

Management innovations from a foucauldian perspective: Time to take action

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Accepted by chief editors Thibault Daudigeos & Thomas Roulet

Abstract. Management innovations have attracted considerable attention from both organizational scholars and management practitioners. However, there is a growing disillusionment with managerialist approaches that present management innovations as best practices that should be implemented straightforwardly, for the better. In this context, the Foucauldian perspective on management innovations appears as a valuable critical alternative that (still) deserves to be discussed and extended. In this paper, we offer a rereading of this perspective by rendering the debates raised by Foucauldian studies on management innovations and by providing what appear to us as promising research avenues. Specifically, we propose several directions for further investigating from a Foucauldian lens the new generation of management innovations that are emerging in organizational settings. We also call Foucauldian disciples to adopt a critical performative stance by taking action on the field.

Keywords: management innovation, Foucault, critical performativity

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INTRODUCTION

Management innovations—broadly defined as management practices that are newly adopted by companies (Birkinshaw, Hamel & Mol, 2008)—represent a topic of exceptional practical and theoretical relevance. In the business world, management innovations are mainly discussed in terms of how companies can improve economic and social performance in a fast-changing environment (Knights & McCabe, 2002). A variety of external stakeholders, including consultants (Fincham & Evans, 1999; Kipping & Engwall, 2002), management gurus (Clark & Salaman, 1996, 1998; Jackson, 1996, 1999) and media companies (Alvarez, Mazza & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2005; Frenkel, 2005; Mazza & Alvarez, 2000) contribute to this ongoing conversation as producers and disseminators of management innovations.

In academia, this topic has also attracted considerable attention from management scholars who view it through a variety of theoretical lenses (e.g. Birkinshaw et al., 2008; Chiapello & Gilbert, 2013; Sturdy, 2004 for overviews). In this context, Foucault appears as the main source of inspiration for critical scholars interested in management innovations. This is not surprising, since Foucault is one of the most cited authors in management studies and has a considerable influence in our field (Carter, 2008; Carter, McKinlay & Rowlinson, 2002). In the journal *M@n@gement*

alone, 12 articles mentioned the name of Michel Foucault in the last five years out of 131 papers published within that period (2013–2017).

In this paper, our objective is to reflect on how Foucault's thinking has been used to theoretically conceptualize and empirically investigate management innovations. Generally speaking, Foucault-inspired studies consider management innovations as technologies of power and, in line with a broader critical agenda, they share a "deep scepticism regarding the moral defensibility" (Adler, Forbes & Willmott, 2007: 1) of the management innovations that currently populate organizational settings. Foucauldian studies thus constitute an alternative voice to the "positivist view on management innovations" (de Vaujany, 2005; Lorino, 2002) which regularly presents certain new management practices as "best practice" that will revolutionize companies' organizational functioning for the greater good (Ezzamel & Willmott, 2008; Knights & McCabe, 2002). In particular, post-bureaucratic practices which introduce team-based, project-based and market-based forms of functioning are widespread and typify what is presented as "good" and "modern" management in many organizational settings (Heckscher & Donnellon, 1994; Johnson, Wood, Brewster & Brookes, 2009). Post-bureaucratic management innovations aim at reinforcing empowerment, transversality, creativity and customer orientation and, by doing so, are supposed to increase firms' competitiveness (Johnson et al., 2009; Volberda, 1998). At a time when there is increasing disillusionment with these management innovations that are often revealed to be only "management fashions" (Abrahamson, 1996; Abrahamson & Eisenman, 2008; Carson, Lanier, Carson & Guidry, 2000), the Foucauldian perspective constitutes an alternative voice to a too-enthusiastic "managerialist approach" (Knights & McCabe, 2002) and thus deserves to be discussed and extended.

In this article, we reflect on how Foucault's thinking has been mobilized to theoretically discuss and empirically investigate management innovations. We show that organizational scholars have imported many Foucauldian concepts to study management innovations, including the notions of panopticon, subjectivation, discipline, self-discipline, governmentality, ethics of the self, "ascesis" and genealogy or morals, amongst others. Our goal is to articulate this jungle of concepts in an intelligible way by clarifying how such imports make distinctive and cumulative contributions to the understanding of management innovations. We will also condense the debates instigated by these notions to reconsider management innovations as well as the critiques that have been directed at these Foucauldian studies. Based on this rereading, the concluding section will propose research avenues that we find particularly promising. Of course, the profusion of Foucault-inspired studies on management innovations meant that we were only able to include studies that seemed to us to be the most significant and decisive. Thus, the goal of this article is to offer an extensive view on how Foucault has inspired organizational scholars interested in management innovations and how he could still inspire them in the future.

A REREADING OF FOUCAULDIAN STUDIES ON MANAGEMENT INNOVATIONS

MANAGEMENT INNOVATIONS AS TECHNOLOGIES OF POWER

The first generation of Foucauldian studies discusses management innovations in terms of disciplinary devices that reinforce control over organizational participants by tightening surveillance. In particular, the

figure of the panopticon has been widely used as a metaphor to depict how the information systems and new work arrangements introduced by management innovations, especially post-bureaucratic ones, reinforce the form and scope of scrutiny to which organizational participants are subjected (Poster, 1990; Sewell, 1998; Sewell & Wilkinson, 1992; Townley, 1993; Zuboff, 1988). For instance, Sewell (1998) describes how team-based forms of organizing constitute a “chimerical” mode of workplace control not only by reinforcing vertical surveillance, through sophisticated top-down monitoring and performance appraisal systems, but also by increasing horizontal surveillance through peer surveillance. A team-based form of organizing is presented as a “monstrous creation” (Sewell, 1998: 414) which can ultimately lead organizational participants to exercise self-surveillance since individuals know that they are, or can at least potentially be, watched on a permanent basis. In a related way, Townley (1993) shows how appraisal systems constitute panopticon devices which not only set up the expected behavioural norms but also reinforce surveillance to make organizational participants respect these norms. These studies thus question the fact that monitoring techniques are neutral techniques that serve collective interests by rewarding good behaviours and by preventing freeloading as well as other misbehaviours. Alternatively, these studies argue that management innovations are surveillance technologies aimed at subordinating the “many by the few” in order to maximize the docility and utility of individuals at work (Sewell & Barker, 2006: 939).

These studies have been subjected to strong criticism, generally, for relying on a much too narrow reading of Foucault that does not accommodate the complexity of how management innovations operate for disciplining organizational participants (Knights, 2002; Munro, 2000; 2012). Indeed, these studies mainly borrow concepts that Foucault developed in his genealogical period,¹ and especially in his book *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1975a), conceptualizing management innovations as surveillance devices. In particular, the figure of the panopticon is a limiting metaphor (Knights, 2002), if not a misleading one (Munro, 2000). As a matter of fact, contemporary organizational settings are not closed areas with clear-cut boundaries, meaning that the way organizational participants are disciplined in such a context cannot (only) be reduced to the “diagram of power” encapsulated by the metaphor of the panopticon (Munro, 2000). Specifically, these studies do not investigate in detail, if at all, a key feature of post-bureaucratic management innovations, which is to discipline individuals by engineering a seductive corporate culture.

A profusion of Foucault-inspired studies which overcome the above-mentioned limitations emerged during the 1990s. These contributions are based on a wider reading of Foucault, especially his later work from the so-called “ethical period” where he puts a much greater emphasis on the construction of the self. Although these studies have their own specificities, they all investigate in detail how management innovations operate at the level of subjectivity (Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian & Samuel, 1998; du Gay, 1996; Knights & Willmott, 1989). Their key contribution is to argue that management innovations attempt to transform individuals into organizational subjects whose sense of meaning is attached to their proactive participation in corporate practices. Indeed, they show that post-bureaucratic management innovations attempt to transform individuals into enterprising subjects (du Gay, 1996, 2000; du Gay & Salaman, 1992), defined as individuals who identify with an “enterprising culture [that] is one in which certain enterprising qualities—such as self-reliance, personal

1. The work of Foucault is traditionally divided into three periods: the archaeological, genealogical and ethical (see, Burrell, 1988 for an introduction).

responsibility, boldness and a willingness to take risks in the pursuit of goals—are regarded as human virtues and promoted as such” (du Gay & Salaman, 1992: 628).

This entrepreneurial culture is characteristic of the neo-liberal “zeitgeist” (du Gay, 2000: 43) that encourages individuals to take responsibility for their own success as entrepreneurs of their self. Post-bureaucratic management innovations convey this zeitgeist within organizational settings through various social and technical mechanisms (du Gay, 1996). Specifically, management innovations individualize people management—notably through individualized forms of performance appraisal and sanctions/rewards systems—while engineering a corporate culture that presents the company as a field of unlimited opportunity in which individuals can express their individual potential.

This process is thus one of double individualization (Knights & Willmott, 1989; Willmott, 1990, 1994), following which management innovations create a sense of “insecurity” amongst individuals—by introducing individualized forms of management that oblige people to surpass their peers—while concomitantly offering them an individualist way to “secure their sense of identity, meaning, and reality through participating in [corporate] practices” (Knights & Morgan, 1995: 194). Put simply, management innovations thus “impose [on organizational participants] the opportunity” to become enterprising subjects (Iedema & Rhodes, 2010: 200). They are thus technologies of power that promote individuals’ freedom while limiting at the same time the forms and means by which such freedom can be exercised and expressed (Knights & Willmott, 1989). Notably, this process of double individualization has been discussed in terms of subjectification (Bergström & Knights, 2006; Knights & Willmott, 1989) and consists of “convinc[ing] the individual who is the object of change that they are choosing it” (Hollway, 1991: 95 from Bergström & Knights, 2006:355).

In a related way, some studies use the term “governmentality” to describe how post-bureaucratic management innovations attempt to align individuals’ project of the self with organizational expectations (Clegg, Pitsis, Rura-Polley & Marosszeky, 2002; du Gay, 2000; Schofield, 2002; van Krieken, 1996). Governmentality refers to the idea that people can be controlled at a distance through their subjectivity (Dean, 1999; Miller and Rose, 1990, 2008; Rose, 1990). It refers to “the totality of practices, by which one can constitute, define, organize, instrumentalize the strategies which individuals in their liberty can have in regard to each other” (Foucault, 1988: 20 quoted in Clegg et al., 2002: 319). However, despite receiving important attention in the field of critical accounting (Miller & Rose, 1990, 2008; Rose, 1990), the notion of governmentality has in fact rarely been mobilized by management scholars (McKinlay, 2010), and even less so by those interested in management innovations (see Clegg, Pitsis, Rura-Polley & Marosszeky, 2002 or Knights & McCabe, 2003 for notable exceptions).

The Foucauldian notion of “self-discipline” has been used frequently to describe how management innovations operate to transform organizational participants into enterprising subjects who proactively engage in a quest for self-improvement (Covaleski et al., 1998; du Gay, 1996; Townley, 1995). Studies of self-discipline show how management innovations in post-bureaucratic organizations incite organizational participants to regard their selves as sites of purposeful intervention. For instance, Covaleski et al. (1998) show how mentoring programmes incite mentees to speak about their behaviours and feelings to mentors in order

to progress according to the mentors' recommendations. Mentoring thus obliges mentees to perform the double reflexive act of introspection and verbalization through which "the inner truths of one's self be both discovered through self-examination and expressed outwardly through speech so as to affirm and transform oneself" (Covaleski et al., 1998:297). Relatedly, Townley (1995) shows how 360-degree appraisal systems—by which individuals are evaluated by hierarchy, peers, customers and subordinates—constitute technologies of power based on "self-awareness". This management innovation is presented to organizational participants as a method of discovering who they "truly" are deep "inside" themselves in order to determine how to improve their selves along corporate lines. Following Foucault (1988: 18), his disciples (Covaleski et al., 1998; du Gay, 1996; Townley, 1995) emphasize that these management innovations thus constitute "technologies of the self [...] which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state".

More recent studies go one step further by presenting management innovations as organizational ascesis (Bardon, Clegg & Josserand, 2012; Kelly, Allender & Colquhoun, 2007; Pezet, 2007). Foucault defines ascesis as the "models proposed for setting up and developing relationships with the self, for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination, for deciphering the self by oneself, for the transformation one seeks to accomplish with oneself as object". It thus corresponds with the ways individuals are called on to "assign meaning and value to their conduct, their duties, their pleasures, their feelings and sensations, and their dreams" (Foucault, 1984a: 10). Foucault argues that ascesis comprises four elements: ethical substance, mode of subjection, forms of elaboration (also called technologies of the self) and teleology (Foucault, 1983, 1984a). Table 1 presents a definition of these elements.

Dimensions of asceticism	Foucault's definition
Ethical substance	« the way in which the individual has to constitute this or part of himself as the prime material of his moral conduct » (Foucault, 1984a: 37).
Mode of subjection	« the way in which the individual (...) himself as obliged to put it into practice » (Foucault, 1983: 1213).
Form of elaboration	« the means (...) that the individual uses to reproduce himself his own subjection » (Foucault, 1984a: 37).
Teleology	« what kind of being one is attempting to become by means of these ascetic practices » (Foucault, 1983: 1215).

Table 1: Definitions of the four constitutive elements of ascesis

The notion of ascesis has been discussed by Foucault extensively in relation to sexual asceticism in fourth-century BC classical Greek culture ("the use of pleasure", Foucault, 1984a), in second-century AD Greco-Roman culture ("the care of self", Foucault, 1984b) and for classical Christians (Foucault, 1983). For example, he suggested that Christians adopted austere sexual behaviours to preserve sinners from concupiscence of the flesh (ethical substance), as purity of the flesh is required to obtain salvation during the "last judgement" (mode of

subjection), consequently attaining metaphysical paradise (teleology). This asceticism constitutes the prescribed identity work that Christians are expected to perform in order to become a “moral subject of their actions” (Foucault, 1983).

Foucault-inspired scholars transpose the notion of asceticism in the contemporary organizational world by showing how management innovations encourage individuals to subscribe to an enterprising asceticism (Bardon, 2011; Kelly et al., 2007; Pezet, 2007). Approaching management innovations as asceticism entails an understanding of how corporate initiatives provide a set of moral justifications (mode of subjection) that reaffirm the “goodness” or necessity of reaching the enterprising ethos and encapsulate different self-oriented technologies (technology of the self) that develop the individual’s desire (ethical substance) to resemble the promised ideal figure (teleology). The notion of asceticism is thus useful to further investigate how management innovations discipline subjectivity because it helps to consistently connect the notion of “technologies of the self” (Covaleski et al., 1998) with the notion of “enterprising” (Du Gay, 1996; Du Gay & Salaman, 1992). Indeed, it offers a reading grid that emphasizes that technologies of the self can only operate when encapsulated in a consistent ethos, which includes a specific definition of the ethical substance to be worked on, and a set of moral justifications (Iedema & Rhodes, 2010; McCabe, 2008) that reaffirm the goodness of the enterprising teleology.

GOING BEYOND THE DISCIPLINED SUBJECT: THEORIZING RESISTANCE TO MANAGEMENT INNOVATIONS

There is much criticism of these studies. In particular, several observers point out that Foucauldian studies marginalize resistance (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999) as it was “all quiet on the workplace front” (Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995). Indeed, at the time, there was a lack of Foucault-inspired empirical investigations on how organizational participants respond to management innovations (Caldwell, 2007; Newton, 1998; Reed, 2000), whereas we found plenty of Foucauldian studies deconstructing how corporate initiatives act to discipline individuals’ subjectivity (see previous section). This imbalance might have given the impression that Foucauldian scholars implicitly assume that organizational participants are necessarily and unproblematically subjectified by the corporate discourses to which they are confronted in organizational settings (May, 1999; Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995).

More problematically, critics also question the ability to offer a consistent conceptualization of human agency and resistance from a Foucauldian perspective. Specifically, they underline that the claimed non-essentialism of Foucault-inspired scholars (Knights & Willmott, 1989) is particularly problematic because, they affirm, we need to assume the existence of a “free will” to explain how individuals can “manoeuvre” (Newton, 1998) with discourses that target their subjectivity. Without such an “essential” assumption, they say that it is impossible to understand how individuals can contest the organizational “reality” in which they are embedded. Indeed, the radical constructionism of Foucault (1971, 1974a) and his followers in organization studies (Bardon & Josserand, 2011; Knights, 1997; Knights & Vurdubakis, 1994; Knights & Willmott, 1989) implies that discourses literally produce the “reality” of which they speak and thus define how individuals make sense of the world, including themselves.

These critiques lead to two lines of responses from Foucauldian scholars. On the one hand, some explicitly or implicitly admit that some minimal essentialist assumptions are needed in order to rehabilitate the figure of an active agent who can resist management innovations. In this way, May (1999) emphasizes that there are “limits of appropriation to discourses” because “power and freedom exist in an agonism” (May 1999: 774, our emphasis). Barratt (2003: 1077) considers that individuals are “smart animals” capable of “creative thoughts”, while Al-Amoudi (2007: 554) offers a critical realist reading of Foucault that recognizes the existence of a “basic stratum of biology” where human agency would be located. However, and although no single true or definitive reading of Foucault exists (Bardon & Josserand, 2011; Townley, 2005), committing such “essentialist sins” (Knights & Willmott, 1989) is completely at odds with Foucault’s self-proclaimed radical constructionism and non-essentialism (Bardon & Josserand, 2011; Foucault, 1974a; Knights, 1997; Knights & Vurdubakis, 1994; Knights & Willmott, 1989).

On the other hand, David Knights and his colleagues offer theoretical developments based on a non-essentialist reading of Foucault which attempt to rehabilitate the possibility of resistance to management innovations (Knights & McCabe, 2003; Knights & Vurdubakis, 1994). They conceive individuals as “social individualities” who are the precarious results of discourses to which they have been exposed during their lifetime and that define their identity. Based on this, they argue that individuals will resist a corporate discourse if it clashes with stronger bases of identification to which they are already attached. For instance, individuals might resist the enterprising discourse encouraging them to work extra hours if they are already strongly attached to others’ bases of identification associated with aspects of their personal life that command them not to dedicate too much time to their job (Knights & McCabe, 2003).

However, Foucauldian critics offer three main counterarguments to the notion of social individuality. First, they offer a quasi-essentialist view of individuals by “psychologizing” the self (Newton, 1998). Indeed, this comes down to thinking of individuals’ subjectivity as a “*tabula rasa*” (Benhabib, 1992: 217) upon which discourses would be imprinted, leading to a complex battle at the level of subjectivity between autonomous discourses. Second, and closely related, commentators also emphasize that such an interpretation cannot accommodate the figure of an “active agential subject” (Newton, 1998: 428). At best, individuals would be “puppets” (Newton, 1998: 427; Reed, 2000) of discourses who do not decide to act otherwise but whose decisions would be the precarious result of the discursive battle that would happen at the level of their subjectivity. Third, such an interpretation has also been criticized for being a nihilist one, since resistance is not explained with reference to certain moral values that organizational participants would voluntarily fight for, potentially collectively, but with reference to never-ending individual identity projects in which people would be trapped (Habermas, 1990).

In this context, Bardon and Josserand (2011) propose a Nietzschean reading of Foucauldian thinking that permits response to these critiques within a non-essentialist epistemology. They reinterpret Foucault’s project as a Nietzschean genealogy of morals whereby Foucault seeks to systematically problematize as “morals” what is presented as “truth”—i.e. to apprehend every “true discourse” as an exercise of power that operates at the level of desires—and to decide the value that one wants to attach to these morals (Foucault, 1984c).

Theoretically, they argue that “problematizing” reality as such is the very founding act through which individuals constitute themselves as active and “free” agents, i.e. as moral subjects of their own actions who reflect and potentially contest the “reality” that is presented to them as truth. Put simply, an individual is not an ontologically “free” and active agent, but they become one when they problematize “truth” as a moral subject of their own actions rather than accepting it as a passive and disciplined agent.

Practically, such interpretation is a call for management scholars to abandon their metaphysical quest for telling the “truth”, especially on the undecidable existence of a “free will”, but to investigate how organizational participants exercise their freedom (or not) within organizational settings, and in particular how they problematize management innovations attempting to discipline their subjectivity.

Ethically, Foucault’s approach is not doomed to nihilism since it opens the possibility for people to fight for and potentially cohere around this (always local) ideal of practising one’s liberty as moral subjects of one’s own actions. Bardon and Josserand’s (2011) reading of Foucault thus answers the three counterarguments mentioned above by offering a non-essentialist reading that rehabilitates the figure of an active agential subject who can reflect on, and potentially resist, management innovations.

EMPIRICALLY INVESTIGATING ORGANIZATIONAL PARTICIPANTS’ RESPONSES TO MANAGEMENT INNOVATIONS

Parallel to these theoretical developments on agency and resistance, Foucauldian scholars also empirically investigate how organizational participants respond to management innovations, and especially how they incorporate the enterprising identity prescribed by post-bureaucratic practices (Collinson, 2003; Knights & McCabe, 2000a; 2000b, 2003; Musson & Duberley, 2007). These investigations concentrate on a variety of organizational participants including shop-floor employees (Ezzamel, Willmott & Worthington, 2001), middle managers (Bardon, Brown & Pez , 2017), consultants (Whittle, 2005), clients (Trethewey, 1997) or other practitioners such as clinicians (Doolin, 2002). The studies focus on how these organizational participants respond to a variety of management innovations including team-working (Knights & McCabe, 2000a, 2003), Total Quality Management (TQM) (Knights and McCabe, 2000b), lean manufacturing (Ezzamel & Willmott, 2001), computer-based monitoring (Ball & Wilson, 2000) and various culture management programmes (Bardon et al., 2017; Doolin, 2002; Fleming, 2005).

Even if each investigation comes with its own nuances, their contributions highlight three main individual positions, corresponding with how organizational participants answer management innovations attempting to regulate their ways of being and behaving: “conformity”, “resistance” and “distance”. Of course, single labels can never express the degree of nuance that such categories incorporate but they can be extremely useful in making the social reality intelligible (Deetz, 1996).

The conformity position refers to “conformist selves” (Collinson, 2003) who agree with the enterprise values and recognize themselves in the ideal worker figure that is prescribed to them in the workplace. According to Knights and McCabe (2000a), this position of conformity not only includes “bewitched” people but also encompasses individuals with different degrees of enthusiasm regarding the enterprise culture. However, all these employees roughly recognize themselves in typical enterprise values such as masculinity (Kerfoot & Knights, 1998), careerism (Grey, 1999) or elitism (Thornborrow & Brown, 2009) and behave according to the

corporate discipline as they tend to recognize post-bureaucratic change as an opportunity for empowerment (Musson & Duberley, 2007).

The second category corresponds to “resisting selves” (Collinson, 2003), i.e. individuals who reject the enterprising culture and are “bothered” (Knights & McCabe, 2000a) by the corporate discipline as it threatens their current ways of being and behaving (Musson & Duberley, 2007). A series of studies show that resisting subjects express their discontent mainly through minor and covert discursive forms of resistance such as cynicism (Fleming & Spicer, 2007), scepticism (Fleming & Sewell, 2002), opposing arguments that question the rationality of corporate prescriptions (Ezzamel et al., 2001) or developing alternative interpretive repertoires (Knights & McCabe, 2000a). Some researchers have suggested that these “underground” forms of resistance hinder the occurrence of more disruptive ones, whereas others recognize the symbolic power of such misbehaviours that constitute everyday acts of micro-emancipation that undermine the authority and credibility of corporate changes (Ezzamel et al., 2001; Fleming & Spicer, 2007).

Resisting behaviours have also been thematized as ethical choices from organizational participants (Bardon et al., 2017). In this way, Bardon et al. (2017) show that middle managers at Disneyland Paris resist a corporate programme prescribing them to privilege effectiveness over ethics because of their willingness to make not only effective but also moral decisions when facing particularly sensitive and ambiguous situations. They interpret such resisting behaviours as the expression of those middle managers’ ethics, and, in particular, of their quest for practical wisdom (“*phronesis*” following Aristotle).

Foucauldian scholars also stress that resistance arises because management innovations include internal contradictions and thus provide non-credible or inconsistent versions of the organizational “reality” to which individuals cannot subscribe (Knights & McCabe, 2000a). Most of these studies provide empirical accounts of individual resistance and tend to neglect collective forms of resistance. This should be seen in light of the fact that these studies often approach resistance as the precarious result of social individualities’ identity projects. The few Foucauldian studies showing instances of collective resistance to management innovations (Collinson, 1994; Ezzamel et al., 2001) make clear that “those who engage in collective forms of resistance are likely to do so for a multiplicity of different, often individualistic reasons” (Collinson, 1994: 55).

The third category of responses to management innovations corresponds with organizational participants who distance themselves from the enterprising ethos. In particular, “dramaturgical selves” make use of the corporate discourse in order to appear conformist in significant others’ eyes (Collinson, 2003, following Goffman, 1959), other distant selves conceive the management innovation simply as rhetoric or irrelevant (Musson & Duberley, 2007), and still others use the corporate discourse to their own advantage (Laine & Vaara, 2007). Interestingly, what was discussed as discursive forms of resistance, such as cynicism or scepticism of management innovations, can also be seen as forms of psychological distancing (Fleming & Spicer, 2007). In this way, such distancing from management innovations has been interpreted either as a way for individuals to protect their own identity and behaviours or as a form of dis-identification which produces alternative identities (Fleming & Spicer, 2007).

Altogether, these contributions are particularly valuable because they provide nuanced accounts of how organizational participants respond to post-bureaucratic management innovations that target their subjectivity.

STUDYING THE GENEALOGY OF MANAGEMENT INNOVATIONS

Along with the studies discussed above, another group of Foucault-inspired contributions provides genealogical accounts of management innovations, understood as the political histories that make certain management innovations become dominant discourses, if not considered as “truth” (Ezzamel & Willmott, 2008; Knights & McCabe, 1998; Knights & Morgan, 1995; McCabe, 1996). By doing this, these studies aim to show that management innovations do not (necessarily) diffuse because they are best practice, i.e. because they are “necessary” to cope with organizational “reality”, but (also) because a number of circumstances, that Foucault calls “conditions of possibilities”, construct the organizational “reality” in ways that make them appear as “necessary” in such contexts.

Following Foucault’s radical constructionism, the goal of these studies is thus to show that management innovations do not tell the truth about how management situations should be handled but that they are social constructions that come to appear as “true”. Genealogical studies thus constitute alternatives to rationalist accounts that explain the adoption and implementation of management innovations following the efficient choice model (Ezzamel & Willmott, 2008). They explicitly question the proclaimed superior rationality of management innovations that are adopted in organizational settings by showing that they are only social “inventions” which have been legitimized in a given context at the expense of other corporate discourses that have been delegitimized. As Davidson (1989: 247) puts it: “Genealogy is not intended to build proud epistemological foundations [...] it shows instead that the origin of what we consider rational or true is rooted in subjection, power relationships—in a word in power.”² The goal of such genealogies is thus not to provide a “history of the past” but a history of the present (Knights, 2002), i.e. to provide historical accounts to trace the emergence of what appears as “true” and “necessary” within contemporary organizational settings. To do so, these studies depict the “conditions of possibilities” at individual, organizational, technological and institutional levels that constitute management innovations as regimes of truth.

For example, McCabe (1996) provides a genealogical account of a TQM initiative in an engineering company manufacturing auto components. His study describes how a given definition of how to implement TQM becomes a “regime of truth” within this organization to the detriment of another that has been discredited and discarded. In fact, two competing definitions of TQM were initially proposed in this company: on the one hand, TQM was presented as a continuous improvement process gradually implemented through a collective process of integrating employees into deployment, by training them to achieve quality standards and by setting up a recruitment policy aimed at attracting “quality” skills etc. On the other hand, TQM was conceived as a Just-In-Time process comprising an exclusively functional reorganization of production that had to be implemented as quickly as possible, following a top-down approach, to minimize waste. McCabe (1996) then describes the “manoeuvres” of legitimation that enabled the second interpretation to prevail by being presented as “true” and “necessary”. In particular, he shows how an external consultant was used as an “expert” to legitimize the indisputable superiority of the technical approach; by referring to data presented as “indisputably” true, this “expert” pointed out that the only way to overcome the “objectively” bad market conditions was to adopt the technical solution

2. Originally in French: “La généalogie ne vise pas à bâtir d’orgueilleuses fondations épistémologiques [...] elle montre au contraire que l’origine de ce que nous jugeons comme rationnel, porteur de vérité, plonge ses racines dans l’assujettissement, les rapports de force—en un mot dans le pouvoir”.

as soon as possible, which would be certain to bring rapid results.

Genealogies of management innovations are thus interested in describing how certain management innovations have emerged and come to be considered as “true” and “necessary” while others have become “subjected discourses”,³ i.e. discourses that were “found to be disqualified as non-conceptual knowledge, insufficiently elaborated knowledge, naive knowledge, hierarchically inferior knowledge, knowledge below the required level of scientificity”⁴ (Foucault, 1997: 9). In this sense, these Foucauldian genealogical accounts can be interpreted as offering a political history of management innovations, i.e. a “strategy as power” perspective which deconstructs the evolving power relationships that constitute and make new organizing processes evolve over time.

A RESEARCH AGENDA

Our rereading shows that Foucault constitutes a major source of inspiration for organizational scholars interested in management innovations. We demonstrate how Foucault-inspired studies on management innovations have developed by articulating their complementarities, limitations and critiques. We show that Foucault’s thinking has the development of an original critical voice on management innovations that constitutes a credible alternative to the managerialist approach. However, we believe that Foucault still has more to offer and can thus still inspire students of management innovations. In this respect, the following two research avenues appear to us as particularly promising.

FROM POST-BUREAUCRATIC TO BIOCRATIC INNOVATIONS

First, we encourage Foucauldian scholars to take an interest in those emerging management innovations that currently flourish in organizational settings and that do not fit well within the post-bureaucratic ideal-type discussed above. This new generation of management innovations includes a great variety of practices such as: the appointment of Chief Happiness Officers responsible for looking out for the well-being of organizational participants (Vanhée, 2013); providing “cool” workspaces with recreational areas where employees can socialize in a relaxed atmosphere, play video games or share “fun” activities with others or offering employees the possibility of teleworking and even freely organizing their working time to suit their particular needs (Morgan, 2004).

These management innovations are distinct from post-bureaucratic practices because they do not attempt to transform individuals into identical corporate clones—who would take the shape of a risk-taking and aggressively ambitious enterprising subject—but play on other registers by promoting values such as authenticity, diversity, well-being, kindness and happiness, etc. (Fleming, 2013). So far, we have found plenty of overenthusiastic writing and speeches from management gurus promoting these new management practices (Getz & Carney, 2012; Hsieh, 2010; Zobrist, 2014). However, very few academic pieces have investigated these management innovations, and even fewer from a critical perspective (e.g. Fleming, 2013, 2014; Land & Taylor, 2010 for notable exceptions).

In this respect, the most sophisticated critical contributions on this topic are certainly the theoretical developments provided by Peter Fleming (2013, 2014) who mobilizes the Foucauldian notion of biopower to

3. Originally in French: “discours assujettis”.

4. Originally in French: “Des savoirs qui se trouvaient être disqualifiés comme savoirs non conceptuels, savoirs insuffisamment élaborés, savoirs naïfs, savoirs hiérarchiquement inférieurs, savoirs en dessous du niveau de la connaissance ou de la scientificité requise”.

conceptualize management innovations as biocratic practices. The concept of biopower is a promising but, in fact, underdeveloped notion that Foucault only touched upon in his work (Fassin, 2006). Foucault first mentioned this concept in 1974 at a conference (the transcript of which was first published in 1977) where he argued that “the control of society over individuals is not only realized by consciousness or ideology, but also by the body and with the body. For the capitalist society, this is bio-politics that matters above all, the biological, the somatic, the corporeal”⁵ (Foucault, 1977: 210). Initially, the notion of biopolitics thus refers to power that targets biological life and includes “a set of processes such as the proportion of births and deaths, the reproduction rate, the fertility of a population”⁶ (Foucault, 1977 216). The concept was later extended to include all forms of power that target “life” itself, including biological life and also the social life of individuals (Fassin, 2006). Fleming (2013, 2014) subscribes to this wider interpretation and theoretically discusses how biocratic practices mean that “our life abilities and extra-work qualities (bios or “life itself”) are now key objects of exploitation” (Fleming, 2014: 875). Notably, he discusses how the biocratic ideal-type is different from the post-bureaucratic one, by arguing that “this change in management ideology is further evidenced in the way it increasingly focuses on moments of non-work as a source of value and inspiration. Contemporary corporate discourse displays characteristics of biopower or ‘biocracy’ whereby ‘life itself’ (which used to be reserved till the formal workaday was over) is enrolled as a productive force” (Fleming, 2013: 487).

These theoretical developments need to be extended with empirical studies focusing on specific “biocratic” management innovations (see Fleming & Sturdy, 2009; Land & Taylor, 2010) in order to document the variety of social and cultural mechanisms through which organizational participants’ lives are captured and exploited productively. To do so, the Foucauldian concept of ascesis discussed above can be very useful in investigating the “lifestyle” (Foucault, 1984a: 36) that biocratic practices prescribe for organizational participants. Indeed, it offers a four-dimensional reading grid that can be used to systematically deconstruct how these management innovations attempt to construct a biocratic subject whose life is entirely spoiled by work.

Future research avenues should also investigate how biocratic management innovations coexist with bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic modes of functioning. Indeed, management innovations are not implemented in a vacuum but in social contexts where existing modes of functioning already exist. This line of research develops critical studies that investigate—not necessarily from a Foucauldian perspective—how newly adopted post-bureaucratic practices challenge and potentially contradict the traditional bureaucratic modes of functioning characterizing the organizational settings in which they are implemented (Clegg, Harris & Höpfl, 2011; Farrell & Morris, 2013; Josserand, Teo & Clegg, 2006). Future studies could concentrate on how the introduced biocratic modes of functioning connect with existing bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic modes of functioning in organizational settings where biocratic management innovations are adopted. Studies could also investigate whether biocratic practices encapsulate principles that are traditionally associated with the bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic ideal-type. Indeed, previous studies show how post-bureaucratic practices are in fact hybrid practices that also convey bureaucratic modes of functioning (Hodgson,

5. Originally in French: “Le contrôle de la société sur les individus ne s’effectue pas seulement par la conscience ou par l’idéologie, mais aussi dans le corps et avec le corps. Pour la société capitaliste, c’est la bio-politique qui importait avant tout, le biologique, le somatique, le corporel”.

6. Originally in French: “Un ensemble de processus comme la proportion des naissances et des décès, le taux de reproduction, la fécondité d’une population”.

2004; McCabe, 2010; Sturdy & Wylie, 2016). In line with this, we should also consider that biocratic practices might not perfectly fit with the biocratic ideal-type by encapsulating bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic prescriptions that might potentially offer organizational participants inconsistent versions of organizational “reality” and raise resisting behaviours.

We join in Fleming’s (2013) call for empirical investigation into how organizational participants respond to such biocratic management innovations. Indeed, resistance is often encouraged, if not prefabricated, in such biocratic contexts involving traditional forms of discursive resistance which might appear as active participation in the corporate-sponsored debate (Courpasson & Vallas, 2016; Mumby, Thomas, Martí & Seidl, 2017). Beyond exiting paid employment, or even suicide as evoked by Fleming (2013), other less radical forms of resistance might arise in response to biocratic practices.

Finally, we also call on Foucauldian scholars to provide genealogical accounts of biocratic management innovations. Foucault disciples should investigate the conditions and possibilities that make biocratic discourse appear as “necessary”, “efficient” or “desirable”. This investigation could be conducted at individual level by investigating the “condition of possibilities” within organizational participants’ biographies that make them consider biocratic management innovations as best practice. In this respect, retrospective life narrative approaches (Watson, 2008) appear particularly well adapted to such political and historical investigations at the individual level. This could make a valuable contribution to further understanding CEOs’ and top managers’ adoption and implementation decisions. Genealogical accounts should also be conducted at the level of single organizational settings and focus on the adoption and implementation of specific biocratic management innovations. They could also be conducted at more macro levels in order to study the historical conditions making this biocratic “wave” gain credence in contemporary times.

STUDYING MANAGEMENT INNOVATIONS: GETTING INTO THE BATTLEFIELD

The second research avenue concerns the opportunity for Foucauldian scholars to adopt research postures that are more engaged in the field when studying management innovations. So far, empirical Foucauldian studies on this topic mainly adopt case study research designs based on organizational participants’ interviews and secondary data (e.g. Kelly et al., 2007; Knights & McCabe, 2003); we also find few ethnographic studies that include field observation (e.g. Ezzamel et al., 2001). Of course, these research methods are perfectly adapted to investigate how management innovations are deployed within organizational settings and how organizational participants respond to these technologies of power. Still, they hold Foucault’s disciples at a safe academic distance. Indeed, the latter do not actively contribute to transforming power relationships within management innovations, i.e. they have very little influence on the technologies of power that they study and how organizational participants respond to them. Put simply, it means that Foucauldian scholars only look at the battlefield rather than participating in the battle. Of course, the latter statement should be nuanced since access to research fields is often granted in exchange for feedback from researchers; it is also common that researchers communicate some of their findings to informants on a voluntary basis. Nevertheless, it is a

matter of fact that the knowledge produced on management innovations by Foucauldian scholars have marginal effects on studied research settings.

Of course, our point echoes the much broader debate about the practical relevance of research activities and the gap that exists between theory and practice (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). In particular, it resonates with more recent calls encouraging critical scholars to adopt a “critical performative approach” (Huault, Kärreman, Perret & Spicer, 2017; Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman 2009; Wickert & Schafer, 2015). Following Spicer et al. (2009: 55), adopting a critical performative stance “requires attempts to question, challenge and radically reimagine management through practical and direct interventions into particular debates of management”. Put simply, critical performativity thus refers to how critical scholars can influence organizational life rather than maintaining a cynical distance from the organizational phenomena upon which they reflect. It thus involves “scholars’ subversive interventions that can involve the production of new subjectivities” (Esper, Cabantous, Barin-Cruz & Gond, 2017: 671). Many intellectual sources have been used, misused or creatively used (in this respect, see the debate between Cabantous, Gond, Harding & Learmonth, 2016 and Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman., 2016) to discuss critical performativity, including Austin, Butler, Lyotard or Callon (Cabantous et al., 2016; Spicer et al., 2009, 2016; Wickert & Shaefer, 2015). In this context, Foucault has not been seen as a key influential resource for stimulating thinking on critical performativity (see Aggeri, 2017 for a notable exception).

Here, our take is that the Foucauldian perspective constitutes a particularly appropriate posture for conducting studies that are performative, most notably in relation to management innovations. Indeed, Foucault himself conceives his own work as being about influencing the field of possibilities. He argues, provocatively, that “I would like my books to be scalpels, Molotov cocktails or mine galleries, and they burn after use, like fireworks” (Foucault, 1975b: 725). This means that he considers that the value of his writings derives from their concrete effects on “reality”. Specifically, Foucault conceives his writings as “experience books” in opposition to “truth books” (Foucault, 1980a: 867), i.e. that he considers that his research aims at renewing one’s experience of “reality” rather than telling the truth about “reality”. As he says, “my experience is to do it myself, and to invite others to do with me [...] an experience of our modernity so that we come out transformed. Which means that at the end of the day we are building new relationships with what is in question”⁷ (Foucault, 1980a: 863).

Beyond transforming his own understanding, the research aims for Foucault were to help “reader-users” (Foucault, 1974b) problematize “reality” not as “true” or “necessary” but as the precarious result of a particular historical configuration of power relationships. The goal is thus to assist readers not to passively accept what is presented to them as the incontestable “reality” but to ethically evaluate the proposed version of reality offered to them and make the ethical decision to conform, resist or transform it, as “moral subjects of their own actions” (Foucault, 1984a). Being performative for Foucault thus means catalysing reflexivity and critical judgement by sapping authoritative discourses that attempt to impose certain ways of being and behaving in the name of “truth”.

For instance, when Foucault investigates ancient sexual asceticism in the last two volumes of *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault, 1984a, 1984b), this is to show us that other ways of experiencing sexuality used to

7. Originally in French: “Mon problème est de faire moi-même, et d’inviter les autres à faire avec moi [...] une expérience de ce que nous sommes [...] une expérience de notre modernité afin que nous en sortions transformés. Ce qui signifie qu’au bout du livre nous puissions établir des rapports nouveaux avec ce qui est en question”.

be legitimate and that what appears now as a “normal” sexuality is thus only a socially constructed historical product. By deconstructing these alternative sexual ascetics, he thus calls on us to problematize our relationships with ourselves and others during sexual acts, and more generally during all social interactions, rather than passively conform to what is presented as “normal” behaviour.

In all cases, Foucault attempts to influence the field of possibilities with his books, which are well received, by responding regularly to interviews in specialized and generalist journals targeting the wider public (see, Foucault, 2001a, 2001b), and through activism in the field. For instance, his strong involvement in the “Groups d’Informations des Prisons” (GIP), a militant group calling for reformation of the jurisdictional and prison system, is a way to practically apply his critique of power and discipline (Welch, 2010). Similarly, Foucault’s practical engagement in favour of gay rights is testament to his desire to influence the field of possibilities concerning the normalization of sexuality (Eribon, 1989).

Likewise, Foucauldian scholars should look for more ways to have an impact on the management innovations they focus on in their research. Of course, it is unlikely that organizational participants read academic articles, and anyway, it would probably only affect them and potentially influence their decisions long after the research period. In this respect, we strongly encourage Foucault disciples to adopt a critical performative stance when investigating management innovations. In line with this, Foucault’s disciples could work in close collaboration with practitioners, both by seeking to influence those who deploy management innovations and those who are subject to them. Indeed, Foucault refuses the structuralist ideological view that involves taking for granted binary opposition between the dominants and the dominated based on class, or on any other a priori defining attributes (Foucault, 1980b). On the contrary, he emphasizes that situations should be assessed locally, meaning that individualities should also be assessed based on their (liberating or constraining) actions in the field of possibilities (Foucault, 1980b). Following this, a performative intervention could thus involve enrolling “disgruntled elites” (Spicer et al., 2016: 238) but, more widely, will entail initially approaching all those involved in the adoption and implementation of management innovations as “moral subjects of their own actions” who can potentially contribute to opening the field of possibilities rather than constraining it.

In all cases, adopting a Foucauldian performative approach to management innovations could involve providing a “tool box” (Foucault, 1974b; Foucault & Deleuze, 1977) to both categories of organizational participants for reflecting on management innovations as moral subjects of their own actions—tools to help them become more reflexive on the management innovations that they consider deploying or to which they are subjected. For instance, Foucault disciples could provide participants with genealogical accounts of these management innovations. Such historical analysis of the “conditions of possibilities” that make certain management innovations and ways to implement them appear as “true”, “necessary” or “desirable” can be particularly useful for informing their decisions on these matters. Similarly, deconstructing the power effects of management innovations can help managers assess the consequences of their own managerial actions; it can also help organizational participants make their decisions to conform, resist or distance themselves from the discipline and asceticism prescribed to them by management innovations. In this respect, the four dimensions of asceticism (see Table 1) can be very useful for organizational participants. Finally, a Foucault perspective offers a

privileged perspective to help actors of management innovations become moral subjects of their own actions and, in doing so, increase morality within organizational settings.

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