



Art, Philosophy, and Business: turns to speculative realism in European management scholarship

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes turn-taking as a way to understand how European management scholarship opens up to societal phenomena as play, critique, artistry, and aesthetics co-creating business realities. European management scholarship rests on contributions, still mostly under the Anglo-Saxon publication radar, of people and platforms favoring un-scholastic scholarship where art and philosophy perform reality-checks. Such scholarship shares the ambitions of “speculative philosophy” turning away from “speculative fiction” preaching and defending preconceived ideals. A recent Carnegie Report criticizes the Business School for building speculative castles in the sky. European scholarship might rethink it as an Art School where managerial action is seen as philosophizing in a speculative realism-mode.

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Opening gambit: the bankruptcy of speculative fiction

Believe it or not, some areas of academia are worse off than business studies. And given that a quarter of college freshmen still pick business programs, business faculty members remain in demand, and business journals and publishers continue to ferret out meaningful research, the legitimacy of this statement would seem indisputable. At the same time however experts like Mie Augier and Jim March declare that B schools are stuck between “greed as a social virtue and the substitution of lessons of experience for lessons of analysis and research” (2011, p. 322). Ellen O'Connor (2011) echoes these concerns when she advocates a reconnection with great books popular during the early part of the last century, specifically the work of Mary Parker Follett, a leader in classical management theory, and Chester Barnard, groundbreaking pioneer in management theory and organizational studies. The nostalgia for times when American elites had spiritual stature is also identifiable in Harvard Business School professor Rakesh Khurana's *From Higher Aims to Hired Hands* (2009); he concludes US business schools fall short in turning out managers who achieve “meaning from their work,” and even worse, are unable to “creat[e] meaning for others”. Moneymaking overshadows the quest for professional value, and curricular absorption in profit-making strategies leaves little room for the ethical development of future managers. Even though admission data, professional job openings, and research opportunities seem healthy,

something is amiss in the picture. Recalibrating the benchmarks for business education requires a moral rearmament against the harsh instrumentality that serves outright greed. In most current American writing on business education for example management scholars are encouraged to staunch the tide of the value-drowning philosophy that corrupts their curricula; their responsibility is to evangelize the good and offer students the entertaining fictions of dreaming up a better world before stepping into their personal reality of paying off humongous student loans. Following the narrative turn in research, good samples of poetic vision and excellent storytelling (Czarniawska-Joerges & Guillet de Monthoux, 1994; Dewandre, 2002; Rombach & Solli, 2006; Sköldbberg, 2002) do exist in the works of management scholars however, and so it may be that the alleged solution to the business school crises could in fact be a cause of future bankruptcies in research and education. Four Euro-based perspectives can help management scholars effect the transition from narrative speculative fictions to a more promising speculative realism.

Play and the real

The US study *Rethinking Undergraduate Business Education: Liberal Learning for the Profession* (Colby, Ehrlich, Sullivan, & Dolle, 2011) departs from standard moralistic complaints. It reports on a recent investigation by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Higher Education that convincingly recommends a reverse of the half-century streamlining of business education that followed the publication of the first Carnegie Report (Pierson, 1959). While the first report made business academics eager to deliver management as science, the second report leaves behind the simplistic faith-based

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dualism of either evil-instrumentality-Scylla or do-good-idealism-Charybdis and advocates a third position, a position that has been well received by European management scholars. The report proposes *liberal learning*, which integrates the humanities as the third way to better management education.

The Carnegie Report of 2011 immediately kicked off a US–EU debate at the “Copenhagen Roundtable: Integrating the Humanities and Liberal Arts in Business Education,” hosted by Copenhagen Business School. Later the conversation snowballed into an intense exchange with US colleagues at an “Aspen Institute Undergraduate Business Education Consortium”. Over the next two years well-attended American Academy of Management Professional Development Workshops at conferences showed continued interest in and response to the issue. The ongoing debate is now materializing in academic publications like the *Journal of Management Education* special issue (Statler & Guillet de Monthoux, 2015), and additional European publications on practicing humanities and social sciences in management education are in the pipeline. Slowly we are trying to make sense of what Jim Walsh, former president of the American Academy of Management, meant when he proclaimed with genuine Yankee enthusiasm, “You Europeans seem much closer to the Carnegie Report than we!”

In the 2011 report Carnegie writers observed how instructors miss the teachable moments provided by what is actually going on around them. Instead of tackling current financial crises head-on for example they become more entrenched in the comfort zones of old theory, ignoring the fact that it no longer fits the real terrain of business. It is time to let reflection, practical reasoning, and multiple framing accompany analytical thinking in business schools and to get hold of realism from what is offered in a liberal arts education. The Carnegie Report unreservedly challenges a blinding hegemony of logical empiricism in management research, a paradigm that became normal science under the banner of Herbert Simon’s “bounded rationality”, the successful cocktail of Chicago-school thinking rooted in the rigid analytical philosophy à la Rudolf Carnap. The lack of any competitive perspective may explain why clever criticisms, from James March’s biting “Technology of foolishness” (1971) to Robert Austin’s plea for managerial artfulness and trust instead of agency theory (Austin, 1996; Austin & Devin, 2003), seldom go beyond a playful holiday away from the dominating mindset. Concepts like instrumentality and rationality seem immune to criticism and in addition are used as straw men legitimizing the writing of irony (Johansson & Woodilla, 2005). It may be acceptable to play around for a while – to poke fun with prejudice and without the mindfulness to see what really happens – provided you get serious by the end of the day (Manz, 2014)! Playfulness even risks becoming an integral part of the metaphysical reproduction of seriousness by a dominating economic paradigm (Gustafsson, 2011). Playfully tossing liberal arts courses into a weighty business curriculum is a first step, but it is hardly enough. Can we expect a natural integration – perhaps like an osmotic effect – to take place in the heads of clever business students? Will vast numbers of them give teachers of the humanities high scores because they are fun edu-tainers, jesters in dull management-science courts?

Critique and the real

Ten years ago Luc Boltanski, a former collaborator with French cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, in cooperation with Eve Chiapello, B-school accounting professor researching artists and managers in cultural enterprises, published a study of *The new spirit of capitalism* (2005); the framework of their book is a comparison of French management textbooks from the 1960s and 1990s. They point out that contemporary capitalism depends increasingly on a “new spirit” motivating work that develops when managers participate in and bring home public political debates. The “new spirit” differs

from the “old spirit” of capitalism of Max Weber’s Protestant ethic for example, which is a more static view of how capitalist ideology works as quasi-religion. The making of the “new spirit” depicted by Boltanski and Chiapello is a muddling-through process and not an outcome of neat clashes between practical instrumentality and theoretical idealism. In fact Boltanski actually severed ties with Pierre Bourdieu’s more dualistic view of a gap between the cultural and the commercial. Boltanski believed critical influence is not achieved when rooted in the pure universal principles studied in university libraries or liberal arts courses. Reading Boltanski and Chiapello enables us to see the intertwining of humanities and business – what Carnegie authors simplify as a double helix – as a pretty bleak and bloodless version of how “new spirit” really emerges. What makes critique perform in French management is a concrete and often violent bricolage stirred up in the melting pots of French politics.

This is a relatively new phenomenon, for management has not always been so intermixed with society in France. Once upon a time it was a subject exclusively for engineering schools and some Hautes Études Commerciales (HECs), semi-public business schools financially dependent on regional chambers of commerce. These schools mimicked elite institutions like the famous Napoleonic engineering school Ecole Polytechnique. They educated not managers but functional cadres (Boltanski, 1982), framing blue- and white-collar company workers in the formal work organization we know from classics of industrial management such as Henri Fayol. Cadres turned into managers and entrepreneurs between 1960 and 1990, with the May 1968 student revolt being the turning point. In the US an MBA-student could abandon society and study monastically in a capitalist cloister of some Ivy League business school. Perhaps that too was a consequence of the French HEC business school moving its campus out of downtown Paris. Nevertheless the French managers that Boltanski and Chiapello depict are pretty street-smart crawlers in the revolutionary backwaters of Lacan, Althusser, or Nietzsche. They may well study Michael Porter or his local clones, but French business depends on capitalist sophists performing their Deleuze–Guattarian “lines of flight” and getting their kinky intellectual kicks out of philosophers’ protests against their shameless co-option of originally anti-capitalist ideas. It seems the European “new spirit” evolves a world apart from the aseptic campus conversations on the American management model (Djelic, 2001). This form of European management erupts in Parisian street demonstrations and echoes clever catchwords stolen from leftist intellectual salons. Boltanski and Chiapello depict and deplore the dirty business of French capitalism thriving on the chaos created in the 68 movement. They show how capitalists fittest to survive navigate in company of Marx and Freud; most successful French brands like Club-Med or Agnes B. were shaped by entrepreneurs primarily schooled in Maoist and Trotskyite activism.

The philosophical turn of French capitalism was eased considerably when postmodernism finally unseated the communist-party monopoly over French intellectual life, and that philosophy contributed to the blurring of business and society (Dosse, 1998). After the Berlin Wall crumbled, when Ossie-communist playwright Heiner Müller applauded the Wessie management guru Dirk Baecker (1994), intellectual French managers had already welcomed the postmodern thinkers who like Bernard Henri Levy and Francois Lyotard had stopped postulating clear distinctions between culture and commerce. In the US, French theory (Cusset, 2008) was recycled by cultural studies; in Europe alert managers gladly gobbled it up!

The critique perspective has of course long been central to business. Reforms are responses to “social critique” rooted in indignation about human suffering, injustice, and inequality. In Europe, especially in a German Hegelian tradition, “social critique” co-created modern management already seen in the late nineteenth century. European management doctrines like that of Betriebswirtschaftlehre

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