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Book review:

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Michael ANTEBY 2013

Manufacturing Morals. The Values of Silence in
Business School Education

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Book Review

Michael ANTEBY (2013)
Manufacturing Morals. The Values of Silence in
Business School Education.
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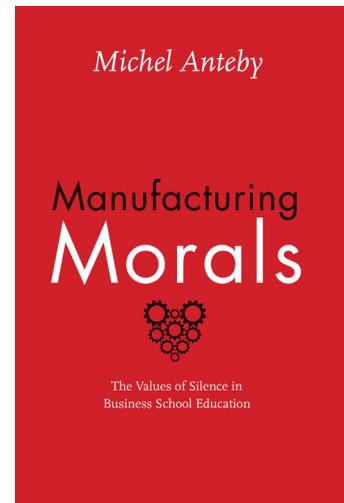
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"Here error is all in the not done, All in the diffidence that faltered"
- Ezra Pound Canto LXXXI (*The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, New
Directions, 1998)

Michael Anteby's fascinating work gives a participant's account of what it like to enter, as a faculty member, the world's most iconic business school, Harvard Business School. Anteby was appointed to Harvard in 2005 as Associate Professor in Organizational Behaviour and soon began to collect the data that forms the basis of this study. His main interests in the book are the interactions of organization, culture and morals in the socialization and reproduction of what is one of the world's most important and influential groups of academics in a business school with a global footprint. Anteby's book constitutes an important contribution to the literature on academic work and has wider interest for those interested in debates about business schools, management education and management values and behaviour.

Anteby offers a rich and compelling account, drawing you into his narrative of his own and others' socialization. His account of how Harvard supports its staff to maximize the time they have to devote to their core teaching and research activities will be the envy of most other business school faculty, struggling through the financial crisis and the squeeze on the public and private purse. What we would not give for the assistants to look after our needs, to organise our teaching material, and to even support our teaching by bringing us coffee during our teaching breaks. Whose research productivity would not benefit from the assistance of a top-quality research assistant? I am not sure, though, how many of us would want the visit from the tailor on our arrival in a new job to advise on appropriate dress and to measure us for this to save our precious time that would be deemed wasted if we actually visited a tailoring establishment. The term 'cloistered existence' takes on a whole new meaning. Harvard's values of the primacy of teaching and research shine through Anteby's account and he offers a sophisticated analysis of the role of silence



in Harvard Business School's codification of its moral and business, teaching and research values. Some of this is quite surprising. Harvard faculty pay an admirable amount of time preparing for, discussing and reflecting on their teaching and the cases they help write that form the focus of their famous pedagogy. But despite detailed teaching notes and much discussion, the *what* of what to teach is apparently left to individual faculty. Those that survive learn to give the "right" answers as if by osmosis. Such directives as there are are open-ended rather than firm guidance. Moral forms of behaviours are encouraged, but not overtly, in silence so to speak.

This is Anteby's major and intriguing theoretical trope – the role and the power of silence in an environment where the higher authorities expect you to behave in certain kinds of ways but do not tell you how. This is a world of strong indirect signs, many of which focus as in the form of the visiting tailor and the support of assistants, on the value of faculty time. Anteby's suggestion is that silence might talk louder than words and promote strong cultures that "enforce" better conduct than can be achieved through top-down explicit guidance and directives. He argues that this is relevant to many organisations, for example, to a major retailer wanting to instil teamwork among its front-line staff. Because what the Harvard Business School code of conduct achieves is precisely this, high performance teamwork among its front line staff.

I wonder finally though if Anteby's narrative of silence might not work against him in ways he did not anticipate. The emphasis on silence eloquently makes the point that at Harvard Business School they say less than they mean. I wonder if the author says more than he meant to say despite his silences and his absences and, if so, how time will judge his contribution. He shares a number of silences with his colleagues that have been examined by others elsewhere and it would have been good to have had his views on these, given he is such a perceptive if also a possibly somewhat guarded commentator. The book is quite short so there was space to extend the argument. The silences I have in mind are more critical analyses of business schools, such as the ones written by senior Harvard Business School faculty member, Rakesh Khurana (2007), and by recent Harvard MBA graduate, Philip Delves Broughton (2009). Anteby offers a somewhat neutral uncritical definition of morals – "what a given community deems appropriate" (page 2), "shared understandings ... internalized ... enduring" (page 130). What a more critical account might have addressed, as Khurana (2007) does, is the growing shift in business schools, and presumably at Harvard, from public to private values and the shift from "higher purpose" to becoming the "hired hands" of those businesses that pay the highest dollar. Delves Broughton (2009) offers another side of the coin to Khurana's critical inside account, reflecting upon his own experience as a Harvard Business School MBA graduate in the run-up to the financial crisis and documenting the hero worship that surrounded the visits of the then champions of Wall Street and the education that apparently motivated the majority of Harvard MBA graduates to seek lucrative careers on Wall Street. There is another kind of analysis to be written here on the things that Harvard and other business schools are silent about and the value challenges they and us are faced with in the aftermath of the financial crisis. The former president on Harvard, Derek Bok (2013), now at the Kennedy School of Government across the divide of the Charles River from the Business School, raises this issue in a critical review of an article by a Harvard strategy professor (Simon,

2013) on the business of business schools. Simons (2103) is urging us to stop moaning and angsting about the vices of business and business schools and to get on with the most important business of beating the competition and making money. In an argument worthy of a latter-day Milton Friedman, Simons argues that pesky, annoying distractions such as stakeholder theory and corporate social responsibility threaten the future of the US economy and are making us non-competitive. CEOs need to get real about the challenges of global competition and stop wasting time and resources on pleasing all of the people all of the time. The logic here is just concentrate on those who really count.

Bok (2103) not surprisingly criticizes Simons for the silences in his argument and his value myopia. I suspect that some Harvard Business School faculty, such as Khurana and the Dean Nitin Nohria, but perhaps not the majority, would be sympathetic to Bok's arguments. As Bok (2013: 5) points out, student interest in "having a positive impact on society" generally declines during MBA programs, an interesting example perhaps of how some interests are silenced in some leading business schools. I also suspect Anteby would be sympathetic to Bok's argument, given his European background(education at the Sorbonne, a PhD in sociology from the École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales and a Harvard MPA!).

Perhaps I am being unfair in wishing Anteby had addressed these vital absences and the silences that support and encourage them but they are among the most important facing business schools, particularly in the aftermath of the financial crisis. Of course, as he acknowledges, he was in a somewhat complex, perhaps, difficult position in the field (page 156). There is a very interesting discussion of his status at Harvard and as an ethnographer of the business school as a new member of faculty. Some established senior faculty were very much against his drawing aside the veil that surrounds the school's staff processes. It is to his credit that he persisted, and he did also have positive support from other faculty. He does resist the argument that what he is offering is a biased insider account of someone who had gone native. His line of defence here is interesting. He checks his evolving narrative with key informants and he argues that he was not a full insider as he was a non-tenured member of staff. During the course of the book we do learn, to this reviewer's relief, that he has indeed been promoted – to untenured associate professor. The book is silent on whether he ever achieves full tenure. But one does wonder whether he might have written differently if he had had full tenure, and whether he will if he does achieve tenure and becomes what he calls an even more "total participant".

One of the most poignant topics in the book is the fate of those who do not make it. Faculty who fall by the wayside of the ferocious tenure track are speedily removed from the premises. "Professional moving specialists routinely and rapidly refurbish office erasing traces of their past occupants" (page 120). The metaphor of Russian roulette is deemed most appropriate to describe this process, with the crucial and striking difference that in Russian roulette you have one chance of oblivion. At Harvard, as at other top US schools operating an up-or-out model, the chances are five out of six, i.e. only one out of six survives the process and stays on the faculty. Returning to Anteby's main argument about the role of silence, I am not sure that Russian roulette is the

best way to promote a healthy culture. This theme makes me think of Michael Cimino's epic film about the Vietnam War: *The Deer Hunter*. What Russian roulette evokes there is cruelty and either abject terror or righteous anger, emotions that are notably silent in what is a very civilised read! That said, it is a book well worth reading!

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