

Opinion Pieces

The management of business or the business of management?

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Business is a large and diffuse activity and growing larger with the expansion of the new market-state, in which virtually all former-state services are contracted out to be run as businesses – if not yet directly for profit, then in heightened competition for customers.

Consequently, nearly all of the academic and more or less technical and specialised disciplines developing the various professional areas of expertise for which further and higher (tertiary) education previously prepared its students are being turned into business activities. This has long been the case with some subjects – Architecture, for instance – but now students of Health or Engineering find that they too must not only practise their skills but also, competitively, sell them to clients, in order both to secure employment and to maximise customer satisfaction, so as to attract more business.

It is not surprising, therefore, that applying for Business is popular amongst school leavers seeking secure employment. It collects together various academic sub-disciplines to cover component areas of accounting, marketing, economics etc. in ‘skill sets’ that hopefully ‘bridge the skills gap’ to match available employment. These sub-disciplines collected together do not then have more than a vocational relevance, because they do not focus, as do traditional academic disciplines, on any one central practice and/or theoretical canon. For example, the discipline of Education collects its constituent elements of philosophy, psychology and sociology in relation to the art – or is it a science or craft? – of teaching/pedagogy.

However, management could possibly constitute itself as the general activity common to multifarious businesses, so that degrees in Management would indicate more than a higher (and usually even more expensive) level in the hierarchy of management, business and administration. This, however, raises the question of whether generic management exists – as distinct from ‘leadership’, for instance. If providing a service in the new market-state depends upon satisfying customers, so as to grow the business, does not the effective management of such businesses depend upon meeting this bottom line: whether the service provides better and cheaper proverbial widgets (or more fancy ones in a niche market), more tasty beans or more satisfied students than the competition?

In other words, a new profession – as suggested, for instance, by Richard and Daniel Susskind in their prediction of a post-professional society – in which, as they conclude:

‘in the end, the traditional professions will be dismantled, leaving most (but not all) professionals to be replaced by less expert people and high performing systems... new roles will arise but... these too, in due course, may be taken on by machines.’ (2015, 303)

Managers of organisations would then be validated and prepared by various levels of the academic discipline of Management, this constituting the unified and unifying discourse that

draws together the various elements of their art, craft or science – in the same way, as suggested above, that Education does.

It seems, however, that there is little demand for such degree level validation for a new management profession, although would-be managers pay through the nose for various MBAs. Again, this is because, like the businesses that managers manage, the activities are too diverse in themselves and all their various combinations. As a result, whilst managers, in whatever business they undertake, are typically pitted against workers to grow their business by growing the number of managers at the expense of an increasingly automated, outsourced and digitised workforce, they do not form a definite cadre – especially as managers themselves are subject to the same remorseless reduction to semi-professionalism that the Susskinds describe.

As a result, as the market-state morphs into what Wolfgang Streeck (2016, Chapter 4) calls a ‘Consolidation State’, run directly in the interests of capital investors rather than indirectly through the mediation of the market (let alone any democratic pretensions); the real generic managers are the politicians. They, and their top civil servants and other consultants, hold briefs for different departments of government – health, employment, transport etc. – that they interchange. At the end of their tenure in office, they interchange again, passing through the notorious revolving doors that usher them into corporate directorships, the management of investment funds or the boardrooms of banks.

Peculiarly, most of this administrative caste are prepared academically – insofar as they are prepared at all – by what Lloyd George (one of the few prime ministers who wasn’t so prepared) called ‘the Staff Colleges of the old Universities’ (Taylor, 1965: 70).

Paradoxically too, even at this level of governance in a Consolidation State, the functions of this managerial elite become reduced towards an algorithm, seeking only profit maximisation at the expense of culture, the environment and humanity’s future.

Reference list

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Taylor, A.J.P. (1965) *English History 1914-1945*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.