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# ESSAY

Invited article

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## PICNIC ON A FROZEN RIVER: CHALLENGES FOR GENUINE MANAGEMENT STUDIES IN SPAIN



Since the eighties, programs in business management have become very popular in post-compulsory education, for various reasons. Students feel attracted to them since jobs in management positions have become more socially desirable and generally better paid than their counterparts in the public sector – which are also under a constant threat of restructuring. Successful managers and entrepreneurs have become role models and media tycoons, and outspoken advocates of the advantages of free market and competition. Moreover, the mysticism that pervades current organizational values – empowerment, compromise, high-level performance, accountability, flexibility and so on – has gained an extraordinary influence in economically advanced societies, helping to develop stronger pro-market attitudes and general concern for good management in different fields, from politics to economic or social policies. Therefore, the term management has become ubiquitous and a key issue in modern societies, to the extent that according to Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) it represents the core of the *new spirit of capitalism*. Institutions such as business schools, consultancies, the financial press and other players have helped to forge and disseminate the concepts of what we understand by management today, helping to frame a specific learning environment and a specific idea of management (Fernández Rodríguez, 2013). However, there have been also concerns about the type of management knowledge available in such institutions, the so-called mainstream management thinking (as opposed to critical approaches, which question capitalism and its context and social order: see Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Fournier & Grey, 2000; Parker, 2002; Rowlinson & Hassard, 2011), hegemonic but raising increasing criticism from different angles and perspectives. Some scholars have particularly highlighted its strong Anglo-Saxon bias which has been linked to a conservative political project engaged with Americanization and neoliberal capitalism (Djelic, 1998; Tietze, 2004; Schröter 2005).

Nevertheless, management knowledge cannot be reduced only to US-influenced theories and practices. Scholars such as Richard Whitley (2008) have highlighted that there are remarkable differ-

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ences across national contexts. Therefore, it could be argued that such differences could help to outline different outcomes regarding management scholarship, helping alternative accounts and theories to emerge. In this contribution, the focus will be made on the Spanish case, relevant here due to the contradictory position the country seems to hold in the current scenario. On the one hand, Spain is experiencing a deep economic crisis as a result of the collapse of a housing market bubble and the tough austerity policies implemented immediately afterwards. It has been stereotyped as one of the PIGS, acronym for “Portugal, Ireland, Greece and Spain”, countries with strong budget deficits and a certain economic and managerial backwardness, which according to the international financial press makes them unable to remain competitive in international markets (especially the high value-added market niches). However, despite the crisis Spain can be still considered a developed economy, ranked 13<sup>th</sup> in size in the world, with strong corporations (Movistar, Repsol, Santander) still based in major Spanish cities, and a number of universities and public bodies focused on research at an international level. Interestingly enough, some of the most prestigious business schools in Europe are based in Madrid and Barcelona, with Instituto de Empresa leading the *Financial Times* European business schools ranking in 2012. Therefore, Spain enjoys an ambivalent position which initially would seem to provide adequate conditions in order to set and launch alternative views and theories of management, detached from the US hegemonic perspective.

However, such potentiality has never been fulfilled precisely due to contextual reasons. By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Spain was still an underdeveloped country, poorly industrialized and relatively detached from modernity. After a civil war, it suffered a long right-wing dictatorship led by General Franco, internationally isolated after the end of the Second World War. During the fif-

ties, however, the Eisenhower administration recognized and legitimated Franco’s regime at an international level to expand his allies in the fight against international communism. The USA not only helped Spain to join the UN, but it also provided significant technical advice - including management training: see Guillén, 2004 - coaching the liberalization of the Spanish markets, as well as opening-up to foreign capitals. The country then enrolled a process of “Americanization” of the management and administration processes (Braña, Buesa & Molero, 1984), in a period in which the Spanish economy developed with an unprecedented growth rate, helping to modernize the country. The most important Spanish business schools were launched during that period (1958-1973). However, none of them coined a distinctive management scholarship: for instance IESE relied on Harvard Business School expertise in its beginnings. Overall, the combination of fierce Anti-communist politics, political repression plus the close relation with the US helped to develop strongly US-influenced management studies (with the MBA as the core product), excluding any kind of critical approaches.

This was not too different to what was happening in the rest of Western Europe at that time (Kipping, Üsdiken, & Puig, 2004). From the 1950s onwards, American business schools and consultancies had become a channel for the transmission of a certain ‘American way of business’ which spread all over Europe. This process is associated mainly with the post-Second World War period and post-Marshall Plan American politics, and is deeply interconnected with the development of American capitalism. According to some authors (Kipping & Bjarnar 1998; Schröter 2005), the Marshall Plan set the conditions for transferring US management models, exporting American practices and attitudes towards business in European economic life. The impact on European business schools was strong, and American dominance influenced the

way curricula, subjects, teaching methods or management problems were going to be designed, selected and presented (Grey, 2005; Engwall 2009). In the Spanish case, this influence was evident, with radical approaches regarding teaching methods: focus on practical examples, small groups of alumni, and a very strong interaction between students and lecturers, almost the opposite of Spanish university traditions. Moreover, stronger efforts to incorporate ICT in teaching skills were undertaken, and campuses were designed to match the image of their Ivy-League peers.

However, US influence did not mean Spanish scholars would not be able to develop distinctive features in terms of management scholarship, linked to a peculiar interaction between management and religion. The curious mix between Catholic corporatism and human relations, whose finest example might be Brugarola’s work (see e.g. Brugarola, 1945) can be considered as an original national contribution, though not very influential and far from the scientific oriented outcomes of US management studies. Besides, the most prestigious private business schools (IESE and ESADE being their most successful examples), which provided expensive education for business elites and top managers, had an unusual common feature: the religious character of their founders, some linked to the Jesuits or extremely conservative groups such as Opus Dei (Fernández Rodríguez & Gantman, 2011). Those schools provided an encounter between entrepreneurial ethics and Christian morality, educating top Spanish executives in an authoritarian scenario. Their contribution was aimed at shaping Spanish managers’ Catholic values towards an attitude of Protestant work ethics, rationalizing the economy but without any critical approach to the political framework. In a parallel effort, business studies were timidly incorporated to programmes in economics in Spanish public universities, but there were no specific studies designed at the post-graduate lev-

el (Cuervo, 2002). Organization studies were subjected to censorship and lack of freedom of expression, with Marxism and other critical schools completely ignored. Quantitative analyses were the norm, and management was seen as a side subject to economics-infused business administration programs.

The transition to democracy in Spain did not have a massive influence in the way management was taught and understood in higher education institutions. There was indeed a new freedom of expression, allowing critical thinkers to be incorporated in the programs of many academic disciplines. The economy improved, particularly after the country joined both the EU and the Eurozone. The education sector expanded notably, with the creation of new universities and indeed new business schools. However, such changes did not help to minimize the US influence on management studies. The public sector together with the expansion in the number of universities offered more opportunities to enrich the theoretical sources of management research but Americanization continued. The emphasis on economics and quantitative analyses was actually reinforced and current academic programs offer a partial account of the complexities of management and its interaction with society. According to some scholars, the lack of synergies of sub-disciplines such as HRM with sociology and political economy are evident, with a serious shortage of rigorous qualitative research (Rodríguez Ruiz & Martínez Lucio, 2010). Employment relations and sociology of work are still virtually absent, while organization theory and the psycho-sociology of organizations play a minor role. Some researchers have criticized this situation: Cuervo (2002) has argued that the study programs remain too theoretical and badly adapted to market needs, highlighting the bureaucratic constraints to deploy reorientations in the studies. For instance, that rigidity and the lack of interest in developing competitive post-graduate programs (MBA)

in Spanish public universities led to a prominence of private institutions in that important space, and only the new EU education policies under the umbrella of the Bologna process have managed to change this trend.

In fact, education reforms not only related to the EU but to the emergence of new bodies in charge of academic evaluation, particularly ANECA which has played a pivotal role with its accreditations, have been essential to transform the landscape of Spanish universities radically during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. New realities have emerged such as the spread of rankings, research evaluations and increasing connections with foreign universities. Spanish academia has become more professionalized and competitive and there are substantially many more scholars publishing in international management journals. However, and due to constraints in this model – the preference for ISI journals by reviewing bodies and institutions, where US journals are at the top of citation reports and therefore prestige - Americanization in disciplines such as business and management remains a salient feature, with scholars engaging in publications that are likely to be accepted in top US management journals. This means that most Spanish management scholars simply struggle to write non-critical quantitative papers that comply with the requisites of those peer-reviewed publications, leaving critical works aside. However, and despite US influence, in this space there might be pre-conditions for the development of critical and alternative approaches to management:

- The new conditions have helped to interact with foreign scholars and have access to new theoretical sources. There are signs of the emergence of a new critical oriented scholarship (see e.g. Fernández Rodríguez, 2007), albeit very limited.
- Spanish as a widely spoken language offers strong potential for the circu-

lation of new critical theories, once it could establish synergies with other Latin American academic institutions (not only Spanish-speaking but also Portuguese-speaking) where critical perspectives could establish roots as well.

- While the accreditation policies stimulate Americanization, some of the ISI journals (mostly based in the UK and other parts of Europe) are critically oriented and can provide a space for critical scholars.
- Public cuts in education and wages and the decline of the Spanish economy might be flashpoints for the outbreak of more critical orientations among scholars.

On the other hand, these pre-conditions do not imply that such scenarios might emerge. It is probably more likely that critical approaches to management would flourish among scholars in other social sciences, such as sociology or political science.

Meanwhile in the private sector the context is not extremely different. The arrival of democracy did little to erode the US influence: on the contrary, the expectations to join the EU and the neoliberal ascent in the eighties were essential to the expansion of private schools in charge of post-graduate studies addressed to new managers. Subjects such as leadership, HRM, strategic management, marketing, international trade or business ethics are included in MBA programs, but despite very few exceptions the approach has been mainstream and non-critical. Case methods prevail over alternative views such as cultural studies, and quantitative studies over qualitative ones. Moreover many theoretical sources are linked to mainstream management and even some management gurus (Fernández Rodríguez, 2013). The Spanish contributions are therefore shaped around manage-

rialism and influenced by US management thinkers, either academics or gurus. Adaptation and labour market flexibility have been emphasized in lectures and publications, grounded on normative and humanist aspects developed by national gurus with theories such as Management by Values or Trust Management (see [García Ruiz, 2003](#); [Aguilar et al., 2002](#)), pure pop management. Managerial narratives (fiction works that describe common problems of managers with a motivational happy-ending) have also become quite popular (e.g. [Rovira & Trías de Bes, 2004](#)), being carbon copies of American pop management. Although their lack in originality, some of those studies present catchy titles: for example – and in a word game impossible to translate into English – the Spanish management guru Juan Carlos Cubeiro titled one of his books “En un lugar del talento”, paraphrasing the first sentence of Miguel de Cervantes “Don Quixote” whose first sentence started with “En un lugar de la Mancha” (see [Cubeiro, 2000](#)).

The emergence of alternative approaches in Spanish private business schools seems even more constrained than in the public sector. In the first place, the schools’ commitment with the market is very strong. Corporations support schools, inspiring their academic project and values. The education provided is extremely costly and therefore tailored for a basic need: access and promotion in the workplace for the managers and soon-to-be executives. It has been emphasized that Spanish top business schools are also engaged, through their admission processes and high tuition fees, with contributing to the co-optation of elites, providing mechanisms of social selection – as some scholars have highlighted ([Schröter 2005](#)).

Business schools and firms, especially big corporations, keep a tight relation. The combination of education and profits has raised some criticism and hampers the possibilities of incorporating new theoretical paradigms. Howev-

er, and in order to strengthen the quality of their MBA programmes and comply with factors highly appreciated in international rankings (for example, studentships in business schools abroad, visiting professors, and so on), some changes have been recently implemented. The need to hire staff with ISI-indexed publications to cope with the growing influence of a ‘publish or perish’ mentality in the field has led not only to changes in the profiles and backgrounds of academics (with a lesser role for management practitioners), but also to new staff policies, such as funding doctoral studies of senior lecturers in prestigious international universities. These policies have contradictory effects: on the one hand, they strengthen the quality of research and broaden perspectives on management studies, but on the other hand, the technocratic approach is reinforced through the need to publish in top management journals. Hence the Americanization project remains here as well.

Therefore, Spain has remained historically dependant on US-influenced approaches to management, in a classic example of epistemic colonization ([Ibarra-Colado, 2006](#)). This is a situation not strident in the European field, as most of the academic institutions on European soil support this type of knowledge. The critical scholars are still a minority despite their growth in the UK, Netherlands and the Nordic countries, with almost no presence in Germany, France or Italy. In this sense, the Spanish case is far from exceptional: it rather complies with the norm. Although there might be certain pre-conditions to launch an alternative and more critical paradigm, the truth is that such a project still stands at an embryonic stage. As a matter of fact, and given the development of management studies in Spain, it would be unlikely for such a project to emerge without framing it inside a wider academic structure. In this sense, alliances either with Latin American or European scholars or even both seem

to be a compulsory requirement to launch such a scene in Spain.

In this sense, scholars such as [Wedlin \(2006\)](#) have interestingly discussed the prospects of a possible different ethos for European business schools. The theoretical approach to management in those institutions would be embedded in social sciences, engaging with critical views and interdisciplinarity. Qualitative analyses would be enhanced whilst scholars could engage with works ranging from philosophy, sociology or anthropology. However, such ethos seems to be only firmly rooted in northern European countries and the UK, which is a quite exceptional case in many ways. To understand the complex paradoxes that led to the emergence of Critical Management Studies in the UK, recommended readings would be [Fernández Rodríguez \(2007\)](#) and [Rowlinson and Hassard \(2011\)](#).

Nations with impressive intellectual traditions such as France, Germany or Italy have not been able to develop alternative business schools despite the influence of some of their intellectuals in the critical management scene. These paradoxes suggest that extensive research on comparative studies regarding the take-off of critical management studies – for instance conditions, political ethos, design, role and expectations of higher education – is still a pending task for social sciences scholars.

In conclusion, management studies in Spain have not been able to challenge Anglo-Saxon dominance, finding notable restrictions to develop an alternative scene. These limits range from the institutional architecture of the education sector (marred by a strong bureaucratic rigidity, which prevents collaborations between scholars from different knowledge disciplines) to student expectations, many of whom usually adopt an extremely pragmatic approach to their studies, linking them to a future job. The marginal collaborations between public universities and extremely wealthy private business schools has been another fea-



ture of the Spanish landscape of management studies, where little exchange takes place between different bodies and players. Moreover, the authoritarian discourse of Spanish employers linked to past heritages (Fernández Rodríguez & Martínez Lucio, 2013) makes critical research not highly valued among HRM managers and entrepreneurs, albeit few exceptions. However, the drastic changes experienced during the crisis not only in academia but also in the labour market might facilitate the emergence of new critical analyses, helping to minimize the influence of US management.

### AUTHOR'S NOTE

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