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“Management and Microeconomics: A historical comparison between the British and the French traditions”

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Résumé - L’objet de cette contribution est de mettre en évidence les circonstances et la nature du processus d’émergence des sciences de gestion au sein de l’analyse économique dans les années 1950 en Grande-Bretagne et en France. Il s’agit aussi d’observer les variations des frontières entre ces deux sciences sociales ; et de comprendre leur signification analytique et méthodologique en tenant compte des différents contextes historiques et culturels au sein desquels elles se sont inscrites.

Abstract – This article seeks to analyse the circumstances and the nature of the emergence of management research from economic analysis in the 1950s in Britain and France. It also looks at the more recent shifts in the boundaries between these two social sciences; and to understand their analytical and methodological significance by taking into account the different historical and cultural contexts within which they were embedded.

JEL codes: B21; B41; M10 ; M21

Key words: Microeconomics; Management research; Intellectual traditions; Methodology

INTRODUCTION

The process of emergence of management research from economic analysis is related to intellectual history and has to be understood in the realm of the history of management thought, which relies on two main approaches. *The first one* defines it in a broad sense as either the evolution of ‘coherent theories or systems of management’, or ‘more generally to ‘thinking about management’, ideas about the meaning, purpose, function and tasks of management which are important and relevant but do not necessarily amount to a coherent overall theory’ (Witzel, 2012, pp. 13-14). Based on this definition, few scholars – mostly American - attended to write a history of management thought since the 1970s (George, 1968; Wren, 1972; Pollard, 1974; Witzel, 2011), mainly focusing on management practices and management schools of thought such as Taylorism and scientific management, the emergence of organization theory with the contribution of Fayol and the human relations movement. Most of them started their accounts of management practices in early civilizations in the near and far East, South Asia, and even Egypt, Greece and Rome before reviewing the most recent ‘theories’. Diffused in various management textbooks, these historical accounts share the same American perspective while the evolution of management thought is mainly reduced to the history of management practices.

Beside these historical accounts, *a second approach*, more conceptual, seeks to develop a history of management thought which is more in line with the evolution of concepts introduced in academic research centers; borrowed from other disciplines, as for instance, industrial organization and the theory of the firm (Child, 1969; Lebraty, 2000; Wilson and Thomson, 2006). This second approach includes more European contributions to the field with a more ‘local’-oriented history, as concerned with specific national intellectual traditions such as, for example, in Japan (Nishizawa, 2011), in Britain (Arena, 2011; Minkes, 2011) or in France (David, Hatchuel and Laufer, 2012; 2013; Marco, 2022). The history of management thought

has always been seen as a “rather underdeveloped area of study especially when one compares it to the history of economic thought” (Lofthouse and Vint, 1976, p. 89)¹. By contrast, history of economic thought has, indeed, substantially grown since the mid-19th century and has often questioned its position *vis-à-vis* other social sciences (Arena, Dow, Klaes, 2013).

This article mainly aims to contribute to the *second approach* to the history of management thought and to get it closer to the history of economic thought. In particular, it seeks to assess the roots of the discipline as a reaction to economic analysis. It shows how early management scholars sought to ensure a certain degree of independence by rejecting some central concepts and methodologies used in microeconomics. As the American development of management thought has been significantly documented in the literature, it focuses on a comparison between two national cases that have been less explored, namely France and Britain, from 1950s onwards.

This comparative analysis allows to throw light on two different trajectories of institutional evolution, regarding respective theoretical developments (understanding of the concept of the firm; approaches on behaviour and rationality; and new subfields as marketing or finance) and methodological orientations. In line with its main objective, this article falls in three main sections. Section one exposes the British case, while section two, in turn, discusses the French one. Section three introduces the main results of a comparative analysis and analyses the influence of both historical and cultural context on more recent shifts in the boundaries between microeconomics and industrial organization on the one hand, and management research on the other.

¹ Authors added at the time: “Not only is the quantity of literature much smaller in the management area, but the major management writers of today do not seem to be attracted into the field in the way that, for example, Schumpeter, Stigler and Viner have been in the area of economic thought” (Lofthouse and Vint, 1976).

1. THE BRITISH CASE: MULTIDISCIPLINARITY AND OPENNESS IN MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

In Britain, management teaching and research mainly emerged in the 1960s. This process of emergence was eased by a series of reports all published in 1963 from the National Economic Development Council, the Committee on Higher Education (Lord Robbin's *Higher Education Report*) and the British Institute of Management (Lord Frank's *British Business Schools Report*) (Arena, 2011). Yet and unlike the French process of institutionalization which has always referred to management research or studies as "*sciences de gestion*", pinning down a relevant label for what is researched (and taught) in British business schools still remains challenging. Since its emergence, the overall discipline has been designated by different labels, such as "business organization", "business administration", "business studies", "management", "management sciences", "management studies", "organization studies", "organizational theory", "management research" ... The difficulty to pin down a specific label on the discipline gets even higher when one categorizes knowledge about management and organizations as a set of business functions which are researched and taught inside British Business Schools, such as "marketing", "finance", "accounting", "human resources management" ... that are also often analyzed from the perspective of other social sciences (sociology, economics, psychology, or even mathematics).

As a result, the following section first provides some elements of context that characterize the British trajectory of evolution in management research. Then, sections 1.2 and 1.3. respectively discuss the theoretical nature of British management research regarding the concept of the firm (1.2.) and approaches on behaviour and rationality (1.3.). The last section discusses the evolution of the field's methodological orientations (1.4.).

1.1. MANAGEMENT RESEARCH IN BRITAIN: CONTEXTS OF EMERGENCE AND EVOLUTION

The main characteristics of the emergence of management research in Britain is its scattered and heterogenous nature, strongly dependent on the intellectual tradition developed in local university contexts and, often, as a result of unintended consequences and institutional power struggles.

Until the 1960s, management studies were gradually established in the British teaching agenda; yet the few elected chairs having relatively little time to engage in research². The creation of three private colleges - the Administrative Staff College at Henley (1945), Roffey Park Institute (1946) and Ashridge College (1959) – strongly contributed to the development of British management education with no corresponding research program. Embryonic management research was most commonly undertaken from 1937 onwards in Nuffield College (University of Oxford, endowed by the Nuffield Foundation) and after 1947 with the creation of the Tavistock Institute (sponsored by the Rockefeller Institute) and of the British Institute of Management (1947)³ (Arena, 2011). During this period, management research did not have an established identity as scholars imported methods from “anthropology, applied economics, economic and social history, industrial relations, social psychology or sociology” (Morris, 2011, p. 34). At the time, only two British specialized academic journals published management research, namely the *Human relations Journal* (1947) and the *Journal of the Operational Research Society* (1950).

² Sargent Florence was elected as the first Professor of Commerce at Birmingham University in 1929 (Arena, Minkes, 2019). In 1953, Murphy witnessed the existence of only three Professors in Industrial Relations at Cardiff, Leeds and Cambridge and one Professor of Management at the LSE.

³ Further details about the early development of management research at the Tavistock Institute and the British Institute of Management could be found in Miller and Rose (1988) and Caswill and Wensely (2007).

Dialogue with economists was rather intuitive as initial degrees in Management were often jointly designed with Master programs in Economics⁴. Also, economics departments were often consulted and associated when imagining the eventual creation of these new centers / schools in management. That was the case in Oxford, for instance, where the Board of the Faculty of Social Studies agreed to form a special Committee on management studies, in 1961, that was chaired by John Hicks, Professor of Economics⁵.

In 1963, an increasing proportion of funding available for social science research as well as the changing institutional landscape marked by the increased number of universities following the Robbins Report led to the establishment of the London and Manchester Business Schools. Although the establishment of management teaching and research in the US arose earlier, British business schools were not intended to mimic their American counterparts. As early as 1961, Nuffield College (Oxford) started an investigation into the possibility of developing management studies in Oxford and sent John Wright (a Fellow in Economics) for three months in the United-States to visit American business schools. In his report that circulated in 1962, Wright reported his very little enthusiasm to establish a business school in Oxford. The report outlined the irony of the matter as a whole: business studies could start being taught at the university level on condition that research in the discipline already existed. In the same vein, according to Lord Franks: “It is impossible to select any one American business school and transplant its ways of life, purposes, methods and curricula *holus bolus* into British soil, and expect the result to be successful” (Franks, 1963: 4).

Overall, early management education in the UK was distinctively British as the first established degrees were B.Phil./ M.Phil. and not MBAs⁶.

⁴ That was the case of the first B.Phil. in Management Studies at Oxford (1963) which had some joint lectures with the B.Phil. in Industrial Economics (Ibid.)

⁵ Minutes of the Board of the Faculty of Social Studies, 2nd February 1961, Oxford Management Studies Archives hold at the Bodleian Library.

⁶ For further details, cf. the content of the first B.Phil. in Management Studies established in Oxford in 1963 (Arena, 2011).

The institutionalization of the discipline from the 1960s onwards led to the establishment of three additional academic journals on the period: the *British Journal of Industrial Relations* (1962), the *Journal of Management Studies* (1963) and *Long-Range Planning* (1968).

Overall, the orientation of the discipline remained largely applied, since financially supported by the industry and therefore results driven, all over the country. There was no unique intellectual tradition in British management research. Yet, as already argued, early conceptual developments were not intended to import the American thought in management research and were strongly inspired by other social sciences (applied economics, in particular) as it will be shown in the next sections.

1.2. THE SPECIFIC NATURE OF THE FIRM IN EARLY BRITISH MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

Despite the fragmentation of the field in sub-disciplines, concepts of “firm” and “organization” were the initial and main objects of studies in management research. Although directly influenced by microeconomics - and in particular, applied economics -, management research sought to open the ‘black box’ of the firm and started considering it as a complex organization. This is evidenced by the content of the first issue of the *Journal of Management Studies* in 1964, which dealt with topics such as flexibility, centralisation, behaviour, structure and industrial relations. Yet, as already noted, there was no single national tradition in the early development of management research and it is worth scrutinizing some archetypal early traditions in the most representative research centres of the country. Two archetypes of conceptualisation could be stressed here, both directly shaped by the evolution of microeconomics, and in particular theories of the firm and industrial organization. First, prior to the 1960s, the London School of Economics (LSE, henceforth) and Birmingham were representative of a particular shift of the boundaries between economic analysis and business studies, mainly stressing a desire towards empiricism, as an alternative to pure economic theory. Then, from the 1960s onwards,

Cambridge and Oxford revealed another type of boundaries shift from respectively industrial economics and applied economics, focusing on innovation management and the growth of the firm.

The LSE accounting tradition in cost theory and business administration (1930s-1970s) – The influence of economic analysis on accounting has been a recurring feature in the discipline at LSE (Napier, 2019). As early as 1919, the School established the second Chair of Accounting in the country and trained a new generation of economic theorists who applied their ideas to practical business problems. In the 1930s, under the leadership of Arnold Plant, the School pursued its development in accounting research, with a particular orientation towards commerce and business economics (Coase, 1987). Plant was an applied economist interested by industrial organization and very much concerned with empirical observations⁷.

Early members of Plant's group were Ronald Coase (later a Nobel Laureate in Economics), George Thirlby and Ronald Edwards. After a career in professional accounting, Edwards was appointed as an assistant lecturer at the LSE in 1935 and helped developing the opportunity cost tradition, especially with his analysis of cost accounting and income measurement (Edwards, 1937; Edwards, Black, 1938). Edward's organization of an evening seminar in problems of administration evidenced the economics roots of the LSE accounting tradition (Arena, Minkes, 2019).

Overall, the LSE tradition in business administration considered the firm as an alternative to market (in terms of transaction costs) and as an entity that gathered financial statements and accounting costs that had to make decisions about costs (and by definition to measure them, as a prerequisite). Coase's notion of opportunity costs, defined as an avoidable cost, established a

⁷ This intellectual tradition developed distinctively from the orientations taken by another LSE research group led by Lionel Robbins which was more interested in pure economic theory and whom members were Friedrich Hayek, Knut Wicksell, John Hicks, and Nicholas Kaldor.

link with the economist's notion of marginal cost, in a context of uncertainty and risk (Coase, 1938: 537).

The Birmingham tradition on labour and organizational behaviour (1920s-1970s) – The University of Birmingham had a long tradition in applied economics, mainly developed at the Faculty of Commerce, created in 1902. Philip Sargant Florence, who was elected as the first Professor of Commerce in 1929 developed his main research interests in economics and sociology of industry and was more specifically concerned with issues of ownership and control in large companies. His understanding of economic analysis contrasted with standard British economics in those days, since as early as 1924, he considered the firm as an organizational structure and a unit of labour. This view of the firm strongly differed from the firm as a 'black box' aiming at profit maximization (Arena, 2014). He questions the then standard hypothesis of the logical efficiency of large-scale production based on a measure of efficiency only in terms of minimum costs, maximum profits and maximum utility. As a more realistic alternative, Sargant Florence argues that actual facts of industry negate this hypothesis and point out the importance of economic, psychological and sociological factors. To him, labour relations and the human factor played a crucial role in the understanding of the growth of modern corporations. In his analysis of the firm, Sargant Florence showed for the first time how one could measure the impacts of human factors, such as fatigue, illness, accidents and labour turnover on efficiency and profitability.

Sargant Florence's intellectual contribution gave rise to further research in industrial organisation from a more oriented-business studies perspective. As an illustration of this research tendency, in his 1972 inaugural lecture at Birmingham, business organization Professor Leonard Minkes showed the importance of contributing to the development of "business behaviour" and "business strategy". The firm was therefore seen as a network of

hierarchical and lateral forms in a world in which “knowledge is incomplete, imperfect and dispersed”.

The technological tradition in Cambridge (1960s-1980s) – The first evidence of the existence of management studies in Cambridge can be found in 1972 with the publication of the Mott report that was commissioned by a senate subcommittee in order to give recommendations on the planning aspects of the relationships between Cambridge University and science-based industry. The report recommended the establishment of a Science Park which officially established in 1972. Cambridge gradually realised that business training was increasingly needed to acquire the appropriate skills to run an engineering firm and started to think more seriously about the development of management research in response to the innovative environment of the Cambridge Science Park. The Science Park became particularly influential in the intellectual orientation of management research at Cambridge. The firm was seen as a unit of innovation shaped by regional economic development in which entrepreneurs played a key role. The Cambridge University Small Business Research Centre brought together a group of academics drawn from two different departments: Applied Economics and Geography and was hosted by the Department of Applied Economics. The Centre’s primary function was, yet, closely concerned with management issues as it aimed to integrate data on industrial organisation, firm behaviour and organisational change and to apply it to the study of small companies.

The Oxford tradition in industrial economics and the theory of the firm (1960s-1980s) - While the inter-war period in Cambridge was animated by theoretical debates which have been later qualified as the years of High Theory, Oxford economists gradually developed a more empirical approach to economics, also in response to developments on imperfect competition. This trend largely resulted from two prior institutional developments: The Oxford Economists Research Group (OERG) in 1936 as well as the Oxford Institute of Statistics in 1935 (Arena, 2011).

Overall, Oxford economists sought to assess the importance of industrial facts, ‘things of life’ and to evaluate the realism and practical usefulness of economic theory.

In the 1960s, despite the various oppositions to the establishment of management studies at Oxford, the persistence of an economist of the firm, Norman Leyland led him to create a privately funded centre in management studies⁸. The research group was to pursue: “studies of interest to management in industry, commerce, finance or public administration” ([Sir Claus Moser, chairman] Report on the Future of Management Studies, 1988: 32). The Oxford Centre for Management Studies was incorporated in 1965 as a company limited by guarantee and was not recognised as a university institution but obtained the status of “associated institution”. Norman Leyland became the first Director and provided the main research orientations of the Centre. He was lecturing “managerial economics” which he saw as “the application of economic concepts to management problems” and with the aim to “develop the manager’s awareness of his problems by examining them from the point of view of an outside analytical observer”. Leyland was trained as an economist of the firm and took part in the enquiries conducted by the Oxford Economists’ Research Group in the early 1960s. His research interests were concerned with business investment and sources of growth of the firm. Two papers on this matter were published in March 1964 in the *Oxford Economic Papers*⁹. The method of this enquiry is described by George Richardson and Norman Leyland in their introductory article “The Growth of Firms” of the March 1964 issue. The firm was seen as a unit of growth. Ironically, the intellectual orientation of early management research at Oxford was, in fact, so close to applied economics that industrial economist even felt threatened by its development hoping that “the name [of Industrial Economics] does not become too popular and dwindle into

⁸ The justification of the Centre, being privately funded was expressed by Norman Leyland, as follows: “[...] we think that administratively the best way of achieving this is by establishing an institution completely independent of University control so as to be free to experiment, yet drawing upon the teaching resources available in Oxford and at the same time contributing a new element to these resources.” (in Graves, 2001: 18).

⁹ At that time, Norman Leyland was the general editor of the *Oxford Economic Papers* and John Wright, its secretary.

a synonym for Management Studies” (Elizabeth Brunner, *The training of academic industrial economists*’, Talk to Frank Friday Group, not dated, but estimated in 1961: 1-2).

1.3. BRITISH APPROACHES ON BEHAVIOUR AND RATIONALITY

As already argued, it is rather challenging to identify a unified approach on behaviour and rationality in early British management research. What was certainly common to all British intellectual developments was a desire for a paradigm shift. Because of the empirical tradition of observations of industrial facts and business behaviour, there has been an early (and permanent) rejection of the perfect rationality assumption, then central to microeconomic theory. This idea could be illustrated by three specific intellectual contexts that fuelled the development of British management research, namely Birmingham, Oxford and Manchester.

As early as 1927, in Birmingham, Sargent Florence argued for the urgent need to study executives’ behaviour, in a realistic framework. He claimed that « the unaided reason of economists cannot possibly cope with the infinite possibilities of man’s behaviour; economists must continually take precautions against rational assumptions by the teaching of fairy-tales, nursery rhymes, and nonsense jingles. » (Sargent Florence, 1927). This view of economic rationality and behaviour was pursued in early management research at Birmingham in the 1960s as business organization research was to some extent influenced by Herbert Simon’s assumption of bounded rationality. Minkes remembers having read Simon and being influenced by his study of managerial decision-making, especially as to understand decisions underlying the corporate behaviour. At the time, micro-economic theory had little interest in understanding the nature of decision-processes in firms and the Birmingham tradition aimed at studying it in an intimate association with the study of corporate structure as well as with the behaviour of the individual executive. It was argued that the executive in an organization looks at his decisions not only specifically, but also in relation to their organisational consequences (Arena, Minkes, 2019).

This ambition to understand real business behaviour was also present in the late 1930s inquiries conducted by the Oxford Economists' Research Group (OERG), and especially with the famous Hall-Hitch exposition of the 'full-cost principle' (Hall, Hitch, 1939). It was the first time that theorists had inquired into actual business practice¹⁰. The results of their survey appeared to conflict the received doctrine of the time, in particular the conventional assumption of maximization in terms of equalisation of the marginal cost and the marginal revenue. In fact, Hall and Hitch justified the full cost principle by the argument that "producers cannot know their demand or marginal revenue curves" (Hall, Hitch, 1939: 22). The study of business behaviour and decisions in real organizational contexts and market conditions were therefore incompatible with the conventional assumption of perfect rationality. This incompatibility was recognised by the instigator of management research at Oxford who stressed the benefits of the OERG in a paradigm shift in economics. To him, « the most substantial benefits to economists attending meetings of the group take the form, not of precise and communicable findings, but of an enhanced sense of, or feeling for, the general atmosphere in which business decisions are made." (Richardson, Leyland, 1964: 1). In the same vein, at Oxford, early contributions of W. Grigor McClelland, first Oxford research fellow in management studies appointed at Balliol College in 1962, are illustrative of this paradigm shift¹¹. McClelland was initially the managing director of a family-owned group of grocery stores and studied decision-making processes from a very empirical perspective. This is evidenced by his article on the "Economics of Supermarket" published in the *Economic Journal* in 1962. The view of McClelland exemplifies

¹⁰ They used questionnaires for a sample of 38 firms; the results of their investigation showed that a significant proportion of these firms set their prices according to the 'full-cost' principle. Among the 38 firms investigated, none used a technique of optimisation to set prices, while 12 firms investigated 'adhered to the 'full cost' policy'. Typically, the company would make an *ex-ante* estimate of its output for the coming year, determining then the average cost (direct costs, e.g. labour, materials, energy, per unit of product) and then add to it one or more percentage margins for profit– the "mark-up". They insisted that this pricing mechanism was a "rule of thumb" and could result in maximum profits by accident only.

¹¹ Further details of the appointment of McClelland could be found in the following local newspapers: 'Balliol College Experiment, Fellowship in Management', *The Oxford Mail*, 3rd October 1961; 'Balliol Seedling', *The Times*, 04th October 1961; 'Fellowship in Management Studies', *Oxford Times*, 6th October 1961; 'Business Fellow', *Oxford Mail*, 23rd January 1962; Research Fellow's Three-Year Study, *The Times*, 24th January 1962.

the general position towards organizational theory at the time, since he was the founding editor of the *Journal of Management Studies* in 1963 and therefore influenced the scientific orientations of management research.

Management research in Oxford sought to look at how decisions are made “in practice”, believing that no general theory of decisions could hope to compete with the complexity of the real world. This was also shared by the contribution of Rosemary Stewart, one of the first fellow in management studies at Oxford who positioned this analysis *vis-à-vis* the more traditional economic perspective. In her book, *The Reality of Management* (1963: 89), she argued that “the traditional economist’s picture of the businessman is of a rational being who, under the pressure of competition, carefully weighs the costs of one action against another and is preoccupied with marginal costs and marginal utility. Managers, even though they may consider this description of business behaviour to be too academic, will probably still stress the rational element in their decisions – although they may allow that the decisions made by others are often not as objective as they should be”.

This paradigm shift concerning behaviour and rationality was also central to management research at Manchester, which was one out of the two first business schools established in Britain. Interestingly, McClelland moved from Oxford to create Manchester Business School in 1965 and early expressed his desire to integrate research and teaching in management education (McClelland, 1974). During the late 1960s, the school benefited from acquiring the Centre for Business Research (CBR) from the Faculty of Economic and Social Studies, which had been initially set up to “promote research into problems of business management jointly between academics and industrialists” (Wilson, 1992: 90). At the time, one of the major research projects in the research centre was led by Professor Douglas Hague who mainly investigated pricing decisions. The publication of his major textbook *Managerial Economics: Analysis for Business Decisions*, in 1969, is quite significant of how academic studies on

decision-making were gradually shifting away from standard microeconomic theory. His assumption on economic rationality was made already clear in one of his prior articles where an empirical investigation allowed him to argue that businessmen were taking decisions in a context of uncertainty and risk.

In line with the strong empirical orientation of business studies and managerial economics, British approaches on business behaviour and rationality in early management research clearly reacted from the well-established rational choice paradigm in economics.

1.4. MANAGEMENT RESEARCH, METHODOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY

British specificity in management research was tangible in the methodologies adopted by business and management researchers as there “was an emphasis on ethnographic, historical, operational and systems methodologies reflecting the disciplinary bases of many of these early researchers” (Morris, 2011: 35). British approaches were empirically-grounded, favouring a dialog with industrialists and businessmen to confront theory to the real business world and to build new relevant concepts, in the perspective of increasing rigor in the field (Arena, Minkes, 2019). Despite this pluralistic approach, there was a lack of formal methodologies as it is reported that “outside the fields of economics, management science and operational research, analytical mathematics and advanced forms of statistical analysis were generally avoided because these early researchers lacked the skills, training, computing equipment and interest required to pursue these methods” (Morris, 2011: 36). This strong empiricism echoed the ongoing collaborations between academic researchers in management and governmental institutions which led to various publications of government reports (in industrial relations, for instance).

Consistently with its empirical tradition, British management research was shaped by initial empirical studies conducted in industrial economics and business organization and did not

constitute a particular disruption from empirical methods already used by economic theorists of the firm (such as questionnaires and interviews). Epistemological issues are rather absent from early management research, as what mattered more was the rigor-relevance paradox which allowed a diversity of methods in the fields.

On the one side, early management research sought to follow the methodological rigour and the formalism characterized by economic analysis. The LSE tradition in accounting is quite significant of this tendency, as pointed out by Ronald Coase in 1938 who referred to “major difficulties”, due to “the lack of uniformity in the practice of accountants and also, which is to some extent the reason for this, the obscurity of much of their reasoning and the distinctions which they employ”. To Coase, “an improvement in accounting theory would materially assist the work of economic research” (Coase, 1938: 12).

Yet, despite this desire to build a rigorous body of knowledge, the objective of early management research contrasted with economic analysis formalism as it aimed at challenging “fascination of economic analysis and model-building” that had attracted a high proportion of the “ablest minds amongst economists away from empirical research”. The dialog with industrialists also aimed at providing a better understanding of the “actual operations of firms and industries” before drawing any of the big issues in industrial organisation (Edwards, in Arena, Minkes, 2019). This need for relevance was also stressed by Sargent Florence in Birmingham who thought it “strange that economics, which is supposed to be a science and not a branch of applied mathematics, should be so late in analysing one of its chief subject matters – industry” (Sargent Florence, 1961, xiii). In particular, he outlined the difficulty which economists trained in “abstract, almost scholastic, deduction find in grappling with the real world, and their allergy to analysis based on measurement of the facts and on the behaviour and motives of actual persons and bodies of person” (*Ibid.*).

This initial view of methodologies in management studies was followed by the integration of teaching, research and consultancy with the early development of business schools in the 1960s. This integration prevented the field from developing in a dual system where there would be purists working out logical implications of hypotheses and developing pure management theory, on the one side, and empiricists collecting industrial facts in a descriptive case study reasoning, on the other side. In a 1974 article, McClelland, then Director of the Manchester Business School, described the main stages in management research. The first stage of the research process corresponds to “problem identification” (generally coming from the real business world). Once the problem identified and the research question clearly stated, the management researcher has to move towards two complementary stages that interact with each other: i) data collection and ii) development of a theory. As a result of this research process, the realistic nature of the hypotheses is key to the validity of the any models in management. To McClelland “the management researcher has to be sensitive to situations in their totality, to immerse himself in them to be prepared to frame his hypotheses in the light of his understanding of them, and to modify his hypotheses in iterative fashion as the facts suggest” (McClelland, 1974: 51). Hence, to some extent, management research process aimed at bridging the “gap between economic theory and economic fact”. The collection of data was, most of all, used to infer theory from factual observations, as already pointed out in an earlier tradition of thought (Edwards and Townsend, 1958).

If there was no general desire in management research to make generalisations from studies of firms but rather to favour the emergence of ‘recurring themes’ while comparing them, data collected were mostly used for case evidence that could enrich an initial conceptual framework (e.g. decision-making; organizational design; costs and revenues management...)

2. THE FRENCH CASE: THEORETICAL UNIFICATION AND SPECIFICITY OF “*SCIENCES DE GESTION*”

To a large extent, the intellectual path taken by management research in France could explain its stronger desire of emancipation, while comparing it to the British intellectual tradition. A deeper understanding of this process could only result from an analysis of the institutional framework in which the field developed and its relation between the educational and the research aspects of the discipline.

In France, management research is relatively recent since it was developed at the end of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies (Capet, 1962). A decisive element in the constitution of the field is the creation of the FNEGE (“*Fondation nationale pour l’enseignement de la gestion des entreprises*”) in 1968 which remains today the major and iconic academic institution in management research and education (Pavis, 2003; FNEGE, 2022). The diffusion of academic knowledge in France is paradoxically more recent than in Britain, as one had to wait until 1975 to read the first published academic journal in the field, with the emergence of the *Revue Française de Gestion*.

The following section first provides some elements of context that characterize the French trajectory of evolution in management research. Then, sections 2.2 and 2.3. respectively discuss the theoretical nature of French management research regarding the concept of the firm (2.2.) and approaches on behaviour and rationality (2.3.). The last section discusses the evolution of the field’s methodological orientations in the French context (1.4.).

2.1. MANAGEMENT RESEARCH IN FRANCE: CONTEXTS OF EMERGENCE AND EVOLUTION

Management research in France has always been *dual* since it is based on two types of competing academic institutions. The first includes universities, which in turn gather ‘Institutes

of Business Administration' (in French, *Instituts d'administration des entreprises* (IAE)). The second which already existed in a limited way in the 1970s (HEC, ESCP, INSEAD for instance) was developed later in the 1990s and is now represented by high-level business schools (HEC, INSEAD, ESCP again but also ESSEC, EDHEC, EMLYON, KEDGE, SKEMA, Grenoble EM...) or even by engineering schools (as Ecole Polytechnique, Ecole des Mines, ...).

Despite the comparatively late creation of the FNEGE in 1968 and the diffusion of the first academic journal (*Revue Française de Gestion*) in 1975, it would be misleading to date back French management studies to the end of the 1960s exclusively.

On the one hand, a recent and outstanding book (Marco, 2022) has developed a « history of French managerial thought » which includes various managerial works from the XVIth to the XXIst century and stresses *five* “steps” in the development of French management studies over this period (*Ibid.*, 2022: 7). These “steps” do not provide a complete and systematic history of management thought but suggest a global and convincing view of what French authors wrote and developed in the past, within and close to business studies. Yet, Marco (2022) introduces the origins of the current status of French management studies presented in the *sixth* and last part of the book. This is key to help readers to understand these origins and especially the research and the educational aspects of the past, modern and actual French view of management studies.

On the other hand, Armand Hatchuel's earlier and extensive contributions (e.g. Hatchuel and David, 2012; 2013) present and explain the nature of the research and the educational aspects of contemporary management studies. In line with Marco (2022), it is argued that the first process of emergence of management studies lies in its educational dimension (Hatchuel, *ibid.*: 17). An ambiguity therefore appears since the French tradition in management studies cannot emerge twice: first, during the 18th and 19th centuries; then, at the end of the 1960s. This possible ambiguity yet disappears if, in line with Hatchuel's conception confirmed by Marco, one

considers that the birth of the French tradition in management studies only concerns its *educational* contents, that is: an « educational project » of businessmen, entrepreneurs or managers (Hatchuel, in David *et al.*, 2012: 17). Its *research* contents only emerge therefore at the end of the 1960s.

As noted, the pedagogic contents of the French tradition in management studies therefore paves the way towards the later development of management research. The founders of the French tradition were not therefore academic researchers but field men who tried to satisfy the educational needs of entrepreneurs and of their subordinates. This characteristic helps to understand why there was such a temporal gap between the emergence of the educational and the research contents of French management studies (see also Bertereau, 2017).

2.2. THE SPECIFIC NATURE OF THE FIRM IN EARLY FRENCH MANAGEMENT STUDIES

It is commonly agreed that, within mainstream microeconomics, *the theory of individual rational choice* plays a central role in the characterization of business behaviour. According to the French tradition in management studies, in *mainstream economics*, the nature of the firm is mainly understood through the lens of the *theory of the firm*. This view does not reject the concept of firm as such but only the contents of the theory which tends to prevail today in microeconomic theory. This is stressed in an early paper written by Marcel Capet in 1962 in the *Revue d'Economie Politique*, a journal which played a central role in the making of modern economics at the beginning of the sixties. Capet was the first author who characterized a *firm* as an *autonomous* entity depending essentially on the activity of *selling* activities, goods or services (Capet, 1962: 175).

Capet's definition of the firm first implies that in *contrast with economics*, firms are never considered as *formal* or as *individual* decision makers described as profit maximisers in *any type of area* including various activities such as production of goods or services; or trade

assimilated to formal and individual *producers*; or financial activity described by specific markets, etc... The definition of a firm is therefore independent from the contents of its possible activities and from the economic analytical connections they imply (Verstraete, 2007).

Second, firms are not considered as *individual* agents exchanging products and services among them; or various products through barter; or exchanging money and financial assets, etc...

Last, firms are essentially related to *entrepreneurship* whatever is the contents of its *legal status* (as, for instance, the status of an individual firm, of a corporation, of a network or of an association). It becomes therefore impossible to consider firms as formal entities and the consideration of empirical elements of the firm are first needed.

This *empirical definition* of a firm developed by the French tradition in management studies – which is clearly in contrast with the microeconomic view - also implies that its foundation is based on a set of permanent but evolving *sub-disciplines* related to various empirical themes: finance, accounting, strategic management, organization studies, human resources management, logistics and production management, marketing, information systems, decisions and CSR (Le Pen *et al.*, 1995). These sub-disciplines structure the research project of French management studies within an interdisciplinary approach and not as various applications of a formal and general abstract construction. However, the observation of firm realities does not exclude what can be called a ‘generalizing construction’ (Marchesnay, 2004: 88). This reference to an *empirical* definition of the firm also confirms the exclusion of an axiomatic conception and suggests other foundations of the concept of the firm. As an alternative, then, if firms are not given and individual entities, they have to be considered as *collective, evolving* and *creative* ones.

The word ‘*collective*’ means that firms are first *organizations* and not individual agents. This *collective* foundation is related to the various possible mixtures of the different forms of the agents and to their various knowledges and the sub-disciplines they are using.

The word '*evolving*' means that these organizations are permanently changing. According to the French view of MS, firms cannot therefore be considered as natural but as *artifactual* (see Hatchuel, 2001, S35; and Verstraete, 2007, 44). The evolving content of firms is therefore reversible and their past characteristics can thus be restored later. To allow reversibility, discussions are necessary within the firm and this confirms that managers or entrepreneurs are not only decision-makers at a point of time but members of a complex organization. Decisions within firms are therefore taken in a collective way implying the various members of this organization. These decisions imply therefore inter-disciplinarity and management studies may use the results of other social sciences as for instance economics, psychology, trade, engineering or even applied mathematics and statistics following some general rules and techniques. These decision-making processes within firms reveal the importance of epistemology and methodology in French management studies, that will be exposed in section 2.4.

Finally, the '*creative*' foundation of firms is related to their evolving aspect since it comes from the environment of the firm which is *permanently changing* because of limited or structural changes and crises. This permanent evolution leads firm's decision-makers to use creative behaviours (David, 1998). For instance, Hatchuel (1999: 187) uses the term 'collective learning' to characterize these creative behaviours stressing the idea they are essential to define firms and especially modern ones. On the one hand, this current concept of a firm indeed emerged founding its foundations on the evolutionary theory of the firm, on the knowledge-based approach of economic systems and on the relation between hierarchy and implementation of firm activities (ibid). On the other hand, he mainly stressed interactive relations rooted on the idea of a permanent revision of the different existing types of knowledge.

2.3. FRENCH APPROACHES ON BEHAVIOUR AND RATIONALITY

The '*evolving*' and '*creative*' characteristics of the firm are rather specific to the French tradition in management. Hatchuel again summed up this importance when he wrote that "the

firm is not a collective that can be isolated naturally and the permanent revising of its boundaries (physical, legal, human, commercial, etc) is a condition of its existence. In studying ‘firms’, management studies could not therefore define themselves by isolating a limited series of collective phenomena in advance but had to examine the actions that *create and destroy collective phenomena*” (Hatchuel, 2001, S35-S36).

As already argued, this specific conception of behaviour and rationality is totally different from the microeconomic approach. Rational choice is not invariable, exogenous and given. It is variable, endogenous and reversible. It also excludes the process of optimization which prevails in microeconomics. According to the French tradition in management studies, entrepreneurial choices are precarious, fragile and strongly dependent on the judgements of various agents belonging to the firm (Hatchuel, 1999, *ibid.*; Lavoisier, 2002; Verstraete, 2007: 44). Therefore, they are based on a process of *collective learning* which is entirely different from the one which prevails in microeconomics and probability theory. This approach of learning and bounded rationality originally based on the works of Cyert and March (1963) and Simon (1947, 1955 and 1959) helped the French tradition to get rid of optimization processes in favour of learning ones (see David, 2002 for a synthetic presentation).

In addition, while considering the *empirical* dimension of rationality, the role played by the help of the *observation* of industrial and entrepreneurial facts and business behaviour cannot be ignored. The use of observation broadens the meaning of the concept of empirical rationality since this reference now includes the interpretation of the real world and not only its methodological and epistemological contents. The consideration of this observation and of the practices and techniques it implies might be slower and often requires substantial *historical* time contrasting with the *logical* time of microeconomics. It might also imply mistakes within decision-making processes and still increase their complexity. The distance between microeconomics and the French tradition in management studies is therefore reinforced.

Last, the replacement of pedagogical ambition by research projects in management studies was slow to emerge at the end of the 1960s. During that period, the road followed by this approach sought to build management studies as a set of techniques or sub-disciplines - listed in a previous part (2.2.) - which kept expanding since then (see for instance the strong development of the forms of labour organization or the emergence of information systems management) (see the rather early book of Jeanne Aubert-Krier, 1962). The increasing risk of the construction of this scientific project was yet to privilege too much heterogeneity. This is why French management researchers tried to find a way of introducing some unity within this set of techniques and sub-disciplines. As argued in the following section, the solution of the French contributors was to provide unifying epistemological or methodological foundations based on rationality and behaviour (Martinet, 1988; Lemoigne, 1997).

2.4.MANAGEMENT STUDIES, METHODOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY

One of the main characteristics of the French tradition in management studies is the significant role given to methodology and epistemology in the context of its emergence (see first Martinet and Pesqueux, 2013; but also for instance Martinet, 1988; Lemoigne, 1997). This feature is rather surprising when one compares this tendency with the development of economics. We indeed noted that this role did not really appear during the ‘pedagogic’ period before the sixties but was essentially related to the emergence of its ‘research’ period, since the 1970s.

This room dedicated to methodology and epistemology is indeed and almost absent or minor in economics during the same period. In the 1960s in France, economics faced a turning point with the Americanization, the axiomatization and the mathematization of the discipline (Arena, 2020) and mainly of mainstream economic analysis. The hostility of mainstream microeconomists regarding methodology and epistemology appears as a way to reinforce the scientific rigor of economic analysis.

Therefore, the form of epistemology and methodology favoured within the French tradition of management studies is certainly not axiomatic or hypothetico-deductive (see David in David, Hatchuel and Laufer, eds., 2012 and Velmuradova, 2004). It is no more a *positivist* methodology combining rationalism, determinism and experimentalism (Le Moigne, 1990) since for this methodology, an objective and constant reality is the foundation of decisions and actions. As already noted, in management studies, reality exists but is neither objective nor constant (see Velrumadova, 2004); formal logic is useful but not sufficient for French management research.

A combination of interpretativism and constructivism provides a better solution for the making of management studies since it is compatible with a methodology in line with an evolving reality (see for instance Le Moigne, 1990; Perret, Séville in Thiétart *et al.*, 2003).

To conclude, the help of epistemology and methodology in management studies was here useful to try to decrease the risk to transform management sciences into a juxtaposition of techniques and subdisciplines and to open a new road towards their unification. However, the evolving and reversible nature of these sciences prevents to use this help to obtain this unification. The reference to epistemology and methodology remains therefore a fundamental tool to allow MS to obtain new future advances.

3. DISCUSSION

This article aimed at assessing the potential roots of management research found in microeconomics, through a comparison between two national intellectual traditions, namely Britain and France. Overall, this comparison allows us to produce four main results.

First, this contribution exemplifies a type of history of management thought that goes beyond a history of management practices, as already significantly documented in the literature. Up to date, only a very small number of scholars produced accounts of the evolution of management thought as shaped by academic research centers. In this article though, management practices

are still considered but appear as a feature of analytical and methodological developments in both British and French intellectual traditions.

Second, in both cases, roots of management research can clearly be found in microeconomics tradition, especially regarding the concept of the firm, business behaviour and approaches on rationality. Yet, both paths of evolution faced a breaking point with a clear separation between both disciplines at both theoretical and methodological levels. Still, the nature of the independence between both disciplines took two different forms. Our analysis shows how different institutional contexts shape different forms of intellectual traditions.

In the British tradition, management studies turned out to be a separate academic discipline in the 1970s but remained very opened towards other social sciences; while economic analysis became increasingly formalized in its investigation of firms, markets and forms of competition. This high degree of openness towards other social sciences in the British case reflects the polyvalence of British managers as, given the eclectic nature of management practices, “managers need to be able to work across technical, cultural and functional boundaries, and they need to be able to draw on knowledge developed by other disciplines such as sociology, economics, statistics and mathematics” (Cassel & Lee, 2020). In that sense, British management studies are considered as a field which is both “multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary” (Easterby-Smith *et al.* 2008: 7). This multi-pluridisciplinarity or interdisciplinarity contributed to transform management research into a “a confluence of different fields of inquiry” and to create a new “fragmentation” of its contents (Pettigrew, 2001: S63). This interdisciplinary orientation could be explained by two main factors. First, we believe that the research funding system in the UK strongly participated in gathering several disciplines around the same object of study. When considering the creation of British business schools, most fundings were provided by large donations from major British companies or national research councils that

were expected a combination of technical, strategic and organizational perspectives¹². One could refer here to several examples of research centers, such as the Oxford School of Industrial relations (1949)¹³, Manchester Centre for Business Research (1965), Cambridge University's Small Business Research Centre (1972), as already mentioned. The source of these fundings led early management researchers to collaborate with existing disciplines to provide analytical, yet practical, answers to real industrial problems provided by local companies. The relevance of other social sciences to contribute to expand the body of knowledge in management studies appears, therefore, central in British research.

By contrast, the French tradition experienced a more sudden and abrupt separation. French management researchers pleaded in favour of an independent discipline, clearly distinct from and opposed to microeconomic theory and other social sciences. Initially, the search for scientific identity and legitimacy became central to the development of French management research, even if, at the fringe, the idea of a cooperation with other sciences was not excluded. As in the British case, the notion of fragmentation of the discipline (finance, marketing, accounting,...) also emerged but it was not a consequence of interdisciplinarity. Quite the contrary, it was thought as favoring the unity of management studies attributing a more precise meaning to the empirical content of evolving and creative rationality. This need of legitimacy and identity could largely be explained by the French institutional environment, characterized by a *dual* system including public universities, on the one side, and private business schools, on the other. This French specificity as regards the evolution of management research was therefore strongly influenced by business and engineering schools and by the educational model

¹² For example, the London and Manchester business schools, established in the mid-1960s, were associated with existing universities, but funding was also provided by large donations from major British companies totalling £4.5 million (approx £57 million in today's terms).

¹³ This School was set up in Nuffield College (Oxford) and its fellows strongly contributed to the emergence of management studies at Oxford, through the creation of Templeton College. For further details, see Arena, 2011.

they aimed at creating, notably under the influence of a Jacobean type of national system of education.

Third, in Britain as in France, management education always became central in the development of the field as an academic discipline. Its vocational dimension naturally contributed to feed and develop the empirical contents of approaches on firms and business behaviour. Hence, this article did not study management education in isolation from management research. Instead, it considers management education as a *first step* towards the process of institutionalization of management research. The integration of research and teaching in the academic culture was developed earlier in the British case, favouring a dialog between businessmen and academics. The relative difference in the integration of research and teaching in both national models is inevitably linked with the nature of capitalism in each country.

British capitalism was fundamentally based on liberalism and always gave significant room to individual entrepreneurs and small firms. This form of capitalism favoured cooperation between firms and academic institutions, leading to a strong empirical tradition of thought when considering concepts such as the firm. In comparison, the French form of capitalism was much less liberal and attributed a crucial role to State intervention. In line with this Jacobean type of economic system, the process of emergence of business schools was slower and did not play a predominant role as regards public universities. Forms of cooperation between firms and academic institutions exist today but were much less central in the initial program of French management research.

These two distinctive forms of capitalism also partially explained the different degree of interdisciplinarity in both national traditions. Finally, while early French management studies were much concerned with the scientific unity and, therefore, the mono-disciplinarity of the discipline; early British management research valued the openness of the field towards other social sciences.

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