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From horse handlers to text mongers

Abstract

One could say that management has been bounded by and bound to its etymological roots. Stemming from *manus*, the Latin word for “hand”, and the Italian word *maneggiare*, meaning “to handle” and “the handling of horses”, management has been encircled as an area subjected to the very same maneuvers found in the manège. On one hand management is considered to be about issues such as discipline and control, on the other it is seen as a powerful hierarchical and ordering function. The analogy between “handling of horses” and “handling of people” consequently brings to mind a symbolic universe of worker alienation, authoritarian principles, incentives and punishment, which not only limits management to a modernistic ethos of do’s and don’ts, but also for better or for worse has linked it to -isms such as Taylorism and capitalism.

The modernist ethos of management has of course not stood uncontested. In light of postmodern, cultural and discursive twist and turns, management has been extensively challenged, criticized, deconstructed and reconstructed. However, many of the management critics have in turn been criticized for acting in accordance with the very same managerial world view they are opposing, thereby rather enforcing the power and range of the modernist ethos than undermining and/or altering it. For instance, scholars within the CMS tradition are more or less on a regularly basis accused of not being enough critical, whereas Marxist oriented researchers are blamed for reinforcing the opposition between management and workers.

Instead of equating management with “handling of horses”, management in this paper, in order to shed some light upon the modernist ethos of management and its critics and to possibly outline a meta-critique, will be approached as “mongering of texts”, and conceptualized as a double-edged writing practice. On one hand

management is understood as an inscription device which engraves the modernistic ethos on to the organizational bodies; on the other hand management is viewed as a literary genre, i.e. a culturally mediated pattern of production and consumption of texts. The turns thus taken are media-historian and literary ones, but specifically focus is put upon the concept of *narrative styles* as introduced by Erich Auerbach (1953/1968). In his influential essay *Odysseus' Scar* Auerbach chiseled out two narrative styles which he argued have had determining influences upon Western literary representation of reality: the Homeric as expressed in *The Odyssey* and the Old Testament, specifically as externalized in the story of Abraham's Sacrifice.

In perspective of these two narrative styles, the overarching question raised is how management is being written in theory as well as in practice. The argument brought forward is that the ethos of management very well might be held captured in between Homeric's enchanting digressions and taciturn truth claims of the Old Testament. On one hand management invites the reader to engage with management "as it is" in a joyful manner; on the other management subjects the reader to a never-ending study of the alluring, but evasive phenomenon labeled "management".