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Deconstructing the future of management: Pharmakon, Gary Hamel and the impossibility of invention



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ABSTRACT

There has been a growing tendency to argue that the practice of management must be reinvented in the future in order to energize the creative potential of employees. However, the discourse on 'management innovation' attributes a curious dual function to the concept of management. On the one hand, management is portrayed as the 'toxin' that can impede innovation. But on the other hand, management is portrayed the 'cure' that will heal the defects that prevents innovation. Informed by Derrida's reflection upon the dual meaning of pharmakon, a word that means both 'remedy' and 'poison', the paper engages with Hamel's popular management handbook *The Future of Management*. Although Hamel attempts to establish a clear-cut distinction between those principles of management that obstruct and those that facilitate innovation, one is ultimately left uncertain whether management is a cure or a poison for innovation. This ambivalence points to an underlying paradox of contemporary post-managerial thinking that is characterized by incorporating transgression into its productive logic.

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1. Introduction

There is a wide-spread assumption in popular management literature that innovation is indispensable for a company to thrive in the turbulent and hypercompetitive global economy and will prove to be even more essential in the future of capitalism (Thrift, 2000). As a means of achieving innovation, popular handbooks written by management gurus offer tools, lessons and prescriptions that they claim will turn the organization into a creative cluster. The success of management gurus is often explained with reference to their ability to fulfil 'the need for managers to find relatively quick and simple solutions to their organizations' complex problems' (Jackson, 1996: 572). Indeed, management gurus have been compared to 'witchdoctors' due to their promises to cure the ailments of organizations (Clark & Salaman, 1996). However, critics have charged that the writings of management gurus are full of 'clichés' (Harney, 2005), 'kitsch' (Linstead, 2002) and 'catchphrases' (Jackson, 2001). But even if this is true, we should not forget that management gurus have significant influence on management practices (Clark & Salaman, 1998; Huczynski, 1993; Jackson, 2001). Therefore, Costea, Crump, and Amiridis (2008), Thrift (2000) and Parker (2002) have called for serious engagement with guru literature, reading popular management handbooks as a symptom of the development of capitalism.

With the intention of undertaking a serious engagement with contemporary guru literature, this paper diagnoses but also challenges the prevalent assumption in popular management handbooks that it is possible to produce a manual for

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reinventing management. To do so, this paper addresses the problem of reinventing management by offering a deconstructive reading of Hamel's (2007) popular management handbook *The Future of Management*. Confronted with the task of organizing innovation, Hamel follows the tradition of management gurus who have called for a reinvention of the practice of management in order mobilize and energize the creative potential of the employees (McDonald, 2011). Since the 1980s, Peters has called for a 'management revolution' (1988) and Hamel (2002) has likewise encouraged future managers to become 'corporate rebels' and take charge of 'leading the revolution' (Sheard, 2007). Marked by their strong scepticism towards bureaucracy (du Gay, 2000) and scientific management (Parker, 2002), these gurus propose that future managers should strive to evoke employees' imaginative and creative abilities in the search for innovation (Thrift, 2000). Rather than taking a rational approach to productivity, future managers must, in the words of Costea, Crump, and Amiridis, enter into a 'Dionysian mode, a spirit of playful transgression and destruction of boundaries' (2005: 141).

Unlike previous readings of popular management literature, I will focus neither on the rhetorical style (Jackson, 1996) nor on how the ideas of management gurus are adopted in practice (Huczynski, 1993). Instead, to borrow the words of Derrida (1981: 6), I will 'operate within the immanence' of Hamel's management thinking. This means that I will not criticize Hamel on the basis of what he excludes, ignores or overlooks. Quite the opposite, I will, once again following Derrida (1989: 99), inquire into the 'internal logic' of the 'discourse' that Hamel (2007) represents. Informed by Derrida's (1981) reflection on the dual meaning of the term *pharmakon*, a word that means both 'remedy' and 'poison', I will show how Hamel's attempt to reinvent the practice of management confronts a fundamental *aporia* in the sense of a 'self-engendered paradox' (Norris, 2002: 49). While Hamel wants to revolutionize the practice of management, the cure that he prescribes simultaneously takes on the character of what he identifies as a poison. Even in his attempt to differentiate those principles of management that will spark innovation from those that will impede employee's creative potential, Hamel paradoxically reproduces the very managerial logic that he opposes. As a result, the concept of management ultimately ends up in a state of *aporia*, a place where it is unclear when management is a poison for innovation and when it is a cure against the organizational structures that traditionally has obstructed innovation.

In this respect, the concept of the *pharmakon*, as developed by Derrida (1981) in his reading of Plato, is informative for engaging with Hamel's account of the future of management, because it captures the paradoxical logic inherent in his conception of management innovation. Although Hamel is only a particular instance of what has been presented as a wider cultural development in post-bureaucratic management thinking (Maravelias, 2003), the discussion of Hamel has implications for the overall project of reinventing the practice of management. Thus, I will argue that the reading of Hamel (2007) discloses a paradox underlying what Costea, Crump, and Amiridis (2008: 663, 2005: 148) have identified as the prevailing model of transgression in contemporary post-bureaucratic management thinking. Hamel's concept of management innovation strives to capture the process of reinventing management in the future of capitalism. However, in order for an invention to be genuinely novel and unique, it has to transgress management conventions of the present. Yet, the concept of management innovation ironically reduces the process of inventing novel management practices to a structured sequential procedure. In this way, the concept of management innovation operates as a foreclosing structure that arrests, confines and standardizes the production of novelty. In effect, the paper concludes that the conceptual structure of management innovation must necessarily be transgressed in order to release novelty.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, I will review Derrida's reflection on the dual meaning of term *pharmakon* in Plato's philosophy, as signifying both 'remedy' and 'poison'. Second, I will engage with the writings of Hamel, who has recently called for managers to fundamentally alter their own practice. While Plato is concerned with the nature of writing and Hamel is concerned with the nature of management, I will show how the concept of *pharmakon* can be instructive for understanding the paradoxical logic inherent in Hamel's account of management innovation. Just as Plato's philosophy leaves it ambiguous when writing is a poison and when it is a cure, so too it is indeterminate when management is a 'toxin' and when it is a 'cure' against the organizational structures that traditionally has obstructed innovation. Finally, I link the deconstructive reading of Hamel with what has been identified as a broader development in managerial discourse over the past decades.

2. Derrida in management and organization studies

Within the field of management and organization studies, Derrida is known for having developed deconstruction. Deconstruction has been used to analyse a range of organizational phenomena, including organization/disorganization (Cooper, 1986), Total Quality Management (Xu, 1999), business ethics (Jones, 2003a) and accounting (McKernan & Kosmala, 2007). Deconstruction is often described as a critical method (Hassard, 1994) that intends to expose indeterminacy between the binary logical oppositions (Boje, 1995; Cooper & Burrell, 1988; Feldman, 1998). As Derrida-inspired scholars have argued, management and organization studies is riddled with loaded binary oppositions, such as organization/disorganization (Cooper, 1986), wisdom/foolishness (Izak, 2013), agency/structure (Knights, 1997), West/East (Frenkel & Shenhav, 2006), masculine/feminine (Martin, 1990), opportunity/threat (Calori, 1998), decision/action (Chia, 1994) and centralization/decentralization (Cummings, 1995). Echoing Derrida, critical scholars have showed how the binary logical oppositions dominating management and organization studies are inherently ambiguous and indeterminate.

Jones (2003b) warns against reducing deconstruction to an analytic method because such reductive thinking fails to take into account the specific context in which Derrida develops his philosophy. Along similar lines, Kilduff maintains that deconstruction 'cannot be summarized as a mechanical series of operations to be applied to any piece of language' (1993: 16). In order to avoid this mistake, I will not conceptualize deconstruction as a universal method. On the contrary, I will

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