



speaking out

# On Meta-Ideology and Moralization: A Prolegomena to a Critique of Management Studies

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During the last ten years, at a time which coincides with the start of a new millennium, there has in management and organization studies been an increased interest in notions such as ideology, hegemony and the like, to the point where some have argued that the field itself is being torn asunder by the political rift apparent between those labelled 'mainstream' and those labelled 'critical'. One perspective on this would be to refer to it as an 'ideology war', a battle regarding the purity of management studies, one where those supporting a *status quo* are set against those who would see the point of social science being the tearing away of ideological veils and the ushering in of a more emancipated age. The key issue of such a 'war' is whether the field can make claims regarding scientific objectivity, or whether it is always already tainted by ideology—and what this might mean, to the field and to the identity of those in it. These are important issues, for they strike at the very heart of the identity politics of management studies—is it a legitimate endeavour, is it worthy of the sobriquet 'science', and who is supposed to benefit from all this hue and cry?

As a way to discuss this, I will argue the following: management studies is not merely ideological, but rather meta-ideological. This insofar as it functions as a praxis to uphold a set of preconceived, often moral notions regarding management, organization and the economic, and does so in a way that makes it believe its understandings of the world represent objective knowledge-production. In this sense, it is an ideological construct put in place to support and enhance another ideological construct, creating a situation where we are symbolically twice removed from any imaginable



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'objective state'. Rather than merely stating that management studies bolsters a set of moral understandings of the world, I want to claim that in order to be externally ideological it has been forced to adopt an unspoken and unconscious internal ideology, and thus create a kind of a 'moralized world' that can be used for metapolitical ends. More specifically, I will deal with the process of moralization and moral delimitation as central to the modernist project of a management science, which has managed to create a limited set of knowledges within which this can then position itself as a natural and neutral mode of analysis. By adopting a critical stance to this moral world, I want to argue that one of the fundamental aspects of how management studies works is that it limits the world in a manner that reduces the same, thus fundamentally making the study of management an ideological practice of the Gramscian variety. This has an impact on the field both as a path of scientific inquiry and as an engagement with the world, and hinders the field both intellectually and pragmatically.

What is a meta-ideology? Simply put, it is an ideology of an ideology, a set of mental constructs established to protect and support other mental constructs. Although there are a multitude of ways in which one can define 'ideology', the one I engage with here is one where it is understood as the lessening of a world by limiting what is possible to say about it, i.e. ideology as a mental structure through which certain (or, possibly, all) social phenomena are established as a priori normal and/or natural. Such an interpretation would state that any and everything cultural and social is ideologically embedded, and that the very practice of making meaning and sense has such a component. Ideology is thus not simply a concept we can throw about, hoping that it'll stick to those with ideas that differ from ours, but an analytical category with which we can discuss any cultural or social structure. This, however, has been the problem of ideological analysis—it seems to say very little. Even though one can state that management as a practice is ideological, and be sure that this statement in all likelihood is objectively true, the same statement can be made with just as much legitimacy about farming, panhandling, child-rearing and any number of other social practices.

From a definitional perspective, there is no discernible difference between ideologies or ideological practices, as the concept simply states something about the properties of a phenomenon. We may find the ideology of conservative Christian fundamentalism abhorrent, and the ideology of women's liberation by necessity good and just, but this does not make them more or less ideological. Rather, the sense of something being more of an ideology might be a question of a 'distance scale'—the further away from our own mindset and preferences something is, the more likely it is we will condemn it as being 'ideological'. But this is merely the case when we are discussing our personal preferences and ways in which groups can attempt to strengthen their own identity by disassociating themselves from others. If we are talking on an analytical level, all ideologies are in a sense equal. For the purposes of this essay this unfortunately means that



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statements regarding the ideological standing of management are often rather meaningless, as they merely point out that structures of social interaction has characteristics of structures of social interaction. In other words, it means very little to say that management is ideological, as it has to be. However, this does not mean that discussions regarding this are senseless, for there may well be other aspects that can be highlighted by such.

The obvious case is when such a claim is made in order to show that management is not a given and necessary structure for organizing, not even when organizing economy or economic behaviours. We may well imagine or even find productive forms of organizing where no management is evident, such as in self-organizing or anarchic systems, which implies that management is merely one possible systemic element in the coordination and organization of production and distribution of things. What discussions about ideology can highlight is that this has become positioned in such a way that we find it increasingly difficult to imagine alternatives to it, i.e. it has become naturalized in our society. The point of ideological critique, then, is to de-naturalize this, show that it is not a logically necessary structure. As an aside it should be pointed out that this has often been misinterpreted as being something undesirable, which is ludicrous—democracy is not logically necessary either, but this does not mean that one when pointing this out is clamoring for a totalitarian dictatorship or an anarchist commune. But illuminations regarding the contingent nature of management are not necessarily very helpful in mounting a more thorough critique. Although one can fairly easily show that one can imagine a case where management simply would not exist, this can be accepted and ignored at the same time. On the level of analysis, as separated from the level of inquiry, such proofs can look like just so much scholastics, and one can just simply state that a number of phenomena are socially constructed, but this makes them no less real.

Succinctly put, there have been two major threads or themes in the criticism against an ideological analysis of the field of management—and both have been broadly correct in their counter-attacks. One has focused on pointing out that the people calling management ideological are just as ideological themselves, and that they often assume that they automatically occupy the moral high ground. This goes some way towards defusing such claims (even though it does not invalidate them), but it is very efficient in presenting the case as one of warring camps, locked in their separate trenches. The other has focused on accepting the logic of the argument, but presenting it as an intellectual parlour-trick, a cute exercise in rhetoric and little more. This is a particularly stinging criticism, as many of those who try to break with the hegemony of management feel marginalized to begin with—neither workers nor captains of industry, uncomfortably positioned as academics or, in a few lucky cases, intellectuals. In the eyes of its enemies, a critical study of management is either biased and political or naïve and of no practical importance. This latter point is highly important, for it goes to the question of what a critique of an ideology actually means.



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One way to thoroughly criticize an ideology is to point out that there is a better (or 'better') world possible that the current ideology hinders or renders unthinkable. Even though such comparisons are obviously a matter of taste and preference, one can in every overthrow of an ideology find that the possibility for improving the world is a central aspect, even if we can argue about whether this succeeded or not. Now, even though one might have differing views on what constitutes improvement in the world, most people would agree that the world is not perfect as it is, and that development and improvement is at least possible—after all, most ideologies contain very clear ideas about such. What ideological critique has been criticized for is thus not the strive for a better world, but the trajectory of such improvements and the means one should use to bring about such. For instance, critical management studies can be accused of being leftist and overly intellectual, and thus (according to some) wrong-headed, but it would seem an odd argument to say that one should not strive to improve upon the world—after all, this is what both parties are trying to do. But what has this to do with meta-ideology?

I use the term meta-ideology to describe cases where an ideology is hindered to develop by the existence of a supporting layer, that by attempting to hold to the ideological framework of its 'host' creates a sort of malevolent parasitism. Metaphorically this could be likened to a parent who persistently gives a child everything it desires, leading to the child becoming spoilt, fat, and developing a stunted personality. The parent acts out of love, and is unable to see that fulfilling desires may not be the best thing for the child. The child desires what children desire—hamburgers, sweets and toys—and is in a sense blameless, even though she, by having her desires fulfilled, is denied the development of a more mature personality. This on the level of metaphor. What a meta-ideology does is that it, masquerading as objective analysis, neutralizes the possibility that an ideology starts developing in novel and innovative ways. In a sense this is similar to how Marx and Gramsci understood the 'superstructure' of an ideology and might seem equivalent to what Althusser referred to as 'ideological state apparatuses'. There is, however, a very important difference here. In these cases one assumes that the cultural secures and supports the overall ideology, so that the superstructural element is in fact beneficial to the prevailing ideology (even though we might be of the opinion that this is detrimental to humanity). Meta-ideology, as I define it, is in fact capable of supporting, but will at the same time subvert that which it assumedly assists, whereas the former concepts have normally been handled as conservative and embedded properties.

In other words, I contend that the field of management studies can be critiqued as being meta-ideological without this meaning that one takes a position in the question regarding the ideological status of market economy. To the contrary, such a critique may in fact point to the fact that the ideological practices of management studies is in fact detrimental to the



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development of capitalism and the free market, whilst being ideologically tainted and working against the emancipation of the masses. Such a critique is to me much more interesting than pointing out that ideologies exist and affect us.

The meta-ideological nature of management studies might be best highlighted by pointing to ways in which the field creates artificial borders that limit our practical grasp of that which is studied. Specifically, we can when analysing the field see that *moralization* reigns as one of the pre-eminent ideological practices therein, suggesting that it is through the moral limitation of epistemic fields we have been able to construct and define management studies. By this I mean that the specifically moral act of choosing what should and should not be included (and therefore deemed important) in management studies is a foundational act, one that has far-reaching consequences for the field as a whole. This can perhaps best be made evident by way of illustration or juxtaposition, and one of the best examples might be that of crime.

Obviously, all forms of crime are normally viewed as at least in part immoral. They involve the breaching of a number of codes of moral behaviour including, but not limited to, codes relating to rights to property and personal integrity. However, from an assumedly objective perspective there is no denying that, for example organized crimes such as drug-dealing, build on a number of organizing processes and also involve quite a lot of management. Also, it is quite apparent that crimes such as drug-dealing or prostitution create value, albeit not of the morally upstanding or necessarily desired variety. Still, interestingly but not unsurprisingly, the academic field of management studies has done very little in the way of grasping such non-traditional forms of business, and instead started from the moral (but less than logical) assumption that it should only deal with legal and morally upstanding forms of economic transactions. As a matter of course, almost all studies of management have been conducted in fields which can at the very least be thought of as 'proper' —it is particularly interesting to note that although pornography is legal in most countries, and a huge business to boot, almost no serious studies of the management implication of this field have been conducted (the author has dabbled in this field, though never wrote up the research). Such examples highlight how management studies as a field has self-assigned legality (and similar moral precepts) as a form of disciplining and tempering function on its inquiries into the world, regulating itself through an externally assigned set of principles regulating the boundary between internal and external. The ideological implications of this is that management studies seems to try to create a purer, more hygienic version of that which it studies/serves, and through this present a hagiography of the world of contemporary market economy.

Consequently, it becomes difficult to uphold the idea of management studies as an objective field of knowledge, as it clearly limits and self-disciplines itself according to what can only (from within an analytic



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framework of economic behaviour) be understood as an arbitrary set of outside rules. In such a mode, the study of management studies becomes an issue of outlining the different ways in which the field has decided to neuter and curb itself in order to better fit into the symbolic construct it assumes it must take to fit in and gain legitimacy from the ideology it feeds upon—ergo becoming a meta-ideology.

That a science can be tempered and circumscribed by the ideology it exists in is nothing new. Many of us know the sad story of how Lysenkoism became the state-sponsored agricultural science in the Soviet Union, and the repercussions this had. In the 1930s to the mid-1960s, Trofim Lysenko took the structures of Stalinism, and used them to position a specific brand of agricultural science as the one true way. Buffered and supported by the apparatuses of the state, he developed a campaign of 'practical science' that fitted the Soviet doctrine well, and used this fit with the prevailing ideology to denounce genetics and what he proclaimed to be overly theoretical academic practices. Even though his science has been shown to be almost wholly nonsensical—excepting the practical agricultural know-how he simply co-opted from age-old farming practices—he was presented as a true hero of science, and amply rewarded. Academics voicing dissent to this dogma were often labelled as hostile and dangerous, and often ridiculed as irrelevant theory-mongers whereas Lysenko stood for a practical and meaningful science (although some people must have doubted some of the more outlandish claims of his followers—such as the claim that firs could be 'conditioned' into pines). Of particular interest to management studies might be the way he always managed to stay ahead of his more academic colleagues. Rather than developing a system through experiments or theoretical analysis (perish the thought), he simply reacted to state-sponsored initiatives with practical-sounding, if at times mindless suggestions, delivering this in perfect lock-step with the proposed changes in, for example the organization of farming. As the state initiatives often came fast and hard, and Lysenko's suggestions and new recipes came even faster, the academics who might have wanted to criticize him simply did not have the time to react before a new theory or model was already laid forth. Even though biologists might have been able to show that a practice was bogus, this took time, and at that point Lysenko had already moved on (and been 'proved right' by state-controlled media). I would obviously not want to label anyone in management consultancy as a modern-day Lysenkoite, but one can in the rapid change of models, the marginalization of differing theoretical approaches, and in the strategic fit with the prevailing language and ideology see certain family resemblances to the problems affecting management studies. (As a short aside, one wonders if not certain aspects of entrepreneurship studies could be fruitfully compared to the Japhetic theory of language as developed by Nikolay Marr.)

So, could we describe Lysenkoism as a meta-ideology? In a sense, yes. It fitted well with the prevailing ideology it existed in, it both supported and



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was supported by the selfsame (in a kind of allelopathic but mutualist symbiosis), and it definitively caused the ‘host organism’ harm—as it hindered the development of a less proletarian but more effective agricultural science. At the same time, it is difficult to view a specific brand of agricultural science as constituting an ideology in the more limited sense, although it clearly was ideological. It may have worked hard to exclude genetics from the field it protected, and done so partly out of ideological (and self-serving) reasons, but this may also be understood as a case of normal academic infighting—if an ideologically coloured and perverted form thereof.

The astute reader has by now realized that I am in fact arguing that management studies as it exists today has a family resemblance to Lysenkoism. Such an egregious claim will no doubt offend quite a number of scholars in the field, but at the same time ... Trofim Lysenko may have been a self-promotor, a fraud, and a careerist, but this does not take away from the fact that a lot of the precepts of the movement still ring true in the ears of many (particularly in the higher echelons of university administration): abstractly theoretical work was inferior to active intervention, science should be practical and give clear and actionable suggestions, one should pay attention to the needs of powerful institutions and constituencies, and entrepreneurial action should be rewarded. Lysenkoism was an action-oriented movement that wanted to break with what was seen as an outdated academic ideal and instead do practical work with societal impact—innovative, entrepreneurial and pragmatically relevant. Even though the words have changed (one fairly seldom hears a vice chancellor rail against the bourgeoisie these days), many of the underlying logics are alive and well in our universities, not to mention used as arguments by academics.

Such a claim can and will be understood in different ways. Some will think that I by this want to say that management scholars are charlatans—I do not. Others will see this as an attack on Critical Management Studies—it most definitively isn’t. Others still will think that I am gunning for a more objectivist ideal in management studies—I might, but I think we disagree on the meaning of ‘objective’. What I am trying to show is that the flaws of management studies are born out of a desire to do and be good, and that herein lies the rub.

What is interesting about Lysenkoism is that it can be understood as a moral undertaking. Obviously one can in the processes in and around it find quite a lot of immoral and unethical behaviour—lying, falsification of evidence, backstabbing, active and at times fatal harassment of those deemed ideologically impure. Still, people believed in the movement, and in the precepts of it, and in a situation of societal upheaval and frequent famines, the figure of a practical man denouncing empty theorizations and abstract academics must have been seen as a godsend. For quite a few people, it must have seemed true and just that somebody was speaking out, saying that the professors were not interested in anything except their cozy offices, and that we must focus on the serious, practical stuff that actually



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mattered. These are clearly moral claims, a version of a research ethic, and one that is often voiced even in our days. It is also important to note that Lysenko through this gained the support not only of the *nomenklatura*, but also of the peasants who seem to have appreciated his practice-centred approach.

But why did Lysenkoism fail? We can suggest several overlapping answers. The usual answer has focused on the fact that it was scientifically unsound. This it was, yet it managed to survive for over 30 years, during which time it hampered and hindered the development of Soviet biology and genetics immeasurably. A more revealing question might be: how did Lysenkoism survive? It is not enough to say that it survived because it was backed by the power elite, as this will necessarily be the case—in itself, this doesn't tell us enough. Rather, it survived because it said what the powers that be wanted to hear, and because it played the role of a practically oriented, result-producing science perfectly. The only problem with it was that it did so in a field where you can actually verify claims, where crop yields can be measured and new hybrids of wheat can be tested. Its failures as a science thus caught up with it, but for a very long time it could survive on the basis of delivering what was important—a discourse that sounded legitimate. Lysenkoism was a meta-ideology because it both supported the ideology it was attached to and caused it harm. By feeding back the kind of agricultural science it knew the Stalinist regime would applaud and find suitable to the Party's worldview, it damaged that which the ideology tried to build upon—economic progress under a communist regime. Lysenko promised to deliver miracles of efficiency, but miracles that were strictly aligned to the prevailing ideology.

Even if we believe in management studies, there are disconcerting similarities. In universities, management studies is often looked upon favourably by the powers that be, and often supported by both industry and the political system. In much of the field, the notion of 'practically applicable results' is seen as the ideal, and speedy reaction to changing circumstances is lauded. Opposing stances—such as, for example critical analyses of managerialism—are marginalized and ridiculed. Saying that one does not want to do the kind of work that would support management and the corporate world can, depending on the setting, get one ostracized or even threatened with sanctions. Studies in the 'wrong' fields are sometimes ridiculed, sometimes merely ignored, but focusing too much on work that is deemed to be 'outside' the field can get one censored. And in fact, when one looks at what is being done in the field, and the reasons behind the work, the field of management studies starts looking increasingly stunted and deformed.

Consider the arms trade. The annual global expenditure on arms and military ordinance comes to an estimated one *trillion* USD, and this figure might be higher as the illicit arms trade is notoriously tricky to get good figures on. Whereas the Big Mac-index might be good to get a sense of price



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levels in market-friendly countries, one could argue that the AK47-index (i.e. one based on what a Kalshnikov would cost on the street) is in fact a much better global measure. The arms trade is huge, in many countries a highly important part of the economy, exceedingly profitable, and fully globalized. For all intents and purposes, it looks like the perfect field of study for someone interested in understanding business and management. Yet it is almost completely unstudied. Why?

My answer, which follows from the exposition so far, is that management studies simply does not care about fit with the stated empirical field, but instead focus on what fits the ideological framework and how further legitimacy can be created. Rather than actually study things from some kind of objective perspective, both the selection of research subjects and the general approach of the field is ideological to the core. We look at things which will make us seem more important, cooler, more serious, more with-it. In doing so, we often ignore both what actually happens in the business world, what is common and everyday, and (bizarrely) what makes money.

For instance: Why do management scholars prefer to study success, entrepreneurship, innovation, knowledge management and leadership rather than boredom, prostitution, curry houses, meeting behaviour and coffee? All of these are existing phenomena in the field management studies claim to be interested in, and with the possible exception of prostitution, the latter are more common, less studied and less well understood. Whereas we have a lot of theories regarding entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial organizations, we have almost no theories of boredom in organizations, even though most would argue that the latter is far more common. 'Tis true that entrepreneurship is for the moment deigned to be more 'important', but such an assignation of importance is *by necessity* an ideological positioning. One might argue that entrepreneurship creates more jobs than boredom does (although one could claim the opposite—think of the amount of jobs that exist in media, fashion, toys, any industry that has developed in order to entertain us), but this is then only true of the phenomenon. In order, for example, entrepreneurship research to be important in the same way, we would have to show that *theories of entrepreneurship create jobs*, something I doubt even the most enthusiastic proponent would bet her job on.

If the problem was merely related to epistemological minutiae, this might be excused, on the grounds that because there is an institutional pressure on management studies to focus on things deemed important. This wouldn't solve the very real problem of a fundamental bias in the field, but all sciences make some concessions to outside pressures (e.g. physicists will also tweak their research problems towards things deemed socially important, as will researchers in medicine). However, there is a much more critical problem lurking behind this. The problems of the Lysenkoite program was not necessarily in what it did, but in what it ignored. Since Lysenko didn't 'get' genetics, any progress that could have been made by



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studying it was squashed, and the faithful tried to develop agriculture through the hit-and-miss processes deemed correct by the meta-ideology. Some parts of the latter actually worked, but in hindsight it is absolutely clear that the overall effect was disastrous.

Compare this to management studies today. The field studies things like proper, preferably big and successful companies, mostly in areas thought to be central right now. Burgeoning, successful fields such as the arms trade, pornography, illicit drugs, money laundering and smuggling are completely ignored, whereas things such as management consultancies and call centres (!?! ) are studied almost *ad absurdum*. If it could be shown that, for example, strategic initiatives in the business of human trafficking (which, it should be noted, is among the most heinous businesses around) either do not exist or are inferior to other approaches, we might argue that there is little to no need for people in the field of strategic management to study it. Likewise, if it could be shown that the arms trade is of no real business interest, one could be excused for not paying much attention to it. *But both these statements are highly suspect, and any statement regarding these businesses are largely guesswork.*

In a manner not entirely dissimilar to how Lysenko ignored those areas of agriculture he found unseemly, management studies today ignores or marginalizes those things that do not fit in with the image one has of how management should *look*, as defined by the surrounding ideology. The movement that was supposed to counter this, critical management studies, has largely failed to do so as it is too preoccupied with battling the same ideological ghost, merely putting up a funhouse mirror in front of the pre-existing structures. Put somewhat differently, critical management studies is just as much part of the meta-ideology, particularly if it takes a counter-position rather than redefining the playing field. The critical thing here is realizing that the prevailing situation is actually creating several kinds of directed damage, a kind of lose-lose situation. Those who would argue for the management-friendly approach to management studies might grudgingly agree that there are things left unsaid, but insist that looking at the big picture, the field is doing society a valuable service. They are wrong, for what management studies feeds the corporate world today is a sanitized version of what the field believes 'they' want. Those who take a critical stance are often on the side of angels as they try to extend the field, but often fail to realize that the current field is not merely limited or ideological, but constructed through a set of legitimizations that in fact work against that which it claims to support. Merely appending a critical stance to this is not enough. Instead, one needs to rethink the very project of management studies, something which requires a series of critical engagements with its ideological foundations.

Another way to define what a meta-ideology is would be to say that it is a moral construct which tries to do good by another moral construct, and thus manages to do it injustice. Management studies tries to do good in



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the world, which is laudable. But any attempt to do good will build upon a view on morality, and as moral notions are ideologically embedded they always run the risk of limiting what is possible to say and do. For a long time, we kept women away from things such as business and management, as we believed nothing good could come out of this—for anyone. Moral notions can lead to unethical behaviour, and they can hurt us. Morality unchecked leads to a world of absolutes—madonnas and whores, evil injuns and heroic cowboys, good entrepreneurs and nasty monopolists—and although this can help one to manage one's world, it functions less well as a basis for inquiries into the world. Believing that there is a 'way' to do management studies, and that straying will damage the field, is a moral idea and one that does far more damage *thanks to* its strive to do good.

As management studies has tried to copy the ideological framework of contemporary capitalism, and as critical management studies has mainly criticized this simulacra rather than engaged with the world from a novel position, the field is increasingly finding itself in a *cul-de-sac*. As those who would support the current state of the world cannot break with the framework within which they are placed they can do little to actually help the field they claim they are useful to, and those who criticize them are increasingly finding themselves fighting not a machine of managerialism but a sock puppet trying to look like a dragon. The mainstream are playing catch-up, and the critics are slinging mud at shadows. No wonder that both companies and the common man tend to find that management studies has little function outside education.

In order to break with this, we need to rethink the role of moralization and legitimacy in management studies. Rather than focus on how we, as scholars, want to be viewed I want to argue for a new kind of empiricism, one where the world is studied as it is rather than as the funding agencies or journal editors would like to see it presented. The world is a nasty, surprising, weird, funny, lovely place. In it children bicker over candy, companies make millions from sex toys, people fall in love and buy ridiculous gifts, and gun-runners sell refurbished MISR 7.62s. If we are to be actual scholars, we need to study all these things, not just the ones which fit with the needs of glossy university brochures or after-dinner speeches. We need to get dirty, and nasty, and weird—because the world is. If we can, even stranger things might happen. Suddenly, it might be critical management studies which presents usable and valuable results for multi-nationals, free from the limitations of 'proper' management studies—a program that was actually intimated by Joseph Schumpeter many years ago. Mainstream management studies, on its part, might develop into something much more critical—freed from the shackles of being good boys and girls one might find even strategic management scholars can bring sexy back. Then, maybe, the field could become fun again. Who knows, it might even become meaningful.



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