

## Relations industrielles Industrial Relations



*The Philosophical Foundations of Management Thought*, By  
Jean-Etienne Joullié and Robert Spillane (2015) New York:  
Lexington Books, 347 pages. ISBN: 978-0-7391-8602-2

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repérer des ‘trous’ dans la littérature qu’il s’agirait ensuite de combler par l’élaboration de questions de recherche ciblées » (p.90), davantage susceptible d’intéresser les initiés. Les chercheurs critiques (généralement plus attirés par les audiences qui débordent largement des cénacles académiques) sont plutôt préoccupés par « [...] l’adoption d’une posture réflexive qui favorise la ‘problématisation’, en suscitant des questions de recherche inattendues » (p.90) et, donc, susceptibles de conduire à une transformation sociétale. Pour parvenir à leurs fins, ils n’hésitent pas à remettre en cause les postulats qui sous-tendent la littérature existante et à interroger les positions dominantes du champ. Il convient toutefois de remarquer, nous disent les auteurs, que les recherches critiques au sujet de la gestion s’institutionnalisent de plus en plus et font l’objet d’un nombre grandissant de reproches qui ne sont pas toujours accueillis comme ils le devraient.

Si la contribution de Nizet et Pichault est d’une grande valeur, elle nous a tout de même un peu laissé sur notre faim. Tout d’abord, nous ne pouvons qu’être très surpris du fait qu’ils ont complètement passé sous silence le phénomène du syndicalisme et le champ d’études des relations industrielles. Historiquement très présentes dans les pays anglo-saxons, ces dernières adressent bel et bien la question de la gestion des entreprises dans une perspective critique, non ? Le deuxième point qui nous a semblé avoir été un peu négligé par les auteurs est celui de la question des ordres professionnels et des regroupements de professionnels, notamment en ce qui a trait à la gestion des ressources humaines. Pourquoi ne pas leur avoir fait une place plus importante ? N’ont-ils pas, justement, la capacité de fédérer les études critiques et de les intégrer dans les parcours de formation continue à l’intention de leurs membres ?

Malgré les deux observations précédentes, il appert que l’ouvrage de Nizet et Pichault devrait occuper une place très

importante dans la bibliothèque de toutes les personnes s’intéressant de près ou de loin à la question de la gestion des entreprises.

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### **The Philosophical Foundations of Management Thought**

By Jean-Etienne Joullié and Robert Spillane  
(2015) New York: Lexington Books,  
347 pages. ISBN: 978-0-7391-8602-2.

The *Philosophical Foundations of Management Thought* is a unique book. It is not an especially easy read. Indeed, between its lines it shouts something that I sort of know but, perhaps, don’t want to think about: there is no substitute for hard work! On the upside, the book also reminds me—and reminded me as I was finishing it in particular—that hard work pays off. Let me be clear: this is a treatise that achieves much for its reader and for the practice of management. It is a heavy-hitter. When enough people get to know it exists (and this is a shout-out to make it compulsory reading for graduate management courses), it will be on its way to greatness.

The authors of this work not only do their (tough) job well, but they accomplish a lot that I am not sure even they are aware of. The first, and perhaps most obvious, thing that the book does is provide a comprehensive and critical primer on key influential philosophies of Western civilisation. The authors reveal themselves to be expert communicators about this material. They have a deft and focused way of dealing with their subject matter. They make clean distinctions between what is said by philosophers and orthodox interpretations of such words. Within each chapter, before they get to issues of management application, they disclose implicitly, and through example, the importance of a solid classical

education. In talking to we who are interested in management, work and employment, the authors disabuse us. They make us realise, in a polite and respectful way—a way that comes with the confidence generated from being an expert—that we are not as smart as we think we are. The message is possibly the most humbling lesson of all solid *exposés* of history's great thinkers: our key problem as know-it-alls and self-proclaimed geniuses is that everything we think we have invented or created ourselves has already been done—and done better, a lot better! The word "better" here deserves attention. In our lives, when we come up with a theory, perhaps a seemingly improved way of doing something, we have actually only solved a small piece of a bigger puzzle. This is akin to getting only one of the six sides of a Rubik's cube to be a uniform colour. So "better"—when referring to how the greats have a decided edge over modern geniuses like you and I—is the idea that: first, our solution was never really ground-breaking or innovative; second, that our piece of the solution wasn't optimal; and third, our piece is only a slice of a much larger cake that we have probably forgotten about. Insofar as the book is concerned, we subtly receive this/ these missive(s) largely before we even get to the issue of application of philosophy to the problem of modern management. It is here, when the rubber of philosophy hits the road of management practice, that the embarrassment intensifies.

Having given an overview of the message and contribution(s) of the book, let me go to its structure—which is pretty much uniform for each of its substantive sections. The work has 12 chapters dealing, in the first half of each mostly in chronological order, with key philosophical movements from antiquity to modern times. We start with a review of Homer and heroism and then move to Greek rationalism, the ideas of Nicholas Machiavel operating in the Italian renaissance, French rationalism, British

empiricism, positivism and the birth of the scientific method, critical rationalism, German romanticism, heroic individualism, psychoanalysis, French existentialism and, finally, post-modernism. In the second half of each chapter, we are introduced to the hypothesis that key aspects of the practice of management appear to have been influenced by the previously-discussed philosophy but, in general, so impacted unwittingly, naively, partially or without an understanding of context. For example, Peter Drucker's *Management by objectives* is interpreted as largely a bastardisation of heroism, as espoused in Homer's *Iliad*. Each view embodies the notion that the end justifies the means; dispassionate attainment of goals is the most important measure of a manager's worth and such accomplishment ultimately earns an actor the right to throw his weight around. Later we get to Machiavelli. No particular modern theorist is associated with him but it is made clear that contemporary consulting gurus have largely misunderstood much of his message—delivered mostly in *The Prince*—but nonetheless been able to create an industry that feeds off it. The book continues in this vein; a critical overview of the source of a modern philosophy and an examination of how it gets partially applied—and therefore misapplied—in different strains of contemporary management thinking.

A message I got on my journey of reading was that there is obdurate disconnect between the real origins of ideas and their modern manifestation. Perhaps more disconcerting, and implied more than said directly, is that management theorists and their acolytes are mostly content for such disconnect to exist. In fact, they probably perpetuate it. After all, the living gurus would never want to relegate themselves to middle men—brokers take a mere commission whereas producers really clean-up. Maybe none of this matters. Who cares if living guys are able to bandy around with authority (and without acknowledgment)

the ideas of dead guys and make a little money—right! Such reasoning may hold-up, particularly as there is no real intellectual property involved. It is not as though the descendants of Plato, Socrates, or Aristotle can be identified and sent a royalty cheque each time elements of their worldview are applied with fidelity. But, there is a little problem, the modern guys don't really understand what the greats meant. Indeed, they probably never read their words but rather just have caricatures and abstractions of the key messages passed to them through a hybrid process possibly involving assimilating aspects of contemporary culture and a mechanism described by Karl Jung in his account of how ancestral memories are inherited. In such a state of (at least) partial ignorance, they – the modern experts - intensify an already existing vested interest in keeping consideration of the real study of philosophy off the agenda for us all. We, the real people, can't allow this to happen. When I finished the last page I was convinced that we as teachers and theoreticians must drag our students (and ourselves) kicking and screaming back to the classics. These are some of the messages I got out of this book—alongside a wonderful, albeit at times challenging, revision of the basics.

When I started this review I used the expression “heavy-hitter” to describe Joullié and Spillane's latest work. As a boxing fanatic I like this expression. A buddy of mine asked me yesterday what the book was like to read and whether he should use it in his graduate courses. In sticking with the themes of greatness and sparring, I told him: “What Mike Tyson is to prize-fights, this work is to management education.” Colleagues, read it! Make your students read it! If you do, you will reinvent our discipline—and make it better.

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## **(R)évolution du management des ressources humaines. Des compétences aux capacités**

Coordonné par Solveig Fernagu Oudet  
et Christian Batal (2016) Villeneuve d'Ascq :  
Presses Universitaires du Septentrion,  
426 pages. ISBN : 978-2-7574-1275-6.

Sous la plume d'universitaires, chercheurs et praticiens de disciplines différentes (sciences de gestion, sciences de l'éducation, économie, ergonomie, sociologie), ce livre, publié dans la collection « Métiers et pratiques de formation », se compose de 29 chapitres regroupés en trois parties. Une première partie narre l'histoire, l'usage et les champs d'intervention des compétences; une deuxième analyse plus spécifiquement les apports et ambiguïtés des systèmes de gestion des compétences; et une troisième convoque un nouveau paradigme, inspiré de l'approche fondée sur les « capacités » d'Amartya Sen. L'objectif général de cet ouvrage est de répondre à la question posée en introduction par les deux coordinateurs : « le terme de compétence a-t-il déjà donné tout ce qu'il avait à offrir ? »

Pour répondre à cette question, un détour historique est réalisé afin de resituer l'origine de la notion de compétence et discuter son déploiement ainsi que ses évolutions dans l'usage. Les auteurs de la première partie s'y sont attelés, soulignant le caractère flou, multiple, pluriel de la notion et les nombreux domaines dans lesquels elle s'est exprimée. Gilbert insiste sur le caractère nomade des compétences et conte une histoire en quatre temps, liée aux dispositifs dans lesquels cette notion s'inscrit. Oiry évoque un « travail social » en train de se faire, marqué par une pluralité de discours et d'acteurs. Des acteurs dont les engagements apparaissent formatés par des conceptions implicites et idéologiques relevées par Coulet. Le constat partagé est celui d'une notion ambiguë, porteuse de malentendus. Koebel rappelle que cette notion est toujours liée à la reconnaissance