

Todd Bridgman and Stephen Cummings: A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Management Theory

SAGE: London, 2020, 160 pp. ISBN: 9781526495136, £15.99

Sitting down to read a management theory textbook can be an uninspiring activity. They cover issues relevant to anybody who interacts with organisations (virtually everybody!). But the lengthy coverage of theories after theories makes the topic seem sterile. And because these theories have been regurgitated by so many people so many times, a reader not following the contemporary research published in journal articles (virtually everybody!) would form the impression that not much has been discovered in the last half a century or so. What one can expect from ‘a very short, fairly interesting and reasonably cheap book’ in a field where even the heaviest textbook is not remotely interesting let alone inspiring? It turns out quite a lot – though perhaps not what one might expect.

While much discussion in textbooks focuses on providing a comprehensive review of theories and turning these into practices to better organisations and their managers, Bridgman and Cummings open room for critical reflection by recognising the politics of knowledge production. The book shows how politics shaped the evolution of management knowledge, with chapters on the classical school (Chapter 2), human relations school (Chapter 3), personality, teams and culture (Chapter 4), leadership and change with a nod towards power (Chapter 5) and ethics and CSR (Chapter 6).

Chapter 1 sets out on a search for the foundations, looking at what is the relevance of management theory and who is it for. In setting up these debates, they socialise the intended

reader, newcomers of the academic lifeworld, into the politics of management research and of management knowledge production. The discussion then moves onto highlighting how a politicised field serves the interest of the dominant group, the managers, and how the production and consumption of knowledge produced to further their interests systematically silences alternative wisdom. Some might think that this chapter is depressing to read. But I see great value in introducing the students or practitioners to the increasingly metric-driven, impact-dominated universities they are inhabiting or interacting with.

Chapter 2 and 3 reproduce the ordering of a typical textbook. Chapter 2 presents the fathers (Fredrick Taylor, Adam Smith and Max Weber) as well as the mother (Mary Parker Follett) of classical management theory. Chapter 3 moves on to the human relations school. It swiftly introduces the Hawthorne Studies and establishes how the so-called discovery of the human worker laid the foundation for motivation research. Yes, you have guessed it right; Maslow's pyramid is demolished in this chapter! These chapters diverge from a typical textbook in one important way though: they reveal how these theorists and their theories (often inadvertently) became susceptible to manipulation to fill an intellectual space or a gap in practice.

Chapter 4 picks up where Chapter 3 left off, the human worker. It covers the interaction between the worker and the organisation by introducing personality, teams and culture. This is the only chapter that left me wanting more. Tackling three complex topics in 17 pages is no easy task. The balance between the sections introducing the theories and the sections that critiques them brings home the critical orientation. But I am wondering if the very short introduction is contributing to the simplification and caricaturisation of management theories – the very issue the book is fighting against.

Chapter 5 joins two topics that have become even more relevant in the pandemic: leadership and change. It shows the damaging impact of binary thinking in theorising and practicing leadership: change leadership versus status-quo management, transformational versus toxic leadership, masculine versus feminine leadership, traditional versus authentic leadership. It blurs the line between these categories. For example, it introduces the reader to the parallels between transformational leaders and cults. And it invites the readers to queering leadership. This chapter also includes a short introduction to change and resistance, with a brief mention of Fox's frames of reference, though curiously leaves the radical frame unmentioned. 6 pages are not enough to do justice to the thorny issues of change, resistance and power, and there is no doubt that these topics would have deserved a stand-alone chapter to cover more contemporary thinking such as emergent approaches to change and authentic resistance. But clearly 6 pages give Bridgman and Cummings enough space to repeat their trick: they debunk the myth that grown up around Lewin's 3-step model.

Chapter 6 raises questions about the place of ethics and CSR in business. I have particularly enjoyed reading about the Quakers and ethical conduct. I am sure it will resonate with readers from the Asian, Middle Eastern, Latin American and African countries who might have experienced paternalistic, religious- or cultural-values-driven management and seen its impact on business conduct. The conclusion, Chapter 7, after having swirled through a wide array theories, counter-theories and behind-the-scene stories focuses right back on the three basic ideas that have set us on the search for the foundations of management theory:

- Much of management education is pro-managerialist in its approach and adopts a 'toolkit approach' (p. 118) without giving voice to the perspectives of those who are managed.

- To serve the expectations of the toolkit lovers' community, too many textbooks reproduce this pro-managerialism at the expense of misrepresenting theories.
- As a result, students of management are misguided to believe by skilfully utilising the tools in their kit managers can unproblematically mould their organisations and employees.

The book is an attempt to redress these problems by showing the reader that the singular ideological position they have been socialised into is much more complex and nuanced than it appears on the surface. And Chapter 7 is an invitation to reflect on what this means for creating new management theory and introducing it into the mainstream.

One weakness is the book's Western bias. Bridgman and Cummings recognise this as a limitation in Chapter 7 when they say 'while we promote new ways of thinking about Taylor, Smith and others, we are reinforcing the same old historical figures. They were not a diverse group, being almost exclusively white, male and Anglo-American' (p. 119). They then move on to review some of the recent calls made by scholars to incorporate more race- and gender-diverse perspectives in management theorising. Notwithstanding with the calls they make to revitalise management theory in Chapter 7, they do not give voice to these marginalised perspectives in the earlier chapters. Chapter 5 is an exception with its critical discussion of the masculine conceptions and perceptions of leadership. And I think the reader would have benefited more of these insights. For example, Chapter 5 could have been enriched by a discussion of indigenous leadership, besides women leadership. Or Chapter 7 could have been made more relevant to a wider international community by introducing perspectives on business ethics from Judaic and Islamic tradition, besides the impact the Quakers had.

This is important because I fear, unless the reader is adventurous enough to explore the wider field (often hidden behind the paywalls of academic journals and impenetrable jargon of academic articles), they are not provided with a way out of the stripped-down world of managerial mystifications of complex theories. Bridgman and Cummings address this problem head-on in Chapter 1 by showing how the pretentious mysteriousness of management research has paved the way for the creation and promotion of pop management promoted by management consultants, ‘thought leaders’ and ‘intellectual evangelists’ in TED talks and on social media. This book, considering the traction it created on social media, could have been a great place to start introducing new theories of management into the mainstream. The central craft of Bridgman and Cummings is to show how things have gone awry when management theories have been translated for popular consumption. But what are we left with? The realisation that our existing knowledge of management theories is misrepresented, misappropriated and one-sided? And the bitter awareness that as long as management education remains concerned with serving managers (and wannabe managers wanting to be socialised into thinking like a manager) we will have to read more of these crooked theories?

I am aware that with a comprehensive coverage of the alternatives, the book would have risked becoming yet another heavy textbook that nobody feels energised enough to read. But even the examples given throughout the book are ‘pale, stale and male’ to use Bridgman and Cumming’s terminology (p.119). The substantive examples provided in the book relate to Enron, Facebook, Theranos, Volvo, the Quakers and Cadbury. The other shorter examples are generalised instances (e.g. surveillance in call centres, the Orwellian doublespeak in the celebration of the gig worker). The reader could have been presented with an assortment of examples from different parts of the world. That would have captured the liveliness of life in organisations and the diversity of thinking around management. And it would have helped to balance out the

Western bias in the discussion of theories. But maybe that is for the 19th book in the VSFI series to address: *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Studying Management Differently!*

Overall, the book upholds its promise. In my library where the typical management textbook averages around 600 pages, with only 123 pages of content the book is 'very short'. Despite the brevity, the authors provide a critical perspective to a range of core topics that is far from superficial. Even though £15.99 is not cheap, with a price tag of one-third of a typical textbook, it is 'reasonably cheap'. When the price is weighted against the content, I can venture to say that it comes with triple the insights. I definitely found the book 'fairly interesting'. As a scholar already familiar with the ideas and theories discussed, and guilty of teaching the Maslow's Pyramid (!), it was a refreshing read.

Undergraduate or postgraduate students who may read this book as part of their studies may feel refreshed too, as the book stands as a complement to the larger management textbooks with its coverage of familiar theories, regurgitated in many learning resources, in a novel way. And with this novel approach, it stands as a provocation in that it reveals the fundamentally politicised nature of theory production in an educative way. It instils in its readers a healthy scepticism and a desire to unlearn and relearn knowledge about management. The book, by injecting scepticism, will inspire the reader 'to cultivate intellectual independence, to be exposed to a wide range of perspectives, to use these perspectives to generate different ways of understanding the world' (p. 3). Bridgman and Cummings will help the reader to take the first step by exposing the strengths and limitations of all perspectives. And they don't follow the well-trodden path. Uniquely, they highlight the light in the dark and the dark in the light. For example, they make us think how (the evil) Taylorism can help us to use scarce resources.

They introduce their readers, possibly the Millennials and Gen Z with a fearless attitude towards (the good) change and innovation, to the concept of change fatigue. I am optimistic that this book will make this group of readers think critically. Will it encourage them to search for alternatives? My qualified answer is no. This where the role of a second group of readers – educators, researchers and management practitioners – is crucial.

Bridgman and Cumming's efforts are necessary to bring down some of the mythical representations of the foundations of our field. But they are not enough on their own. We need to rebuild the field up. The authors close Chapter 1 by saying 'we hope that our stories of management theory's past will inspire innovation. We hope they encourage you to think anew about what management is and how it can be practised differently (and better) in the future' (p. 15). They certainly inspired me. And I hope it will inspire others too to collectively commit to incorporate the alternative wisdom to the mainstream and an effort to engage with a variety of audiences more readily.