

## Comments on White Paper

### A Vision of Responsible Research in Business and Management: Striving for Credible and Useful Knowledge

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#### SLIDE 1

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There is little, in a general sense, which one could or would want to argue with in the White Paper.

#### SLIDE 2

Who would not support “research that produces credible and reliable knowledge with either direct or indirect usefulness for addressing problems important to both business and society”?

It is, however, the generality of the White Paper that is problematic, despite its laudable sentiments.

An implicit organicism imbues the paper. Singular entities, such as ‘business’ and ‘society’ are scattered through its pages: ‘society’ occurs 31 times; ‘business’ occurs 138 times.

#### SLIDE 3

Now, it wasn’t only Mrs. Thatcher who claimed that there was no such thing as society: so did Bruno Latour – although he meant it in a slightly different way. The point is, that there is no essence to which the abstract noun of either ‘society’ or ‘business’ can be attached. These are terms that, similarly to the role that ‘the people’ play in populist politicians’ presidential inaugural speeches, signify nothing in particular: they are what semiotics calls ‘floating signifiers’, words that don’t point to any actual object and with no universal, agreed upon meaning. They are extraordinarily useful as such, because they allow us to conduct exchanges with inbuilt etc. clauses: a tacit understanding that we each know what others and ourselves are on about, that when I talk about business I mean the same thing as the next person, be that person the Director of the CBI or the neighbourhood anarchist.

I am not so sure. In this White Paper we are told that, as a matter of belief, “business is a means for a better world”. As a matter of belief, as devotees of shows such as *Father Ted* or listeners to *Thought of the Day* will attest, even where there is faith about matters of belief some quite unbelievable things are possible. That’s the nature of ideology, even quite specialized aspects of it such as religious discourse.

Now I am not sure that belief is a sound basis for a ‘responsible science’. On the contrary, I would have thought.

#### SLIDE 4

Let’s discuss methodology: the White Paper is an exercise in what one might call future perfect thinking, an integral part of scenario thinking. It projects to 2030 – why 2030 is chosen is nowhere explained – a possible world, termed Vision 2030, constructed in the future perfect tense: one that will have come to pass as projected by that time.

*In 2030, business and management schools worldwide are the envy of other social science disciplines in the universities. Research is timely and cutting edge, producing well grounded knowledge on pressing problems. Both schools and scholars are committed to the principles of responsible research, which are embedded in the core curriculum of doctoral education. Research has helped organizations and communities of all kinds to develop effective systems leading to high economic performance, great innovations, positive employee and customer wellbeing, a clean environment, and strong communities. Policymakers routinely seek the guidance of business academics in developing policies that promote vibrant socio-economic systems for their constituents. Many schools have a focused area of research where they excel and are centers of excellence around their chosen areas of focus. Many schools have contributed valuable knowledge to support humanity’s highest aspirations, e.g., poverty alleviation; access to food, clean water, and education; a green environment, gender and social equality; economic growth and fair wealth distribution. Business leaders and government officials are frequent guests in business and management schools, seeking advice on policies and offering support for research on issues that need understanding. Business and management research is a model of “responsible research” after a major transformation that began in 2017.*

#### SLIDE 5

What are the obstacles to this Nirvana?

1. The fetishization of novelty necessary for publication in elite journals that produces discontinuity in rather than an accumulation of what Lakatos called ‘hard core’ knowledge.
2. A widening gap between research and practice: in essence, the worlds of research and the worlds of practice exhibit different and largely non-communicative institutional logics. Performativity in the one does not

amount to ‘a hill of beans’ in the other.<sup>1</sup> In addition, cut price teaching that does not trade on research can massively undercut in the market that which does so trade.

What is to be done?

### SLIDE 6

The answer, it is suggested, is “building a sound body of knowledge that serves society” through seven guiding principles of responsible research – what one might think of as the seven pillars of wisdom.<sup>2</sup> These are:

1. Service to society
2. Stakeholder involvement
3. Impact on stakeholders
4. Valuing both basic and applied contributions
5. Value of plurality and multidisciplinary collaboration
6. Reliable knowledge
7. Broad dissemination.

### SLIDE 7

*Service to society* sounds good but what does it mean? Given that there is no such thing as a unitary society, an essence to serve, that what we are wont to call ‘society’ is a collection of heterodox and unstable interests, contradictions and connections, how does one serve something that has no meaning? Is ‘society’ some sort of secularized devil or God in which we all have to serve somebody?<sup>3</sup> I might serve society by delivering a reliable electricity supply that makes everyone’s everyday lives more comfortable, except for those who scientists who point out the adverse effects of climate change attendant on burning fossil fuels. Who is serving society here: the businessmen who run the major global mining companies or the scientists and green activists who fear for the long-term sustainability of the planet? Well, both could claim to be serving society: the one here-and-now, the other for the probable future. So not only is society not a thing, a unitary thing, it is also an index of a temporal process that is dynamic and contested, in which a key part of the contestation will be the ideological appropriation of key terms such as ‘business’, ‘science’ and ‘society’. These terms are not in themselves meaningful but are only meaningful in use, in context, in specific language games, language games in which, in Wittgenstein’s memorable phrase, there are sometimes only slight family resemblances.

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<sup>1</sup> Due acknowledgement to *Casablanca* and Humphrey Bogart.

<sup>2</sup> Due acknowledgement to T. E Lawrence.

<sup>3</sup> Due acknowledgment to Bob Dylan and ‘You Gotta Serve Somebody’

## SLIDE 8

*Stakeholder involvement:* the problems here should be evident from the preceding. Different stakeholders play different games even when they are using the same signs. Serving tomorrow's potential stakeholders by arguing against today's is not an unusual situation to be in for scholars of sustainability, for instance. The benefit of research might be measured in terms of the discomfiture of today's stakeholders rather than their benefit; if the evidence basis of contemporary ecology and climate science cannot persuade the President of the United States and his government that burning fossil fuels, even great, beautiful American ones, is a bad thing for the future, what hope have responsible social scientists with much less public platforms? Business and management scholars might co-create knowledge with business and other organizations such as NGOs, governments and social enterprises but the grounds for doing so with agencies from each sector simultaneously are, I suspect, slight. More likely that there will be possibilities where interests align – but that brings power relations into knowledge – something that is omitted from the White Paper.

## SLIDE 9

*Impact on stakeholders:* having a positive impact on stakeholders is only possible where the stakes are aligned. It is the nature of vibrant democracies for that rarely to be the case: think of Brexit and the role that our disciplines have played in its debates. Then think of the stakeholders: reason does not characterize the debates that have ensued. In the best of all possible worlds it would be the case that it did but as social scientists in business schools we do not live and work in such a world; rather, we live in a world traversed by diverse and occasionally irreconcilable interests that are hard fought. I am a researcher of megaprojects, for instance: where these occur in an urban fabric there are always agents that define themselves in terms of winners and losers and where there are winners and losers different frames, assumptions and interpretations will always attend research processes and findings.

## SLIDE 10

*Valuing both basic and applied contributions:* in principle, this is unproblematic. In practice it may be a little less so. Both 'basic' and 'applied' contributions have what Francis Bacon referred to as their idols: In the *Novum Organum* (the new instrumentality for the acquisition of *knowledge*) Francis Bacon classified the intellectual fallacies of his time under four headings which he called *idols*. He distinguished them as *idols of the Tribe*, *idols of the Cave*, *idols of the Marketplace* and *idols of the Theater*. For 'basic' orientations, the idols of the Tribe, Cave and Marketplace are particularly dangerous; for the 'applied' orientation the idols of the Theatre are never far away.

#### SLIDE 11

*Values of plurality and multidisciplinary collaboration:* in principle, this is also unproblematic. Who cannot be for pluralism and paradigmatic promiscuity? Well, plenty of professors, that's for sure: having made intellectual investments they are reluctant to relinquish them or admit the value of others that might question the currency of these. I would think that no one that has worked in a business school would deny this if they have even the slightest relation with people from other disciplines – especially neo-classical economics, the most hermeneutically impermeable of disciplines.

#### SLIDE 12

*Reliable knowledge:* with this canon there can be little questioning. Of course, what are glossed as sound scientific practices are essential; while there can be no argument in principle, in practice what is constituted as reliable is an effect of the disciplinary practices in play and these are rarely in concordance across different social science approaches: positivists, realists, phenomenologists, etc., may agree on the importance of reliable knowledge but have little agreement on what constitutes such reliability.

#### SLIDE 13

*Broad dissemination:* again, with this canon there can be little argument. Books, blogs, articles, all media, aid researchers in communicating findings. Broad dissemination does not mean broad agreement or acceptance – the case of climate science should be a caution that, as Habermas advised, knowledge cannot be disassociated from human interests.

#### SLIDE 14

The remainder of the White Paper makes a number of recommendations for different constituencies of interest and practice for implementing the Vision before providing an analysis of the current situation in Business School research. Of particular note is that, distinctively amongst professional schools, the Business School does not produce or police a license to practice. Lacking these powers its reach into the constitution of knowledge is disciplinarily weak – it can classify but it cannot easily frame – while its reach into practice is weaker still.

#### SLIDE 15

Towards the end of the White Paper the current problems are diagnosed as a lack of relevance for business practice; an A-ranked journal fetishization of incentives; a privileging of theory, bias against refutation and problem-orientation, and an inadequacy of textbooks – well, on the latter point, comrades, I would immodestly suggest that there are some exceptions to this rule.

#### **SLIDE 16**

Who benefits? Not business and the broader society it is suggested but ourselves and our careers. I would not have thought this unusual professional practice.

#### **SLIDE 17**

What topics should be studied? The following are suggested: value beyond shareholder value; the changing nature of work and the workforce; social sustainability; environmental sustainability, and the diminution of distributional differences of poverty, prosperity and inequality. These topics are highly laudable but also highly contestable – each implies the relation of knowledge and human interests in a manner most political

Changes in the mode of production are envisaged to make a difference but it is recognised that in a complex system such changes are difficult as even small changes pursued for the best of intentions can produce the worst results in terms of unanticipated and counter-productive effects.

#### **SLIDE 18**

A change is overdue, the White Paper concludes. Absent that change, the future looks increasingly one of decline and decay, it is proposed. New problems generated by social and technological innovation require new responses from Business Schools if they are to remain relevant. The Business Schools have a key role to play in being social science midwives to the birth of better prospects for a better future world. It is a prospect that Saint-Simon would have cherished – a new class of technocrats as harbingers of the future.

#### **SLIDE 19**

In conclusion, while I would endorse the call for dialogue and debate I would argue that its basic terms require clarification and that the obfuscation of a discourse premised on imaginaries such as 'business' and 'society', irrespective of considerations of context and which side one is on in what are irremediably contested terrains, does not help us gain clarity. It is not enough to be for 'society' or 'business' but to be specific about what kinds of society and what kinds of business one is for and against and why, for what reasons. And technocracy can never answer these questions. They are questions of values, of politics, and it is these that should be at the centre of debate rather than anodyne notions of 'business' and 'society', which merely mask the politics in play.