Guest editorial

From business and society to business for society: coming (back) to a sounder relation between knowledge and organization

Business and management have been instilled so much in contemporary minds that, may they be perceived positively or negatively, their interplay with society has become self-evident. Indeed, criticisms of a society dominated and pervaded by business matters as well as the promoters of a totally-managed-as-business society share the same blind spot concerning the possible dialectic or dialogic relations between business and society.

Pioneering authors in organization studies (Drucker, Chandler, Berle and Means) would consider that the purpose of business and organizations was to contribute to the social good by providing goods, services and welfare to the society. During the past decades, two phenomena have reinforced each other in what could be called an epistemological and practical vicious circle. First, a reversal of goals and values has placed companies at the very core of social matters. Indeed, financial objectives, instead of being aimed at for ensuring sustainable and expandable contributions of companies to the society, have become ends in themselves. Second, all attempts to put an end to this reversal have been neutralized by the ideological hijacking performed by the advocates of emerging forms of supposedly emancipatory capitalism. In that vicious circle, scholars have played, more or less consciously, a significant role. The hijacking of critical perspectives like stakeholder theory, sustainable development and global value chains exemplify this process that has been theorized by Boltanski. Rephrasing EURAM's SIG Business and Society into Business for Society expressed a profound will to reverse that reversal.

Indeed, slipping from a liberal model (business *and* society) to a functionalist one (business *in* society, Wood, 1991; Siltaoja and Onkila, 2013; Bazin, 2016) does not meet our expectations. Functionalist patterns are subject to hijacking as well (see the switch in discourse between Wood, 1991 and Mitchell *et al.*, 1997). We are living a great transformation, as says Polanyi (1944), in which business is hollowing political and social spheres in conjunction with the threat of rising populisms.

To operate the "reversal of the reversal", we aim at, there is a need for both institutional and epistemological efforts and changes. On the institutional side, we strive to develop transversality among fields, methods and research paradigms to set up an ecosystem of researchers where researches have opportunities to hybridize. On the epistemological side, we have to study concepts and schemas in their "genetic intimacy" so as to generate concepts and theories that could better self-defend against hijacking.

Epistemological concerns

Numbers of recent theories in business and management science (and also in humanities), like neo-institutionalism, ANT, structurationism, performativity are probably successful due to their attempt to overcome the main aporias of the great tradition of Western thought: holism vs individualism, materiality vs spirituality, locality vs ubiquity and theory vs practice. So doing, having striven so much to smoothen tensions may have erased any notion of contradiction and conflict. Thus, the underlying epistemological assumptions of business-

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oriented research can easily be hijacked by dominant ideologies. Conflicting interests are apparently evacuated from integrative views on organizations, and thus, domination relations are more concealed than ever. To reverse the dilution of domination within synthesis, how can we regenerate the epistemology of management research so as to place essential conflicts in the foreground? Such a stance would imply to explore (or at least re-discover) research with no pretention to comprehensive explanation or research that assumes basic contradictions within comprehensive frameworks. The latter could be based on the concepts of complementarity (the non-exclusiveness of irreconcilable differences, Bohr), syncretism, hermeneutics preserving the conflicts between interpretations (Ricoeur). This is why we suggested that the following issues be dealt with in the near future: Is it possible to trace the path through which some research streams have been made barren by theories, which tend to "smoothe" epistemological tensions? How can we analyse the way management science uses integrative ("smoothing") theories and the role of this use in the hijacking of research streams? Which theories would allow to restore conflict as a major factor for understanding organizational phenomena?

Concepts

Management science builds on different knowledge fields and is accustomed to import concepts. This import almost never comes along with reflexivity on the concepts themselves. It often happens that the original authors are forgotten by the discipline, to the benefit of importers from inside the field of management science. As a result, the fundamentals of knowledge in the organizational field remains what we can call an unthought, though some contributions to critical management studies may not follow this general trend. For instance, the ideas of responsibility, accountability, value, performance, legitimacy are referred to like self-evidence, and fundamentally, sound as empty tins. Once again, the hollowing of concepts facilitates some kind of spineless consensus, scientific quietism and amnesia. So doing it leads management research to stand still and to stay available for hijacking by dominant ideologies. This raises conceptual issues as: Which concepts have been hijacked so significantly that they would deserve to be freed from ideological dominance? Are there concepts that have been so much disembodied that they urgently need being conceptualized again? How to build on original and rethought concepts to move forward in managerial knowledge? How to provide them with a "genetic code" that would preserve them from hijacking?

Institutions

The institutions which have to play a role in the production and in the assessment of management research have undoubtedly contributed to a consensus that is both conceptually spineless and highly constraining. It seems that, probably to preserve legitimacy through the scientific stability of knowledge, management science progressively turned into what Kuhn calls "normal science". According to such an approach, any new scientific production is no more than a replication of previous exemplary research and provides marginal knowledge. Research becomes not only standardized in terms of "paradigms" but also because disseminations mean are following extremely constraining patterns. First, the ideal way to disseminate has become the scientific journal. Such a format does not allow to provide deep analyses of concepts. By the way, publishing in journals becomes the exclusive criterion for academic appraisal. Metrics for performance appraisal in scientific research are sophisticating in one single direction: promote compliance to the academic standards of journals. Moreover, it introduces an extreme pattern of competition between authors, which actually performs managerialism within academia. Standardizing through competition makes research more rigid and highly vulnerable towards agile hijackers.

The other stake of legitimacy for management research was to provide answers to managerial matters. This concern drove management research to set up an ideal of "what a manager expects from academics", building utilitarian views. So doing, institutions have (partly) forgotten their commitment to society outside their commitment to managers. To institutionally reopen fields of knowledge in business for society studies, is it possible to relieve pressure within existing media or to create new ways of disseminating research? In parallel, how can institutions preserve diversity and emerging research fields against normal science? More precisely, which institutional conditions could help restore research agility to prevent it from hijacking? We even may wonder how could institutions challenge the utilitarian ideal of "managerial expectations". This is naturally related to pedagogy: how to provide management education with significant space and time devoted to business for society issues?

Among the papers received for that special section, we have selected three of them addressing some of those issues. Nicolas Postel carries out an institutionalist Polanyian analysis leading to put forward the mandatory role of legislation as a warrant of the collective nature of CSR development. Muhammad Atif focuses on rhetorics and renews the Habermasian framework of the ethics of discussion in order to asses to what extent stakeholder management be a sound inclusion of social issues or a cynical manipulation. Justine Ballon reports about a field study within business and employment cooperatives to diagnose the advances and limitation of a singular business for society driven institutional innovation.

Business for society approach could be compared with Sisyphus' myth developed by Camus (1955): contrasting with the brutality of the destruction of society and nature, building a new body of concepts and arguments to reverse the manipulation of CSR stakes by firms is a slow, patient, meticulous de-construction and re-construction work [...] under the risk of seeing all those efforts collapsed by new waves of ideological hijacking and new threats on society and nature as well. This is why we conclude that introduction with the paradoxical pessimistic activist motto of Albert Camus: we have to imagine Sisyphus as being happy.

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