The Quiet Americans: Formative Context, the Academy of Management Leadership, and the Management Textbook 1936-1960

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“A dollar love had good intentions, a clear conscience, and to hell with everybody.”
Graham Greene ‘The Quiet American, 1962, p. 62

ABSTRACT

Roberto Unger contends that societies are held together by a combination of institutional and imaginative arrangements that serve to maintain and obfuscate underlying tensions and conflicts. These institutional and imaginative arrangements constitute important stabilizing aspects of the “formative contexts” in which social struggles are played out and constrained. In the words of Blacker (1992), “As conflicts are temporarily resolved, solutions become supported by particular organizational and technological styles, by emerging group interests, patterns of privilege, and the ways in which a basic grammar of social interactions becomes articulated in official dogmas. The imaginative schemas of participants interact with the institutional frameworks in which they operate” (p.279).

In this paper we examine the relationship between US management textbooks, institutional practices and imaginative schemas (Unger, 1987) in the middle part of the twentieth century (1936-60). In a preliminary study based on content analysis and archival research we examine the development of the Academy of Management (AoM) and the writings (and commentaries) of the men who served as President of the association from 1936 to 1960. In particular we set out to assess the impact of these men on the dissemination of management theory in the US during a critical time span.

We focus on the AoM because of its current significance as one of the leading, if not the leading, association of management educators in the US, with more than 15,000 members in 91 countries, and “21 professional divisions and three interest groups” (AoM On-Line, 2004) that reflect a range of scholarly communities and interests, from the more traditional functional area of operations management through to the more radical concerns with Critical Management Studies. Nonetheless, the association continues to be dominated by a largely white, male, and functionalist (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) membership.

Our focus on the period from 1936 to 1960 is due to several factors, (i) 1936 was the year the AoM was founded, (ii) the period as a whole covers three crucial timeframes in recent US history – the Depression, the Second World War, and the Cold War (specifically the era characterized as McCarthyism), and (iii) it was a critical period in the
development of modern management theory (Cooke, Mills, & Kelley, 2005) and the development of the management textbook.

In our research endeavors we were specifically interested in the extent to which selected textbooks and the AoM discussed and reflected on issues of class, gender, race/ethnicity, and the broad socio-political era of the Depression, the Second World War, and the Cold War. Thus, we explore a number of emerging themes and issues in the early years that shaped the modern AoM and had some influence, through the management text (Mills & Helms Hatfield, 1998), on wider constituencies of management educators.

We conclude that the early leaders of the AoM played an important role in establishing an organizational culture that encouraged objectivism (Jamison, 1937b), elitism (Jamison, 1937a), ethnocentrism (Newman, 1948), masculinist values and a philosophy of management that was rooted in a commitment to “free enterprise” and anti-communism (Mee, 1953). Nonetheless, we contend with Jamison (Jamison, 1954) that it would be “some time in the dim future [before] the Academy [would] become a potent force”. The AoM had much less of a direct impact on management thinking than the textbook production of the early AoM leaders – all of whom were pioneers in the development of the management textbooks ((Davis, 1957; Davis, 1940; Jucius & Terry, 1961; Koontz, 1941; Mee, 1952; Newman, 1947).

References


Jamison, C. L. 1937b. Objectives of an Organization to Promote Research in the Philosophy of Management Presented to the 1937 Conference Participants, Academy of Management Archives. Ithaca, NY: in the Kheel Center for Labor-
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