

A New History of Management

Stephen Cummings, Todd Bridgman, John Hassard, & Michael Rowlinson: A New History of Management, Cambridge University Press, 2017, 380 pp. £27.99 (Paperback) ISBN: 9781316502907 £75 (hardback) ISBN: 9781107138148 \$28 eBook ISBN: 9781108294836

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‘The object is to learn to what extent the effort to think one’s own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently’ (Foucault, 1986)

‘Concepts of ‘good management’ are generally derived from what is assumed to be a fundamental need to increase efficiency. But this approach is based on a specific and limited view of management’s past’ (the authors)

A ‘New History of Management’ is an ambitious work, crafted around a compelling argument: to change the future of management practice we should look ‘more deeply at our interpretations of the past and how these limit our horizons’ (p.xii). The material that follows is well crafted, insightful and compelling. The theory that underpins well-structured arguments is presented beautifully, making reading a pleasure and analysis easy to follow. In short, I thoroughly enjoyed this excellent piece of scholarship and came away convinced that the authors have made an important and timely contribution to ‘management learning’ and knowledge. I provide a brief outline, detailing salient arguments, with reflections on what might be concluded. My intention is to encourage others to engage more fully with the authors own words.

The preface notes that the image on the book cover portrays a beautiful yet decaying institution, the field of management, and explains that the works of important authors, central to the development of management science (including Adam Smith, Frederick Taylor & Max Weber) have been appropriated (the authors use the term ‘distilled’) as ballast for a ‘set of unquestioned and inevitable certainties that now bound the way management is presented to young scholars’ (p.xii). This foreword leads to a brief introduction on ‘management history’, as an established

academic field underpinned by certain conventions. While I would have enjoyed a more thorough account of the state of the field, the authors focus on ‘orthodox’ (and often uncritical) presentations of past thought - taking aim (in particular) at ‘potted histories’ found in many ‘introductory’ management text books, ‘that in the words of those who develop them ‘put the present in perspective’ and ‘...help us understand today’s management theory and practice’’ in light of the past (p.1). Here the authors outline their central contribution at length, providing a sophisticated overview of contemporary debates on the importance of history to management theory - establishing the importance of thinking differently about management, by ‘looking again at’ and ‘rethinking’ conventional assumptions in the field of management history (p.2).

In short, the authors argue that: unearthing ‘new histories’ might promote greater innovation. Providing the grounds for theories unconstrained by historical conventions that do not hold up under scrutiny. The materials that follow demonstrate how conventional historic accounts of management theory provide a linear view of historic developments in the field, drawn from narrow geographical and temporal frames (compared to the fields of Architecture and Medicine). These limitations (together with other precedents, usefully outlined in the pages that follow) act to limit how we approach the subject of management, ‘an archive stuck in time, rather than a dynamic reflection of a vibrant field with multiple possibilities’ (p.26). Next, the authors skilfully discuss the legacy of Michel Foucault to historical analysis, presenting ‘a methodology for a new, deeper history of management’ (p.33). What follows is one of the true highlights of the text: an extremely satisfying discussion of Foucault’s methods of analysis. The authors’ expertise is crystal clear, as they circle through Foucault’s impact on management theory (and in particular, critical management studies). Materials are well structured, nuanced, detailed, yet terse – presenting Foucault’s ‘oeuvre’ (their term, not mine) in an engaging and helpful formulae. Having plainly

outlined their own Foucauldian methodology in great depth, the authors conclude by asserting how ‘counter-historical strategies borrowed from Michel Foucault... raise doubts about our assumptions of how management studies came into being, what it responded to, what ‘good’ it seeks to serve, what it is fundamentally about and what it could be’ (p.41). In the empirical chapters that follow, the authors make good on these claims, taking the reader on a tour of some of the key thinkers in the establishment of management science. Beginning with Adam Smith, the authors immerse the reader into ‘critical historical understandings of moments that have been defined as key in management’s development’ (p.313).

To be clear, this is not a complete and linear history of management, but rather, a thorough analysis of how ‘historical’ theories, statements and ideals are situated within particular episteme (simply put, contexts and discourse). For reasons of space and in order to encourage others to read the book for themselves, I shall only outline two chapters – each warrant further reading – but, provide a solid illustration of this *new* and, to my mind, *important* history of management. In chapter 2, the authors analyse the works and times of Adam Smith, we learn that the field of management emerged in Smith’s day, not from neo-liberal or laissez faire economics, but ‘social and moral liberalism and the decline of slavery’(p.313). Smith railed against unfettered capitalism, believing that ‘people achieve progress in spite of, rather than because of, the machinations of their economic masters’ (p.54). Common to the chapters that follow, Smith’s voice is present (quotes are suitably dense and not subsumed by rhetoric) and we learn that moral philosophy, not wealth management, lay at the heart his project. From my reading, we might ponder how far management theory has strayed from one of its founding voices and build on Smith’s thesis to consider how social equality, altruistic responsibility and cooperation might form more compelling logics for organization than brute profit.

A view, further substantiated in chapter 3, in which the authors sagely frame Frederick Taylor's work on efficiency through the dominant discourse (to use a Foucauldian term) of the day, 'conservation' and calls for 'the wisest use of resources for the benefit of the greatest number of people for the longest possible time' (Pinchot, 1910). In Taylor's day, unfettered corporate profiteering had been condemned by the president of the United States as 'injurious to the public' (Roosevelt, 1902 cited p.92) and responsible for widespread social inequality. Such that calls for greater efficiency became integral to popular campaigns for environmental protections, increased public ownership and enshrining human rights into the constitution. My reading gave me pause to consider contemporary criticisms of neo-liberal ideology and corporate profiteering (cf. Klein, 2015). Through the prism of conservationism, wealth distribution and human rights - free market capitalism appears excessive and extremely *inefficient* in producing 'social arrangements that are conducive to people's rights and welfare, and to fulfilling their just aspirations - in brief, the common good' (Chomsky, 2014). The authors present a very convincing case, tied to substantive historical research, in arguing contemporary conceptions of efficiency (driven by profit) captured the collective imagination decades later – and were constructed in opposition to the foundation of scientific management, as a morally grounded discourse for the conservation of the commons. These opening case studies framed my engagement with subsequent materials, giving rise to an important question, 'what *good* does management theorizing advance' (cf. p.82)?

The chapters that follow on: (4) Max Weber's theory of social and economic organizations; (5) the institutionalization of the case method at Harvard Business School; (6) Elton Mayo's 'narrowly managerialist' (p.185) *tale* of the Hawthorne Works; and (7) textbook distortions on the theories of Lewin, Maslow and McGregor – all illustrate, through differing forms of analysis, how foundational organizational theories emerged 'out of specific socio-political contexts' (p.316)

quite remote to subsequent interpretations – which, none-the-less, are dominant within the field of management. Such that our field, to some extent, has been built on *myths*, ‘not about what happened, but about something equally important; what people want to believe to have happened and why’ (Gabriel, 1991, p.429). The field of management valued/values ‘a set of unquestioned and inevitable certainties’ (p.xi) on which to generalise and, it might be argued, aggrandise the practice of management – even if this means consciously distilling, simplifying and silencing important aspects of our field’s foundation. These chapters provide a rich retelling - revealing important (yet largely silenced) practices, ideals and opinions that might allow us to reconsider and innovate the field of management, to meet the pressing challenges that society now faces (cf. Alvesson & Willmott, 2012, p.105). Thus, there is much to admire and the acumen of arguments left me challenging my own assumptions. A point, perfectly illustrated in chapter 8, which examines how Cadbury’s supposedly ‘virtuous’ and ‘continuing’ cultural history has been largely constructed from historic texts, which patronised by the company itself, reflect vested interests. The authors, relatively unabridged, history of Cadbury reveals important disjunctions, silenced voices and historical inaccuracies – while simultaneously revealing how certain cultural myths ‘came to be constructed and accepted’ as historically accurate (p.295).

In conclusion, on reading this excellent and timely contribution to the field of management theory, one becomes pressed to consider whose interests are served by particular (and narrow) ‘socially constructed narrative on history’ (p.282)? My reading, led to a constant question: why have important aspects of the field’s history been excluded and certain voices privileged? When this distorts the foundation of management scholarship; ‘presents simple frameworks as general theories’ (p.318) and dilutes innovation. Preventing people (and in particular, teachers, students and managers) thinking differently – what Foucault termed, ‘to get free of oneself’ (cf. Deleuze,

1988, p.96) – in order to develop and reimagine ‘what a business school could be’ (p.317). As Chomsky notes, we academics, by virtue of our theories and interpretations ‘serve as mediators between the social facts and the mass of the population’, we ‘create the ideological justification for social practice’ (1979, p.4) and thus, should think very carefully upon which foundations this important task should be built. It must be hoped that this text encourages other academics in our field to analyse, challenge and dislocate historically embedded myths – to help build innovative and vibrant centres of learning, more in tune with the pressing issues of our time.

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