

**BOOK REVIEW: *A NEW HISTORY OF MANAGEMENT*. BY STEPHEN
CUMMINGS, TODD BRIDGMAN, JOHN HASSARD AND MICHAEL
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GEMMA LORD

gemma.lord@manchester.ac.uk

UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER, UK

DEAN PIERIDES

d.c.pierides@stir.ac.uk

UNIVERSITY OF STIRLING, UK

Book Review: A New History of Management. By Stephen Cummings, Todd Bridgman, John Hassard and Michael Rowlinson. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 380 pages, paperback.

A New History of Management (ANHM) sets a renewed and higher standard for teaching the history of our field. It confronts commonly accepted textbook representations of the history of management with novel interpretations of ‘classical texts’, supported by new historical case materials, which together challenge many conventional narratives about management that would typically be taught in business schools. In the authors’ words, “without critical questioning, the little that we remember of our past becomes inevitable, both as the truth about our past and for our future horizons too” (p. 320). The authors of *ANHM* expect that readers who understand the socio-political contexts which led to the development of each of the ‘classics’, will be convinced to abandon the idea that management theory emerged solely as a response to, and in the quest for, efficiency. The major strength of *ANHM* is that it specifically unsettles the conceptual dominance of the concept of efficiency and instead, invites its readers into a history of management filled with other concepts for innovatively responding to contemporary concerns in business and management.

Many books pursue a single line of argument, but this book is rich with multiple resources. Each individual chapter makes a distinct contribution and differently reconfigures our understanding of management’s history. Chapter One identifies a ‘map’ in management history, uncovering how it limits “variability in business history research” (p. 18), and hampers innovation in management and business. Chapter Two revisits the context in which Adam

Smith's thought emerged, and highlights discrepancies between a simplified textbook representation of Smith, which locates him as the rationalist economic 'father' of management who brings his theory to a fledgling field, versus a promotor of progressive taxation, public education, choice, freedom and of opposition to slavery.

Using textbook extracts, Chapter Three demonstrates how Taylor and scientific management are used as a "key point of origin" (p. 87) for advancing the story that management is mainly concerned with efficiency. Chapter Four explores "what a more rounded Weberian view of human organization would mean for our understanding of management" (p. 118). Chapter Five sketches a conventional straight-line history of the Harvard Case Method (HCM) and then disrupts its prescriptive decision-making purpose by suggesting instead that the HCM was an "invented tradition" (p. 152), influenced by critical moments of industrialisation and mass production.

Standard textbook accounts of human relations theory see Mayo's contribution as either a discontinuity in management thought because it moves away from Taylorist, mechanistic scientific management, or they see it as an evolutionary advance which discovers that social relations motivate employees. With reference to historical data from the Western Electric Company, Chapter Six argues that both of these conventional narratives overlook important and distinctive contextual details. Chapter Seven considers Lewin's CATS, Maslow's HON, and McGregor's Theory X and Y. It demonstrates that "theories take on their modern form and develop into something different" (p. 230). These theories are therefore reinterpreted to fit with the problems framing the development of management textbooks. Chapter Eight challenges the received 'truth' that 'corporate culture' is important to management success, and the 'discovery' that a strong culture leads to greater business functioning, arguing instead that this

is an invented tradition, created and preserved by a network of elements (academics, corporations and consultancies) in search of legitimacy (p. 270-71).

Chapter Nine recaps the aims and approach of the book, stating its bold opposition to the commonly accepted reason for writing management history which “makes initiates feel good about management’s past, puts present advances in perspective, and helps us build upon these in order to continue the evolution” (p. 311). The chapter asks instead what an alternative history might be, not only in relation to organization but to how we might “measure our lives more generally” (p. 309). What might this look like if we revisit and reclaim original works? What if we read these within their context and without an evolutionary narrative? Finally, a short conclusion proposes an alternative management history course module, developed from the key findings and arguments within *ANHM*. This would principally focus upon: philosophical and ethical foundations for the field inspired by Adam Smith; endorsing the ‘original good’ of management in conservation/sustainability; following Weber in wariness of abstractions; recognising cultural specificity, including moving beyond Anglo-American perspectives, in organizational forms; and considering what might happen if business schools are formed in accordance with contemporary concerns.

About a year prior to the publication of this book, we started to develop a new course module that aimed to make good use of earlier publications by the authors of *ANHM* on teaching management historically (e.g. Cummings and Bridgman, 2011; 2016). In the absence of any textbook that would capture the spirit of this historical approach, we structured our module so that it introduced theories of organization within the social, political and historical context in which they emerged (e.g. using Hassard, 2012), whilst also encouraging students to connect these theories with contemporary management problems. Even more recently, we have

conducted research interviews with students who completed this module to better understand how they experienced a course that is taught in this manner. So far, we have found that students valued this approach: *“Rather than just facts, it expanded that... It talked about its relevance today, and that’s what enhanced my understanding”*. This was important to students because, as one of them said, *“I can learn about history, but if I don’t learn the lessons from [it] then it’s pointless”*.

We found that encouraging students to revisit primary texts is helpful because it disturbs watered-down textbook representations of them. For example, one student noted disparities between *‘The Principles of Scientific Management’* (Taylor, 1911) and the textbook summary of this: *“Reading the original content myself really helped a lot... You look at it differently after you’ve read the source material”*. Engaging with the wider issues framing the texts’ development, this student acknowledged its value for contemporary management concerns: *“The gist of it, what he was trying to do: trying to collaborate and share interests; those are things that make sense, he actually does care, and it would help the organization”*. This point is developed in *ANHM*; it would have significantly supported this student’s learning. By considering the contexts surrounding the emergence of these texts, students also envisaged wider concerns and thus departed from the idea that efficiency is the be-all and end-all of organizations. As a different student suggested: *“You need to have the context in order to fully appreciate the development in management and organization studies. It helps see the place of organization theory in a wider context: not just a business context but a social context; an economic context”*.

When asked how useful it might be to have a [text]book which revisited classic work and evidenced alternative interpretations, the students we interviewed were receptive. One said,

“That would be like ‘mind blown’. Tell me more”. They recognized this as a departure from the usual way business and management is taught: *“Instead of just hearing from gurus talking about today from today, being able to draw on other stuff, other proper credible people, I think that is an asset”*, and suggested a resource like this could support their reading of primary texts: *“[Students] might be interested to read further to see what was actually in the text. And because now they could see what potentially could be done from the original text. I would like that...I think it could help”*. Yet another student described the practical application of approaching the history of management in the manner that *ANHM* promotes, *“you can use both the past and present experiences, and contextualise them, and essentially use them both in decision-making... The combination of both of them is what you need to move forward”*. Ultimately, as one student surmised, *“Organizations can be different, and we can change them”*. However, as one interviewee cautions, potential pedagogical obstacles result from taking this atypical approach: *“For some [students] it would be difficult to get their heads around, because they are just looking for the right or wrong answer, because that’s what they’ve been conditioned to think”*. This emphasizes the need for a book that supports students in learning this material, in this manner.

ANHM is filled with resources for teaching, learning and writing about management. A wealth of empirical material, alongside explanations of how often-accepted potted histories are sustained, counters the usual narrative of evolutionary progression in management thought and provides a platform from which to interrogate these prevailing accounts. Chapters Six and Eight in particular, unsettle the evolutionary narrative which would otherwise recount the story of management as one of necessary and inevitable progress. For example, by charting its reputation and corporate philosophy, Chapter Six shows how Western Electric becomes a

champion of technical innovation and ‘progressive’ employee welfare approaches *before* Mayo ‘discovered’ these phenomena. An ethnographic history, recounting the tragedy of an annual excursion where employees died, illustrates how a story such as this one is preserved by the organization; further demonstrating the distinctiveness of this site and thus questioning the generalisability of the Hawthorne studies overall. The chapter therefore reveals how familiar narratives devoid of contextual issues can become reproducible. Thus, by demonstrating “just how mobile and subject to reinterpretation key theories in the history of management are” (p. 229), *ANHM* guides us in appraising whether management is fundamentally ‘good’ and raises important questions about contemporary capitalism. Its response – a framework for revisiting and critiquing the substantive history of management – offers us a means by which to conceptually replace efficiency with sustainability.

To achieve their stated aim of disrupting solidified historical assumptions and thinking innovatively about contemporary management concerns, the authors propose a fitting methodology: Foucauldian-inspired interpretive analytics and a “critical approach to memory” (p. 34). As opposed to the search for an objective or whole ‘truth’, this methodology aims to raise doubts about, and alternatives to, conventional truths of historical evolution and the smooth progression of ideas. For example, *ANHM* challenges the idea that Smith’s primary contribution lies in the division of labour, showing evidence for his concerns with collective and individual social liberty instead. Within this context, Smith is vindicated as an important contributor to our understanding of coercion and control within ideological frameworks of governance beyond sovereign rule, democracy and a problematization of liberty. Elsewhere, *ANHM* provides a detailed counter-history of the Cadbury chocolate company which disrupts much received wisdom about culture management. Focusing on the invention of tradition, the

authors show how the logic of shareholder value and performance management ends up being justifiable because of a failure to integrate management history effectively into the concept of corporate culture.

Furthermore, by recognising the role of epistemes in developing conventional truths, as well as the networks that maintain these, the methodology adopted in *ANHM* promotes an engaged connection with history. For example, Taylor's thinking and scientific management are shown to be both *causing* and being *caused by* the gospel of efficiency. By introducing the latter dynamic to our understanding of the birth of management studies, *ANHM* therefore allows us to also see management as a response to the concern of big business with conservation (or what we now call sustainability). The inception of management can thus be traced in public consciousness via notions of democracy, patriotism and a 'new language', driven by Taylor and others before him. Using a genealogical approach, the authors of *ANHM* also trace the networks of relations that sustain such truths, demonstrating that many accepted interpretations in management are too selective. When the most important contributions go missing, interpretations can end up questionably "retrofitted into a narrative of the evolution of organizational knowledge as a 'science'" (p. 261).

As we read through *ANHM* and became increasingly convinced that it sets a higher standard for teaching the history of management, some concerns did emerge in tandem. The book sets up a single methodology for the work in its entirety, but each chapter offers distinct contributions. This is a strength, yet some readers might misinterpret analytic differences between chapters as methodological inconsistencies across them. At times the book promotes discontinuities and offers an alternative or counter-narrative. At other times it is 'blurring things' to promote an opposition or multiple alternative histories. These differences are not

inconsistencies but grasping this subtlety can be trickier for students than it will be for researchers.

ANHM is an exceptionally good text for teaching the history of management to undergraduate, postgraduate and research students but it may best be used alongside supplementary reading. In Chapter Four for example, the authors show how Weber is often portrayed in textbooks as the father of organization science who regrettably ‘got it wrong’ by supporting bureaucracy and mechanistic efficiency. This ‘straw-man Weber’ is thus depicted as both a pioneer and a problem. Subsequently, the chapter reveals “the relationships and interests that sustain these interpretations” (p. 131), demonstrating that as the dominant epistemic commitments shift, so too does the caricatured textbook Weber. We wondered whether we found this convincing because we were already familiar with the detailed analysis in Cummings & Bridgman (2011), but more importantly we wondered whether someone arriving at this argument for the first time would be equally convinced in the absence of that detailed analysis.

We also felt somewhat uneasy inviting “a contest of ideas” and opposing any “agreed upon history” (pp. 311-12) given the potential danger of developing multiple claims of knowledge, forms of revisionism, or even pseudohistory, approximating or perhaps even permitting ‘post-truth’ tendencies under the moniker of remaking foundations. To be sure, questioning the present state of management whilst also probing these paradigm-shaking problems for the entire discipline of history is a tall order. Levelling critique at *ANHM* for not resolving problems which destabilised the entire field of history is therefore exceedingly unfair. And in final analysis, Chapter Eight does eventually serve to alleviate some of these concerns, prescribing instead what we ought to do and on what terms:

“having recognised management history’s invented and self-reinforcing and homogenizing nature, we should actively seek to reinvent it from the ground up, and to do so purposefully this time, with ethical sociability, mutual benefit, sustainability and innovation, rather than efficiency as our aims” (p. 308).

Conservation and sustainability ultimately appear as the alternative aims of management, maybe even new fundamental truths. This is a book that can influence audiences beyond the business school by way of its imperative to ‘bring history in’. Revisiting the ‘classics’ is not in itself revolutionary (Thornton, 2009:33), but by doing so *ANHM* exemplifies how this can be done, by providing “us not only with paradigms for rigorous engagement with big issues but also with powerful concepts for making sense of these kinds of issues” (Adler, 2009:7).

By interrogating the edict that “all history is contemporary history” (Croce, 1941:31), *ANHM* also cautions us against an approach to history from the perspective of the present. In opposition to this, the Foucauldian methodology its authors adopt, allows us to consider the context of classical ideas, the episteme creating and sustaining the conventional narratives, as well as returning us to the texts; and in doing so provides a specific history of alternatives, revisions and discontinuities. In this way, it invites management scholars to debate concerns that were previously considered to belong only to the discipline of history. Management scholarship which will follow in the footsteps of *ANHM* can now adopt a general consensus about the importance of context, also remaining suspicious of the counterfactual. At the same time, whether or not the book supports a Kuhnian search for a new paradigm of organizational research is a matter that remains to be seen. Either way, as Evans (2001:14) suggests, “arguments and theories, however dominant in the intellectual life of their day, have to be assessed on their own merits, not accepted uncritically just because they are espoused by a

majority.” In order to ensure these alternative aims are not also lost on future management learning and education, we need more accounts that are historically informed by *ANHM*, advancing and evaluating these aims alongside our teaching of management.

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