The Lock-In of Management Studies

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Abstract

This paper proposes a systemic narrative that contributes to understanding the current state of management studies. It argues that a lock-in situation is occurring due to the convergent impact of cognitive, functional, and political constraints. Cognitive lock-ins originate from a dominant epistemology. Functional lock-ins relate to the oligopolistic structure of the industry. Political lock-ins derive from the cooperative behavior of power structures. The paper suggests that a lock-in situation is inherently resilient, but signs of a possible change are increasingly visible.

Keywords: Management Studies, Management Journals, Positivism, Pragmatism, Business Schools, Publishing Industry, Journal Ranking, University Ranking

1. A Resilient System

Looking at the present state of management studies, many aspects are critically debated, such as the role of journals, peer review processes, the use of journal rankings in research evaluation, the partial achievements of open access, etc. (Tourish, 2019). For many, these elements are just facets of a more general trend towards managerial corporatization and "performatization" of contemporary universities (Humphrey & Gendron, 2015).

However, criticisms do not seem to gain momentum and induce a process of transformation beyond the status quo. A vast majority of professional scholars, while agreeing on the existence of very serious flaws in the system, comply with the imperatives of letting things go. Individual dissent never grows into collective resistance or revolt.

In our management science community, like other academic communities, one can detect different attitudes. In some cases, there is a passive acceptance of the established normality and of the rules imposed by our institutions. In other cases, complicity is more active, being instrumental in the progression of individual careers and to the reputation of the institutions. The lack of alternatives is often mentioned as a justification. Therefore, these scholars feel that they cannot help but engage in the "publishing game". They regularly post on social networks and personal websites

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their H-indexes, publications in top-ranking journals, citation scores, etc. and implement individual and collective strategies that imply the de facto acceptance of the assumptions and implications of the game. Finally, there are scholars who comply with the system on an ethical basis, because they share the rationale and welcome the moralizing effects of a university transformation disciplined by a "new public management" vision (Kalfa et al., 2018; Pianezzi et al., 2020; van Houtum & van Uden, 2022).

Yet, a divided but complying community does not fully explain the remarkable resilience of the present situation. In this paper we propose a different perspective, based on a systemic narrative that looks not so much at the behavior of individual actors but at the interrelatedness of factors that may explain such a resilience.

To this aim, we will borrow the conceptual framework of the "economics of Qwerty". As discussed by Paul David in the seminal essay (David, 1985), technical interrelatedness, economies of scale, and quasi-irreversibility of investments may produce severe path dependence and create the lock-in of a patently wrong system.

A lock-in situation may occur also for communities and networks, because the interaction of cognitive, functional, and political constraints may prevent the evolution out of the established socioeconomic paradigm (Grabher, 1993). Is this happening in management research? To discuss this question, we will outline and discuss:

- cognitive lock-ins, originating from the dominance of a vision that ignores dissonant phenomena;
- functional lock-ins, deriving from the long-term stability and predictability of the established connections among different actors;
- political lock-ins, deriving from the cooperative relations with the power structures of public institutions (Grabher, 1993).

2. The Cognitive Lock-In

2.1 Positivist vs. Pragmatist Perspectives

Perhaps more than for other communities, management studies see in the enduring gap between academia and practice an existential issue. "Only a very small fraction of business books that presumably influence management are actually written by academics …[whereas] less than one third of the tools and ideas that companies are paying money to implement came out of academia and those that originated in universities were used less often and were abandoned more often" (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002, p. 86).

Making a difference in the real world is certainly not a new challenge for social scientists. Already in 1845 Karl Marx had warned, in his famous 11th thesis on Feuerbach, that "philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it". Management science has always witnessed a similar challenge. Introducing a scientific approach was key in legitimizing the discipline in academia,

but, as the constraints of academic rigor became increasingly stringent, the trade-off with practical relevance has turned out to be increasingly problematic. Below the surface, there has been constant contamination of theory and practice, but this has concerned established and often outdated theories, providing one more example of the slavery of practitioners defined by Keynes (Ghoshal, 2005).

In recent times, what is at stake is not only the ability of researchers to provide managers with pertinent prescriptions, but even their ability to interpret major trends in the business world. In 2019 it was noticed that "none of the major journals issued by the Academy of Management [had] published a substantive paper dealing with the Great Recession of 2008" (Tourish, 2019). And how can management science be expected to give now any insights on the impact of artificial intelligence when ChatGPT reaches the threshold of 100 million monthly active users just two months after launch[1], while publication processes for main journals last normally over 12 months?

The roots of this problem go deep in our scientific tradition. They originate in the perception of theoretical development and practice as inherently different activities, where theory may influence practice, but is not required and expected to do so. When this happens, this is thanks to a mediating discourse between theory and practice. In any way, researchers are warned to be aware and careful of the constraining effect on theoretical work that derives from meddling with practice (Gustavsen, 2001).

The feeling of a progressive estrangement between the ivory tower and the outside world is clearly perceived by many scholars in our field and is triggering several commendable initiatives (such as action research projects, joint university-industry labs, etc.). These try to go beyond the mere exchange of information between managers and researchers and to achieve some kind of knowledge co-creation. However, the prevailing scenario is one of persistent divergence between the quality of scientific work and the relevance for business practice. Consulting businesses, their associations and public authorities are separated from research or considered a mere and inferior by-product that must be appropriately communicated and packaged for the use of the layman, often by trivializing scientific methods with the provision of anecdotical descriptions of good practices. Nowadays these activities may be valued as part of the universities' public engagement, sometimes termed as their "third mission", together with other types of scientific dissemination and public engagement. They are considered as a possible source of inspiration and motivation for the research process, but not as one of its constituent stages.

Therefore, it is important to look carefully into the philosophical and epistemological foundations of our discipline, as it is currently practiced in academia and in business schools. Management research has consistently shared a positivist approach, pursuing the myth of a value-free science in search of the objective truth, and has "replaced all notions of human intentionality with a firm belief in causal determinism for explaining all aspects of corporate performance" (Ghoshal, 2005).

This has had several important implications. Methodologically, dealing with management as a "science of objects" rather than as a "science of subjects" (Clegg & Ross-Smith, 2003) has induced systematic attempts to distance itself from the humanities by mimicking hard sciences and experimental methods. Good evidence

of this is the obsessive use of structural equation modeling to provide supposedly robust evidence of causality, often overlooking the conceptual limitations of this approach (Bollen & Pearl, 2013; Davcik, 2014) .

Another implication is reductionism. The unwillingness and inability to think in systemic ways has reduced the awareness of the contextual (social, political, and cultural) dimensions of business management in the contemporary world. E.g., it is especially frustrating to read the mechanical translation of supposed casual relations into "policy implications". Most of the times, these have neither analytical nor prescriptive value because they are clearly unable to grasp the implication of business issues with power and history and the complexity, pluralism, and unpredictability of policy making (Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003; Kickert et al., 1997).

At the same time, by separating facts and values, one suggests a fake neutrality, "surreptitiously encapsulating certain ethical values and assertions"(Harris & Freeman, 2008), and one (conveniently?) overlooks the "inherent responsibility" of business scholars in shaping the relations between businesses and society (Gonin, 2007).

An alternative epistemology is possible. One possibility could be provided by integrating the insights of American pragmatism, as it was suggested with specific reference to organizational studies (Wicks & Freeman, 1998) and as it is also practiced in action research (Greenwood & Levin, 2007). Within a pragmatist perspective, management scholars are invited to reconnect to practice, as thinking originates from our need to confront ourselves with a practical problem (Dewey, 1997) and must result in a practical solution. Thus facts, values, and theory are always entangled and mixed up in an integrated narrative. The alleged objectivity of positivist science is unmasked, and, as discussed in the next paragraph, wider implications become evident with regard to the way knowledge can be produced in management research.

2.2 Inclusivity

To any science, and especially to social sciences, inclusivity is, first of all, an ethical imperative: "no one mode, and no single discipline, has a monopoly on insight" (Freeman & Newkirk, 2023).

Inclusivity means preventing any limitation to research questions and to the theories and methods that can be implemented to answer those questions. Inclusivity means that the diversity of practices is reflected by a diversity of products, also to allow for earlier and more timely sharing of the results. Inclusivity means transdisciplinarity. Inclusivity means appreciating that there is a variety of researchers' profiles and missions, based on individual skills and dispositions, as well as on gender and cultural factors.

The last point deserves special attention. Contemporary management science has a built-in bias favoring high-resource groups and countries, marginalizing non-English speaking countries and/or poorer ones and/or those whose scientific elites are not sufficiently integrated in the Anglo-American ones. The result is "the irrelevance of the local", which has proven to be increasingly disturbing to emerging science

powers, such as China (Qian et al., 2020). Theories and cases that are rooted indigenously and not (yet) recognized and legitimized by some globalized conceptual frameworks are easily disregarded.

Thus, the pressure to be "fast global" or even "born global" is a must for the positive appreciation of scientific work, even within national contexts. Globalization is not there to provide a transnational knowledge base for local communities to connect to global networks. Rather, *à la* Levitt (Levitt, 1983), the globalized management science intends to satisfy a supposedly homogeneous (and US-centric) global consumption of the scientific work. This, "along with the recruiting of faculty in a global labor market, has contributed to the production of some degree of theoretical isomorphism" (Pfeffer, 2007).

However, inclusivity is not just a matter of ethics. As we enter the era of artificial intelligence, a large share of the scientific work will be (and already is) easily and effectively entrusted to it. The stronghold still in control of "natural intelligence" will require superior creativity and imagination. However, creativity requires that we accept a certain degree of "theoretical anarchism" and even explicit breaking of methodological rules as a necessary condition for the growth of knowledge (Feyerabend, 1975).

Are we really supportive of creativity? Quite the opposite. If one looks at scientific journals and conferences, we seem to be moving in the direction of a systematic standardization of research methods, shaped around the positivist lines. Diversity and inclusivity are, in fact, a threat to the economies of scale that journal editors, referees, conference organizers, and even academic recruiters need to achieve (and increasingly so, due to the quantitative growth of scientific products) in the validation of scientific production.

An additional implication is the explicit exclusion from the scientific discourse of contributions coming from the world of practitioners. This is reflected in attitudes that seem to assume an inherent superiority of the values of researchers over the values of practitioners, mainly due to the "fetish of theorizing" (Hambrick, 2007; Tourish, 2019).

Of course, differences cannot and must not be denied, and, as researchers, we must contribute to the advancement of the society and of the economy in our own way, e.g. by pursuing evidence-based assessments rather than anecdotical opinions, based on ideological assumptions or fuzzy stereotypes. Yet scholars seem reluctant to recognize that other forms of knowledge generation and types are possible and should be taken seriously, drawing on them also for scientific purposes. These include tacit knowledge *à la* Polanyi (Polanyi, 1966), relational knowledge (i.e. knowing of people rather than facts or theories, as a foundation of selective openness to outside sources of knowledge) and reflective knowledge, as in Karl Popper's "Oedipus effect" and in the Thomas theorem ("If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences") (Park, 2001).

Eventually, the separation of scholars from laymen is made visible by the adoption of a specific style in the development and communication of arguments. This style is characterized by the conscious use of abstract concepts, obscure language, and complex phrasing, which conveys the lack of interest in shaping public discourse,

while an absolute priority is placed on the positioning of the work within disciplines and subdisciplines. Creativity and variety in writing styles are forbidden and every paper must "follow the same template – introduction, methods, findings, discussion, implications, limitations and yawn"(Tourish, 2019, p. 245). Conferences and journals often require that authors structure their submissions accordingly by filling in a kind of form that will make it easier and hopefully speed up the review of the referees.

3. The Functional Lock-In: An Irreversible Oligopoly?

Scientific journals are the pillar of contemporary science production in management. Due to the marginalization of other research products, namely books and chapters in edited books, and to the process of digitalization, journal articles represent "the" scientific products that eventually matter in defining and certifying the reputation of a researcher in management.

The relative positioning of journals, measured by their impact factor and certified by journal rankings such as the one issued by the Chartered Association of Business Schools (ABS), contributes to the reputation of authors and plays a fundamental role in their prospective careers and/or in their actual salary, either by allowing them to be hired by more prestigious or more ambitious business schools or by linking bonuses and prizes to successful submissions. This marks a sharp contrast with the evidence that, even in the recent past, innovative contributions to theory were first published (unsurprisingly) as books, book chapters, and articles in "minor" journals (Pfeffer, 2007).

The equation between the quality of a paper and the quality of the journal where it is published is a major factor in providing substantial advantages of incumbency and restricting the possibility of new journals to emerge: "It is a perfect catch-22. A journal can only become highly ranked if it publishes excellent work, but it can only publish excellent work if it is highly ranked" (Tourish, 2019, p. 44).

But the management of established journals is also not without problems. In a scenario characterized by exponential quantitative growth of article submission and publication, the workload has grown accordingly. This "strain on scientific publishing" (Hanson et al., 2024) appears increasingly unsustainable. The perception that we have reached a point where there are "too many" articles with an overall declining quality is shared by many (Heesen & Bright, 2021; McKercher & Dolnicar, 2022): "the unpalatable truth is that there are too many journals publishing too much research, most of which is barely read and very often has no impact whatsoever" (Kai & Thomas, 2020).

"Top journals" base their own reputation on the strict implementation of double-blind refereeing in peer review processes (as well as their relatively low rate of acceptance), but the increase in the number of submissions translates into organizational difficulty in providing qualitatively adequate peer reviews. While, ideally, peer review should realize a dialectic, two-way learning process, it actually establishes an asymmetrical relationship, where the reviewer gets from the editors an

unchecked power to dismiss knowledge and methods that are not liked or are unfamiliar (Lanier, 2021).

In fact, the present practice of refereeing increasingly shows flaws and downsizes that outweigh the original benefits of the system. Such practice does not prevent the publication of mediocre and simply mistaken papers and severely contains diversity and interdisciplinarity (Rafols et al., 2012): "Authors may feel that they have ended up writing what they don't want to write solely in order to satisfy reviewers, secure publication and build their careers" (Tourish, 2019). From different disciplinary perspectives, radical suggestions are emerging, such as the move to open refereeing or the substitution of pre-publication with post-publication peer reviews (Heesen & Bright, 2021; Özler, 2018).

The management of this system is in the hands of an oligopoly on a global scale, which has been rapidly consolidated since the second half of the 1990s. As for social science disciplines, while the top five publishers accounted for 15 percent of scientific articles in 1995, this figure reached 66 percent in 2013 (Larivière et al., 2015; Nishikawa-Pacher, 2022). Thanks also to appropriate marketing strategies, such as the bundling of journals (Phelps, 2022), these companies enjoy exceptionally high profit margins (Aspesi et al., 2019). Furthermore, these companies have developed vertical integration strategies aimed at acquiring and developing academic services, mostly based on data collection and analysis, that cover all stages of the publication process: the research process, the publication process, and, most importantly, the research evaluation process (Chen et al., 2019; Neff, 2020).

Faced with two major challenges, the oligopolistic structure of the scientific publishing industry has proven to be remarkably resilient. The first comes from the growing support for the idea of open access to the results of scientific research. Oligopolists have brilliantly overcome the problem so far by providing two "compromise" solutions. On the one hand, their journals opened to the "gold open access" option through a publication fee, labeled as article processing charge (APC), paid by the author or his/her institution or the research funder. On the other hand, they reached agreements with the national authorities, the so-called "transformative agreements", in order to subsidize publication under open access (Borrego et al., 2021; Capaccioni, 2021).

It is fair to say that these profit margins are the result of speculation, on the one hand, on the unpaid work of researchers, editors, and referees of journals and, on the other, on the public budgets which financed to a very large part the research being published and now pays also for its publication. Furthermore, APCs have a strong discriminatory effect on those who do not have, for a variety of reasons, the necessary financial resources (Butler et al., 2023; Shu & Larivière, 2024).

The second challenge comes from the competition both of new publishers (that have been eventually reabsorbed) and, above all, of the so-called "predatory" journals. These are a loosely defined category including journals that have the formal characters and appearance of traditional academic ones, require publication fees, and assure fast publication of submitted papers through questionable review processes. In fact, these journals provide an apparent, but deceptive option to especially young researchers from countries with "first-generation" policies on research evaluation

that emphasize the quantity of publications along the imperative of "publish or perish" (Cobey et al., 2018; Marina & Sterligov, 2021).

What is especially significant is the emergence of the Swiss-based publisher known as MDPI, an acronym for "Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute". MDPI implements a strategy of "aggressive rent extraction", as it "is sitting on a large rent - it controls access to something that is in demand and for which it faces little competition" (Crosetto, 2021). MDPI has become the leading open-access publisher and presents features of both traditional journals (a good, although very fast reviewing process, professional editing, good papers, some good journals), and of predatory publishers (spamming, massive production of special issues), resulting in impressive performance, also in terms of impact factor.

One may question the average quality of the astonishing number of articles and problematic features (like the relatively higher rate of self-citations), and yet the ability of this publisher to innovate in the professional management of the publication process and to increase inclusivity, especially for authors from less developed countries, should be appreciated (Crosetto, 2021; Oviedo-Garca, 2021). In this respect, the strategic convergence of oligopolists with academic institutions is crucial in fighting back the challenge to the present oligopoly, as mentioned in the following paragraph.

4. The Political Lock-In: Contributing to Resilience

Despite the ritual reference to the freedom of research, universities seem to assume that they have a right to "guide" research and researchers. The supporting rationale is one of the most problematic and ill-founded contributions of the "new public management" to university governance. It is the adoption of the metaphor of a market where universities and schools compete in the endless effort to climb places in the university rankings, where measures of quality in research have a bearing in the final placement.

Rankings are nowadays an element of the image of academic institutions and of their international visibility. They please the media that are eager to report on changing positions and to speculate on apparent trends and, of course, matter for marketing, especially to prospective customers like future students and their families. Therefore, they are often managed by specialized offices, disconnected from real research strategies. Governments may be induced (like in France) or may consider (as suggested in Italy) to build top players through mergers in order to get access to the celebrated Shanghai ranking, and universities may be even tempted in manipulating information in a mendacious way (De Nicolao, 2021; Farrell, 2023; Gioia & Corley, 2002).

In this scenario, the drive towards the corporatization of universities and the strengthening of the profit-oriented logic in business schools has characterized recent years, leading to a radically new emphasis on the issue of accountability also in research activities. This is a reasonable expectation from institutions and individuals, especially when working on State-financed budgets. In countries like Italy, one cannot

deny the moralizing effect with respect to the quasi-feudal practices of cooptation of the past, largely based on "professorial patronage" (Humphrey & Gendron, 2015) and on the "loyalty" of young researchers, that are substituted by quantitative measures of scientific performance. These measurements, which are increasingly assumed as key performance indicators, have also shifted in their content from the mere counting of scientific products to the synthetic assessment of the quality of those products.

The pillar of this kind of quality assessment is the already-mentioned availability of journal rankings, i.e. the possibility to assess the quality of the paper from the relative positioning of the journal that has accepted it for publication. Rankings are the most practiced and ubiquitous tool for evaluating scientific quality, leading to "a self-reinforcing cycle of institutionalization" (Walker et al., 2019). The otherwise unmanageable imperatives of accountability and the increasing availability of data make journal rankings the way that "enables university managers to evaluate the quality of a paper without having to undertake the tiresome job of reading it (…) Since we want to measure it, we will use a measure that takes no time at all, even though it is wildly inaccurate"(Tourish, 2019, p. 42). At the same time, some scholars may find in their position within the editorial boards a new source of academic power.

This approach is vulnerable to several well-known distortions that derive directly from the need to comply with the evaluation schemes adopted by the universities (Bos, 2020, chapter 9). They concern the displacement of goals in research choices, but also the transparency of authors' contributions and perverse practices, like the "gift authorship", the abuse of self-citations, the "citation gaming" etc. (Baccini et al., 2019; Baccini & Petrovich, 2023; van Houtum & van Uden, 2022). More fundamental distortions concern the erosion of passionate engagement in scholarship (Courpasson, 2013) and the progressive distance of the researcher's "job" from the Weberian ideal of *Wissenschaft als Beruf*. Measurement strongly contributes to the standardization of professional profiles and to the excessive emphasis on specialization.

This is not to say that bibliometric approaches must be discarded and simply substituted by qualitative judgements, such as peer reviews. Rather, it is important to accept the problematic nature of *any* judgement on the quality of a scientific work, especially when one wants to assess features like its originality or its societal value (Aksnes et al., 2019).

The real problem is not bibliometrics but the data on which it is performed. Most bibliometric exercises are made on commercial databases, mainly Web of Science (Clarivate Analytics) and Scopus. The former manages a product family that includes a variety of research and publication services. The latter is directly owned by one the oligopolists in the publishing industry, i.e. Elsevier. This patent conflict of interest would not be acceptable for any other industry, especially where a public interest of such a high relevance, such as the advancement of science, is at stake. But again, the system appears resilient, due to the inertial convergence of university managers' need to govern individuals and groups and the business interests of the industry.

The convergence takes the form of an alliance when one considers the nature of transformative agreements and the passive acceptance by governments and universities of the "necessity" to comply with contractual offers that "cannot be refused". Ironically, this is often justified precisely by the engagement in promoting open science!

As far as MDPI and other "potentially predatory journals" are concerned, publishers can rely on the zealous support of many universities and business schools. These are actively and forcefully advising their research staff that they "should neither send papers for their publication, nor cite them, nor act as reviewers for them, nor form part of their editorial committees" (Oviedo-García, 2021).

5. Can the Lock-In Be Broken?

Everything is held in the lock-in of management studies: the apparent irreversibility of the oligopolistic arrangement (the functional lock-in), the quasi-monopoly of positivist approaches to managerial research (the cognitive lock-in), the corporatized management of research institutions (the political lock-in). Breaking lock-ins that are inherently resilient is a difficult task, but not an impossible one. Cracks in the building begin to appear.

The market power of oligopolists can be resisted, as shown by the decision of the University of California to end its contract with Elsevier in 2019 (Phelps, 2022).

Under the flag of "open access" and the need for a different kind of research evaluation, many signs hint at the possibility of fundamental changes. Notwithstanding its many limitations, the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (COARA)[2] is an important step in defining a new regulatory framework for research that aims at a "responsible research assessment" (Peruginelli & Pölönen, 2024). It constitutes the synthesis of a long and challenging journey, which had its milestones in the "Leiden Manifesto for Research Metrics" of 2015[3] (Hicks et al., 2015) and especially in the "Declaration on Research Assessment" (DORA) of 2012[4].

On this specific point, it is perhaps also worth mentioning that Utrecht University has since 2022 formally abandoned the reference to the journal impact factor in evaluations for recruitment and promotions of research staff[5]. Regarding economics and management studies, already on 4 December 2020, Section 37 of the French CNRS had unanimously decided "to abandon all forms of classification of journals in economics and management"[6].

Bibliometrics demands data, and alternative databases are being developed by non-profit organizations that are not linked to publishers. In France, it is the government itself that financially supports the open repository HAL (Hyper Article en Ligne). Important institutions have taken important steps to undo or reduce dependence on proprietary databases. In France, the Sorbonne University discontinued its subscription to Web of Science and Clarivate bibliometric tools for 2024[7] and, in January 2024, the CNRS terminated its subscription to Scopus, provisionally maintaining Web of Science to ensure the necessary continuity of use[8]. The "Barcelona Declaration on open research information"[9], published on April 16, 2024, and already adhered to by 40 institutions, including the universities of Bologna and Milan, includes a commitment to actively support the opening of research information and to support collective actions to accelerate the transition.

The fetish of university rankings has also been challenged. In March 2024 the University of Zurich decided to discontinue its collaboration with THE World

University Ranking, to which data will no longer be provided, in order to avoid distorting effects on research policies[10].

Finally, there is an individual dimension to this change that cannot be simply entrusted to our *alma mater*. Even when wanting or needing to play the game, individual researchers could engage in effectively reinstating creativity and originality as a beacon value in their own and in their teams' work.

For sure, in the highly necessary engagement to "reclaim the primacy of disinterested academic inquiry" (Tourish, 2019), individuals and institutions cannot simply "wait and see" and "follow the wind".

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Notes

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