

***Unplugged* - Academic Non Fiction**

The dinner: How can we explain management research just before dessert?

François-Xavier DE VAUJANY

François-Xavier de
Vaujany

Université Paris Dauphine
devaujany@dauphine.fr

Creative non fiction in journalism uses narrative means from fiction to highlight dramatic tensions of reality and thus put the subjectivity of authors at the heart of the writing process to approach unfolding experience and practice from ordinary people. Life of academics is punctuated with astonishing, ordinary, ceremonial or dramatic scenes which sometimes take place in liminal spaces but may constitute a core social piece of the research practice. The unplugged “academic non fiction” section is dedicated to share these moments.

It could have been a nice dinner like so many others: a relaxing moment with some friends. Agnès and Pierre arrived at the house with plenty of time, a beautiful chocolate cake, and a marvelous bouquet of flowers. Agnès is a former sociology student who has worked for over ten years (with increasing detachment) in an HR department. Pierre is a strategy consultant, convinced that the devil is in the detail, and that everything is “potentially strategic.” We had also invited another old friend, Alain, a customer advisor at a bank. With my wife and my son, all the ingredients of a good evening were assembled. Yet it is at the approach of a very promising asparagus risotto that the anger-inducing question was posed ...

Agnès: You know, I’ve never really understood what you do. How many hours of teaching do you do per week?

Me: Not much ... but the job is not limited to that. There are a lot of administrative tasks and research. I try to spend the maximum possible time on research. It feeds everything else.

Agnès: Research? Research in management? What do you do, search for the formula that will yield the most money possible for businesses? And sometimes you find something?

Collective chuckle. Smoke is already beginning to come out of my ears. I breathe. Alain drives the point home ...

Alain: If they find something, they no longer have much to research!

Agnès: Coming back to my main question, what is management research?

My son approaches the table. He had been playing behind the couch and hands me two playmobil figures.

My son: Yes, Papa, what's your job?

Et tu! You too, my son—you are part of the conspiracy! What are these two playmobil people? What do they do? How can I show, embody what I do? If Papa was a fire fighter, it would be enough to take the fire truck and put both in it or put a fire hose in their hands. I take the two figures and rest them on the couch.

Me: You see ... Papa is a little like your school teacher. He makes lessons for children, but much bigger than you. And unlike your teacher, he tries to find what to say in class by himself. He doesn't go looking for it in books, or rarely. He will look in life by asking lots of questions.

The answer seems to satisfy him—or perhaps simply to bore him. He returns to behind the sofa.

Alain: That's OK for the Care Bear version. And the adult version now? Don't take us for fools, don't forget management; we do it every day ...

Yes it's true ... I often say to myself: I work on a subject, management, that everyone today thinks they handle. The parent, the athlete, the politician, the baker, the artist ... today everyone is a manager of their business.

Me: Doing research in management is trying to understand how people work together, with financial, human, informational, and technical resources. The idea is to look especially at how a collective, working together, will provide a product or service to another collective. There are researchers who are interested in the question of "being," others in "being together," and others still in "acting together." Management is historically rather on the side of those who try to understand and accompany the acting together. With recent trends like telecommuting, remote work, or Bring Your Own Device, acting together and living together are, however, less and less separable.

I sense that I am beginning to spoil dinner ...

Pierre: You sound like my philosophy teacher from my last year of high school! So, what you do is close to what I do, with more long words and a whole infrastructure behind it all: journals, communities, methods. Elsewhere, we have more and more of the same mess as you!

Me: Yes, the difference between consulting and management research, or between journalism and management, is not obvious. However, I want to believe that the idea of community (some speak of "paradigms") is stronger on the side of the management researcher. We try to learn together. Moreover, many management researchers try to go beyond the immediate understanding of what is happening, which is linked to the scope of the relationship with the client, project, or organization. Increasingly management is regarded as a resonant space for the company (and its conflicts), or the social construction of the company.

Agnès: Meaning ... you talk a little like sociology profs!

Me: Take the example of the financial crisis of 2008. This is also a crisis of management, products, notably sub-primes, and control systems. Multiple micro-economic regulations that have not worked helped create a large macro-economic crisis ... The withdrawal of certain monetary-economy courses from financial-management courses may have also contributed to future traders losing sight of the likely impact of their actions on the economy and society. The same goes for the absence of critical courses on the performative character of tools—that is to say, to explain how they socially and physically build the market at least as much as they represent it.

Alain: You're a bit like, what, an economist?

Me: Political science and political economy—or, well before them, philosophy—have long been interested in collective activity. The productive features, however, are less present in political science, and the normative expectation is perhaps less present in political economy. In any case, I see management as a crossroads discipline. The use of social sciences is essential for understanding subjects and management practices. Otherwise, we risk remaining strong on the surface or reinventing ideas developed by others centuries ago ...

Pierre: Is it embarrassing? I do that a lot in my work!

Me: In terms of logical evaluation by the community, concern for individual and collective discipline, the problems of credibility in relation to other disciplines, yes, it's embarrassing.

Agnès: But the type of management that interests me is the sort that is planned with tools, the organization? Is it about more social things for you?

Me: I don't really know what you mean by "more social." But management and organization are also things that emerge and re-emerge constantly. For example, the other day, the door slammed shut before a family outing. The keys were still on the other side ...

My wife gives me a dirty look. I should have chosen a less painful example ... too late; I continue.

Me: We called two locksmiths at random, very shady, who tried to open the door for a few minutes with a X-ray photograph. "Strangely," they didn't succeed. They then offered to remove and replace the lock, all for 1500 euros ... A neighbor came first. She drew our attention to something fishy in the document they showed us (no address or specific things about the company). Having thanked them and paid them for their travel ...

My wife: You can skip that part ...

Me: Yes ... the first neighbor came along and offered to help us open the door with an X-ray photograph, but we needed to find a new one. The locksmiths left with their. Another neighbor brought us his X-ray photograph of his broken leg. As I shook the door, he slipped the photograph into the doorway and tried to unlock the door. A third neighbor came to help us and removed the insulation. The door moved better ... A fourth was helping us make it vibrate in a different way. Sometimes, we swapped roles, testing different options. After 40 minutes of concerted effort, the door finally

opened ... There are not structures, tools, contracts, or organization in the traditional sense in my story. There is a do-it-yourself solidarity, a complex management process that also enabled us to better know our neighbors and create various connections.

Agnès: A management researcher is a bit of a sociologist and a philosopher who would have made a wrong turn and is interested in the most ordinary actions, making them extraordinary?

Me: Perhaps. But I don't see many who are not interested in our societies ... Also, I think management is intended to produce, usually immediately, speeches and subjects in the broadest sense, stimulating, rewarding for action.

Agnès: Immediately: meaning what? And how? You are not a manager ... have you had any background experience in management?

Me: Do we need to have had a sore throat to find the cure? Do we teach a child to swim by throwing them directly into a swimming pool? We need to accompany managers. The researcher, often the management-research professor, is formed through such accompaniment; it's sometimes even desirable not to have direct experience yourself. Having only a little experience perhaps better allows you to take a step back and to offer different perspectives on trends or management practices. What would be bad would be not to go and meet the actors and see, observe, feel, experiment, transform the management practices, whatever the method. And another test is teaching yourself, in front of students and experienced managers ...

Agnès: And supposing the ideas are there, how do you make them happen? How do you diffuse them?

Me: There are articles. But they are rather constructed, using the tools of rigor and academic certification. Popularizing books can be significant. But most of all, I believe in immediate teaching in public, sometimes putting people into simulated management situations or doing a mixture of education and work experience in management (as in apprenticeship). I also think there are still many new communication formats to be invented, more specific to our disciplines. Research articles were born more than four centuries ago, at a time when the thinking was very different, more likely to fit with a 15 pages long article. Management, as practice and theory, didn't exist. With social networking, video, wiki, big data, artificial intelligence ... new practices should emerge.

Pierre: After all, the world, my company, a manager can easily do without academic management ...

Me: Yes, and besides, since the first business schools and the first university management departments were founded in the 19th century, more than a century has passed. Capitalism did without. The largest British universities have only very recently created business schools ...

Pierre: And what has changed? Why has there ever been a need for academic management and strange characters like you?

Me: Management has become a profession, with its techniques and titles. To legitimize, regulate, and form an evolution of higher education became essential. This has become a problem of legitimacy to the elites themselves, who are all managerialized. Universities have integrated management curricula, mainly after World War II. Major engineering schools have increasingly included management education in their hourly teaching volume. The global economic competition has pushed each individual organization to better streamline its procedures and actions. Today, management is facing a new rupture. After being “professionalized,” it is now “socialized.” Everyone manages something. The mother or father manages the family budget and family life. Administrators manage their services and budget, beyond rules and procedures. Politicians need to manage their image and show themselves to be good managers. Furthermore, management and organization are everywhere and nowhere. With the massive outsourcing of many processes, work on a project basis, the massive use of digital and portable technologies, the development of telecommuting and co-working, challenging the wage system that Western countries knew in the 60s and 70s, erasing the usual boundaries of the organization, the development of self-production and Do It Yourself with fab labs and maker spaces ... management is “at large” in society, with its movements, its aspirations. We live in an exciting time for management researchers. Collective activity is being reinvented in depth.

Pierre: And beyond these beautiful general ideas, what you actually do in practice as a researcher?

Me: Right now, I’m spending time doing interviews and observing the daily life of collaborative communities, in particular co-workers, makers, digital nomads and teleworkers. For management research, we find an old problem to re-examine. What makes the actors work together, act together, when this is not necessarily in their best interests? In a context where that doesn’t happen through contracts, a structure (with shared ex ante roles), how do actors go in the same direction? I feel I am at the very heart of this societalization of management that I mentioned earlier, and of attending to the comeback of communities.

My wife: And just to revisit the question of collective activity ... shall we eat together?

Me: Excellent idea; I’ll get the dessert.

Passion, when you take ahold of us ... I think nobody will come over for dinner anymore