



A history of project management models: From pre-models to the standard models ☆, ☆ ☆

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Abstract

The basis of project management theory includes, as is the case of many management theories an “articulated collection of best practices”, drawn for the most part from the study of major North American engineering projects. There is no history of project management comparable to the ones that have been produced for marketing, accounting or strategic analysis. Very few historians have studied projects as a specific activity and academics in project management are rarely specialists with archives or have familiarity with historical reasoning. Defining the historic trajectory of project management implies specifying the scope of what this history includes beforehand. To write a history of project management we must specify the object of this “historicization”. What are we dealing with when we talk about “history of project management”? A first objective of this paper is to define object and scope of this history. The author suggests a difference between “managerial practices” and “management models” and recommends writing a history of models rather than a history of singular practices. A second objective is to sketch the transition between pre-models of project to the standard North American model.

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1. Introduction

Project management has been in vogue since the end of the 1980s, even though it is not, by any means, a simple trend. Interest in the various means of steering human activities has not declined over time in the media, as well as managerial and academic circles. We can observe the development of project management in the service sector, mass production industries or public companies. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (1999, p. 154) have gone as far as to suggest that the “projective city” is an integral part of modern capitalist ideology.

This article examines the projects conducted by people within organizations. Project management raises the dual issue of envisaging a future undertaking and the act of making it happen. Mastery of the unique and sometimes highly complex

processes that constitute a project implies the implementation of specific management techniques (Turner, 2007).

Research on project management has developed a great deal since the mid-1990s. The notion has earned a place in management sciences as an organizational mode and more generally as a system of anticipating and rationalizing temporary collective initiatives, or even as the foundation of a new theorization of the firm (Söderlund, 2004). While there is a global conception of the phenomenon (Boutinet, 2005), there is no unified theory of project management. According to Mats Engwall (1998), the basis of project management theory includes, as is the case of many management theories, first of all, an “articulated collection of best practices”, drawn for the most part from the study of major North American engineering projects. Project management has been hard to integrate in traditional management disciplines, even if it has become more widespread since the turn of the 21st century. In the business world as well, project mode is rarely institutionalized, at least at the corporate level, compared to finance, accounting, marketing or strategy. The functions of project leaders are only temporary and individuals are, over the long term, identified and defined professionally by their business skills rather than their project experience.

☆ This article is dedicated to Professor Christian Navarre (†) whose brilliant contributions in the field of project management will live on forever.

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Finally, project management is a generalized practice in contemporary capitalism and a legitimate field of research, even if it is still nascent (Blomquist et al., 2010). Project management is not a “crossroads discipline”, which would mean diluting its content and making it a “receptacle” or depository of what is produced elsewhere, in other academic disciplines. Project management exists in and for itself, with its own corpus of knowledge, concepts, organizations, methodologies and lines of thinking. The status of project management as a “theory” continues to compete for recognition against its “professional” dimension. This tension is commonplace in disciplines rooted in practices, especially when they are new.

What are the main stages in the evolution of project management models and the determinants of their differences? Ordinarily, any historical approach is exciting because, in the social sciences, history is part of the laboratory. While converging contributions have emerged in the past five years and have helped structure the field of project management history (Scranton, 2008), this part of the laboratory is rarely explored in the case of project management. There is no history of project management comparable to the ones that have been produced for marketing, accounting or strategic analysis. Very few historians have studied projects as a specific activity (Scranton, 2008) and academics in project management are rarely specialists with archives or have familiarity with historical reasoning. As for specialists in project management, generally focused on the study of practices in real time, they rarely consider history or often only concede to a quick overview in the introductions of their work (Engwall, 2003). However, the intersection between the terms “project” and “history” is not an empty space. Whether the contributors are historians or researchers in management, we can find:

- *case studies* generally presenting projects that are emblematic in their scope and success or failure, whether they concern events, works or new products (ex. Sapolsky, 1972 on Polaris project; Latour, 1996 on Aramis project; Lenfle and Loch, 2010 on Manhattan Project or Garel and Mock, 2012 on Swatch project).
- *Analyses of a sector* or particular firm. For example, projects in aeronautics (Whittle, 2004 and Scranton, 2006 on jet industry) and railways (Caron, 2005) or development of project management in the automobile industry have been extensively studied (Midler, 1993).
- “Typologico-historic” *markers*. For example Christophe Midler (1996) identifies four project management models (the entrepreneurial model, the engineering model, the Taylorist model and the concurrent engineering model) that have more or less succeeded each other over time. Note however that the emergence of one model does not necessarily correspond to the disappearance of another. This study defines the typical ideals of project management through organizational and economic characteristics, and situates them within specific timeframes and challenges. On the other hand, Christian Navarre (1989, 1993) has graded the modern history of project management according to two degrees: “degree zero” that, at the start of the 20th century, rendered project management autonomous and “degree one”

that, during the second half of the 20th century, rationalized and defined a standard model for it. Many project management handbooks present a “historical section”, from past to present, sometimes with some anachronisms (Kozak-Holland, 2011).

Defining the historic trajectory of project management implies specifying the scope of what this history includes beforehand. To write a history of project management we must specify the object of this “historicization”. What are we dealing with when we talk about “history of project management”? A first objective of this paper is to define object and scope of this history. We suggest a difference between “managerial practices” and “management models” and recommend writing a history of models rather than a history of singular practices. A second objective is to sketch the transition between pre-models of project to the standard North American model. This article primarily uses literature from project management journals and also the founder work of Jean-Pierre Boutinet and Christian Navarre.

The first part introduces this difference between “managerial practices” and “management models” and reviews the premises of project management models. In the second part, project management is rationalized and then standardized, until a common model is defined, i.e. the one used in North American engineering.

2. The history of project management between “managerial practices” and “management models”

A North American research stream (or team) has examined the history of managerial thinking in much the same way as the history of economic thought or political ideas (George, 1972; Wren, 1994). This history does not deal with project management directly, but its subject, the evolution of managerial theories, making the distinction between “managerial practices” and “management models”. The first sub-part defines the concept of “management model” while the second one describes pre-models of project management (in Europe and in France) when projects were conducted but not completely institutionalized.

2.1. Management model

Generally speaking, the study of managerial practices without any analysis or historical context, without any debate, without any discussion or hypotheses, has never constituted a line of managerial thinking. Managerial thinking only emerged when practitioners such as Taylor and Fayol, at the start of the 20th century, introduced, or coined from their own experiences, new organizational theories. That is to say, when they produced sufficiently general and recurring discourse to move beyond the context and the case that gave rise to them in the first place and disseminate them more widely. What differentiates project management practices from the assertion of a line of thinking that is autonomous, specific and specified, fully formed, identified and widespread? In other words, where is the cleavage between former project management practices and the emergence of more recent models? Four criteria can be put forward.

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