
Pragmatism: a key source for the renewal of organization and management studies

Philippe Lorino*¹

¹ESSEC Business School – ESSEC Business School – avenue Bernard Hirsch BP50105 95021 Cergy Pontoise, France

Abstract

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This paper will propose a survey of the main potential contributions of pragmatist thought to the renewal of management and organization research. It will be based on a draft book for Oxford University Press. It will illustrate those potential contributions with a historical example: the influence of pragmatist philosophy on the emergence of the "Total Quality" movement and the strong and invisible resistance of managerial mainstream culture, leading to the astonishing "hijacking" of the original ideas and their conversion to the contemporary "lean management", more or less the revival of good old Taylorism.

The context: a paradigmatic turn in organization and management studies

In the recent years, many streams of research in organization and management have criticized the traditional mainstream view of organizations as decision-making and information-processing structures, controlled through rational representations (substantive or procedural rationality). These critiques have adopted diverse points of view: the central role of practices ("practice-based studies") or of activity ("activity theory"), as opposed to the view of organizations as information-processors; the performativity of techniques and objects ("sociomateriality", "performativity", actor-network theory); communicational, discursive or narrative approaches to organizations (communicational approaches to organizations, narrative approaches); processual nature of organizations as organizing rather than as structures ("process perspective"); organizing as a continuous and collective sensemaking process.

In spite of their diversity and differences, all those streams of research share some key theoretical principles: their processual view of organizing as "becoming", and their critique of the static view of organizations as predefined structures; their emphasis on the key role of action, action meaning or action meaning-making; their interest in the agential power of artefacts and objects.

The potential contribution of pragmatist thought to the renewal of organization studies

Pragmatist thought can provide those new approaches to organizations with an important theoretical contribution: as a general intellectual orientation; as a basis to develop the critique of some major principles of organization research mainstream(s) and to propose

*Speaker

alternative views; as a conceptual toolbox.

- As a general attitude, Pragmatism ("pragmatism" here principally refers to the work of Peirce, James, Dewey and Mead) develops a radical critique of all the dualisms which plague organization studies: thought / action, design / utilization, decision / execution, reality / representation, individual / collective, micro / macro...

As a basis to develop critical views of some key issues in organization studies, in particular: The critique of the dichotomy between change and stability, involving the articulation between habit and inquiry. The critique of the "vertical" ontology distinguishing between micro-situations and social macro-structures or institutions, often linked with the concept of "sharedness" or commonality as a link between so-called micro and macro phenomena; here the pragmatist concepts of trans-action and conversational sociality lead to a dialogical view of sociality, excluding micro-macro dichotomy. The critique of the dominantly representational view of knowledge, thought and meaning, involving pragmatist semiotics, the theory of the semiotic mediation of action (shared with Vygotsky and Leont'v) and organizing as a semiosis process. The critique of the planning view of time, which hinders the deep and effective understanding of such key organizational issues as uncertainty, irreversibility and improvisation.

- As a conceptual toolbox, Pragmatism can contribute key and useful concepts for the study of organizations, many of them already mentioned as tools for the critical re-assessment of management mainstram(s): the semiotic mediation of collective activity, habit, abduction, inquiry and community of inquiry, trans-action, conversation of gestures and dialogism, valuation, experience as a flow.

A historical illustration: from the pragmatism-inspired quality movement to the Taylorian-Cartesian "lean management", the story of a surprising intellectual "hijacking"

There has been an extraordinary reversal of the practical meaning of "lean management": what is today meant by "lean" is often the opposite of what pioneers taught in the 50s to 70s.

It was originally an anti-Taylorian and process-oriented approach, promoted by experts who were, directly or indirectly, the disciples of pragmatist philosophers, in particular Clarence Lewis and John Dewey. Ideas (in particular the concept of inquiry) migrated from Peirce and Dewey to the philosopher Clarence Lewis, within the academic world. Then they migrated from Lewis to the consulting and managerial world of Walter Shewhart - the father of statistical process control (SPC) at Bell Telephone Laboratories in the 1920s, a passionate reader of Lewis. Shewhart designed his approach to quality management as

1/ future-oriented, exploratory inquiry as opposed to standard- and variance-based control,

2/ involving field employees as the key actors of the inquiry, because experience is not substitutable and actors are the only experts of activity.

Then Deming generalized the SPC practice into the wide concept of Total Quality Management (TQM), viewed as a complete anti-Taylorian managerial philosophy, based on the operationalization of the pragmatist inquiry into what Deming called the "PDSA loop" (Plan-Do-Study-Act, an on-going exploration of collective activity: Plan = Make a hypothesis; Do = experiment; Study = evaluate and analyze the results of the experiment; Act = change the hypothesis or transform operational habits).

Those ideas migrated from Deming to Ohno, the father of the Toyota Production System, and more generally to the world of Japanese managers. In this migration towards the managerial world, some distortions could be observed, in particular the substitution of the "PDSA" loop with the "PDCA" (Plan-Do-Check-Act) loop, a small change of one letter, which represented a kind of counter-revolution against which Deming fought till his death (the replacement of

S for "study" as "inquiring" with C for "check" as controlling the conformance of actual performance to standards). Actually the move from "PDSA" to "PDCA" is a key moment in the general appropriation of the initial inquiring philosophy and it twisting into a traditional Taylorian controlling approach.

It later migrated from Toyota back to the academic world, with the MIT five-year study of the future of the automotive industry, titled "The Machine That Changed the World" (Womack, Ross & Jones). The MIT researchers formalized the Toyota Production System into the principles of "lean management", in which key pragmatist ideas could still be found, but with major ambiguities. The nowadays success of the label often goes hand in hand with the planning ("push") approaches, the strict variance-based controls, the "best practice" reification, and the individualization of evaluation that Deming and Ohno had altogether rejected.

The analysis of this historical case will allow the identification of some of the basic and deep contradictions between pragmatism and the managerial mainstreams and, as a conclusion, the revolutionary power of pragmatism in management theory and practice.

Keywords: organization studies, management, dualism, inquiry, habit, transaction, semiosis