



History, a Useful “Science” for Management? From Polemics to Controversies

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In 1988, a French management journal, *La Revue française de gestion*, published a special issue on “the roots of enterprise.” Authors assessed the research of business historians and management science academics who were working on corporate history or were at least using history as a tool for understanding corporate life and for helping managers in their day-to-day practice. The conclusion was optimistic. Since then, more managers and academics have used history as a frame for corporate comprehension and more historians have focused their framework on enterprises and organizations. Nevertheless, even though academic recognition of “management historians” has improved, the dialogue between the two fields relies primarily on personal initiative, rather than on a conscious and systematic interdisciplinary academic strategy. Only a few academic associations, such as the French Accountancy Association, have developed an interest in business or corporate history. Why and how can we improve the dialogue between the two groups concerning scientific controversies?

In 1988, a French management journal, the *Revue française de gestion*, published a special issue on “the roots of enterprise.”¹ A group of authors assessed the research of business historians and management science academics who were working on corporate history or at least using history as a tool for understanding corporate life and for helping managers in their day-to-day practice. They optimistically concluded that there were good prospects for common research, comparative approaches, and methodological or epistemological dialogue. Since then, more managers and academics seem to have used history as a framework for corporate understanding, and more

I thank Geraldine Raymond for her help with this text.

¹ *Revue française de gestion* 70 (Oct.-Nov. 1998), special issue on “Les racines de l’entreprise,” ed. Patrick Fridenson and Jean-Marie Doublet.

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historians have focused their work on enterprises and organizations. Nevertheless, although academic recognition of “management historians” has improved, dialogue between the two groups still relies mostly on personal initiative rather than on a conscious and systematic interdisciplinary academic strategy.²

My aim in this essay is to analyze the way management sciences and practices use history, or at least the kind of research that they define as history. This will lead to discussing the possibility, and the opportunity, for using a historical approach in creating management knowledge, especially “workable” expertise—an outcome that would cope with one of the most common criticisms leveled by management scientists against history. However, to carry on a dialogue, one needs to have a partner. Therefore, I will also explain how a growing number of professional historians have focused their attention on management processes and enterprises, a trend that is relatively recent and interesting.³ For a long time, classical historians neglected, and even rejected, these subjects as having little legitimate scientific value. A quick look at current scientific exchanges between the two communities could lead us to conclude that these tensions have not entirely evaporated. Might they explain the relative modesty of the dialogue, at least in France? In this short article, I cannot provide an exhaustive response, but I will sketch out paths for analyzing and eventually organizing better possibilities for resolving scientific controversies between management and history.⁴

First, one could try to evaluate the influence of the long scientific tradition that systematically shaped these two academic fields. Each of them has its own origins, its own objectives, and its particular historical evolution. Obviously, such a strong matrix could contribute to establishing a durable barrier of misunderstanding and suspicion. Can we find ways to circumvent these critical pitfalls?

When management researchers and historians start to study the evolution of a business, its organization, and management processes throughout history, they face the striking challenge of legitimating their work in two complementary areas. Within their own scientific field, their peers must officially recognize the new objectives and methods. Outside their discipline, beginning the dialogue and allowing it to progress requires creating positive conditions. This is not an easy task.

² I define “management historians” as academics who are educated in management, but also use history.

³ “Professional historians” are those educated and trained in history.

⁴ A scientific controversy involves opposition among individuals who speak the same language and share the same system of norms, whereas a polemic involves opposition among individuals whose judgment criteria belong to separate universes; Gérard Noiriel, *Sur la “crise” de l’histoire* (Paris, 1997), 43. I published an earlier version of this article as “Organiser et s’organiser: Histoire, sociologie, gestion,” *Cahiers du Centre de recherches historiques* 25 (Oct. 2000): 135-48.

Crippling and Permanent Disagreements?

Some disciplines of management sciences are very cautious about the way French business historians study corporations and management practices and tools.⁵ From their point of view, this approach limits the possibilities of dialogue and interdisciplinary work. They believe some French business historians give large corporations and industries of the first and second industrial revolutions too much attention. They note the lack of research on small and medium-sized companies, or on services; the absence of theories; and a research technique relying mostly on monographs. Historians comment that more management academics are using history without caution or education in historical methodology.⁶ They find the theoretical models of management globally weak for several reasons, including the poor quality of the facts used, progressing too quickly or incautiously on a path toward generalization and abstraction, and an epistemological position too attached to an outmoded positivism. Sometimes scholars hide this position behind the vague term “constructivism.” From where do these tensions come? A quick glance at the past confirms that French historians have only recently started to study business life and corporations. Reviewing the history of the development of management sciences in France is also helpful.

History and Management: Two Parallel Evolutions

Between the end of World War II and the late 1960s, there was some contact between history and management. A few pioneers in economic history began to focus their research on enterprises. Bertrand Gille and Jean Bouvier wrote two famous monographs on banks.⁷ Claude Fohlen analyzed the textile industry in his doctoral dissertation.⁸ Apart from these studies, however, there was very little research on companies until the 1970s.⁹ The search for an explanation of the development of a particular industrial branch, region, or the dynamics of national macroeconomics may explain this early interest in corporations.¹⁰ One important exception, well known among the French

⁵ Especially marketing or finance, but also positivist researchers from other fields (such as human resources management and strategic management).

⁶ This can be surmised from the growing number of unsolicited papers received by the editors of the French business history review *Entreprises et Histoire*.

⁷ Bertrand Gille, “La fondation de la Société générale,” *Histoire des entreprises* 8 (Nov. 1961): 5-64. Gille (1920-1980) founded the corporation section of the French National Archives. Jean Bouvier, *Le Crédit Lyonnais de 1863 à 1882* (Paris, 1961), or *Un siècle de banque française* (Paris, 1973). Jean Bouvier (1920-1987) was one of the most important specialists in banking history in France.

⁸ Claude Fohlen, “Une affaire de famille au XIXe siècle: Méquillet-Noblot” (Ph.D. diss., Université Paris 1, 1955).

⁹ To find more details, see Alain Beltran, Jean-Pierre Daviet, and Michèle Ruffat, *L’histoire d’entreprise en France: Essai bibliographique*, Les Cahiers de l’IHTP, no. 30 (June 1995).

¹⁰ Luc Marmonnier and Raymond-Alain Thiétart, “L’histoire, un outil pour la

academics in management, is Alfred D. Chandler, Jr.’s *Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the History of Industrial Enterprise*.¹¹ However, scholars have not often chosen history as a tool for advancing understanding. There are several explanations for why they have not.

In the 1960s, structuralism and Marxism still influenced economic history; both shaped the way historians perceived economic phenomena. Many researchers have focused on the Industrial Revolution and technical innovation; others have analyzed cycles and economic crises or long series of price fluctuations.¹² The growing influence of the journal *Annales* explains the new interest in business and corporate history. In the 1970s and 1980s, the editors of *École des Annales* started to focus on local-scale analysis, including social institutions and enterprises.¹³ During that period, the issues that the “new economic history” and practitioners at Purdue University (Indiana) had raised since the 1960s arrived in France. This new approach widened the nature of historical sources and deepened research on a limited set of topics. For instance, studies of the influence of railways on American growth.¹⁴

However, the French management sciences were still in a fragile position after World War II. At that time, researchers viewed the study of management in the United States as a road to reconstruction and modernization, which changed the path of the development of management. Since the end of the eighteenth century, management has followed two parallel, but complementary, tracks. The first is practical. Some early managers and engineers managed to systematize and diffuse the knowledge and experience they created and accumulated day after day on shop floors around the country. The legitimizing of this new field of knowledge depended on its ability to demonstrate its practical efficiency to managers and in public opinion. The second track is academic and relies on production of an objective and universal knowledge recognized by educational institutions, and considered as important as the other sciences. It is necessary to describe these two paths toward the official recognition of management sciences in detail to explain the difficulties management academics have with history as a discipline.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, there were some attempts to conceptualize management, but the mainstream of this thought process gained momentum and stability only in the 1870s and 1880s.¹⁵ The *École*

gestion?” *Revue française de gestion* 70 (Sept.-Oct. 1988): 162-71, 167.

¹¹ Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the History of Industrial Enterprise* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962).

¹² Pierre Vilar, “Histoire économique,” *Encyclopédie Universalis* (Paris, 2006), CD-ROM.

¹³ Guy Bourdé and Hervé Martin, *Les écoles historiques* (Paris, 1983), 171-226.

¹⁴ Jean Heffer, “Nouvelle histoire économique,” *Encyclopédie Universalis* (Paris 2006), CD-ROM.

¹⁵ These early attempts were made by Vital Roux, *De l’influence du gouvernement sur*

Spéciale de Commerce et d’Industrie de Paris was founded in 1819, and for quite a long time it was the only school where one could study management.¹⁶ Does this mean that management had to wait? No, in the first plants and on the shop floors, engineers took the lead as the first “company managers” in developing management techniques. As a result of their growing numbers, they became an important social class and experts in the design and implementation of new production technologies. Here, obviously, the investment in fixed capital was the first impetus toward organizational innovation. In Great Britain, in order to sell one of their machines, innovative entrepreneurs such as James Watt or Richard Arkwright had to explain to a potential buyer how to install and use it. In addition to technical advice, they slowly began to suggest modifications of the factory’s organization, staffing, finance policy, and product commercialization and management. Of course, the methods they proposed were not completely new. The problems faced by the first large corporations already existed in the “putting-out system,” the quasi-integrated production network adopted by the textile industry. Nevertheless, the emerging factory system with huge plants changed the size and complexity of the problems.¹⁷ Technological innovations created immense financial needs and pressure for an improvement in accounting methods, which in turn allowed other innovations in management and production technologies. Starting locally, or limited to a specific branch or geographic area, newly designed management knowledge soon became widespread among corporations, regions, and countries.¹⁸ This diffusion process continued to increase in size and speed until World War II.

la prospérité du commerce (Paris, 1800); Jean-Baptiste Say, *Cours complet d’économie politique appliqué* (Paris, 1828-29); and Jean-Gustave Courcelle-Seneuil, *Traite theorique et pratique des entreprises industrielles, commerciales et agricoles, ou Manuel des affaires* (Paris, 1855).

¹⁶ A special school for Commerce and Industry of Paris, the ESCP-EAP near the Place de la République in the center of the city, in 2008 became the third-ranked business school in France. Founded in 1881, Hautes Etudes Commerciales (HEC) is the top French business school in the early twenty-first century. In the late eighteenth century, only two schools existed: Koechlin and Thierry launched one in the city of Mulhouse in 1781. The other was the Duc de La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt farm-school. I thank André Grelon for this information. One may read more about the French business schools in the special issue of *Entreprises et histoire* 14-15 (June 1997). In Great Britain, one of the first teachers in management was Andrew Ure, with his course in *Principles of Manufacturing* at the University of Edinburgh, starting in 1804. He probably influenced another French teacher, Charles Dupin; see Daniel Wren, *The Evolution of Management Thought* (New York, 1994), 63.

¹⁷ Sydney Pollard, *The Genesis of Modern Management: A Study of the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain* (London, 1968), 42-50.

¹⁸ Jean-Philippe Bouilloud and Bernard-Pierre Lecuyer, eds., *L’invention de la gestion: Histoire et pratiques* (Paris, 1994).

In France, the productivity missions sent to the United States after 1949 illustrated a national backwardness in management issues.¹⁹ At that time, industry was slowly adopting the American model. French universities did not recognize management sciences as a fully legitimate field until the 1960s, although they were teaching technical skills.²⁰ In response to the huge need for manager training, the idea that management could be seen as engineering, a kind of action science, inspired project design. Its legitimacy relied on various theories and doctrines imported from diverse social sciences, validated by experience.²¹ It began with the development of new technical tools (operational research, decision tools, statistics, and so on). At that time, the solutions found for improving management knowledge used the functional structure of corporations: marketing, production, finance and accountancy, social relations and human resource management, planification, and strategy. Beyond these practical topics, management sciences had to wait until the early 1970s for academic recognition through the creation of a corps of permanent professors and a specialized Ph.D. program. The 1973 economic crisis began at the same time.

First Moves toward Dialogue: The Paradoxical Consequences of the 1973 Crisis

This external event rapidly led to an important evolution of the epistemological paradigm. Until then, the positivist and normative vision had dominated. The day-by-day brutal changes faced by managers rapidly caused an evolution through academics and researchers confronted with a critical evaluation of their concepts and work. In short, they took two separate paths.

The first, based on “abstraction,” pushed for an improvement in theory through a more systematic use of mathematics. By designing formal models of management, this strategy could explain what was actually happening with corporations and managers. Here scholars continued to see Cartesian reductionism and a functional approach to corporate structures as the most

¹⁹ Vincent Guigeno, “L’éclipse de l’atelier: Les missions françaises de productivité aux Etats-Unis dans les années 1950” (Master of research/DEA diss., ENSPC-Université Marne-la-Vallée, 1994), 92; or, more generally, Dominique Barjot, ed., *Catching Up with America: Productivity Missions and the Diffusion of American Economic and Technological Influence after the Second World War* (Paris, 2002), and Robert Locke, *Management and Higher Education since 1940: The Influence of America and Japan on West Germany, Great Britain, and France* (New York, 1989).

²⁰ Marie-Hélène Chessel and Fabienne Pavis, *Le technocrate, le patron et le professeur: Une histoire de l’enseignement supérieur de gestion* (Paris, 2001), 11. The first IAE (Institut d’Administration des Entreprises/Institute for Enterprises Administration) was launched in Aix-en-Provence in 1955. Others followed; most were part of the universities’ law or economics department.

²¹ Armand Hatchuel, “Quel horizon pour les sciences de gestion? Vers une théorie de l’action collective,” in *Les nouvelles fondations des sciences de gestion. Éléments d’épistémologie de la recherche en management*, ed. Albert David, Armand Hatchuel, and Romain Laufer (Paris, 2001), 7-43, at p. 11.

reliable scientific references. In contrast, those following the second path, the “empirical way,” shared the belief that the theoretical problems in management sciences came from a gap between forecasts and practical results. Scientific problems and methodologies were inadequate in the context of restructuring and corporate change.

The crisis had an interesting result: the disqualification of previous theories whose validity and design some thought were better the further they were from real management practices and specific local management situations (corporations, management of local industries or branches). The more abstract they were, the more efficient and defining they were supposed to be. In the new economic and managerial context, however, they were too disconnected from the real needs of managers, and the theories were unable to make sense of the actual transformations that French enterprises encountered. This rapidly led to the establishment of new frames of analysis, which took into consideration the historical and geographical variability of management phenomena, in other words, their historicity. This strategy of cross-fertilization between management sciences and older classical social sciences such as history, but also sociology and even anthropology, brought a renewed scientific paradigm and a rejection of reductionism and technicism in the explanation of management issues. The possibilities of collaboration between management sciences and history are clearly different within each of the two methodologies: the abstract and the empirical.

On the abstract track, scholars see history as an auxiliary discipline that management sciences can use. Its role is to provide facts that can prove abstract management theories. However, to be accepted, history has to adopt scientific discourse, legitimating questions designed by management scientists for themselves, as well as their results. On the empirical track, history and management sciences are equal partners. They first have to harmonize their scientific approaches, developing common methods and shared research issues; then they need to allow a better integration of the two perspectives. Although this project has made important progress, misunderstandings are still frequent and significant, with the reasons most often found in the evolution of each discipline.

First, there is divergence on the object of investigation. One must remember that for a long time, French history has neglected the study of enterprises.²² Gradually, French historians have begun to analyze recent times.²³ Historians continue to use the same methodology, conducting traditional research on enterprises and management. This involves trying to understand and reconstitute the “truth,” the obscure dimensions and complexity of a fact or an event, by revealing hidden history. In doing this, basic research clearly involves history. Studying enterprises and management supposes a rigorous, critical, methodical use of documents and sources

²² Patrick Fridenson, “Les organisations, un nouvel objet,” *Annales ESC* 6 (Nov.-Dec. 1989): 1461-77.

²³ Robert Franck, ed., *Écrire l'histoire du temps présent* (Paris, 1993).

gathered by the historian, guided by a permanent spirit of doubt.²⁴ Applied to management tools and practices, this process inevitably leads to studying their origins, the contexts in which they have appeared, and the eventuality of their standardization or divergence. The result is an interrogation of the relevance of management models and practices in time and space, and the localness, rather than the universality, of their efficiency. Business and corporate histories keep alive questions about the efficiency and actual impact of management. Why do managers and some academics find this such a clear source of annoyance?

From the management sciences point of view, the ability to combine science and technique is what is important. The study of management situations presupposes the study of the practical “know-how” of actors within the enterprise and, more broadly, of the organization’s operations.²⁵ “Managers want to be efficient, practical, and down-to-earth. From their point of view, History seems an academic exercise proposing very few links with the actions they are supposed to manage.”²⁶ For some people, the conceptualization of new management knowledge often involves a sharp break with old practices and theories. This thought process dominates French management, which postulates the universalism of models and theories. There is no interest in what researchers cannot express or reduce to a scientific question, preferably mathematically formulated. Managers and academics mainly focus their attention on the present or the future, not the past. For a long time they have seen history as work for noble souls, a useless but amusing curiosity, except for important commemorations or corporate communication, including short anniversary books. Rare are the managers, such as Roger Martin, former chief executive officer (CEO) of Saint-Gobain, who have used history as a framework for strategy.²⁷

Many things seem to place management and history in opposition: methodological quarrels, epistemological frameworks, scientific projects, and validation of results. Does this mean that dialogue is impossible? On the contrary, the present intellectual and historical contexts seem to offer real possibilities for fruitful exchanges.

²⁴ Ibid., 86.

²⁵ Jacques Girin, “L’analyse empirique des situations de gestion: éléments de théorie et de méthode,” in *Épistémologie et sciences de gestion*, ed. Alain-Charles Martinet (Paris, 1990), 141-82.

²⁶ Jean-Marie Doublet and Patrick Fridenson, “L’histoire et la gestion: un pari,” *Revue française de gestion* 70 (Sept.-Oct 1988): 1-3.

²⁷ Roger Martin, “Stratégie industrielle: l’éternel retour?” *Entreprises et histoire* 1 (April 1992): 3. Roger Martin (1915-2008) was educated at Ecole Polytechnique. After World War II, he played an important role in the modernization of the French steel industry. Recruited and promoted by the tube maker company Pont-à-Mousson, in the late 1960s he organized an important strategic move from the steel to the glass industry, transforming Pont-à-Mousson in Saint Gobain into one of the world’s leading glass companies by the early twenty-first century.

New Conditions for Interdisciplinary Dialogue

Since the 1990s, more management academics have been using history in their research in a variety of ways. The next step is to design a process combining rigorous methodologies and scientific knowledge and results that both disciplines recognize as legitimate. Before this can happen, two categories of conditions must be satisfied: an evolution of scientific paradigms and a change in methodological practices.

Paradigmatic conditions for scientific controversies

One might think that we could define the research process by a fundamental hypothesis: the concept of enterprise as an institution that designs management practices embedded, as are their members, in a socio-historical dimension. This assessment seems obvious, but, in fact, it is not easy to recognize and implement. This supposes understanding what separates enterprises from other kinds of social institutions and organizations, such as trade unions, the church, the state, the city, or the family. It requires the adoption of a specific point of view. One views enterprises as based only on their internal problems; this is the approach of management sciences.

Unfortunately, many management theories describe enterprises as disembodied, fully rational organizations in which abstract “actors” design tools and implement them without emotion or mistake. Reductionism inspires such an analytical framework, which presents management phenomena as sliced pieces to be reassembled, systematically, as a complete object. The official structure of the enterprise directly inspires the criteria used to separate the parts, as well as the analytical process: hierarchical levels (problems “for” workers, supervisors, managers) or technical functions (problems of marketing, finance, production, and so forth). Closely related to positivism, this intellectual position is, more or less officially, inspired by neoclassical economics, and through it, by the paradigms of rationality and individualism, the methodology that dominates microeconomics.

It is puzzling that so few management academics have broken with this paradigm in recent years. Herbert Simon or James March proved, beyond a doubt, the limits and theoretical dead ends attached to this approach.²⁸ However, this scientific position does seem to permit a dialogue between management academics and managers engaged in day-to-day practices. Using these criteria and representations could closely link the evolution of management to people and field practices with other targets and methods of legitimate evaluation. There is a certain paradox involved in using these scientific methods and, at the same time, formal abstraction, which considers rupture with actual management practices and day-to-day working life as the *summum* of scientific quality. Hence, management theories and

²⁸ For a complete overview of James March’s work in French, see Eric Godelier, ed., *James March, Penser l’organisation* (Paris, 2003) or Thierry Weil, *Initiation à la lecture de James March* (Paris, 2000).

methodologies are better if someone artificially designs them in dark rooms, far away from real enterprises. The future of management sciences is supposed to be autonomous from practice as well as from traditional social sciences (sociology, anthropology and, of course, history). Researchers rarely compare the models’ theoretical hypotheses and their results with empirical facts, or with historical reality, except when they use history to “validate” the choices made. Even then, when historical events or facts should logically lead to a questioning or critical analysis of the theories and models, some seem ready to conclude that “reality is wrong.”²⁹

A second condition is also important: leaving behind the idea of universalism in management. This task is not easy, either, for universalism is a widely accepted view. One may find it, for instance, in books that look back at the history and origins of management, supposedly as old as humanity. For instance, Daniel Wren describes in his well-known work how ancient Egyptians used management methods:

Management as an activity has always existed to make people’s desires through organized effort. Management facilitates the efforts of people in organized groups and arises when people seek to cooperate to achieve goals. People have always participated in organizations, and organizations have always existed to serve the ends of people.³⁰

Later in the text, Wren declares that, prior to the Industrial Revolution, the first organizations were the house, the tribe, the church, the army, and the state. Here, he presents notions of organization and management as universal and timeless elements, thanks to the evident demonstration that the issue of organizing collective action is as old as the early moments of humanity.

Undoubtedly, coordinating people and resources is a social activity that enabled hunting, planting and harvesting, organizing day-to-day life, or structuring social and housing space. The design of practices to save rare resources or lighten human work has also been a constant preoccupation since prehistory, for all societies are “organized” with rules and logic, more or less consciously shared by their members. Nevertheless, these common elements do not justify the conclusion that the rules of collective actions observed in past or faraway societies are the same as those used by either present or earlier managers, or as the doctrines they have used since the nineteenth century.

The difficulty, with the legitimacy of management sciences at stake, is to demonstrate why and how in one moment in history (the mid-nineteenth century) certain parts of the world (mainly Western Europe and the United States) began to think systematically and consciously about organizational

²⁹ See, for instance, some supporters of “agency theories” or of “transaction cost theories,” which are the core of management sciences nowadays; see Hubert Gabriél and Jean-Louis Jacquier, *La théorie moderne de la firme* (Paris, 1994).

³⁰ Wren, *The Evolution of Management Thought*, 10-15.

issues. In this projected dialogue, history could be an important ally for management. The aim of this process is to understand how it is, that as a kind of individual and collective action the practices and sciences of management have emerged.³¹ Thanks to the discipline of history, much of the interest in the prerequisite definition of normative criteria to validate methodologies or scientific results has been lost. The loosening of this constraint has allowed a better dialogue with historians. How can we facilitate this dialogue? It implies significant re-contextualization.

Understanding the organizational structure of enterprises, the rules and tools of management, and their influence on the coordination of individual behavior and collective action, could be a common scientific goal. Beyond geographical or historical differences, these are designed to facilitate the convergence of people toward a common objective. We cannot see enterprises—like other forms of organizations—as transparent or as shells filled with general imported social rules. Researchers must analyze enterprises as specific places for designing rules that make possible the institutionalization of organizations and the working relations of their members.

Through this process, enterprises contribute to the evolution of macro-social institutions and to the reproduction of certain rules modeled by such institutions. We can therefore conclude that the environment historically and socially validates and embeds organizations and rules originally targeted for the needs of production and coordination. Once historians and management academics have recognized this renewed epistemological paradigm, they will have to work out several practical issues to stimulate an interdisciplinary dialogue.

Dialogue on methodologies and results

A first point of divergence is the importance of methodology to research mechanisms and the role it plays in researchers' recognition process within their discipline, and more broadly, in the acceptance of management sciences within the social sciences. For historians, methodological expertise is not a prerequisite for starting research. This does not mean, as some management academics seem to think, that historians are not interested in methods. On the contrary, intense debates on methodology have periodically shaken the discipline.³² Using myriad facts, historians systematically construct a stratagem. In an inductive process, they combine intuition and validation through cross-controls and confrontations among sources, hypotheses, and

³¹ Sociologists have already started this historical work on the birth of the discipline through the controversies in which Émile Durkheim opposed historians such as Denys Fustel de Coulange; see Jean-Michel Berthelot, “La sociologie: histoire d’une discipline,” in *La sociologie*, ed. Karl Van Meter (Paris, 2000), 11-26.

³² See, for instance, Paul Veyne, *Comment on écrit l’histoire* (Paris, 1979), or Gérard Noiriel, *Sur la “crise” de l’histoire* (Paris, 1997) and François Bédarida, ed., *L’histoire et le métier d’historien en France (1945-1995)* (Paris, 1997).

disciplines to answer a set of questions. In writing history, historians’ elegance relies on their ability to hide themselves and the methods they have used behind the narration. Their “technical” expertise appears in the similarity of their results to social realities.³³ Is it possible, then, to have their results recognized as scientific?

In this brief paper, it is impossible to present an exhaustive study of the answers acknowledged across time and space. However, for a long time, historians sought objectivity by using positive epistemology. Focusing on objective methods and on subjects from the distant past seemed to guarantee a healthy separation from subjective interests and any emotional reactions by researchers, which, in turn, protected the objectivity of a scientific historical approach.³⁴ From this position, historians could not study current issues and objects or those judged to be subjective, such as contemporary history or individual and social mentalities. Nor could they view organizations or enterprises as determined by the social environment. Thus, it was better to study a branch, a local market, or national economic and social structures. But, although we occasionally still hear criticisms of corporate history or contemporary history, that suspicion has been largely overcome.³⁵ Recognition by peers has long played a fundamental role in the scientific validation of historical research. The immense size of the study area, the complexity of dependencies among topics, and the multitude of time periods suppose a continuous dialogue among historians, which allows a coordination and combination of research. This also creates an “increase in the number of concepts at the historian’s disposal and therefore a lengthening list of questions” that historians can apply to their documents.³⁶

In contrast, in management sciences, methodology plays an important role in the design and validation of the research process. For numerous academics, it is not only a support for knowledge production, but also a lever toward institutional and social recognition of their own work and of the entire discipline. One reason for this particular attention is the fact that management sciences struggled for a long time to establish a separate identity from the methodologies of economics.³⁷ Researchers increasingly see methodology, in leading to recognition and epistemological legitimacy, as the cornerstone for management research processes. The tough discussions between the supporters of constructivism and qualitative methods and those in favor of quantitative methods are clear proof of this trend.³⁸ Nevertheless,

³³ Fernand Braudel, *Écrits sur l’histoire* (Paris, 1984), 23.

³⁴ Noiriel, *Sur la “crise” de l’histoire*, 41.

³⁵ Eric Godelier, “Le discours politique: source vivante ou source figée?” in *Pierre Bérégoz: Une volonté de réforme au service de l’économie (1984-1993)*, L’Institut de la gestion publique et du développement économique (Paris, 1998), 51-58.

³⁶ Veyne, *Comment on écrit l’histoire*, 147.

³⁷ Philippe Lorino, *L’économiste et le manager* (Paris, 1991).

³⁸ Pierre Louart and Alain Desreumeaux, eds., *Constructivisme(s) et sciences de gestion*, Actes du colloque de l’Institut Administration des Entreprises, Université des

in both camps, management academics seem to have adopted a vision of learning methodology as a technology prior to beginning the research process. We could explain this thought process by the epistemological paradigm that dominates management sciences. What gives management a strong position among the social sciences is that it is not only a descriptive and explicative science, but also a predictive one. Management scientists design a project to support an action thanks to more or less normative knowledge, aiming to improve the efficiency of managers in their day-to-day actions.³⁹ This is not an easy task, because management sciences have to prove their conceptual and operational strengths. Can history be useful to such a program? The answer depends on the epistemological paradigm used by management academics. It also depends on with whom the dialogue is engaged: researchers or management practitioners.

If management scientists try to program their disciplines' development by strictly following a certain vision of the history and formalization of natural sciences, dialogue will be difficult. They view history as subordinate to management questions and concepts. Although more management academics are writing papers and doing research presented as history, most of these attempts are a list of chronologically aligned facts called “history,” based on a very short period of analysis (five to ten years at most), with little understanding of the rigor and concepts used by professional historians. This often leads to the publication of smallish books containing few questions and little analysis.⁴⁰ Such a trend could lead to a negative vision of management as an arrogant discipline, attempting to explain, on its own, the multiple dimensions of its subjects, when it is, in fact, a complex combination of techniques, economics, and social dimensions.

This quick detour into history might seem easy and open, even to those without training, but it carries a boomerang effect. It seems to be the ultimate proof for some management academics that the field of history lacks conceptual rigor and systematic methodology. However, others in the same scientific field march to a different drummer. They see history as a discipline that could help management sciences understand managerial thought and practices. This supposes a historical approach to the discipline to understand how the technical tools, the leading managers, the educational institutions, and the networks used to diffuse doctrines and general knowledge have actually emerged. It might also be helpful to rebuild the path followed by management models and study the influences among enterprises, regions, and even countries. Here history could be of major assistance in clarifying the management scientists' understanding of how management models have

sciences et technologies de Lille, 23 octobre, 2 vols. (Lille, 1997).

³⁹ Claude Riveline, “Un point de vue d'ingénieur sur la gestion,” *Annales des Mines-Gérer et comprendre* 25 (Dec. 1991): 50-62. For example, see Henri Mintzberg, *Grandeur et décadence de la planification stratégique* (Paris, 1994), 24.

⁴⁰ Daniel Roche, “Les historiens aujourd'hui: Remarques pour un débat,” *Vingtième siècle* 12 (Oct.-Dec. 1986): 19.

appeared. It could nourish scientific discussions in management sciences, bringing about a more accurate critical analysis of their sources and intellectual categories, as well as a better knowledge of general management practices, and thus serve as a catalyst for advancing the discipline.⁴¹ This scientific dialogue compels historians to be aware of the debates (and their results) within management sciences without being blindly submissive to them. This dialogue must consider the possibilities and the constraints of interdisciplinary transmission of concepts and methods.⁴² This use of history has a firm foundation in the supposition that the variety and complexity of management issues impose a multidisciplinary approach. We must study management practices objectively; just as Marcel Mauss describes the ultimate goal for all social sciences, we must analyze management facts as a “complete social fact.” This project could lead to the reinforcement of management results and theories as soon as they have successfully passed the “fact examination” by historians. Managers are just as concerned about the dialogue between management and history as academics.

Managers often use history to provide success stories or to underline the excellence of corporate methods or the high quality of CEO leadership and charisma. Here history narrows to a kind of erudite journalism. More rarely, managers use history as a way of rigorously retracing the evolution or dynamic of a management tool or doctrine.⁴³ Visiting the past, therefore, could be a first step toward a diagnosis of management problems and, eventually, provide a guide for change. This approach is not very far from that used by re-engineering or benchmarking models. Nevertheless, an efficient dialogue between historians and managers supposes that the latter would be ready to allow the former to reveal not only managements’ official procedures, but also its hesitations and mistakes. Thus, it becomes possible to draw a genealogy of tools, individual or collective representations and of the unconscious logic and behavior of members. Here history is a tool for unlearning and change, converging toward Donald Schön’s conclusions.⁴⁴ Finally, let us not forget that history is a requirement for specific aspects of

⁴¹ Colin Ronan, *Histoire mondiale des sciences* (Paris, 1988). For example, French management sciences present bibliographies and footnotes that give more visibility to recent authors than to older ones, and favor quantity over quality, through a long list of references that the researcher has not always integrated by a critical analysis. See Christophe Midler, “Logique de la mode managériale,” *Annales des Mines-Gérer et comprendre* 3 (June 1986): 74-85.

⁴² Yves-Frédéric Livian and Pierre Louart, “Le voyage de la culture et de la motivation des sciences sociales à la GRH,” in *Repenser la gestion des ressources humaines*, ed. Julienne Brabet (Paris, 1993), 39-67.

⁴³ One may read the works of Yannick Lemarchand or Nicolas Berland on the history of amortization or budget control. On management models, our colleague Jean-Louis Peaucelle has visited the Henri Fayols’ family archives.

⁴⁴ Chris Argyris, *Savoir pour agir: Surmonter les obstacles à l’apprentissage organisationnel* (Paris, 1995).

management such as corporate culture or human resources management, where we must take the influence of time into account.

Conclusion

Obviously, management sciences and history share common interests once they are ready to put aside and/or clarify the origins of their methods, paradigms, and epistemologies. The aim is not to merge the two disciplines, but, rather, to improve the quality of knowledge of enterprises and organization in both. All these opportunities could prevent managers and management science academics from naïvely believing that rational tools and determination are powerful enough to change reality or the behavior and reactions of corporate members. If the central objective of management is to realize the full potential of the enterprise, a return to the past reveals that success and efficiency rely, unsurprisingly, on manager charisma and on leaders’ technical expertise.⁴⁵ More important, it shows that leaders’ main strength is their ability to create conditions conducive to cooperation and coordination among corporation members with divergent motivations, means, and personal strategies.

⁴⁵ Elie Cohen, “Épistémologie de la gestion,” in *Encyclopédie de Gestion*, ed. Yves Simon and Patrick Joffre, 3 vols., 2d ed. rev. (Paris, 1997), 1: 1158-78, at pp. 1164 and 1170.