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Lancaster University Management School
Working Paper
2003/046

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Historical Critique**

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PEDAGOGICAL OBJECTS IN MANAGEMENT EDUCATION: A CULTURAL-HISTORICAL CRITIQUE

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Abstract

This paper looks at the evolution of the core curriculum in business education. It examines the kinds of ideas which underpin teaching and the ways in which these ideas are woven into a narrative in pedagogical practice. We treat ideas as *pedagogical knowledge objects* which create the ground for a meaningful relationship between teacher and student. We argue that business education relies on a system of *closed* pedagogical objects which create and sustain a phantasy world in whose mirror managers see themselves as privileged experts able to understand and cope with the complexity of work organisations and to assume the role of leading social ordering processes. This position reflects business education's own cultural history and preferences; it is held together by a world-historical narrative which reproduces the neo-liberal agenda of the latter part of the twentieth century. But reliance on 'closed' pedagogical objects (or phantasies of mastery) also means that business education has been and is gradually losing the ability to provide an intellectually credible account of social practices in work organisations. Is it possible to think of an alternative? In the final part of the paper, we briefly discuss an alternative perspective: an approach which uses 'open' pedagogical objects to design and deliver academic courses in management and organisation studies.

Key words: pedagogical knowledge objects (closed and open); business (or management) education; core curriculum; world-historical narrative

Introduction

This paper provides a historical investigation of the role of *ideas* (crystallised as 'course content', or 'curriculum') in management education. We treat ideas as *pedagogical knowledge 'objects'*¹ – in other words, as abstract objects which mediate the relationship between the student (*paido-*) and the teacher (*-aggos*) in the context of educational

¹ The term is still tentative. An important question is whether *knowledge* is at all necessary. In appearance, it is redundant. Indeed, in parts of the paper we use *pedagogical objects* instead of *pedagogical knowledge objects*. The aim of the qualifier 'knowledge' is to link the use of 'objects' to the recent tradition of object study as developed by Knorr Cetina for instance.

activity systems (the immediate origins of this position are in Blackler et al, 1993 and 2000, and Knorr Cetina, in Schatzki et al., 2001). For us, ideas are central to interpreting any formal academic educational process; they are central both as the basis of the teaching curriculum and as signs of the main focus of research. Ideas as pedagogical objects establish the lines of engagement in the process of study, they delineate objects of activity which are considered meaningful in learning, they literally create the subject matter of a discipline.

In business education, ideas had a particular trajectory. The history of this trajectory is in itself an interesting aspect in the rise of managerial ideology and culture in the twentieth century. In this study, we argue that since their beginnings (around 1881) business schools were less preoccupied to serve and preserve the tradition of academic inquiry (as search for knowledge and truth, regardless of how relative these notions are). Rather, they tended to fulfil the function of an ‘intellectual mirror’ called upon to provide legitimation for the phantasies entertained by the rising managerial profession about its place, role and significance in the world. To this end, the traditional phantasy of academe (as unbiased place of learning and search for truth, the place where ideas are cultivated through the offering scholars make of their personal lives) was sacrificed – increasingly so as business schools became more and more successful throughout the twentieth century. The sacrificial victims were ideas themselves (ideas understood *lato sensu* as the life-giving force of the academic community). They were gradually replaced by the ‘student’ seen as customer and main object of pedagogical activity.

This process however was not cynically intentional, but neither is it unsystematic; rather it reflects major tendencies in western societies and cultures brought about in the twentieth century by the rise of management as a professional body, as a system of reference for the practical organisation of work, and as a discursive formation leading to the generation of new images of desirable social order. In this complex history, business schools were both off-spring and generators, ‘effects’ and ‘causes’.

Placed in the wide cultural context of the twentieth century transformation of the world of work, business education would be too vast a domain to understand in one study. That is why we will only discuss here a small number of aspects: how a certain world-historical narrative became entrenched in management education through a particularly dominant core curriculum; how pedagogical practices associated with this curriculum shape the learning process through focusing on a set of what we term *closed pedagogical objects*; and how this focus has fundamentally undermined over the years the general process of inquiry which animated and still animates academic activity in other fields of social science.

Part I. A brief history of management education – “phantasies of role” and “imaginary worlds”

Because our study is historical, it is important to specify the solution we propose to use with regard to periodising this history. As in any historical study, periodisation frames

the conceptual horizon by reference to which we will interpret change and stability of different phenomena. In the case of management education, the period of its existence is relatively short. It is convenient to place its beginnings in 1881 when the Wharton School of Finance and Economy was endowed by Joseph Wharton to be created at the University of Pennsylvania (although commercial colleges existed before). Since then, a key moment is considered to have been the publication of two reports on the state of business education in the USA in the same year, 1959 (Gordon and Howell, 1959; Pierson, 1959). These two studies proved to be extremely influential in bringing about what we today recognised the core curriculum in both undergraduate and graduate business degrees (such as BBAs and MBAs). We characterise separately the period between 1881 and 1959 from the period after 1959. We add another period segmentation: we argue that, after 1989, a new rigidity was added to the world-historical narrative grounding the core curriculum. This was generated by the dominant tendency to interpret the collapse of centrally planned economies as a victory for free market, neo-liberal economics (in the Reaganite-Thatcherite version), and, indeed, as the “end of history” (in Francis Fukuyama’s famous terms).

a. From 1881 until 1959

The creation of the Wharton school and of business education in universities is important in many ways. For us, a key document is Joseph Wharton’s address to the Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania in 1890. He starts it with the phrase:

“The general conviction that university education did little toward fitting for the actual duties of life any but those who purposed to become lawyers, doctors, or clergymen... etc.” (reproduced in full in Sass, 1982:21 *ff*)

With this turn of phrase, Wharton presages a fundamental tendency in academic management research and education: a move away from the tradition of university enquiry as it was known and embraced in the other disciplines. Shils begins his essay on *The Academic Ethic* (1997:3) with a direct statement of this tradition:

“Universities have a distinctive task. It is the methodical discovery and the teaching of truths about serious and important things.”

In business schools, however, the turn towards supporting and reflecting the interests of the socially rising commercial class meant from the very beginning a break away from and a tense relationship with the mother institution. Rather, Wharton developed from the very start a vision (or phantasy) which animated his desire to establish business education as an academic pursuit. He aimed to prepare “America’s young men of ‘inherited wealth and capacity’ ... to become the nation’s next generation of leaders.” (Sass, 1982: 19)

This aspiration to become the ‘new elite’ was recognisable in the general atmosphere of business schools from the 1880s onward. The curriculum developed in the early days reflected this narrative. In Wharton’s own words, it was meant,

“To provide for young men special means of training and of correct instruction in the knowledge and in the arts of modern Finance and Economy, both public and private, in order that, being well informed and free from delusions upon these important subjects, they may either serve the community skilfully... or, remaining in private life, may prudently manage their own affairs” (in Sass, 1982: 21)

The central value of pragmatism created a basis of education which was fundamentally new to university traditions. Although pragmatic outcomes acceleratedly emerged from university research, the central pursuit of knowledge for knowledge's sake had been the foundation of academic work from its beginnings.

In business schools, however, the pursuit of systematic knowledge about the pragmatic issues of organising business enterprises became the dogmatic purpose. To this end, the sponsors of business education claimed the right to dictate the direction of academic activities. Indeed, this precisely what has occurred.

The early part of the twentieth century was rather hesitant in the search for an settled curriculum. This is due to many reasons. First, the managerial profession itself struggled to find the body of knowledge which suited its aspirations and reflected the practices of the new mass-manufacturing enterprises. Secondly, managers and the captains of industry found it hard to disentangle from their mutual dependency and establish the new division of labour in new corporations. Thirdly, business schools were staffed by a new breed of academics who did not begin their work with any sort of fundamental research of their own domains. Rather, they aimed to emulate as quickly as possible the other fields of technical expertise (especially engineering). They did this by seeking to reproduce in the field of management and organisations metaphors of order and expertise which formed the bases of knowledge in the field of engineering (see Shenhav, 1999 for an extended introduction).

The mechanical worldview which accompanied this search became entrenched and the lack of proper fundamental and critical research allowed this view to remain the backbone of business education. Coupled with the expansion of businesses and of business colleges, a simplistic mechanical framework sustained the phantasy business academics had of their knowledge as being practical and relevant. This illusion has since become dominant and an important rhetorical move in any debate about fundamental aspects of knowledge of management and organisations: is this knowledge practical? Is it not too theoretical? Is it about the 'real world'? These are examples of the heritage which grounds in a fundamental way the atmosphere in business schools around the world and which undermined the search for fundamental knowledge about important aspects of contemporary social order.

b. From 1959 to 1989

Business education found important new resources in the scientific developments of the twentieth century. A major effort of reconsideration of the role of business education in

the US economy led to the publication of two reports commissioned by the Ford and Carnegie foundations in 1959. Their content is not surprising as such. What is interesting is the move they have generated toward a clearer and more rigid commitment made in business education to a curriculum which further alienated business academics from their colleagues in other social and historical sciences.

This core curriculum can be synthetically described as follows:

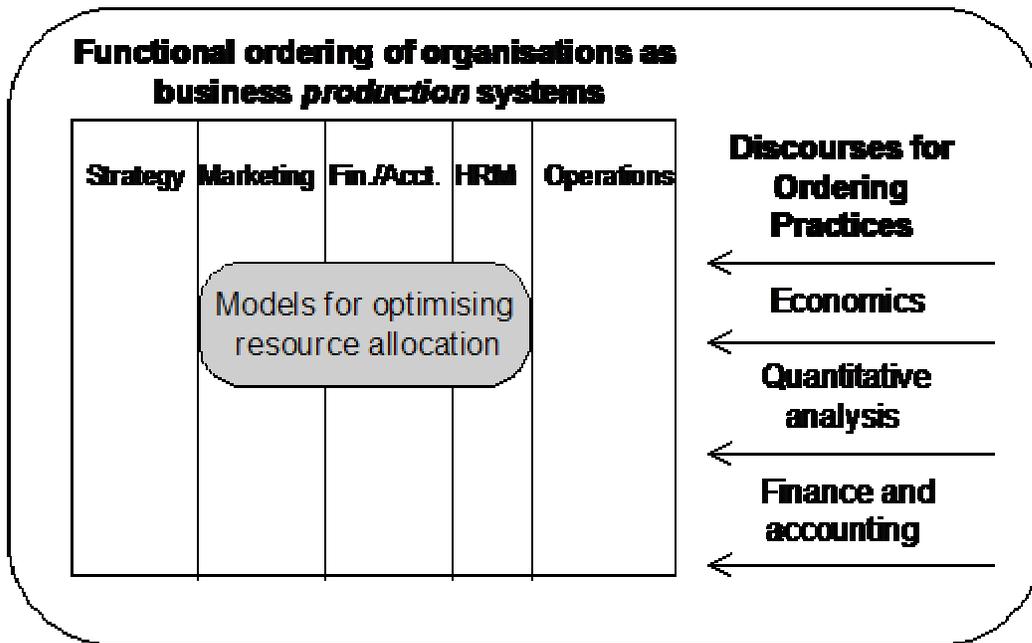


Figure 1.

This has been ever since the basis of the fundamental academic degrees offered in business schools: the BBA and the MBA. It has become the standard of the increasing cache of accreditation agencies (begun with the AACSB and nowadays become more and more numerous). More importantly, this scheme reflects the general disciplinary structure of the field of business studies and the institutional structure of business schools themselves.

This was the outcome of a general cultural process which characterised European societies after the second world war. The accelerated spread of the authority of scientific knowledge into all spheres of public significance led to the establishment of public bodies (such as the US National Science Foundation in 1950) as formal frameworks for the distribution of funds to university researchers. Management academics became seriously concerned about the scientific legitimacy of their own preoccupations. The model of knowledge creation in the natural sciences and the professionalisation of business management quickly turn into the main aims of reformist trends in US management education. Not surprisingly, the general model has been replicated: two major private foundations, Ford and Carnegie, issue influential reports critical of business schools. Robert Gordon and James Howell undertook to survey American higher

education for business at undergraduate and graduate level at the request of The Ford Foundation (1959); at the same time, a similar study is commissioned by the Carnegie Foundation, and is undertaken by Frank Pierson (1959). The two teams collaborated throughout the study and their results paint a similar picture.

Pierson argued that the central task and challenge for these institutions is the *application of scientific method* to society in general in order to derive knowledge about issues required for good business policy decision-making (Pierson, 1959:313). It was precisely this aspect (application of science) that he and his colleagues found wanting in America's business schools in the period up to 1959. They diagnosed the problem as one of tension between the type of knowledge business schools could provide (highly specialised in certain areas e.g. accounting), and the knowledge employers believed business schools should provide (a general foundation curriculum in business administration emphasising generic business subjects with a strong background in science knowledge). In anticipating the mission of future business programmes, Bach (who contributes chapter 13 to the Gordon and Howell report) emphasises what will become the leitmotif of business education design to this day:

“[Business education] should provide the primary focus for educational activities looking to the future. It implies greater emphasis on the development of fundamental analytical tools and on the use of these tools in identifying, solving, and implementing decisions on managerial problems. *Fundamental tools will be provided especially by the behavioural sciences, economics, and quantitative methods (including the use of mathematics).*” (Pierson, 1959:319, emphasis added)

In the same spirit, Gordon and Howell's report is headed by a quote emphasising the role of business leaders in the age of “extraordinary advances in the application of science” (Gordon and Howell, 1959:3). Executives are envisaged not merely as economic agents amongst others, but as social actors who “will affect the welfare of the American people in a thousand directions” (Gordon and Howell, 1959:3). Yet “business education [is] adrift”, as the first sentence announces (Gordon and Howell, 1959:4). The reasons for this disorientation are key: business education does not have a clear conception about the nature of the managerial profession. Business schools are not sure whether they prepare students for an occupation which can be accurately defined as a *profession*. As many other domains, but perhaps more importantly for Western history than any other, business management undergoes the pains of birth as a specialised profession. It is called upon to become rigorous, scientific, more abstract and concise, yet more practical. The call comes from industry, or at least this is the interpretation of the authors of this report. Industry seems to be trapped in the spiral of its own development: the growth of corporation and the technologies of mass production need to be managed. And for this purpose businessmen need to be educated in the spirit of that force which brought about such development.

Yet business schools are ill-prepared for the task: they are not capable of articulating a convincing agenda or purpose. The widening role of industry in shaping society calls for

men who have the breadth and horizon to engage with this unparalleled complexity. On the other hand, business is a product of efficient management of technologies of production; hence, good specialists at managing the technical and organisational problems facing the new corporation are in high demand.

The multiple issues facing business education crystallise in the Gordon Report in two main categories: (a) what should be the balance between scientific and non-scientific content in the curriculum? and (b) what balance should academic life have in university business schools (how much research, teaching of practitioners, teaching of teachers and researchers)? (Gordon and Howell, 1959:9)

To resolve these tensions, management education, note the authors, needs to understand the historical transformations of business practice in the second half of the century (Gordon and Howell, 1959:13). Their interpretation of this historical set of circumstances is an important representation of the general cultural background against which the authors will put forward their recommendations. The trends of the period are summarised (Gordon and Howell, 1959:13-15) as follows:

- a) the growing size of businesses brings to the fore organisational and administrative problems—hence the “greatly increasing need for *co-ordination and planning*” (emphasis added);
- b) the separation of ownership and management generates the need for a business degree more than for capital;
- c) the progress of science and technology creates an imperious need for businessmen to master the language and logic of technology as it revolutionises production, work, and organisations. “Automation” requires skills in planning, operating and maintaining the process. “Indeed, one of the most pressing of contemporary needs is to produce a sufficient number of enterprising and competent leaders of industry and society, capable of facing up to the demands of the increasingly complex and *science-based* economy which we are now entering” (King, 1987, in Gordon and Howell, 1959:14);
- d) since Taylor, there has been a “growing scientific attitude toward management problems” – spreading to all areas of management. And the authors also remark that “there has been a concomitant growth of usable knowledge in the social sciences and in statistics that is providing an increasingly substantial basis for rational decision-making.”
- e) the individual human being plays an increasing role in the organisation: human relations skills are an essential ingredient for effective management. The focus must be put on understanding the psychological needs of the individual.
- f) increased specialisation calls for more specialists – this idea is not, however, trivial. Its justification is of interest to us. “Specialisation, which is essential in today’s large organisations, is coming to rest on an increasingly technical and rapidly changing body of knowledge that derives from the physical and social science and from mathematics and statistics.” (Gordon and Howell, 1959:14);
- g) the environment in which business organisations operate has become increasingly complex and uncertain.

Gordon and Howell saw this as a new historical reality and business schools are asked to respond adequately to these exigencies. In this interpretation, science becomes the discourse that can reveal the workings of the universe and its inner principles – both the natural universe and the human one. In fact, the main conjecture at the heart of scientism is that the two are the result of similar forces and can be made known in similar ways.

For the authors, the orbit of business will be, in this view, enmeshed with that of science on the horizon of modernity. Science becomes the answer to man's problems in mastering his world. Mass consumption is the outcome of science-based technologies of production. Science is capable of creating the basis of an unending prosperity and comfort, and it is also capable of developing the defensive systems that would preserve the 'good' society (especially in the Cold War). The mental turn in the West after the war was a 'scientific' one. The domination of science in the creation of the knowledge-base of human societies is central to the belief system specific to the post-war rhetoric. The fascination with what appears to be mass consumption ratifies the *scientific use of reason* in all spheres of life.

In addition to this scientific turn, the appeal of general systems theory must be mentioned. The possibility of a systemic modelling of everything (Bloomfield, 1986) left a ground-breaking trace on the constitution of the worldview of business education. The work of Forrester in "industrial dynamics" created the premise of an illusion of total coherence and rationality of social phenomena. Moreover, it created an image of the managerial profession so irresistible that no critical questions were really raised of the new theory. In fact, figure 1 is a depiction of a quintessentially *systemic* view of work organisations. In the detailed ordering of work organisations as *production systems*, business schools called upon the disciplines of operations research, management science and other mathematically oriented programming approaches to management.

The period which followed (1960s-1980s) was characterised by optimism and a spirit of reconstruction and anticipation. Coupled with it was the emergence of the *mass university* whose mechanisation of academic education also contributed to the gradual erosion of the traditional spirit and ethic of inquiry (Shils, 1997: 14 ff). The rise of mass consumption rounds the general circle which gave managers the impression of historical success. Business education continued to derive its own legitimacy from its efforts to reinforce this desired image for the managerial profession by deploying a universal narrative of science-based management and organisation.

The heritage of this period of change in management education is multifaceted: (a) a consolidated pragmatic orientation towards the agenda of corporate and public organisations; (b) a firm orientation towards a functionalist systemic approach to business organisations (see fig. 1) and a sustained effort to 'globalise' this acultural and ahistorical approach; (c) a set of institutions associated with business schools which have led the policing of this dominant approach (accreditation agencies such AACSB, AMBA, EFMD-EQUIS to name but a few); (d) an exponential growth of business education in the world and an exponential growth of student numbers. The list may continue along

these lines; in essence, we find most important to note the consolidation of rigid academic activity whose rise and success are not following the lines of traditional academic work.

At the centre of this phenomenon lies, in our view, a foundational narrative about world history which has been extremely powerful in shaping expectations and in avoiding its own critical examination within business schools. This narrative claims that there is a universal approach to ordering work practices, that this approach is neutral culturally and historically, and that its associated technologies should be treated almost as a dogma by recipients of education unless they want to fall outside the desired realm of ‘corporate executive life. It has been extremely successful in perpetuating the image of its own success.

c. From 1989 onward

The victory of the ‘managerial conversion’ of the world-image led to the emergence of a new phantasy managers have of themselves as established, proven, qualified ‘global leaders’. As Roberts (2002:17) argues, “In a globalised and, above all, in a *managed* world the expert suppression of contradiction... becomes feasible.” Business education rhetoric has seized the opportunity to entertain this phantasy. In fairness, business academics understand only partly that this is what they are doing. More likely, they are trapped in their own tradition as it is swept upwards by history.

This explains the fact that, overall, the core curriculum has stayed largely unchanged and unchallenged. But it also explains how it has acquired an unprecedented sense of its own righteousness and of its privileged place in history. This derives from the new sense of (emotional) confirmation generated by the resurgence and triumph of capitalism after the demise of state socialism. The world-historical narrative of the (now) old core curriculum found a new lease of life as more and more aspects of individual and collective life are assimilated into the managerial prerogative. This trend can be seen as the root of a new direction in management: the expansion of managerial ideas into multiple areas of subjectivity which have become disembedded from tradition and are open to capture and manipulation (Roberts, 2002:18). The last two decades saw an exponential proliferation of *subject-based management objects*. This multiple expropriation of subjectivity has transformed managerial discourse into a new form of guardianship of identity, or at least of its current sources. This led in turn to new forms of infantilisation and colonisation of the relationship between individuals and work organisations.

Here, we are interested in the effect this relatively recent process has on business education which promptly added these aspects of subjectivity to its existing discourses. In a brief and perhaps harsh position, we argue that, generally, a cursory glance at the spirit of any respectable MBA classroom (or at the curriculum of any marketing and advertising department, for example) reveals a process which can be interpreted as a form of infantilisation of higher education whose official name can be found along the lines of ‘a series of experiential opportunities in a student-centred learning environment’.

What follows is a more detailed discussion of these cultural processes. The success of mass consumption in establishing itself as the main foundational myth late modern in western societies seems, paradoxically, to have become a source of problems for managers and management academics. The success of mass consumption is due to the success of a philosophy of mass production. But the growth of technologies of mass production renders much of managerial work as configured in fig. 1 obsolete. Most of productive activity is technically embodied in different forms of machinery.

The changes in economic circumstances in the 1970s and 1980s showed that managers (especially middle managers) became insecure in their roles. Productivity appeared to be possible without managers. This indeed sent western managerial circles into a desperate search for new meaning. The 1980s and 1990s have proven to be two extremely successful decades in the search for new legitimacy for managerial work and managerial understanding of social order. This success can only be understood by linking elements of context from within and outside management itself. First, there was a transference of responsibility from the state and business corporations onto the private citizen for the apparent failure of welfare state arrangements. Margaret Thatcher offered the best sound bite illustrative of an ideological realignment which placed the solitary individual at the centre of their own destiny: “there is no such thing as society!”. The idea was to reconfigure a fundamental principle of post-war social order – the principle of mutual support through the means of a collective social representative, the state. The solution was to attack the welfare state as pointing to a deep defect of being, a defeat of freedom, and social cohesion as an unnecessary and paralysing illusion. In other words, a properly functional human being does not need any support and can make it on their own through life by being entrepreneurial. This ideological readjustment enjoyed a historically unprecedented success. It touched the right chord with the right tone and it swept a whole social and political philosophy aside.

One of its side effects was to restore the pride of place for entrepreneurial spirit, for the spirit which made the economic system great. This tendency restored implicitly legitimacy to the community which saw itself as the official heir of the tradition of enterprise: managers.

Secondly, an important boost to the neo-liberal narrative and all its associated policies, practices and institutions was given by the collapse of communist states in 1989. This was immediately interpreted as a victory of the former and an “end to history”. Again, much of the rhetoric of reconstruction in the east was based on the illusion and phantasy that management will solve all the problems of production leading to the establishment of the long-awaited regime of mass consumption.

These trends had a double effect: they re-legitimised managers, but also placed them at the centre of a new historical ‘wave’ in which they found themselves both revered and continuously challenged. To face this new position became a task in which managers, consultants and academics engaged together and never looked back. Interestingly, the ground for this new engagement seems to have been provided precisely by the trends

which threatened managers in the 70s. The loss of competitiveness to Japan and other emerging economies, generated a rather important shift in the western managerial profession itself. It had to rethink its identity and recover its ground. Surprisingly, it was the emergence of notions such as ‘organisational culture’, participation, empowerment, etc. – ostensibly, lessons from the ‘Japanese miracle’ – which had a very important role in the readjustment of managerial ideology in the latter two decades of the twentieth century.

In brief, the 1980s and 90s can be characterised as a period in which management turned its attention from the control of mass production processes to an unprecedented form of control of subjectivity. A turn to the subject is what management seems to have sustained in this period and what seems to have saved the managerial profession in the West. Since organisational culture, we have witnessed an exponential proliferation of subject-centred managerial ideologies, and the associated creation of a plethora of subject-based managerial objects (culture, quality, participation, empowerment, teamwork, core competencies, human resource management, individual and collective learning, innovation, knowledge, ethics, transformational leadership, and the list is probably open). These new managerial objects have in turn opened up a space for the deployment of new techniques of management which are no longer technologies of material production but rather “technologies of the self” in Foucault’s terms. Their instinctive aim is to reproduce the success of mass production of standardised goods in the process of mass producing standardised subjects, both producing and consuming subjects. The efficiency of the service economy requires standardisation too. It is inconceivable that there will be profitable corporations which can offer genuinely customised mass services. Hence there is little surprise that we have witnessed a race to find ‘models’ of management which can control the human subject in the most intimate recesses of its being.

This race for new ideas gave new impetus to management academics and consultants. Partly cooperative, partly competitive, they are both trying to supply the managerial profession with further and further conceptual ammunition in its search to maintain its historical relevance. The expansion of managerialism gave management education a new source of optimism. But it also places it under a subtle but relentless pressure. At this point in time, the core curriculum has not changed in any significant way from the one presented above. That means that, at its core, management education only provides knowledge about the inner workings of business organisations. However, over the last twenty years managerialism has burst the boundaries of organisations. It finds itself at the centre of a mode of understanding both work and life to the extent that both are conceived by reference to production and consumption. Yet this success makes management a poisoned chalice for managers themselves: in fact, they are ill-equipped to understand their position and potential vulnerability. For this situation, business schools are a main cause. By failing to undertake proper investigations of the fundamental nature of contemporary social order, management, and organisations, they also fail to prepare the future members of the managerial profession. The circle is vicious and an exit is hard to envisage.

Our argument here is that due to the tendency to neglect serious research, the knowledge content of the main business disciplines has become intolerably impoverished. Summed up, the general approach to understanding social practices provided by mainstream business education is at the moment inadequate.

Part II. Closed Pedagogical Objects and the Poverty of Business Education

In our second part, we want to examine in more detail the ways in which certain ideas embody the worldview dominating business academia and how these ideas impact business school pedagogy.

We must first clarify to some extent the category of *closed pedagogical object*. In brief, we refer to those elements of course content which aim to reduce complex and essentially intractable social processes to simplistic ‘problem areas’ described by a finite set of ‘artefactual’ variables causally linked to each other. The aim is to claim a positive resolution (the illusion of harmonious closure) to potential problems (for example, Maslow’s *Hierarchy of Needs* as it is taught in business schools professes the possibility of resolving motivational problems). But this is only one level – the most visible – at which pedagogical closure occurs in the curriculum. We will discuss closure here at three levels: at the level of theoretical models, at the level of the general world-historical narrative of mainstream management education, and at the level of course organisation.

a. Models in business education and the fragmentation of the world

The reduction of complex aspects of human existence (such as motivation, culture, creativity, emotion, knowledge, commitment, etc.) to ‘problem areas’ needs further clarification. An important feature of closed pedagogical approaches is to problematise subject areas in bipolar modes: normal – abnormal; good – bad; in need of intervention, or not; growth – decline; ordered – chaotic; etc. The task of the analyst is to diagnose the ‘problem’, decide upon a course of ‘therapy’, and intervene as privileged ‘expert’. Such abstract objects seduce the student with an illusion of simplicity (seeing that which for others is incomprehensibly complex), and of his/her own agency and expert power. There is also a tendency to frame social processes (practices) in ways that allow the expert to stand in a privileged quasi-Archimedean point of stable equilibrium: in mainstream models, the manager is always outside and above the problematic context and always equipped with the technology to deal with it. This type of closure occurs at the level of immediate course content. In the five or six major disciplinary areas taught on a BBA or MBA, teaching is organised around a sequence of models (most of which have become the ‘staple diet’ in business schools across the world).

For example, in the area of economics, we encounter demand and supply curves, the category of economy of scale, or of elasticity of demand. In the related areas of finance and accountancy, we find break-even analysis, different financial ratios, and other indicators such as internal rate of return, net present value, or variance analysis. Between them, these models reduce the multitude of spaces of social practice to the hard rationality of neo-liberal understanding of the economy as a social reality. For instance,

break-even analysis functions as a marginal costing technique used to identify costs and profits in relation to sales volumes. It is a direct illustration of how a pedagogical object can contribute to the reduction of social practices to processes of production in financial and accounting language. Its unit of analysis is the so-called *unit of production*. This, in turn, becomes the unit of managerial practice. What is at stake from a pedagogical perspective is the substitution of *social* or *human practices* with a notion of “production processes” presented as quantifiable, precise, reliable. Students begin to be exposed constantly to internal and external measures of *production efficiency* as the only criterion which gives managerial action its purposefulness. What we term ‘closure’ is represented in this case by the mutation of *practices* (inherently human *and* material) as pedagogical objects of study, into *processes of production* (whose logic is first and foremost economic and financial).

Financial models function in combination with economic depictions of the ‘world’ and the ‘corporation’ as economic entities. The dominant economic doctrine in business education is centred on *neo-classical* views. Through neo-classical macro and micro economics, courses ensure that the overall ‘space’ of managerial practice is portrayed as a space of transactions between rational agents seeking to optimise the use of scarce resources and information. The institutional nervous centre of this social space is the *free market* seen as the best modality of social ordering. Courses in economics operate with specific conceptual units of analysis of human practice. For example, a typical course is organised around themes such as: (i) markets, demand and supply; (ii) the functioning of markets; (iii) market structures; (iv) the economics of supply (more precisely, issues related to degrees of competition, monopolies and monopolistic markets, price discriminations, etc.); (v) aggregate demand and supply, macroeconomic policies, and governmental intervention in the case of market failures (for example, inflation and recessions); (vi) money and monetary policies; (vii) labour markets, wages, the distribution of income and unemployment; (viii) national income and fiscal policy; (ix) international trade and balance of payments (see, for example, Sloman, 1998).

Together, these ideas create an important form of closure: they reify objects such as the free market, supply and demand, financial measures of efficiency, etc. These ‘objects’ become almost material ‘things’, they capture the imagination of management students and create the illusion of world mastery.

A similar type of closure is achieved in other core disciplines. Closely connected to economics and finance are strategy and marketing. Strategy models, for example, are fundamentally economic models. They assume the equivalence of the input of all actants taken into account: the industry in which a corporation operates, its competitors, suppliers, customers, etc. In essence, strategic work consists of product-market decisions, general corporate strategy (portfolio of businesses and co-ordination among businesses within the company), as well as the wider issues of deciding between competitive or co-operative approaches in relation to other entities in the business environment.

The typical range of models taught on strategy courses includes, to mention only a few examples, the “seven S model” (Mintzberg and Quinn, 1991); value chain and integration

models; expansion strategy models such as the one elaborated by Ansoff (1976; 1990); industry analysis models, nowadays dominated by the Porter models (1985; 1990), as well as models of generic strategies resulting from the logic of Porter's industry matrices; portfolio strategies taught on the basis of models such as those provided by consultants: the BCG Matrix, Arthur D. Little's SBU system, or McKinsey's Screen. What is important with regard to this thesis is that the fundamental assumptions behind these models are those of neo-classical economics as a theory of practice.

In most cases, students are also taught that there is a rather rigid hierarchy of integrated plans: flowing down from *corporate strategy*, to *long range programmes*, to *policies and procedures*, to – finally – *budgets*. The translation of 'vision' into financial language, the move from *timeless visions to timetables* is the rationale of such models. It is the 'money mindset' which becomes the connecting *logos* and which forms the basis of a desired universal validity of their claims. Models of strategy remain at the level of a comfortable, rationalised, simple, comprehensible story of a future which is otherwise disturbingly uncertain, unknowable and faceless. The paradox of the strategy philosophy on MBA programmes is that instead of taking future managers *closer to practice*, it displaces the problematic nature of envisaging the unknown through a delusion created by 'closed' models. The dominant view of strategy in management education remains that of a rational, linear process. The main feature in strategy courses continues to remain the focus on analysis and linear rationality as modes in which the strategy act occurs as a result of the manager's work.

Marketing is similar and taught in connection to strategy. Marketing strategies focus on the distinctive competencies of organisations, on customer segments, on the effectiveness of promotion and advertising, and so on. The approach to marketing is strikingly similar to that of strategy; it is perhaps even more dominated by calculative economic rationalisation (Kotler 1996; 1999). The issues taught on marketing courses are treated as quantitative approximations of the world. Moreover, this world is portrayed as malleable, as available to the actions of the manager insofar as these actions follow the models of rational decision making associated by marketing courses with the field of marketing practices. The marketing process is portrayed as a circular function in relation to business strategy. Each reflects the other in their respective terms: production finds its *alter ego* in consumption. In fact, production can only be conceived of in the context of an understanding of reproductive cycles which imply consumption. Both strategic facets are supposed to be internally consistent and mutually supportive of each other's stated objectives. The elaboration of marketing strategies is modelled in a similar fashion to strategy in that it is seen as a linear, iterative process which relies on the sequential processing of information gathered relatively unproblematically about different aspects of the market environment. The main assumptions about the latter is that they follow the logic of free markets as proposed by neo-classical economics. The language of marketing follows closely the language of rational market theory. The categories employed to analyse the 'market' are ordered on the premise that these markets are governed by the economic behaviour of agents, both collective and individual. Furthermore, economic categories are sustained by functional marketing categories: products are conceptualised as satisfying particular visible needs, and the consumer is

analysed as a simple functional agent characterised by a means-ends calculative rationality.

We have briefly discussed four of the core disciplines in business education. It is important to introduce in this section a brief comment on the disciplines dealing with the human subject. Unsurprisingly, organisational behaviour and, nowadays, human resource management operate with equally closed conceptions of the human subject.

Two interesting modalities of closure occur in relation to the subject. One is the use of menus of human types such as various personality indicators (examples include Myers-Briggs personality type indicators, Belbin's Team Roles, Margerison's management role profiles, etc.). The other is the use of models in which human subjects can appear as either normal or abnormal, functional or dysfunctional. This distinction is not immediately visible, but it underlies motivation models such as content or process based (Maslow, Herzberg, Vroom, or Porter-Lawler), it underlies models of the life cycle of teams (such as Tuckmann and Jensen's), and it underlies all models of cultural management (which provide means for the identification of those who belong and those who are outside a designed organisational culture).

The general effect of this type of pedagogical approach to the study of human practices is the artificial delineation of strong categories such as individual, group, organisational culture, motivation, universal human features (such as needs), and eventually a universal, fixed model of human nature. We will develop these ideas more in the following subsection.

b. The world-historical narrative of contemporary business education

The level of closure discussed above is doubled by another, less visible, but arguably more important one. This is the level of what we term the world-historical narrative of business education. "World-historical narrative" is a category which describes the necessary weaving of space, time and human concerns which forms the basis of a historical view underlying a pedagogical approach.

Although business education claims to be scientific and to have a privileged position outside history, as a set of theories of social practice it is necessarily historical. The curriculum works with time and space in specific ways: from strategy, planning, product life cycles, discounted cash flows, return on investment, to economic cycles, uncertainty, 'change', globalisation and so on. All these presuppose a conceptual mapping of historical time and space. A particular version of a historical narrative emerges from the kinds of categories and modes of categorisation of the world described above, from their mutual relationships within a programme, and from their articulation through pedagogical technologies in the class.

Our argument is that the underlying historical perspective of mainstream business education is itself *closed*. It does not create the premises for students' understanding of historical dynamics as an unfolding of human destiny, as an open process of human

discovery, ultimately, as the open horizon in which human agency and freedom themselves are possible. If we want to understand pedagogical closure at this level, a new set of 'closed' ideas needs to be investigated. However, these are not visible any longer, or directly detectable from the curriculum itself. Rather, they have to be inferred from the general choice of content.

Here are some of the implicit conceptual axes of business education which we consider to constitute forms of closure. First, there is the non-historical course of study. None of the core disciplines is taught through historical contextualisation. This creates the illusion of their transhistorical validity, of their solidity and immutability. The most important consequence of ahistoricism is the closure of the debate about the dynamics of human nature and of social institutions. By claiming a form of transhistorical, universal validity, business education lays a more general claim to knowledge of the essence of fundamental things such as the nature of human rationality, the principles of social order, the nature of freedom and of agency. This claim is demonstrated, to recap only some of the categories discussed above, by the fetishisation of economic rationality, free markets, and quantitative representation.

Closely associated and derived from the non-historical foundations of the approach is the treatment of social practices as non-contextualised, as acultural, as independent of their situatedness. This derives from the claim to universality and from the kinds of categories used to describe practices. The reduction of work organisations to production systems creates the ground for the reduction of the cultural element to mere variations on the same theme. Culture, context, situatedness are presented as mere surfaces which can be overcome once universal economic rationality is liberated from the bonds of cultural context and form.

Closure occurs at the level of a fundamental message about the homogenous nature of the human condition: despite variety of forms, humans are essentially the same and to order them relies on understanding and acting upon their common nature. The world is a homogenous economic scene which witnesses the ultimate superiority of liberal democracies and free market economies on the stage of history.

Another fundamental dimension of closure at this level is the tendency to present social contexts as essentially non-contradictory. In other words, tension is not an irreducible feature of human existence. In fact, tension is presented to management students as an abhorrent feature of dysfunctional human contexts (from individuals, to groups, to organisations as wholes). The idea that tension is fundamental to man's being in the world, that its source is the irreducibility of the finitude of the human condition does not figure and is almost taboo in business education. Indeed, processes which can only be explained by reference to tensions in human activities (learning, creativity, innovation, etc.) are reduced in current managerial models to linear manifestations of rationality which do not benefit but are rather disrupted by tension. The manager's job is to eliminate tensions (seen as pathological) by the use of models such as those above which can restore harmony and order. The question of the contradictory nature of social realities is never raised.

One last but not least aspect of pedagogical closure in business education: there is no significant space created for the presentation of equivalent alternative theoretical positions. The whole tradition of debate and freedom for intellectual commitment is thus almost entirely absent in mainstream business education.

c. Programme organisation and closure through modularisation

Another aspect which needs to be considered briefly is the tendency to modularise teaching which has dominated business education over the last four decades. Modularisation and the reduction of post-graduate programme duration (to one year from the traditional two) are apparently simple mechanical moves aiming to raise the rate of throughput in universities in order to cope with the allegedly ‘democratised’ demand for higher education.

But underlying modularisation and shortened durations for courses is the reduction of time for thorough critical engagement in academic study. In management education, the main consequence of modularised teaching is the elimination of a coherent narrative throughout a programme of study. Equally, each module also lacks the opportunity to engage students in a long-term process of reflection upon the fundamental aspects of phenomena under study.

Increasingly, classrooms in business schools have become workshops for the transmission and uncritical assimilation of models such as those described above. The study load has thus progressively increased and programmes pride themselves on the fact that students do not have time to breathe between assignments, case studies, projects, presentations, business plans, etc. Combined with the last point made in the previous section, this intensive technology of teaching has removed learning yet again from the tradition of academic enquiry and reflection.

This ‘turn to student-centred learning’ was accelerated in the 1990s and now appears irreversible². Two historical factors contributed to this overwhelming tendency. One is relatively external to business education: the end of the cold war in 1989 renewed the confidence in the historical success of free markets and liberal democracies. This in turn renewed the self-confidence of those who profess this type of world-historical narrative (western politicians and business academics were the main beneficiaries). Interestingly, this also created the basis for a new dogmatism: the narrative itself is not discussed or assessed intellectually any longer. Its historical merits are taken entirely for granted. Any sustained critique is dismissed as a form of reactionary political project (usually assimilated with some form of Marxism or anti-capitalist anarchic instinct – both seen as favourite culprits). This means that the management education classroom is not a place where the nature of capitalism as a form of social order are discussed at all. Rather, business school classrooms have become the training ground for the new elite of ‘global

² In 2003, there are more than 3,000 business school websites which claim as a main feature of their approach the creation of a student-centred learning environment (using the *Google* search engine).

executives', the places where one acquires the licence to be a jet-setter, and where the illusion of a successful future is devised.

The other important reason for the suppression of any preoccupation with serious intellectual inquiry and for what might well be the final 'turn to the student' is more internal to the managerial profession over the last two decades. This period has been characterised by an exponential proliferation of subject-centred managerial ideologies and by the associated creation of a plethora of subject-based managerial objects (culture, quality, participation, empowerment, teamwork, core competencies, human resource management, individual and collective learning, innovation, knowledge, ethics, transformational leadership, and the list is probably open). These new managerial objects have in turn opened up a space for the deployment of new techniques of management which are in fact "technologies of the self" in Foucault's terms. These technologies of 'self reengineering' (many originating in management consultancies) have been very quickly adopted as pedagogical technologies (from presentation skills to group work, to leadership, etc.). Classrooms have now become the ground for new simulations of a future corporate existence. But this time the student is the focus of intervention. Once more, there is no real need to engage pedagogically with any substantive inquiry into the nature of processes of social ordering such as management, organisations and society.

The essence of scholarship, in the etymological sense of *skhole* as liberation of the student from the activities of the *polis*, from the immediate involvement in life's necessities, as freedom and space to think, becomes obsolete and undesirable in the context of management classrooms where a manufactured 'busy-ness' aims precisely to seduce the students through simulated delights of a successful future corporate existence.

To conclude these comments, we argue that both the curriculum and the organisation of courses create a pedagogical space in which the learning can unfold in only one direction. This closed horizon of learning is mainly created on the basis of a set of disciplinary discourses together with a set of teaching technologies which are antithetical to the academic tradition.

Part III. Open pedagogical objects: a sketch

If the mainstream approach to management education produces intellectual closure in the process of academic learning, what would constitute an alternative? Would it be something called "open"? How viable would an open narrative be as a basis for pedagogy? What would it look like? We do not propose to give answers to these questions here. Rather, instead of offering a concluding section which would repeat the comments made above, we will present some of the elements of what might be termed an 'open' pedagogical approach to teaching undergraduate students in management and organisation studies.

These elements derive from a concrete experiment with an introductory course in organisational behaviour. The main aim of this course was to create a context of learning which would completely side-step the business education model analysed above.

In practice, we aimed to turn the closed principle of course development identified in this paper in its head. One way to think about this conceptual “overthrow” would be to see it as an inversion of narrative and of foundations of analysis from the closed perspective to an open one. The course we designed is a first year undergraduate introduction to the study of management and organisations. It lasts ten weeks with three hours of weekly contact. We arranged the fundamental ideas on several layers, some of them directly visible, some less so. At one level, the main objects of the course are: (a) twentieth century social order, (b) organisations and management, and (c) contemporary understandings of the human subject. The course is thus split in three parts.

a. The nature of twentieth century social order

The first deals with the nature of social order in the twentieth century in the western world. We use this opportunity to introduce some of the work of three classical sociologists: Weber, Durkheim, and Marx. We use their ideas to emphasise the fundamentally historical nature of social ordering processes. From Weber, we take some of his discussion of the rise of modern formal rationality and the contrast he creates with the category of substantive rationality. From Durkheim, we take the discussion he offers of the effects of industrial development upon the social fabric of communities and work organisations. From Marx, we use the categories of alienation and commodification as manifestations of the capitalist mode of production.

But that is only one level at which this material operates. Besides opening up society to historical analysis, we also use these three thinkers to introduce the notion that social ordering are ‘open’ in the horizon of history because they are contradictory. No form of social order, argue these sociologists, is final in history; all create as many problems as they solve and the work of historical ‘construction’ shall continue *ad infinitum*.

Against the background of neo-liberal economics and the thesis of the end of history, the idea of irreducible contradictions at the core of social ordering processes comes as a pedagogical surprise and an seriously unsettling notion to assimilate. Associated is the idea of history as ‘open’, unfinished, uncertain – but also the idea of history as the horizon in which human can act, can create, can intervene.

At another level, much less visible in the immediate learning context, is the common theme of alienation in the constitution of man’s modern condition. Weber’s analysis of the Protestant ethic gives us a message about the alienation of the human from the world of temptation; Durkheim’s analysis of the modern division of labour presents it also as an alienation from traditional forms of community; and Marx’s work sees modern production systems as the ground for the alienation of man from himself. The question opened up by these analyses is whether the modern condition is irreducibly burdened by one or other form of alienation from the world and whether modern organisations are

some of the main expressions of world alienation? Although it is initially hidden, this type of message gradually impacts students' understanding that modern work organisations are not naturally given in history, that they are incomplete, irreducibly problematic, in need of continuous consideration. In the context of contemporary education, this is entirely new and anxiety-provoking for most of them. This anxiety however begins to lessen with the gradual understanding of the categories of analysis offered by social thinkers such as the ones presented. The openness of history becomes the reason for further reflection rather than for desperation.

b. Management as ideological practice in historical perspective

In the second part of the course, we discuss management and organisations as emerging against the historical background of twentieth century society and embodying its dilemmas and tensions. We use as key reading Barley and Kunda's influential article about the surge of different managerial ideologies of control (Barley and Kunda, 1992). This creates a new opening in the understanding of the nature of management as a historical, discursive, ideological phenomenon. Again, this is a surprise and a reason for some discomfort among students. Management is usually taken for granted in their image of the world, a bit like medicine, technology, or the internet. Management just is, and its existence is perceived as good. The challenge proposed by Barley and Kunda's historical review puzzles and unsettles. But this is precisely the opening up of understanding we were seeking.

The three weeks devoted to the theme of management and organisations takes three managerial ideologies in turn: scientific management, systems rationalism, and organisational culture. They allow the creation of a reflective space about the cultural constitution of managerial ideologies, the relationship between management and science, between management and other aspects of contemporary culture (especially consumption).

The idea that management can be seen as an ideological practice is the main benefit of this approach. But there is a further intention behind this choice of teaching material. The deep agenda is to open up the space for reflecting upon the fluidity or ideological malleability of management objects which are taken for granted in the world of work – such as rationality, economic priorities, productivity, efficiency, markets, motivation, culture, and, most importantly, the nature of the human subject itself.

c. Reflections on the *human self* in the twentieth century: psychology, psychoanalysis, existential phenomenology

This last 'object' takes us into the third part of the course: contemporary understandings of the human self, with a bearing on understanding management and organisations. This part deals with some of the psychological theories which inform managerial practices. One the surface, the material covers some elements of experimental psychology (behaviourism and cognitivism), some elements of psychoanalytic thought and their

application to organisational analysis, and the general outlook of existential phenomenological understanding of human being in the world.

But a more fundamental layer of learning here is an understanding of the basic split between psychological theories which do not take into account the whole of human experience organised around the person as a unit of analysis (namely, the psychological reductions of behaviourism and cognitivism), and theories of the self which makes the entire person their main concern (psychoanalysis and existentialism). Further, besides understanding the variety of units of analysis which can form the basis of psychological thought, we also want to open up the fundamental question of tension in human existence: is tension an irreducible feature of human existence? If so, how does a theory of the self which makes tension central to the dynamics of existence operate? What does such a perspective offer for the examination of work organisations and their dynamics? What could it tell us about the boundaries of individuality and collectivity, about the dynamics of learning and creativity, about emotion and rationality, etc.? How would such a theory problematise some of the managerial concepts taken for granted in contemporary parlance in the public sphere? Why would a return to philosophy be necessary for a better grounding of this kind of questioning? These questions lead inevitably to the deepest level of inquiry of which students in social sciences ought to be made aware: a return to the fact that the nature of human existence is a mystery – in other words, that there are no final answers and no final methodology for finding an answer.

Although it appears to operate with a complicated array of aims, teaching such a course is made simpler by its historical approach. The consideration of the world as historical offers the possibility of sustaining a coherent narrative throughout the pedagogical process. Employing historical approaches allows one to engage with the world in its openness and endless diversity. It is much easier to face the complexity of the world from historically grounded perspectives, than it is to defend ahistorical, decontextualised, reductionist models. Certainly, teaching is made infinitely simpler by the very absence of models. Open categories create a feeling of uncertainty and of unending, unfinished inquiry – but they also allow the world to present itself ‘open’, with the multitude of its possibilities. Accounting for multiple historical trends and phenomena is indeed not simple. But it is much simpler than defending reductionist ideas which collapse at the merest encounter with world complexity.

Concluding Remarks

This study offered an incomplete analysis of academic management education centred on its course content. We used the notion of pedagogical knowledge object to place content in the dynamic context of teaching and learning. We proposed a contrast between what we termed closed pedagogical objects (ideas which reduce learning to simplistic, unreflective schemata), and open pedagogical objects (ideas which assert that the nature of social processes is historically open at all levels of analysis, and that the aim of learning is to become accustomed to this openness and gradually more comfortable with thinking in open terms and acting openly but responsibly in the world).

None of the elements presented here is definitive. Both sides of the argument are themselves continuously moving with the movement of culture. Moreover, there are many historical factors which have not been mentioned and accounted for and which have a bearing on management education. But the argument for thinking about academic pedagogy in new ways remains one which has to be taken into account in the effort to maintain relevance in academic management education.

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