

A Transdisciplinary Chair to Save the University

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Abstract

The following presents a critical examination of the changing role of universities within the context of a misunderstood contemporary globalist society, where economic and techno-scientific imperatives increasingly influence academic institutions. Traditionally, universities were autonomous entities dedicated to the production and transmission of independent knowledge. However, the rise of management sciences, driven by market demands and aligned with economic doctrines, poses a significant threat to this independence. The article argues that universities risk becoming mere providers of market-driven skills, thereby compromising their fundamental role as spaces for critical thought and fundamental research. To counter this trend, the concept of a transdisciplinary chair is proposed as a means to reclaim the university's mission to explore beyond the dominant socio-economic paradigms.

Keywords: *transdisciplinarity, University autonomy, management sciences, economic influence, knowledge production.*

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1. Introduction

What is the role of universities in today's thermo-industrial, techno-scientific, globalist society? Traditionally, the university was a free zone dedicated to the production and transmission of knowledge, in a spirit of complete independence from the political and religious powers that surrounded it. Any intrusion on this independence was considered an extremely serious insult.

It is by no means certain that this independence is scrupulously respected

today, even in countries whose authorities claim to care about freedom of opinion. It's not just a question of the intrusion of police officers armed with truncheons in search of students who resist the dominant *doxa* and are therefore supposed to constitute a danger to public order. More subtly, it's about the subversion of the university by the dominant interests in the society in which it finds itself.

In France, these interests first manifested themselves in the proliferation and development of the '*grandes écoles*'. At the outset, in the early 19th century, the aim was to meet the needs of public authorities, particularly for highly qualified engineers. Following on from the engineering schools came the '*écoles de commerce*', which became *business schools* under the pressure of Anglo-Saxon influence. Today, these schools strive to meet the demand for 'talent' – in other words, skills – from companies. Their original aim is not to produce independent knowledge.

Faced with this competition, while at the same time seeking to supplement their public financial funding, universities have in turn come up with programs to meet the demands of business. One example in France is the *Instituts universitaires d'administration des entreprises* (IAE). All in all, we can see that disciplines linked to business demand (economics, law, management) have come to clearly outweigh traditional academic disciplines. The objective is to prepare students for the job market, which is an entirely honorable one. It remains to be seen whether this objective still meets the university's initiative purpose, which is the independent production of knowledge.

But that's not all. To ensure their respectability and competitive *ranking*, the '*grandes écoles*', and in particular the *business schools*, have been granted the right to award diplomas hitherto reserved for the academic world: master's degrees and doctorates. They are now required to 'do research', the value of which is measured by the number of foreign (i.e. largely from United States) lecturers, the number of articles published in peer-reviewed journals, the number of chapters in academic books, the number of books published by their lecturers, and so on. We will examine more on this later. So, in this dual system, *business schools*, to put it simply, strove to give themselves an academic and scientific image, while universities, for their part, strove to meet the demand for 'talent' demanded by the market.

But it's safe to say that this is a major danger for the university. Implicitly, it is being asked to serve society as it is, and no longer, or no longer only, to think about it independently and, if necessary, critically, by prejudging what it might become beyond the majority *doxa* and the interests that dominate it.

2. Should Universities Serve Economic Religion?

This calls for an in-depth analysis. First of all, dualism is the spirituality of our time. This dualism is twofold: dualism between soul and body, and dualism between man and the rest of the world. The specificity thus attributed to man

authorizes him to use the world as a quarry and a dumping ground, for his own use, in accordance with what he deems useful. If we consider that a society cannot do without spirituality, this is the religion of our time, as traditional religions find themselves more or less marginalized, or even rejected, by modernity. This new religion enjoins man to find fulfilment in the possession and consumption of ever more sophisticated goods produced by his industry from raw materials borrowed from his terrestrial environment.

Such a religion takes shape in dogmas – in other words, in postulates held to be true – in founding texts and a doctrinal corpus, and finally, in the existence of a clergy charged with explaining to the multitude the rules of behavior which, according to them, must be respected. This doctrine has a name: ‘economics’. Economists claim to gather and express scientific knowledge, and it’s true that they most often bow to the rites of scientificity, understood as an approach tending towards objectivity and presenting itself, in its classical sense, as subject/object dualism, even if this is an approach condemned by quantum physics over a century ago. However, beyond this approach, which is intended to be rational, economic knowledge unfolds in a space that is that of the dualistic spirituality on which modernity is founded. Science thus joins myth, and the myth is that the earth’s environment must be subordinated to the designs of mankind, and that this design necessarily consists in multiplying the artefacts that are supposed to have value. It should come as no surprise, then, that economic knowledge, as an expression of the spirituality of our times, has become the foundation of political action and, if there is such a thing, of its social project.

If we accept this reading, which pious believers are probably not ready to admit, ‘management sciences’ are to ‘economic science’ what the catechism is to the Gospels: the expression of a set of dogmas and prescriptions designed to ensure salvation, be it the salvation of the ‘manager’ confronted with the reality of the company in which his action takes place, or that of the consumer confronted with his drives for pleasure. This catechism is made up of the results of ‘management science research’ and taught in the kind of seminars that *business schools* are in fact. In this way, what contemporary humanity must accept as true is disseminated and transmitted. Let’s continue.

3. Are ‘Management Sciences’ Scientific in Nature?

‘Management sciences,’ make a strong claim to being ‘scientific’. As we have said, this quality results from their kinship with the economic sciences. Having said this, they are based on a paradigm whose implicit axioms need to be clarified. The first, which they share with the dominant economic discourse, is utilitarianism, as the foundation of human action, at least in the field of economics. The second is the principle of efficiency. In other words, the search for the most effective means of reducing the costs of a given operation and maximizing the expected results in terms of utility. This research focuses on the organization

and management of companies, since management science is more concerned with companies than with public and non-commercial services, although the latter are increasingly being invited to draw inspiration from it. It is then broken down into a multitude of specialties, ranging from 'commercial policy' to 'human management', which form the curriculum of 'écoles de commerce', which have become '*business schools*' in the context of liberal globalization, i.e. in the United States, where they must find their place.

What is singular is that management science, as knowledge applied to a certain purpose, never questions *a priori* the relevance and legitimacy of that purpose. It is seen as a given that does not need to be questioned, whether from a political, ethical or ontological point of view. Whether we're talking about the arms trade or the production of plush toys, the problem is posed in the same way. However, we may well wonder whether this apparent neutrality with regard to the ends pursued does not conceal a relationship of subordination to this end, as expressed in terms of necessary efficiency. In other words, by refraining from taking a critical view of these ends, the management sciences have adopted an ideological perspective and a worldview that constitute a definitive and self-evident framework.

We won't discuss here what is meant by scientific knowledge in the case of 'economic science', and how this fits in with a positivist, dualistic vision that has today been completely ruined by the scientific developments of the last century, particularly in the fields of physics and biology, where we know that the observing subject cannot be separated from the observed object, and even that the observed object is a construct of the observing subject. Suffice it to say that the 'management sciences', as an extension of economic discourse, follow the same positivist, dualist perspective, confusing description with a prescription. They are thus confronted with the need for a double questioning, which can be formulated as follows:

- The first would be to take a critical look at the founding assumptions of the discipline, and in particular at the validity of utilitarianism as it underpins our thermo-industrial society, and more generally at Western ontology and ethics as they form its spirituality. This would be a legitimate scientific approach, since the constant questioning of generally accepted theories and the conceptual framework within which they are expressed is the very foundation of the progress of knowledge. Galileo, for example, recognized the need to question the heliocentrism that had been accepted since Greek antiquity, thereby challenging a worldview that seemed to be taken for granted, and getting into trouble with the political and religious authorities of his day.

- The second would be to go beyond the questioning of the founding principles that could legitimize the discourse of 'management sciences', and attempt to free ourselves from the concrete conditions – material and institutional – currently imposed on research. In other words, to ensure the independence of management research from what is expected of it in the economic and societal context

in which it exists and is even possible. It's safe to assume that many researchers are indeed driven by such a critical approach, and that their honesty and clear-sightedness cannot be called into question here. What is problematic, however, is the context of their professional careers, to which they are quite legitimately attached since this is the career path they have chosen.

4. The 'Obstacle Course' for Young Doctoral Students

Business schools – and the universities they have become – are not educational institutions that are neutral in relation to the economic context that led to their creation and development. If such was their development, it was because the 'economic system' needed them to procure the 'talents', i.e. skills, it required. The student who enrolls in a *business school*, with its expensive tuition fees, does so not for the love of knowledge, but in order to be able to put forward a recognized diploma and, possibly, to have certain 'skills' that will enable him or her to hope for a successful professional career. As for the young doctoral student, he cannot remain indifferent to his professional future. To do so, he or she must embark on a veritable obstacle course: publish in peer-reviewed scientific journals, if possible ranked according to criteria borrowed from the Anglo-Saxon world, participate in collective works by writing a chapter, and present 'papers' at symposia, which he or she will carefully include on his or her *curriculum vitae*, in the knowledge that this is the real objective of some of these symposia.

He is strongly encouraged to do so by the school in which he teaches and conducts research. The school's future ranking is at stake, and consequently the funding from which it can benefit, including the cost of enrolment. In a competitive world, this is perfectly normal. The only difference is that, under the guise of new theories that are more or less ephemeral fashions, this institutional mode of operation encourages the flattest conformism, albeit one that is always claimed to be innovative. Added to this is the problem that universities, which should be temples to knowledge, with a view to its enrichment and transmission as a cultural vector, find themselves in competition with business schools, particularly when it comes to financial funding. They must therefore adopt, at least marginally, the ways and means of doing so. The result is a two-pronged movement: universities, simply to survive, are drawing closer to *business schools*, with the creation of university business schools while business schools, anxious to ensure their academic credibility, are offering master's degrees and doctorates using terminology borrowed from universities¹.

All this raises several questions:

1. Insofar as they provide companies with the 'managers' they need, 'management sciences' contribute to the stability of the system and its identical reproduction. They help maintain the performance expected of companies, but

¹ cf. Lindsay Waters, *L'éclipse du savoir*, Éditions Allia, 2008.

above all, as Bourdieu would say, they contribute to the reproduction of the values that drive it. Graduate students, ready to seek employment, are expected to adhere to certain principles of action. Twenty years later, it is on the basis of these same principles of action that he will have succeeded in his professional life and that he will recruit those who, after him, will ensure the future, on bases that will therefore be more or less unchanged.

2. The very scientific nature of the ‘management sciences’ deserves to be discussed. For knowledge to qualify as scientific, it is not enough to survey the academic ‘literature’ published in peer-reviewed journals on the problem under examination, and then present the results of a generally very limited survey, always accompanied by supposedly convincing statistical precautions, to produce a work that would be truly scientific. The scientific approach, in fact, does not consist in accumulating details. It is also, and even primarily, about questioning what is held to be true, and questioning the meaning of the results obtained on the basis of knowledge that cannot be merely academic, but must appeal to the vision of the world, of cultural essence, in which it takes place. So, to look no further, it was the utilitarian presupposition that was proposed to them, in a way that remained more or less unchanged despite the climatic setbacks they were observing elsewhere, that the protesting students of certain ‘grandes écoles’, in France and elsewhere, sought to challenge with their manifestos.

3. Knowledge relates to a reality that resists it. It constantly strives to build up a coherent discourse, but at the same time needs to reach conclusions that are relevant to this reality, which ultimately constitutes its object of observation and analysis. And the resulting dissonance must alert the researcher to the fact that it is sometimes necessary to call into question certainties that once seemed well established. These certainties are to be sought not only in the academic corpus itself but also, and perhaps even primarily, in the presuppositions on which it is based. However, a researcher in the ‘management sciences’ who set out to question the very relevance of the economic system to which they contribute would not be guaranteed the funding he or his ‘lab’ would survive for very long.

5. An Ethical and Professional Choice

Management researchers are well aware of this. Management sciences are largely responsible for improvements of all kinds, whether in the organization of work or in the side effects of corporate activity on its human, social and environmental environment. Congresses and symposia follow one another, extolling the efficacy of the ‘liberated enterprise’, the ‘agile enterprise’ or the ‘circular economy’ (blithely confusing the object of study with fashion, media gesticulation and opportunities for consulting firms), or the merits of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Increasingly elaborate legal and regulatory texts are supposed to be imposed on company directors. Congratulations are in order, and progress

is widely reported. Good for them. Researchers, on the one hand, and practitioners, on the other, see the benefits of their efforts. Having said that, it's important to assess their impact. And perhaps because we haven't got to the heart of the matter, it's not certain that quality of life at work today is always better than it was in the past. While the physical workload has probably diminished overall, the mental workload, on the other hand, has very often increased considerably, to the point of causing 'psychosocial risks' that did not exist before, or were less visible. Similarly, for obvious communication reasons, any progress, however small and debatable, is immediately highlighted as a considerable change. And finally, it may be asked why, despite all this effort and progress, economic productivity has not risen considerably, and why human happiness, as measured by Richard Layard², has been in marked decline for at least the last twenty years.

And so, while 'management sciences' undoubtedly contribute to economic and social progress, we must ask ourselves whether they are also not a guarantee of it. It's worth noting here that certain subjects that could open up the debate are not given priority in the training programs of future managers: the practice of social relations, the radical perspectives resulting from the work of the IPCC, despite some progress on the ecological dimension, they are not among the dominant subjects at the French '*grandes écoles*.' Managerial discourse thus tends to be confined to a *doxa* that is consistent with the expectations placed on it by the companies that finance the institutions where it is taught, but does not necessarily constitute adequate preparation for a world that is no longer one of happy globalization and assured growth.

The 'management sciences' discourse will therefore have to evolve much more than it has in recent years. It will have to escape the dominant *doxa* in the village and go out into the vast forest in search of the elements that will enable it to think differently, escaping both the conditioning that overwhelms it and the clichés in which it holds itself. He will have to focus his vision on something other than the commercial enterprise that today constitutes his privileged object of study and take an interest in other forms of human action and other forms of ethics than that constituted by utilitarianism. On this condition, and only on this condition, can it cease to contribute to the reproduction of the identical, and move towards a contribution to a future that cannot be defined today.

In the absence of such a transformation, business schools and management research present themselves as conservative forces through which the founding values of the kind of secular spirituality that drives liberal globalization are maintained and transmitted. Of course, their leaders and backers can only deny this. On the contrary, they like to emphasize the need to adapt the institutions they manage to the new situation represented by the need to take account of new approaches such as CSR or the 'circular economy'. However, it is fair to ask whether this is not an effort to keep things as they are: 'change everything in order

² Richard Layard, *The Price of Happiness*, tr. fr. Armand Colin, 2007.

to change nothing³, at least on the essentials. Management research and management education, in other words, are rigorously held within the framework of the convictions that drive Western civilization. It's all about knowing how best to produce, in line with the *doxa* of productivism and consumerism. The only way to escape from this confinement is to be convinced that it is leading humanity to disaster, and that there are other ways of living than the one that is destroying the planet.

6. The Major Risk of Instrumentalising the University Institution

The major danger for the university, then, is that of being trapped, as an institution, within the confines of today's globalist society. It has to find funding, and funding is largely under the control of the money powers. Hence the programming of courses based on their economic and social usefulness, leaving a large part to the skills expected by companies. Fundamental research, carried out in complete independence, is thus subordinated to the priorities imposed on the university by its funding structure. As a result, the university is no longer a 'temple of knowledge' and a place of free research, but first and foremost and increasingly a provider of skills tailored to the expectations of future employers.

Universities are thus obliged to comply with the skills repository to which they are being asked to respond. It is required to train lawyers, economists or managers, i.e. experts in clearly identified specialties that evolve only through increasing specialization: marketing experts or management controllers. This compartmentalization means that researchers are unable to go beyond what is taken for granted, regardless of what they think. The institution is reduced to a place for reproducing what already exists. Transdisciplinarity rebels against this compartmentalization and enclosure in the commonly accepted existing. Its aim is to open windows onto what lies beyond the village, and therefore beyond the university institution. Such would be the ambition of a transdisciplinary chair, whether in a university or in any other place recognized for ensuring freedom of the mind.

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Any errors or omissions are his own.

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³ As Giuseppe Tomasi de Lampedusa says in *Le Guépard*, Points, 2007.