organization studies could have appeared anyway in the form of handing down for decades established knowledge about founding fathers, experiments, and theories that were not subject to careful scrutiny. Research was at times conducted that took for granted simplified accounts of the classics that were rarely investigated directly, nor disputed before being embedded in research and teaching. As a young discipline, management avoided digging into its past in search of the accurate scientific foundations of the classics. It took some time to re-read the Human Relations movement with a critical eye (Wrege, 1976). It took even more time to look back at the statistics of the Hawthorne Experiments to find out that it was probably just a *Fable of Our Times* (Gale, 2004).

It took this book to discover many more inaccuracies and fallacies. Two authors of this book (Cummings and Bridgman) are currently working on the famous Milgram experiments, claiming that unlike what happened in psychology textbooks, histories of Organization Studies ignored the experiments in later editions because the results of the experiments implied a critical view of management, leadership, and division of work. Le Texier (2018) recently published a book on a similar experiment held in Stanford in

1971 by Philip Zimbardo. In this case it is a study about the inaccuracies of the account of the experiment itself, as in the case of the Hawthorne experiments. Simplification and lack of historical contextualization also led to weak theories and interpretations of reality. The oversight on the Milgram experiments, like the inaccuracies mentioned in the book, provide clues that efforts and deficiencies converged in the construction of a discipline bent towards managerial consensus. The discipline facilitated the diffusion of a shared, simplistic explanation of human motivation that ignored how unchallenged leadership and division of labour could run the risks of conformity and ‘banality of evil’ (Arendt, 1963).

Are Business Schools fit for purpose?

The book by Cummings, Bridgman, Hassard, and Rowlinson has implications for teaching and management practices too. It turns out that some of us have been teaching an inaccurate history of management, and that management education has been altered by an ideological manipulation of the boundaries and the identity of the discipline. This means that generations of students, many of whom are now managers and policy makers, have used non-contested, yet in reality controversial, knowledge to develop their ideas about organization, organizing, and the organized (Ortenblad, 2015).

We have ethical responsibilities to our students. While our research is constrained by formal ethical procedures and the scrutiny of peer review, this is not the case with teaching. And yet when teaching we often have an even greater impact. While our papers may not in the end be read by more than a few dozen people, hundreds if we are lucky, when teaching we reach hundreds of students every week.

If we accept Martin Parker’s provocative book (2018), it might be time to shut down business schools or at least reinvent and rename them, possibly rethinking their role in academic institutions. Not everybody would agree with that, but certainly many colleagues would accept that it could be time to fix and update our teaching materials. *A New History of Management* offers some good reasons why we should do so. The most striking case is the one of

the famous pyramid of needs, supposedly drawn by Abraham Maslow. In chapter 7 we learn that the pyramid, probably the most powerful symbol in management education, never appeared in Maslow's writings. Similarly, famous and present in most MBA classes is the so-called theory of change management developed by Kurt Lewin (Cummings et al., 2016). Do you remember 'Unfreeze, move, refreeze'? Who has not used this in class? I have used it, for sure, yet this book tells me that Lewin never devoted more than 160 words to the process of managing change.

The book presents the results of detailed historical research on the thought of Adam Smith (chapter 2), F.W. Taylor (chapter 3), and Max Weber (chapter 4), describing how some parts of their work were omitted while overemphasizing others. For instance, Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is rarely mentioned in business schools. Smith's treatment in management is limited to efficiency, control, and division of labour, but there was much more, for instance his belief that skilful management and liberalism could bring equality and mutual enrichment, and his opposition to slavery and repression. Similarly, Taylor's interest in the natural environment is scarcely covered. Nor the fact that he did not even choose the title of his famous book; *Scientific Management* was the choice of his solicitor, Louis D. Brandeis, and Taylor originally tried to resist it. Incidentally, the book by Cummings and colleagues is dedicated to the late Charles Wrege (1974; 1978; 2000), who devoted his career to the critical study of Frederick W. Taylor and scientific management.

The book even finds space to topple the most famous pedagogical device of any MBA programme: the Harvard case study. The authors of the book discovered in The Harvard University Archives evidence that its origin and development is not so straightforward as conventional histories of the Harvard case make it out to be. In the 1920s and 1930s there was contestation rather than consensus and a continuity of ideas and practice. This was due to the social and economic crisis that led the faculty to conceive it as a tool for independent thinking and innovation, including in labour relations. But the idea that the cases could be used to discuss with students alternatives to traditional capitalism, whose dominance was so violently questioned during the Great Depression, did not last for long.

Surprisingly, that radical past of the Harvard case has been lost and earns not a mention, not even in the 100 year-anniversary publications of Harvard Business School. Lamentably, the case-study teaching method has lost its radically creative potential, becoming a conservative rather than innovative tool for teaching and learning. Of course, we also need plain, straightforward, uncontroversial cases to train students in their future profession. Most of them will have to engage with the relatively predictable tasks of standardized professions in finance, accounting, marketing, or HR. We cannot expect everybody to be willing and capable to be educated and prepared to challenge capitalism, financialization, and managerialism at work or in their life. Nevertheless, the excess of conformity and the lack of a critical mindset is a threat to everybody, also to those happy with the status quo, corporations included.

In chapter 6 we are again reminded of the importance of the study of the historical context. Here, the precedents of the Hawthorne Experiments are described. One of them is the tragedy that occurred during the fifth annual picnic of Hawthorne Works. That day, on 25th July 1915, employees and families boarded a boat on the Chicago river that then capsized, killing more American passengers than the Titanic (841), only two years after that famous shipwreck. That disaster eventually contributed to rethinking employment relations at the Hawthorne Works. A colossal tragedy, still omitted in management textbooks, which contributed to the climate that led to commissioning the Hawthorne Studies and later to a slightly more humane management style.

You know what? He never actually drew that pyramid

This book is now a companion in my classes. At the beginning of every module I draw a pyramid on the whiteboard, and I ask students what it is. There is always more than one student proudly ready to attribute it to Abraham Maslow. At that point I congratulate them, but then I cross out the pyramid on the whiteboard and I tell them: ‘You know what? Maslow never drew any pyramid of needs in his life. If you want to know more, you can read this book. Don’t take for granted what lecturers or textbooks say about

business, management, and organizational behaviour.² I warn them that, as students, they need to be critical in class. They might not read the book but perhaps they will remember me next time a colleague of mine, next door, shows them the famous pyramid that according to Cummings, Bridgman, Hassard, and Rowlinson was not drawn by Maslow although he did develop the idea of a hierarchy of needs. From page 253 onwards we learn the history of this invention and more broadly about the development of Maslow's Five Elements of Motivation. An early representation of the pyramid was published in a book by Keith Davis (1957), based on Maslow's contributions of 1954 and 1943. But it is another book that is responsible for the misinterpretations of Maslow that would become mainstays of many management textbooks to come. This is McGregor's *The Human side of Enterprise* (McGregor, 1960). The origin of the trivialization and misinterpretation of Maslow's work is as early as that.

Hyper-simplification and populism

Another trick I do with my students is to bring in to class a classical contribution that they might have heard in a lecture or seen quoted in a history of management, be this Smith's (1776) *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Marx's (1867) *Das Kapital*, Barnard's (1938) *The Functions of the Executive*, or even Hofstede's (1980) *Culture's Consequences*. I carry the actual physical book with me in class to show that their contribution is much more complex and lengthier than what the bullet points on a PowerPoint slide, a reader, or even a set textbook suggests.

Students and academics share the experience of living in an age of populism (Rodrik, 2017; Inglehart and Norris, 2016), in which the rejection of expertise and uninformed political debates is rife (Clarke and Newman, 2017; Hensmans and van Bommel, 2020). Whether on trade policy, public deficit, healthcare, international relations, or economics, any member of the public is ready to

2 In the introduction, the authors of this book warn us that their research too cannot be taken for granted. In fact they chose as a title *A new history of management*, suggesting that this should not be considered the only nor the ultimate or the exact history.

share his/her views and criticize politicians and experts, invoking the democratic right to have an opinion on every technical matter regardless of his/her level of education and experience. Of course, this is legitimate, and agonistic populism might even play a positive role in liberal societies (Hensmans and van Bommel, 2019). Nevertheless, it can also be dangerous if it leads to hazardous individual decisions (as in the case of vaccinations and face masks) or collective decisions (as in the case of Brexit). If this is the case, it could be argued that it is exactly the trivialization of science and research that contributed to weakening the role of experts and expertise; it is thanks to that trivialization that many feel entitled to talk about monetary policy or science, disregarding the recommendations of experts (Knight and Tsoukas, 2019). If trivialization is a problem, we have got a lot of that in business and management education, and we should start taking countermeasures to correct the pitch of teaching and public engagement. We cannot prevent simplification, misinterpretations, and trivialization of scholarship in society, but we cannot allow its proliferation in the university.

Conclusions

For the reasons briefly sketched above, this book is a must-read for scholars and practitioners, tutors, and students. Academics will be able to reflect critically on the nature of business education and on conformism in teaching and research. Practitioners and students will be able to challenge what they have been taught and the textbooks they were given. Both students and scholars will be able to discuss alternative approaches for managing and organizing in the twenty-first century. As academics, we have educated generations of managers who now are running firms and institutions inspired by the words and the reading we selected for them. We often complain that good management does not prevail in our organizations (universities included). But after all, does the blame for this not lie partly at our door, since some of us have been educating contemporary managers and policymakers and have let management studies take the road that brought us to bullshit jobs (Graeber, 2018) and bullshit managers (Spicer, 2017)? As this book shows, inaccuracies in management textbooks have become structural components of teaching. Probably the inaccuracies, the trivialization, and the ideological selection of perspectives and approaches

contributed to reinforcing a dominant paradigm of management practices, a global paradigm, thanks to a high degree of standardization of business and management education across institutions and nations. As a result of this standardization, management styles and practices were adopted and enforced worldwide, regardless of the sector and the type of organizations (Ortenblad, 2015).

This paradigm might even be judged not fit for purpose, given the recurrent corporate scandals and failures that at times even escalate to macroeconomic crisis. The last great recession, of 2008, had an impact on the management programmes taught in business schools and in management textbooks and practice (Lansbury, 2009; Bratton and Gold, 2015; Lancione and Clegg, 2015). But one would have expected much more, and even the most prominent initiative like PRME³ has been judged as disappointing (Millar and Price, 2018). Probably a higher impact is visible in economics where there were some actual reflections and readjustments among academics and leaders of political and financial institutions (Lavoie, 2014; Elsner et al., 2014; Tae-Hee et al., 2017; Clift, 2018). In economics, students and scholars have widely debated whether dominant economic theories and research methods were sound and whether university economics programmes were fit for purpose (Gräbner, 2017). A good indication of this is the international movement of Rethinking Economics⁴, which actively involves both prominent scholars and graduate students. Governments and Central Banks have explicitly discussed how policies and institutions have not managed to prevent the financial crisis and its diffusion across the planet, and certain innovations were introduced. The impact on newly published monographs and textbooks of economics has been substantial. The debate in business and management was less prominent, pervasive, and organized. Surely the time has come, and this book can act as a spur, for management scholars to ask ourselves how we can scrutinize our teaching materials with more attention. This might eventually contribute to training better executives who one day might try to shape healthier workplaces and more sustainable organizations.

3 <https://www.unprme.org/>

4 <http://www.rethinkeconomics.org/>

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