Management without theory for the twenty-first century

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper analyses the origin, conceptual underpinnings and consequences of the idea of management theory. It argues that despite claims to incommensurability and except for critical studies authors, management researchers come together in their quest for performativity. The search for theory has condemned management scholars to espouse structural-functional-positivist assumptions. As such, mainstream management theorists assume and promote psychological determinism. Equivocations, ambiguities, tautologies and imprecise language obscure this implication, however, hollowing out management theory of its performative quality. A century after its inception, the quest for management theory has failed. Another avenue for management scholarship exists, one in which management history is a major contributor.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper offers a historical and conceptual analysis, relying on relevant philosophy of science scholarship. The object of study is the concept of management theory.

Findings – Most commentators on management theory rely on a widespread view (of postmodern lineage) according to which incommensurable management research paradigms exist. Allowance made for critical management studies, this paper argues otherwise, namely, that current management research paradigms are merely variations on a positivist theme. It further contends that mainstream management research has failed in its quest to identify theory, even if the language used to report research findings obfuscates this fact.

Research limitations/implications – A notable implication of this paper is that management academics should reconsider what they do and in particular abandon their quest for theory in favour of management history.

Originality/value – This paper builds on arguments that philosophers of science and scholars specialising in sociological analysis have long recognised to offer a new thesis on management theory in particular and management academia in general.

Keywords Management theory, Scientific management, Science, Postmodernism, Positivism

Paper type Research paper

In everyday language, a theory is a speculation or hypothesis, a loosely substantiated conjecture about a general or particular aspect of human experience. In scientific and scholarly literature, the term acquires a more precise meaning and stands for a group of statements about the world and their logical consequences (Bogen, 2017). Scientific theories range from descriptions of regularities observed in natural or experimental conditions, to laws, like Newton's, that are universally applicable. In all cases, the validity of theories goes beyond the phenomena that underwrote their formulation, all other things remaining the same. That is, scientific theories express permanence and causality: they describe and codify patterns deemed stable enough to serve as bases for predictions about unobserved phenomena, thus allowing for their control. Lyotard (1984) called "performativity" this predictive, instrumental quality of scientific theories.

Management researchers have embraced the performativity of scientific theories. In management studies, a theory is a testable proposition through which scholars describe organisational phenomena with the view of predicting the occurrence and controlling the course of similar ones (Shapira, 2011, p. 1313; Sutton and Staw, 1995, p. 378; Gioia and Pitre, 1990, p. 587). To contribute to management theory, researchers study managers' environment and behaviour as well as their consequences, in the hope of identifying regular relationships between them. Once identified, such relationships are codified as management theories, that is, become formal expectations that identical consequences will follow should the same behaviour be repeated, everything else remaining equal.

Donning the mantle of science has enabled management to acquire the status of an academic discipline (Locke, 1989). At university, if students cannot practice management, they can study theory. Theoretical knowledge offsets a lack of experience of future managers by allowing them to predict organisational phenomena, including the effects of their own behaviour. Theory also helps current managers improve their practice (Christensen and Raynor, 2003). In other words, theory allows managers to manage like engineers engineer and doctors heal patients: safely, reliably and on the back of a formal body of theoretical knowledge acquired at university. Such has been in any case management academia's overall promise since its inception (Khurana, 2007). A convincing pledge: while business and management programmes have established themselves as the most popular ones among US undergraduates (about 20 per cent of current enrolments), faculty in business, management and related disciplines command the highest salaries, only outdone by academics in legal studies (Snyder *et al.*, 2018; CUPA-HR, 2016).

After a short survey of the origins and main historical developments of the idea of management theory, this article examines its conceptual underpinnings and consequences. It argues that the quest for theory that preoccupied management academics during the twentieth century has failed. To survive this failure, the academy must reinvent its objectives. The conclusion adumbrates a possible avenue for such a reinvention, one in which studies in management history play a central role.

The birth of management theory

If the origins of management thought date back to ancient philosophy (Joullié and Spillane, 2015a), management theory has a more recent history. Commentators (Kiechel, 2012) have located its formal birth in the address that Henry Towne delivered in May 1886 to the American Society of Mechanical Engineers. In his talk, Towne lamented that although engineering was in his days already endowed with a formal body of knowledge, the "management of works" was still a scholarly orphan. In Towne's view, the missing discipline would be rooted in economics, as management's ultimate objective is economic gain.

Despite calling for its development, Towne came short of uttering the expression "management theory". He was also seemingly unaware that, over a century before his talk, an economist had laid the first foundation of the notion. In *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Smith indeed argued that division of labour contributes to economic growth through increased efficiency, although also widening the distance between workers and employers. Empirical confirmation of Smith's insight became available when, in the first decade of the twentieth century, Frederick Taylor and Henry Ford showed that manufacturing process simplification and standardisation made spectacular productivity gains possible, enabling in turn lower consumer prices and increased wages. Unlike Towne, Taylor (1919, p. 27) did use the term "theory" to refer to his "principles of scientific management". Although industrialist and social reformer Robert Owen (1771-1858) preceded Taylor in advancing

principles to regulate cooperative work, the latter can justifiably claim the title of first self-conscious management theorist[1].

Following Smith, Taylor insisted on the distinction between mental and physical work, that is, between managing (task specification and planning) and executing. With the control of the work, prestige and power went to the production managers. As Smith predicted, workers resented such a loss of status and many went on strike where industrialists implemented Taylor's ideas. Theirs was a lost cause: once scientific management had proved its mettle in a variety of settings, the idea that management can be systematised, that is, that there are reliable techniques available to managers the implementation of which makes their organisation more profitable, proved irresistible. The quest for management theory had begun.

Early twentieth-century management theorists contemplated a vast research programme. In an effort to improve workshop productivity and in the spirit of Taylor's time and motion studies, the US National Academy of Sciences launched in 1924 a series of experiments at Western Electric's Hawthorne Plant in Cicero, IL. The results of the Hawthorne Studies were puzzling at first: although productivity within a small group of women assembling relay parts improved, no change in environmental conditions, in work schedules or even in incentives could explain why. A succession of rejected hypotheses led to the Studies' abandonment, until Mayo (2004 [1933]) revived them by considering the relationships that developed between workers, between workers and their supervisor and between the entire group under analysis and the researchers. In his view, work organisations, extended to those studying them, were "social systems" transforming inputs into outputs.

Mayo taught at Harvard Business School, then (as now, if to a lesser extent) renowned for its MBA programme and case-based teaching. However, if Harvard's business degree met with great success, its pedagogy (inspired from that of its Law School) remained an exception. Indeed, the case method implies that each situation, each organisation is different and therefore that no overall theory applies. Elsewhere, the quest for universal principles applicable beyond the factory floor continued. Chester Barnard (1968 [1938]) held for instance that work organisations are cooperative systems. If, unlike the Catholic Church, they rarely survive for long, Barnard argued, it is mainly because they do not meet two essential criteria. These, for Barnard, were effectiveness and efficiency, defined as attainment of collective purposes and fulfilment of personal motives, respectively. Accepting much of Barnard's analysis, Simon (1997 [1947]) outlined the foundations of an "administrative science". In the management of administrations, Simon argued, efficiency must receive the highest priority and decision-making is the most important process. This endeavour, which rests on logical and mathematical considerations, requires distinguishing value judgements from factual observations. However, since, as Barnard taught, efficiency involves personal motives, decision-making is never entirely rational. It is "bounded" by the values of the decision maker. Not that this individual is beyond scientific study and understanding: intelligence is merely computation and human beings are simple "behaving systems", complex only insofar as they respond to an environment that is itself complex (Simon, 1996 [1969]).

Simon joined what would become the Carnegie School of Industrial Administration (GSIA) in 1949. Staffed with social scientists, economists, psychologists and mathematicians, almost all of whom would become famous, the GSIA soon established itself as a leading business school and model to imitate. For instance, when in 1959, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching delivered a report railing against the poor academic standards of management programmes, it took GSIA's programmes and discipline-based research as benchmarks (Khurana and Spender, 2012; Mintzberg, 2004,

pp. 22-29). Owing to the endorsement of the American Association of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) and to generous grants made available to those institutions that implemented its prescriptions, the 1959 Carnegie Foundation report reshaped management academia first in North American then worldwide. The search for universal principles (combined with GSIA's emphasis on decision-making based on quantitative methods) was thereby confirmed as the academy's overriding agenda.

Working along Simon at the GSIA, Igor Ansoff applied quantitative methods to long-term corporate planning. As part of this effort, Ansoff coined the expression "corporate strategy", then an unknown and empty phrase to which an eponymous book (Ansoff, 1965) gave substance and popularity. Ansoff was an academic pioneer, but he was neither the first nor the only one to promote strategy as a management concern. In 1963, Bruce Henderson had started what would a few years later become the Boston Consulting Group, a management consultancy hailing "business strategy" as its specialty (BCG, 2013). Studying historical data, Henderson found that the evolution of manufacturing costs follows in most industries a predictable pattern, which corporate portfolio managers can use to decide on investments and divestments. Bringing the mathematical rigour of his PhD in economics, Michael Porter (1980, 1985) provided additional theoretical support to his predecessors' work. He notably argued that organisations determine their strategy after examination of the "competitive forces" that operate in their industries. Chief executives respond to these forces by following one of three possible generic strategies, which Porter analysed as chains of value-adding activities and resources. Among these are competitive advantages, the attributes that enable an organisation to outperform its competitors.

At Harvard Business School, Porter's work on strategic management was that of a maverick. More representative of his institution's pedagogical tradition and overall approach to management scholarship was Alfred Chandler. In his landmark book, Chandler (1977) studied the evolution of large American businesses and their economic role. He held in particular that these enterprises' managers visibly discharge the function that Smith attributed to invisible market mechanisms, namely efficient resource allocation. Chandler's thesis thus amounts to a teleological view of organisational history, a view in which business organisations take particular forms to perform particular economic tasks. Significantly, however, Chandler did not advance a theory of management; his is a theory of management history.

Mayo studied people working in groups, Simon analysed decision-making, Ansoff investigated corporate investments, Henderson delved into manufacturing costs, Porter mapped corporations' strategies, while Chandler tracked the evolution and economic contribution of large businesses. In the same decades, operations research came into being (Wilson, 2018). Despite their differences, all these endeavours, for successful and influential as they have been on their own, belong to the same tradition. Called by Kiechel (2010, p. 4) "Greater Taylorism", this tradition is more accurately described as structural-functionalist-positivist (SFP) for reasons to be exposed shortly. It is a tradition that assumes that management research is a scientific endeavour because it aims at an objective similar to that of the natural sciences: the production of a performative body of knowledge. In one word: theory.

Theoretical foundations

The quest for management theory has not ended since the days of the pioneers mentioned in the foregoing. More appropriate today is to speak of management theories. Taylor based his theory on the view that line workers only execute, not organise, their work. Conversely, Mayo took account of employees' interpretations of the experiment he supervised at Hawthorne. Different levels of analysis produce different management theories. Already in

1961, Koontz lamented a theoretical "jungle", identifying first six, then eleven distinct families of theories less than two decades later (Koontz, 1961, 1980). The jungle has not receded since: an overarching criterion for article acceptance in a leading management journal today is that the research it reports extends existing theory or builds new theory.

About the phenomena they study, what these phenomena encompass and how to study them, management researchers develop clusters of assumptions. For instance, scholars wanting to develop a theory describing how people behave in organisations must first define what they believe qualifies (or not) as an organisation, what kind of behaviour is relevant and what kind is not. As the examples of Taylor and Mayo illustrate, however, such definitions rest themselves on different conceptions about human nature and social reality. Underlying the plethora of management theories lies therefore another profusion, that of ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions. Different clusters of assumptions lead to different conclusions about how to conduct management research, about what kind of phenomena should attract researchers' attention and therefore about what counts as a management theory. Such is the view, in any case, advanced by business research textbooks (Bryman and Bell, 2015).

In management and organisational studies, an influential study of the assumptions scholars espouse when conducting their research is Burrell and Morgan (1979). At the time of writing, the work has attracted over 13,500 citations according to Google Scholar; twenty-two years ago, the work's influence was already judged "hegemonic" (Deetz, 1996, p. 191). That Burrell and Morgan's study has been influential does not mean it has proved consensual, however. For example, disagreement exists about the number of research frameworks, their names or the research practices they produce. Thus, in place of the four frameworks identified by Burrell and Morgan, authors have proposed three (Locke, 2001, pp 7-12) or two (Lakomski and Evers, 2011; Boisot and McKelvey, 2010; Clegg and Ross-Smith, 2003). Whatever its merits, Burrell and Morgan's work has shaped discussions about such matters.

Burrell and Morgan (1979, pp. 21-25) called "paradigms" the four clusters of assumptions that frame management and organisational research and named them "functionalist", "interpretivist", "radical structuralist" and "radical humanist". In their view, these paradigms are incommensurable because they rest on fundamentally incompatible views about social science and social reality, thus leading to radically different research practices, objectives and results. For instance, researchers working as per the radical structuralist and functionalist paradigms share an emphasis on an objective study of social reality, while those inscribing themselves in the radical humanist and interpretive paradigms believe that social phenomena can only be understood subjectively. That is, it is the perspective and intentions of those individuals the behaviour of whom is studied that primarily concern the latter group of scholars, not the actual manifestations or consequences of that behaviour (which concern the former group of researchers). However, still according to Burrell and Morgan, adepts of the interpretivist and functionalist paradigms promote social regulation, while those scholars following the radical humanist and the radical structuralist paradigms stimulate research enabling social change.

Burrell and Morgan's (1979, pp. 32-33) radical humanist scholars deserve further exposition, for their conception of research sets them apart. These researchers believe indeed that ideological constructs dominate human consciousness and estrange human beings from their full potentialities. In particular, radical humanists see a science of management as a concept leading to alienation, with the Taylorisation of the workplace held as a prime example of such dehumanisation. In the radical humanist perspective, the trust invested in management as an applied science is one of these ideological barriers to human fulfilment.

Radical humanist scholars thus see their mission as identifying the multifarious manifestations of the management science ideology and helping fellow human beings in their attempts to liberate themselves from it.

A critical evaluation of Burrell and Morgan's classification is not immediately relevant to the present argument (Hassard and Cox, 2013, Deetz, 1996 are examples of such evaluations). Similarly, whether the paradigms Burrell and Morgan identified are truly incommensurable or can be somehow reconciled is a question that can wait, at least for now. General comments about management research are in order before a discussion on such matters is possible.

Structural-functionalist-positivist management research

Beyond their disagreements, authors who have analysed the assumptions underpinning management research grant, if under a different name, a dominant role and influence to the sort of research that Burrell and Morgan called "functionalist". For instance, while Clegg and Ross-Smith (2003) and Johnson and Duberley (2000) have called such research "positivist", Boisot and McKelvey (2010) and Locke (2001) have preferred to name it "modernist" and Lakomski and Evers (2011) "empiricist". Although connected, these terms deserve to be distinguished.

"Modernism" refers to a period in the history of Western ideas, arts and culture, with roots in the nineteenth century but culminating in the first decades of the twentieth century. "Empiricism" is the view, developed from the sixteenth century onward, that the exclusive source of knowledge is experience, that is, information conveyed by the senses. Positivism is a philosophy of science first given systematic exposition by Auguste Comte (1798-1957) and further developed in the 1920s and 1930s (Kolakowski, 1969). Positivist science accepts the empiricist premise: it studies reality in its phenomenal manifestations. It ignores moral values to focus exclusively on facts, defined as corroborated, intersubjective sense data. Accordingly, positivist scientists strive for objective (value-free) observations of phenomena, from which they infer theories that they confront to new observations by way of predictions and experiments. In the natural sciences, positivism is the exclusive research model.

Functionalism is not a philosophy of science, but a conception of social reality. Although often said obsolete, functionalism is still central to general sociology (Kingsbury and Scanzoni, 2009). Functionalists believe that they can adequately describe any social phenomenon (institution, pattern of behaviour, norm or belief) in the terms of the function (and of the effects this function) this phenomenon discharges on other phenomena under analysis, irrespective of the intentions of the individuals that animate or harbour it (Spillane and Martin, 2005, pp. 112-113). As Radcliffe-Brown (1940) long argued, however, functionalism is intimately associated with another sociological ontology, namely structuralism. Structuralism is the view that phenomena only exist through their relationships with larger, ordering structures (Blackburn, 2005. p. 353). The connection between functionalism and structuralism is a natural one, for the concept of relationship leads to that of function. Further, to speak of function is to imply that there is an entity that functions. If phenomena are only observable through relationships seen as manifestations of functions and if these functions manifest the existence of entities that can be decomposed into sub-entities, the difference between "function" and "structure" disappears. In this sense, dissociating functionalism from structuralism and holding them to be incommensurable views of social reality, as Burrell and Morgan did, is misguided; many authors understandably speak of structural-functionalism (Dew, 2014).

In social science, the structural-functionalist tradition is particularly visible in the work of Émile Durkheim (2002 [1897]). For Durkheim, society is the ultimate structure, a

determined, complete, coherent and self-regulating system made of causally interconnected components (structures). Among these are work organisations, which stand for and discharge social functions. Individuals do not exist as autonomous beings but only as components (substructures) of society and its institutions, i.e. as vehicles of the various social functions they simultaneously embody and discharge.

In management studies, the combination of structuralism, functionalism and positivism has been attractive to scholars. Indeed, the research framework such a combination produces provides immediate ontological, epistemological and methodological support to the quest for management theory. As per the structural-functionalist view, work organisations, their internal components and attributes, as well as their partners, suppliers, customers, etc., are nothing but structures, which discharge and embody stable and causally effective functions (relationships) on other structures. Further, as per the positivist research framework, the behaviour (function) of these structures is amenable to objective observation, thus ensuring the scientific status and value neutrality of the resulting management theory.

In the SFP perspective, management research is an endeavour modelled on that of natural science, resting on similar assumptions and aiming at the same overall objective of performativity: prediction and control by way of theories. Management is itself a practice conducted as per a body of theoretical knowledge, expressed in scientific language and grounded on objective observation and quantitative data analysis. Further, there are universal, value-free and predictive methods available to managers through which they can improve their practice. The SFP conception of management studies is that which Taylor pioneered and to which Simon and his peers at the GSIA first gave academic credentials. It has formed the backbone of management academia to this day (hence the qualifiers "traditional", "orthodox" or again "mainstream" that are also used to denote it). As attested by AACSB's mission statement, which is "to transform business education for global prosperity" (from the website), it is a conception of management research and practice that, in typical positivist fashion, equates scientific progress with social progress. The appearance of game theory, the rise of economics and finance in management schools' curricula and the preponderance of quantitative studies in management journals are signs that the SFP tradition is still gaining influence because quantitative analysis is associated with certainty, objectivity and instrumentality, all notions at the heart of the positivist research programme. "Evidence-based management", insofar as it is a research agenda and not merely a body of practice, is another outgrowth of the positivist branch of management studies.

Burrell and Morgan's radical structuralist account of management research, as its name indicates, hinges on the view that stable structures underpin social reality. Citing Marx as example, Burrell and Morgan (1979. p. 34) note that, for radical structuralists, "radical change is built in the very nature and structure of contemporary society", and that such structure "provide[s] explanations of the basic interrelationships within the context of total social formations". Interpretivist social researchers espouse this (structural-functionalist) conception of social reality insofar as they are committed to the position, as Burrell and Morgan (1979, p. 31) put it, that "the world of human affairs is cohesive, ordered and integrated". When Mayo spoke of causally effective "social systems' to account for what happened at Hawthorne, he did not mean differently.

In *The Theory of Social and Economic Organisation*, Weber (1969) argued that social scientists should inquire in the causes of unintended events, but ignore intended ones. If an event occurs as the deliberate result of an individual's action, this particular individual is the cause of that event, and there is no need to engage in scientific enquiry to discover what caused it. However, if the event is unintended, then its real causes are unknown and it is

therefore worthwhile to mobilise scientific means to discover them. Such a discovery will make it possible to judge whether the event in question will occur again or to control its occurrence. In this argument at least, Weber did not deviate from positivist science's overall performative agenda, that according to which the ultimate purpose of scientific knowledge is to expand and consolidate control of reality. The interpretive school of social research is not an alternative but a complement to the picture provided by the positivist account (Khurana, 2007, p. 394).

The radical humanist management researcher, according to Burrell and Morgan (1979, p. 32), has much in common with his interpretivist counterpart. Both believe in the existence of stable, causally effective superordinate arrangements of organisational reality buried in human consciousness (for instance in the shape of ideologies or moral constraints), which they strive to discover and codify. Radical humanists differ from interpretivists in how to use such knowledge: to regulate organisations for interpretive scholars and to change it for radical humanist researchers. In either case, however, scholars remain faithful to the performative programme of SFP research.

The four paradigms of management research identified by Burrell and Morgan (1979) share a central agenda. They are variations on the quest for stable, ordering and causally effective features underpinning organisational reality, the existence of which is assumed. In making this assumption, management researchers walk in the steps of their illustrious predecessors in social science, be it Marx, Durkheim or Weber, all of whom took the existence of causal trends or relationships structuring the social phenomena they studied for granted (Giddens, 2000, p. 239). The alleged incommensurability of Burrell and Morgan's research paradigms must therefore be requalified: in a crucial aspect, it is merely superficial. These paradigm differ not on the nature of the ultimate substratum of organisational reality (stable, causally effective structures), but on where to locate that substratum and how to study it.

Stable and causally effective structures form bases from which prediction and control of organisational phenomena are possible. For instance, if organisational cultures manifest themselves along fixed dimensions (stable and causally effective structures), then managers must take advantage of these dimensions when restructuring or regulating organisations (management theory). The idea that there is such a thing as a management theory to be discovered because there are such things as stable, causally effective features that determine organisational reality is therefore *the* theory underpinning all management theories. In this statement, however, "theory' is not to be understood in the scientific sense (i.e. as law-like generalisation stemming from past observations intended to predict future ones), but in the everyday sense, as mere speculation. Management researchers accept it *a priori* because without it, the performativity of their research cannot be justified. To put the matter somewhat differently, if management academics suffer from "physics envy" (Bygrave, 1989, p. 16), they also labour under a managerial bias. Indeed, the ultimate rationale of their research and objective of their theories is to provide means to organisational regulation or transformation, that is, executive control. Irrespective of their research paradigm, they are all, to reuse Baritz's (1960) expression, "servants of power".

Postmodern management research
Published in 1979, Burrell and Morgan's work could not include a discussion of a stream of management studies that is embryonic in their analysis but only emerged in the early 1990s[2]. This stream appears in later explorations of management research frameworks, albeit with a much weaker degree of agreement about what sort of research it consists of and to what sort of theories (if any at all) it leads. This is the research framework called "postmodern" (Hassard, 1994), "postpositivist" (Clegg and Ross-Smith, 2003), "postmodernist" (Lakomski and Evers,

2011; Boisot and McKelvey, 2010; Johnson and Duberley, 2000) or again "deconstructionist" (Hassard and Cox, 2013). Another name for this body of management research is "critical management studies" (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Adler *et al.*, 2007). Supported by dedicated journals, postmodern management research, in its multifarious hues, represents today an active area of scholarship. However, even if many postmodern research themes have found their way in mainstream management scholarship (Hassard and Cox, 2013), postmodern management scholarship has had little influence on the content of management curricula. There are good reasons for this.

Along the lines opened by Burrell and Morgan's radical humanist scholars, postmodern management researchers seek to distance themselves from the tradition of Taylor and Simon because they are wary of its consequences. They, too, pursue a "political" research agenda insofar as they oppose what they believe are noxious effects of a science of management. What makes postmodern management scholars' position distinctive is their rejection of stable empirical referents. Following such thinkers as Foucault, Feyerabend and Derrida, postmodern management authors either reject the notion of "truth", with they see as an element of a discourse seeking domination, or, if they accept it, believe it to be inaccessible (Joullié and Spillane, 2015a, pp. 278-283). As a result, postmodern management authors are not merely suspicious of a science of management for being an instrument of social oppression; rather, they dismiss it altogether. They deny society a stable, neutral existence and see institutions, symbols, words and texts not as having fixed meaning or pointing to permanent entities. Rather, postmodernists analyse such components of social experience as repressive processes silencing other institutions, symbols, words and texts while promoting the agendas of incumbents, owners and authors. In the postmodern worldview, there cannot be a science of management because the objectivity demanded by SFP research is a delusion, a mirage: what passes for reality is in fact a fabrication, a socially constructed deception. The psychological self is an oppressive illusion of religious lineage and rationality is a markedly dangerous, because persuasive, form of lie. As for organisational life, it is politically motivated, a scene on which vested interests constantly play out and collide and therefore an experience escaping passive or neutral recording.

While there are merits to a critical view of organisational life, it is easier to understand what postmodern management scholars oppose than what they propose, if anything. This impotence is mainly the consequence of a radical (anti-) epistemological stance that condemns anyone who adopts it to an anti-performative position. Rejecting the idea that experience and reason are reliable instruments, postmodern management scholars find themselves in a perilous position when it comes to developing a logical argument from empirical premises; denying that organisational reality exists as a permanent object of study, they logically cannot recommend a course of action. Indeed, in the absence of stable, causally effective social structures, there is indeed no ground upon which theory could develop. Further, if postmodern management authors are correct in their views of social reality, their work itself must be dismissed for stemming from and embodying an ideology that is politically motivated, that is, oppressive in its intention.

Postmodernists will not allow logic or argument to come in their way, however. For instance, Chia and Holt (2009, pp. 9-10) recommend managers they downplay conscious decision-making, instrumental rationality and goal-directed behaviour; instead, managers are encouraged to let things happen by themselves. That is, Chi and Holt write a book (a deliberate behaviour, surely) to argue that managers should not argue or act deliberately. Equally inconsistent (if understandable) are calls by postmodern academics to continue research as per the postmodern agenda (Donaldson (2003) offers an extended discussion on this theme). To be fair, some postmodern management authors have recognised that embracing an anti-

epistemological posture amounts to pulling the carpet from underneath one's feet. They have tried to retain their balance through irony, autocriticism, self-effacement and (as last resort) by grasping at their readers, presumably hoping these would fall with them (Burrell, 1997).

The collapse of theory

The ethical, logical, epistemological and ontological difficulties met by researchers in social science have been long documented (Giedymin, 1975). In fact, it was their progressive articulation (in the hands of Weber, Adorno, Horkheimer and Popper, most notably) that spurred the development of the different versions of social research that Burrell and Morgan mapped. Various strategies are available to mitigate the difficulties that each generates in management studies (Johnson and Duberley, 2000; Boisot and McKelvey, 2010; Wicks and Freeman, 1998; Gioia and Pitre, 1990). Rather than these well-travelled themes, the following explores an overlooked aspect of management research's difficulties.

The main issues social researchers face in their work stem from the influence they inevitably exert on the individuals the behaviour of whom they study, the complexity of social phenomena, the impossibility of studying them in laboratory conditions and the challenge of identifying control groups. Considered together, these difficulties rule out explanations of social events similar to those advanced in the natural sciences, which are in terms of causes and effects of these causes. As Andreski (1969, p. 58) observed, at most, in social sciences, only "possibilistic" explanations can be advanced, that is, explanations why something could happen, not why it happened. In other words, in social science, explanations do not express sufficient conditions of occurrence of an event (causal explanation), but necessary conditions of occurrence. As such, explanations of social phenomena are not predictive and thus cannot be performative. Moreover, if one accepts the reality of free will, i.e. if one understands that human behaviour is by nature unpredictable, then one must also accept that causal explanations of social events are impossible in all cases where these events are determined by the choices of one or a handful of individuals. Such is typically the case in management situations where decision-making rests with one or a small number of people.

If the indeterminacy of human actions vitiates the possibility of causal explanations of social events, it follows that the possibility of causal explanation requires that human actions are predictable. Expressed differently, the quest for performative management theory must assume a degree of psychological determinism, at least on the part of those to whom the theory applies. For example, in *For Positivist Organisation Theory*, Donaldson (1996) argues that organisational decisions are contingent on phenomena over which managers and executives have no control, such as general economic conditions, competitors' offering, legal constraints or simply shareholders expectations. There is therefore no such a thing as strategic choice. Managerial free will, if it exists, is of negligible consequence; trying to account for it in management studies is a pointless endeavour. If true, this deterministic view of organisational reality leaves little room for such widely debated notions as business ethics and corporate social responsibility. Scholars engaged in these research agendas are misguided in their efforts.

Even if they do not share Donaldson's positivist commitment, management theorists, irrespective of their research paradigm, share his view on human agency. This is the case because if organisational reality is structured along stable and causally effective features (be they buried in the depths of human consciousness), then organisational life is ultimately determined in some aspects. These aspects are the phenomena that management researchers study, the occurrences of which their theories describe and predict. It is thus possible to determine future occurrences of these phenomena, like, for instance, the

behaviour of elementary particles is predictable and controllable by way of the electromagnetic forces theorised by physicists. As discussed, postmodern management scholars escape these comments at the cost of being incapable of proposing any management theory at all.

Being performative, management research requires and implies a degree of psychological determinism. Yet, bar for theorists like Donaldson (and postmodern researchers, if for opposite reasons), most management scholars do not realise this implication, as their concern for managerial and corporate responsibility attests. It thus behoves the present commentator to explain the discrepancy between what management researchers actually do and what most of them profess they do. Although such an argument requires more sustained development than space affords here, I submit in the following paragraphs that management authors do not recognise the psychological determinism implied in their research and conveyed by their theories because they obfuscate it, presumably unwittingly, behind a cloud of equivocations, ambiguities, tautologies and imprecise language.

Scholarly management and organisation literature offers equivocations aplenty. Although a systematic survey of the concerned literature is normally required to substantiate such an assertion, three examples will suffice to provide it credibility and prosecute the present case. They pertain to the use of "authority", "personality" and "motivation", three terms that are pervasive in management literature.

"Authority" is an ambiguous word most management authors leave undefined. Dictionaries (e.g. the *Merriam-Webster* on-line dictionary, accessed on 14 March 2018) acknowledge this ambiguity when they define the term as "the power to influence or command thought, opinion or behaviour". To influence is not to command, however: while the former verb leaves room for gradation of interpretation and thus psychological freedom, the latter does not and implies obedience. Thus, when Rojas (2010, p. 1264) writes in his study of academic authority "some actors [. . .] seek the authority to coerce others" and that "connections help individuals acquire the legitimate authority to influence events" (2010: p. 1265), he equivocates on the two meanings of the term and leaves the practical implications of his theory uncertain. Such an equivocation is doubly convenient. First, should the theory be implemented, the equivocation protects the theorist from the charge that his research does not result in employee coercion. Second and more to the point of the current discussion, the equivocation presumably leaves the same theorist unaware of the deterministic implications of his theory. Had the meaning of "authority" been clarified or a less ambiguous word like "power" or "control" been used, these implications would have been either avoided or made apparent.

"Personality" is a concept central to managerial psychology and to a large component of management and organisational behaviour literature. Although there are over 200 different definitions of personality (Spillane and Martin, 2005, p. 71), most of them advance personality as a stable psychological structure or process that confers individual behaviour an overall degree of consistency. In this perspective, personality explains (that is, causes) behavioural regularities (McRae and Costa, 1996, pp. 57-58). The concept of personality thus assumes that there are aspects of behaviour that remain beyond the volition of the individual. Notwithstanding claims to the contrary, the psychological determinism of personality theories is particularly evident in the view of personality as a bundle of stable traits (dispositions) existing within the person and controlling his or her behaviour (Clarke, 2009). Behavioural predictions based on personality tests have been the goal and the justification of personality research since its beginnings (Baritz, 1960, pp. 21-41).

The psychological determinism implied in personality psychology is not without consequences on personal freedom, intelligence and creativity. If individuals behave as per fixed psychological structures beyond their control, they are not completely free and thus not entirely responsible for what they do: they behave in ways constrained by their personality. It is illusory to expect from them behaviour outside of the range of activities that their personality allows. The narrower the range of activities in which the concerned individuals can engage, the more consistent their behaviour remains regardless of environmental conditions. In other words, the stronger the personality, the less intelligent (in the sense of adaptive) and the less creative the individual. Although this argument is of sound logic and in accord with explanations of aberrant or deviant behaviour in terms of personality factors or mental illnesses (Spillane and Martin, 2005, pp. 72-74), it is not widely recognised by management authors. This state of affairs is evident in the use of such oxymoronic expressions as "creative personality" (Oldham and Cummings, 1996), "imaginative personality" (Kartono *et al.*, 2017) or again "intelligent personality" (Bartone *et al.*, 2009), which are common in literature.

Finally, "motivation" is a concept often found in management and organisational behaviour articles and textbooks, if generally left without a clear definition. When a definition is provided, it is typically along the lines provided by Griffin and Moorhead (2012, p. 90), that is, one which conceives of motivation, in Newtonian language, as "the set of forces that causes people to engage in one behavior rather than some alternative behavior". In this reading, motivation is a causally effective factor, the reach of which is inescapable: motivated employees are caused to behave as they do (that is, they do not act but react). These individuals' intentions and free will, should they exist, are of no consequence. In ordinary language, however, motivation has a different meaning. As the *Oxford Online Dictionary* attests (accessed on 20 February 2018), motivation typically refers to a reason for acting in certain ways, a desire to do something, that is, a volition, a fear, an incentive or an objective. This definition makes room for choice and free will: if a motivation is a reason for action and not a cause for reaction, then one can change one's behaviour by changing one's motivation. As is the case for "authority" and "personality", the equivocation that surrounds "motivation" is convenient for authors, for it hides, perhaps even to themselves, the determinism of their theories. It also makes their theories unfalsifiable, thus unscientific in Popper's (2004) sense, because whatever experimental evidence produced will be compatible with the theory. Should "motivated" employees behave as expected, motivation-as-cause will figure centrally in results' interpretation; should these same employees not behave as expected, researchers will call on motivation-as-reason when interpreting the results of their experiment.

The aforediscussed equivocations and conceptual ambiguities allow management scholars to cloak their theories in a scientific veneer. In strategic management literature, circular reasoning provides the scientific varnish. In two distinct streams of publications, Powell (2001, 2002) and Priem and Butler (2001a, 2001b) have indeed observed that, since competitive advantages and valuable resources are only identified within successful organisations, these competitive advantages and valuable resources cannot, in and of themselves, explain these organisations' successful performance. Implying, as Porter (1985) and countless strategic management authors do, that competitive advantages or valuable resources produce organisational success thus amounts to implying that organisations are successful because they are successful. The proposition is true, but trivially so. It does not state a theory but only a tautology without predictive, let alone performative, content.

Strategic management literature is not alone in advancing tautologies masquerading as scientific theories. Tautological propositions also abound in the "implications for practice"

sections of management articles. Bartunek and Rynes (2010) reviewed 1,738 empirical articles published in five leading management and management-related journals in 1992 and 1993 and between 2003 and 2007. Bartunek and Rynes (2010, p. 105) found that, overall, 74 per cent (up to 89 per cent for some journals, depending on the year considered) of these "implications for practice" sections rely on tentative language, that is, make use of "may", "speculate", "potentially" or other words of similar meaning. Propositions expressed in this sort of language are either tautological or unfalsifiable; in both cases, they have no empirical implications.

Although Bartunek and Rynes based their analysis on articles published in 1992-1993 and 2003-2007, recent exemplars are not difficult to identify, showing that the phraseology they identified is still prevalent. For example, Su and Tsang (2015, p. 1143) write, as practical implications of their research, that "results suggest that firms may strategically control the scope of the secondary stakeholders in which they are interested". The verb "suggest" signals that the proposed interpretation contains a part of subjectivity, that other researchers could interpret the same results differently; the modal "may" indicates that the opposite result is possible. If the sentence has some appearance of performativity, it has none of its core attributes, namely, objectivity and causality.

Tentative and speculative language, like the equivocations, conceptual ambiguities and tautologies reviewed earlier, obfuscates management literature's inherent determinism and hollows it out of practical consequences. In both cases and crucially, such language does not convey theoretical knowledge. Sentences like "X suggests Y", "X may cause Y" and "X potentially triggers Y" imply that Y does necessarily follow from X, that something else, or nothing at all, can possibly follow from X. That such formulation is so widespread in, indeed typical of, management literature shows that scholars, despite their intentions to identify and codify theory, have been incapable of doing so.

If management research is a quest for performativity, this goal has disappeared from its practical conclusions. When engaging in management research, scholars assume that stable, causally effective structures underpin the way organisations operate, yet the language these same scholars use to report the result of their research implicitly but unambiguously betrays the inexistence of such structures. The fact is that management researchers have yet to identify a single theory they can apply in the world of organisations with the same reliability that physicists apply theirs in the world of objects. The limitations, weaknesses and adverse social consequences of scientific management, the first and perhaps most successful of all management "theories", need no rehearsal here: scientific management is not the panacea, the "one best method" Taylor (1919, p 25) insistently claimed it was. The promise of performativity made by management academics has remained a promise. Except in their intentions and research hypotheses, there is no such a thing as a management theory. This failure of management theorists illustrates Gellner's (1986, pp. 126-127) argument that, if science is characterised by its ability to generate consensual, cumulative knowledge capable of improving human existence by way of predictions and controls (i.e. what Lyotard called science's performativity), then the so-called "social sciences" are not scientific.

Conclusion: management scholarship for the twenty-first century
The idea of management theory has had a successful run since its inception in the first decade of the twentieth century. From Taylor to Simon to Porter (and countless others), the contention that there exists a theoretical body of knowledge enabling managers reliably and predictably to improve their practice has been widely accepted. Management education

hinges on this conception, to which thousands of management scholars around the world have given flesh – or so it seems.

In scholarly literature, theory is a performative and deterministic notion. Anyone proposing a theory about natural or experimental phenomena implies that, should the conditions that presided over their initial observation persist, these phenomena will continue to occur as they have occurred and can thus be controlled or at minimum predicted. Proposing a theory about particular phenomena thus amounts to claiming that the behaviour of these phenomena is predictable, that is, somehow determined. Applying the notion of theory to management and organisational concerns thus requires, implies and conveys the idea that the phenomena management scholars study are determined in some essential but inescapable ways. Organisations, however, are made of people; management is, ultimately, the management of people. The notion of theory applied to management involves a deterministic picture of human agency, one in which human beings, in some ways at least, do not act but react, do not behave as they wish but as they must.

To escape the psychological determinism of the structural-functional-positivist research agenda, management theorists have developed alternative ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions upon which to conduct research. Despite incommensurability claims by their advocates, these research frameworks are only superficially different. They come together in one central assumption: the existence of underlying stable and causally effective features of organisational life upon which to develop management theories. Scholars for whom this comment does not hold are those postmodern management researchers for whom there are no fixed structures in social reality and therefore no basis upon which to ground theory. Postmodern management scholars escape the charge of determinism but face that of theoretical paralysis and practical irrelevance.

Except for avowed positivists such as Donaldson, management scholars do not commit to the idea of psychological determinism; rather, they typically deny such a commitment. Nevertheless, if management theories were not deterministic in at least some of their aspects, there would be no way to justify their performativity and consequently their teaching in management schools. It is only because management theories are supposedly performative that their knowledge enables managers to improve their practice and management graduates to pretend to management positions.

Knowingly or not, willingly or not, management scholars obfuscate their commitment to psychological determinism by way of equivocations, conceptual ambiguities, tautologies, speculative wording and tentative language when reporting their theories. Constructs such as "personality" and "motivation", common in management literature, demand psychological determinism to be used as support of theories. However, they are typically employed as if this was not the case, thereby obscuring their meaning and fatally undermining theoretical models built upon them. The notion of "authority" (specifically its articulation with the concepts of "power" and "control") is rarely elucidated, leaving its practical implication uncertain. Circular reasoning is at the heart of competitive advantage and valuable resource theories, carving them out of empirical relevance. Finally, the sections of articles that spell out the practical implications of research rely in their vast majority on a language that denudes them of predictive application. Their theoretical content is only apparent and their performativity inexistent. The quest for management theory has failed.

A handful of scholars have perceived that management studies is facing a crisis of theory (Ghoshal, 2005), that current management scholarship is mostly irrelevant to theory, practice (George, 2014) and teaching (Pearce and Huang, 2012) and that management academia's legitimacy is now at risk (Khurana, 2007). Management academia must reinvent itself if it wants to survive these crises. If this reinvention goes through the abandonment of

theory to make room for managerial freedom and responsibility, then so be it. In any case, forfeiting the claim to theoretical knowledge will not be at management studies' cost. If the pursuit of theory cannot be reconciled with a world picture in which managers act, choose and are responsible for their decisions, then so much the worse for theory. Scholars receptive to this line of argument will remember, however, that an abandonment of theory must remain compatible with their academy's claim to instrumentality, if not to performativity. That is, unless they are ready to embrace critical management authors' practical irrelevance quagmire, scholars must find ways to make their research useful, if not predictive, to managers. The work of Peter Drucker, who never claimed to have a theory of management (and insisted there was no such a thing; Drucker, 1986, p. 39 and 99), shows that such an endeavour is possible.

For more than 2000 years, education for citizenship and community leadership was based on *studia humanitatis*, that is, on an engagement with the body of knowledge in which and through which people document and come to terms with their existence. To prepare himself for a senior administrative position, Machiavelli, to take one famous example, studied Latin, rhetoric, logic, diplomacy, history and philosophy. Such an education provides analytical and critical methods of inquiry rooted in an appreciation of diverse human values, skills that managers, as decision-makers, require. The critical evaluation of assumptions brings about the awareness of alternatives: intellectual freedom, citizenship engagement and moral leadership have no other possible origin. Critical analysis, however, is impossible in the darkness of an imprecise language, in the absence of moral references or in the chaotic outline of a world without history and intellectual foundations. Mastery of language and an appreciation of philosophical systems support the use of reason, encourage argument and produce mature individuals. Introductory courses in the humanities in general and in philosophy in particular have their place within management programs (Joullié (2016); see also Joullié and Spillane (2015b) who argue that Drucker's work should be received as an ancient philosophy applied to management).

It is possible, as Chandler (1977) did (as well as Marx and Weber, in their own ways), to read organisational history as governed by an overriding principle. The present analysis is itself an interpretation of the history of management theory through the lens of an overall pattern. History, however, is an immense tapestry, composed of innumerable interwoven threads. While it is tempting to make any of these threads look like the dominating motif, doing so comes at the expense of losing the entire tapestry and its fabric from sight. Moreover, it remains an enduring Humean insight that from a finite set of data (particular events) an indeterminate number of internally consistent interpretations can be inferred, including incompatible ones (Lipton, 2004: 9ff). In other words, if the past helps understand the present, if experience is a guide, it is not in and of itself a failsafe basis for prescription because the future remains underdetermined.

In human affairs, no behaviour is necessary. If their environment is complex, human beings are even more so and their decisions contain irrational elements that make them unpredictable. Rather than looking for management theory, scholars can choose to contribute to management history, provided, for reasons just exposed, that they guard themselves from reading it as an merciless master but rather take it as a guide, that is, as a servant to human reason. Chandler (1977) made sense of the economy of his time by analysing the role of businesses in the century that preceded it. While managers should be cognisant of his conclusions, Chandler himself did not pretend to have identified universal principles before which they must unconditionally bow.

Organisational and management best practices must be created before they can be studied and replicated. Expressed differently, instead of searching for elusive behavioural

causal theories, scholars have the option to expose organisational reasons and contexts, those that led to executive choices. Taking into account objectives and constraints, these researchers will elucidate the consequences of these choices and identify those that proved beneficial to the concerned individuals, their organisations and the economy. This is, in broad terms, what Chandler did. Besides, explaining decisions of managers, their tenets and their glorious or inglorious outcomes reveals what alternatives there were, what other options were possible, what could be done and what should not done should similar circumstances present themselves. Defeats are sobering, successes are fleeting, possibilities are attractive; all are sources of learning. A fertile research agenda awaits.

Notes

1. Besides Owen and Taylor, one must mention Charles Babbage, Henry Gantt, Henri Fayol as well as Frank and Lillian Gilbreth (among a few others) as pioneers of management theory (Wren and Bedeian, 2009).

2. Embryonic in two ways. First, because postmodern management research is a continuation of Burrell & Morgan's radical humanist research, for reasons to be provided. Second, because the very idea of (allegedly) incommensurable research paradigms, which underpins Burrell & Morgan's work, is itself of postmodern origin, for reasons that will also become apparent.

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