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The fad motif in management scholarship

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Abstract *This paper offers a critical reappraisal of the nature and significance of guru theory. Noting that critical scholars of management have sought to dismiss guru theory as an insubstantial and ephemeral body of knowledge, dedicated to the production of fads, which are said to obscure the reality of management, the paper attempts to encourage academics and practitioners to reconsider the implications of the fad motif. Offering six objections to the fad motif in management scholarship, which variously discuss the realities of managerial toil and the nature of management scholarship, the paper argues that so-called faddish developments in management knowledge actually offer persuasive and substantial representations of reality. However, the paper concludes that while guru theory may be substantial, it is also flawed because it offers a self-privileging form of analysis, which obscures the many realities of organizing and managing, which might otherwise be subject to serious inquiry.*

Introduction

In recent years a guru industry, which Huczynski (1993) defines as that hotchpotch of ideas and actors, which produces advice concerning the aims, processes and conduct of management, has grown rapidly in the world's developed economies. While Crainer (1998) suggests that management's gurus are as much a part of the entertainment business as they are part of industry, most commentators accept that the guru industry is broadly concerned with supply management practitioners with advice on how best to conduct their business affairs (Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 1997; Burnes, 1998; Collins, 2000a). In an attempt to come to terms with the gurus and their readings of the key organizational and management issues of the day, management scholarship has formed a curious relationship with the guru industry. It has been drawn to the gurus of management, yet it clearly regards guru theory as a wilful distortion and misrepresentation of the problems of managing and organizing. Thus Jackson observes that academics tend to dismiss guru theory as being both insubstantial and ephemeral. Guru accounts of management, he warns us are:

... generally considered to be too philosophically impoverished, theoretically underdeveloped and empirically emaciated to warrant academic scrutiny (Jackson, 1996, p. 52).

In an attempt to articulate their concerns regarding the guru industry and its propensity to market "new" solutions (Forrest, 1984), a large number of scholars have invoked the concept of the "fad" as a convenient and economical means of debunking guru theory (Abrahamson, 1991; Wilkinson *et al.*, 1991; Grey and Mitev, 1995; Hilmer and Donaldson, 1996; Wilmott and Wray-Bliss,

1996; Malone, 1997; Shapiro, 1998; Crainer, 1998[1]). Discussing business process re-engineering, for example, Wilmott and Wray-Bliss have noted:

Business Process Reengineering (BPR) is set to become the most influential management idea or fad of the 1990s (Wilmott and Wray-Bliss, 1996, p. 62).

Similarly Coulson-Thomas, an advocate for many developments in management knowledge, wonders:

Is BPR a temporary gravy train for consultants? Or is it a management fad equivalent to a flu epidemic, quickly spreading and leaving people and organisations the worse for wear when it passes? (Coulson-Thomas, 1996, p. 18).

There is of course some truth in the sentiments conveyed by these statements. Concepts such as business process re-engineering have indeed been influential in the field of management, and they have, indeed, brought mixed benefits to organizational members (Guest, 1992; Hammer and Champy, 1993; Moore, 1997). However, this paper will argue that while the debunking of guru theory makes good sport, it makes for poor scholarship because the fad motif, which occupies a central role in the activities of debunking, fails to offer a sensible and sustainable basis for a critique of guru theory. In this short paper, therefore, I will attempt to offer an analysis, which has been designed to undermine the sport of debunking, in the hope that academics and practitioners might come to see the value of a qualitatively different analysis of guru theory – one which seeks to consider, seriously, the nature, forms and processes of guru theory *in situ*. This paper, therefore, seeks to encourage a form of analysis, which, far from debunking the gurus, takes guru theory seriously as a persuasive and substantial representation of an organizational reality. The paper, however, is no simple celebration of the wit and wisdom of the gurus. Instead the paper will take the gurus and their works seriously, in the belief that this form of engagement will offer the means to construct a more useful – a sensible and sustainable, critical analysis of guru theory. Taken as a whole, therefore, the paper seeks to offer a form of analysis which is designed: to take the gurus and their theories seriously; yet will, allow us to articulate serious critical reservations about guru theory; in a manner which does not rest upon the totalising and self-privileging forms of analysis employed in the activities of debunking. To this end, the paper will outline six, variously overlapping objections, which may be raised in connection with the fad motif, in the hope that management scholarship might be encouraged to adopt a different, and more thoughtful means of interacting with the guru industry.

1. Ivory towers?

Our first and second objections reflect concerns about the nature and conduct of academic toil.

As we have seen, a number of scholars have argued that “fads” belittle management and serve as a brake upon sensible management practice, because they obscure the true nature of management and organizations, and so, distort the problems of managing. Yet, in seeking to deny the efficacy of guru ideas,

scholars, invoking the fad motif, seem to claim for themselves, privileged access to an authentic world, which has a real and objective existence (Chia, 1996). Analyses, which seek to debunk management buzzwords (Collins, 2000a) as “fads”, therefore suggest that management’s gurus live in a false or deluded world, while critical scholars of management enjoy unique access to a world which provides true and objective information regarding the nature and performance of organizations. In seeking to debunk guru ideas as fads therefore, critical scholars seem to substitute the totalising world-view of the gurus, for their preferred totalising world-view. Sadly both the totalising view of the gurus and the over-arching accounts offered by more critical scholars seem to exist at some distance from the worlds and experiences of organizational participants. For example Wilkinson and his colleagues argue that both management’s gurus and management scholars have produced limited and partial accounts of total quality management (TQM) (Wilkinson *et al.*, 1997). Observing that management’s gurus have produced “bouquets” for TQM, while critical scholars have sought to hurl “brickbats”, Wilkinson and his co-authors argue that both sides of the debate have produced “blinkerered” accounts of TQM, which fail to capture the complexity of workplace responses to managerial initiatives. Offering a remarkably similar form of analysis Glover (2000), again seeks to carve a middle way between the extreme positions adopted by gurus on one side of the debate and critical scholars on the other, when she argues that TQM is neither poison, nor panacea. Reflecting these important contributions, therefore, we might argue that the fad motif, when invoked by management scholars as a means of debunking the guru industry, betrays an “ivory tower” mentality.

2. Just one ivory tower?

In comparison to the natural science, or techno-science domain, management studies are poorly organized. Indeed, Whitely (1984, 1988) has argued that management studies might be likened to a “fragmented adhocracy”, since the actors employed in the production of “management studies” lack a consensus as to the ends and means of management scholarship. Indeed, Whitely suggests that the field of management studies has the capacity to produce many accounts of managing and organizing. Furthermore, he notes that while each of these accounts is able to sustain its claims to truthfulness within its own particular social network, the representations do not travel well between the different networks of management scholars (Latour, 1987; Furusten, 1999).

This account of management studies as a fragmented adhocracy has implications for buzzword debunking. It suggests that, when we dismiss a buzzword as being faddish and insubstantial we tend to collapse the diversity of management scholarship. Thus the fad motif implies, quite falsely, the existence of a common consensus as regards the nature, form and processes of academic scholarship in the field of management. Taken together, therefore, our first two objections suggest that any attempt to employ the fad motif as a prelude to discussing a real world, untroubled by fads, will tend to

misrepresent the field of management scholarship, while misrepresenting the nature of managerial toil, since the charge of “faddism” suggests the existence of a united body of scholars, inclined to share a common view of the proper role of management and the rules of management studies. Thus we might argue that the fad motif in management scholarship might well be regarded as little more than an attempt to billet all of management academia within the “ivory tower” currently inhabited by certain branches of scholarship.

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3. Puppets and puppeteers?

Our next two objections are concerned with the relationship between managers and their gurus, which is assumed to exist in analyses, which employ the fad motif as a means of debunking guru theory.

When critics of guru theory invoke the fad motif, they tend to portray managers as the meek victims of a malign guru industry, which exists to manufacture distracting fads, which might then be marketed to hapless managers (see Hilmer and Donaldson, 1996; Shapiro, 1998). However, this account of the guru industry tends to misunderstand and misrepresent the dynamic relationship – the push-pull of forces (Benders *et al.*, 1998) – that exists between managers and their gurus, since it assumes that management ideas are transmitted in a linear fashion, from gurus to managers. Countering this view of the gurus as all-seeing, creative, market visionaries, Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1997) note that gurus report futures that are already here. Executing more rigorous forms of analysis, Pruijt (1998), Ten Bos (1997) and Valentine and Knights (1998) all concur with Micklethwait and Wooldridge on this point. Studying a recent development in guru theory, these authors have all reported that business process re-engineering initiatives variously report, re-label and elaborate *existing* practices, within organizations.

In a similar fashion, Jackson (1996) and Grint (1997) have also noted the tendency of the fad motif to portray managers as the meek victims of ideas, which arrive fully-formed in organizations, having been produced elsewhere. However, they argue that this account of the production of guru ideas misrepresents the roles which practitioners play in the construction of management knowledge. Indeed, they argue that the boundary between the producers and the consumers of guru theory is both more open and, yet more blurred than the fad motif allows. Disputing the notion that malign management consultants dupe managers into accepting “fads”, therefore, Jackson (1996) and Grint (1997) argue that managers, as consumers, play an active role in the production of so-called fads. Indeed, Jackson argues that:

Management gurus are both products and producers of managers’ need to define, judge, reconcile and preserve themselves (Jackson, 1996, p. 56).

Our third objection to the fad motif, therefore, is based upon an understanding that managers and their gurus enjoy a relationship, which is more complex and less one-sided than that which is suggested by the fad motif. Indeed, this analysis of the production of guru theory suggests that managers and their

gurus enjoy a relationship founded upon some degree of mutuality and reinforcement, which is quite unlike the linear, one-way relationship suggested by the fad motif. Since managers both produce and consume guru theory, therefore, it seems wholly wrong to portray them as the meek victims of faddish ideas.

4. Water and wine?

Our fourth objection to the fad motif again reflects our discussion of the production of guru ideas, as it turns to consider the consumption/translation (Latour, 1987) of fads within organizations (Collins, 2000b).

As we have seen, those who have invoked the fad motif to study the guru industry have tended to argue that the ideas and neologisms, which are produced elsewhere and then transported to the workplace, misrepresent both their potential and their novelty. Indeed, it has been argued that the management fads propagated by the gurus lack relevance to contemporary problems because they are little more than “old wine in new bottles”.

To some extent, of course, this is an accurate representation of the claims to novelty, which have been made for many management buzzwords (Huczynski, 1993; Grint, 1994). Indeed, in an ironic and playful commentary on the guru industry, Forrest offers management practitioners a view of the turbulent future, which awaits those, inclined to follow guru advice. He notes:

The progress of the “behavioural sciences” is inexorable and accelerated. You are unlikely to keep up. Should you threaten to catch up, we will define what we gave you as passé and give you something new. Should we run out of new stuff, which is not very likely, we will change the nature of something we have already promoted to you as “the answer”, and which we have displaced with some “new answer” and then give it to you again (Forrest, 1984, p. 54).

Studying this same issue in a less playful way, Pruijt (1998) has noted that Hammer’s account of re-engineering within Ford did, indeed, produce a “new answer” by renaming the old answer. Thus, Prujit notes that Ford’s re-engineering initiative was, at root, an existing TQM initiative with a new name! However, Pruijt warns us against dismissing BPR as being just a new name for TQM. He argues that accounts of buzzwords, which dismiss managerial neologisms as being just “old wine in new bottles”, fail to consider the organizational processes associated with the development, elaboration and consumption of managerial initiatives (Valentine and Knights, 1998), and so, fail to consider the interpretative flexibility (Bijker, 1987) of terms such as re-engineering. Thus Prujit warns us that buzzwords will tend to mean different things to different people, in different places, at different times (Collins, 1998), and so he reminds us that concepts, whether “old” or “new”, are seldom unconditionally applied in organizations.

Valentine and Knights (1998) capture this rather well. Discussing business process re-engineering, they report that management consultants and organizational participants have often found it necessary and/or expedient to adjust organizational initiatives to meet local problems and contingencies. Indeed, they note that in spite of Hammer’s (1990; Hammer and Champy, 1993)

comments concerning the need to make a fundamental distinction between business process re-engineering (a radical rethinking of organizations) and TQM (which Hammer dismisses as a conservative fad due to its incrementalist approach), organizational attempts to achieve business process re-engineering suggest a convergence between TQM and BPR in practice. Reflecting upon the metaphor of “old wine in new bottles”, therefore, Prujit warns us that in different ways, and in different settings, water gets added to the wine of guru ideas!

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Our fourth objection to the fad motif, therefore, reflects a concern that the fad motif fails to locate buzzwords contextually (Wilkinson, 1998) and immanently (Chia and King, 1998), and so, discourages us from analysing the social-political complexities, which will tend to accompany any attempt to interpret and to consume the “fads” of guru theory.

5. Fads and change

Our fifth objection to the fad motif concerns the consequences of debunking/ ignoring the “fads” of guru theory.

The fad motif, as we have seen, makes certain judgements about the nature of reality. Critical scholarship, the fad motif suggests, deals with matters which are real and significant, whereas the fads of guru theory address issues of little consequence, which are, by definition, insubstantial and ephemeral. The problem with this dualistic form of analysis, however, is that the so-called fads of the guru industry have been used by consultants and others to engineer real changes in our working lives and in the conduct of our hospitals, our schools and in the apparatus of our governmental structures (Wilkinson *et al.*, 1998). Despite this track record of achieving change, however, much of critical scholarship seems to refuse to take guru ideas seriously, insofar as it continues to contrast the rhetorics and myths of the guru industry with the reality accessed by the academy. This is not to suggest, of course, that critical scholars have failed to engage with guru theory in more useful ways. Clearly a number of scholars have sought a more extensive engagement with the buzzwords of guru theory and are to be applauded for their efforts. What this particular objection to the fad motif does suggest is that management scholarship should pick its fights and its battlefields more carefully when it engages the guru industry.

Our introductory discussion noted the ways in which critical scholars of management have used the fad motif to attack guru theory. Indeed, our discussions so far, suggest that it would not be an exaggeration to venture that critical scholarship has employed the fad motif against guru theory, in an attempt to provoke the gurus into an all-out battle for the “hearts and minds” of management. This battle, in many ways, turns upon questions concerning the true nature of organizational reality, but it is at root a fight for the monopoly rights to organization studies, and the right to lecture others about their own lives and experiences. Thus in the ideological battle fought for the hearts and minds of managers, guru works have been attacked for being both superficial

and distorting when compared to the truthful accounts available to academia. As far as critical academia is concerned this is a one-sided battle – critical academic scholarship, after all, enjoys privileged access to truths, which are denied to others. Yet, in truth, it is the gurus who have made this engagement a one-sided skirmish, since in an ironic twist – a parody of the anti-war poster – the gurus simply failed to turn up for the battle and have, for the most part, chosen not respond to the attacks made on guru theory. Perhaps surprisingly, however, they have through their non-attendance, been winning the war, because those critical scholars keen to debunk the gurus and their works have failed to connect with the practitioners they would seek to convert.

This failure to convert practitioners to the one true way offered by the debunkers might be explained in a variety of ways. For example, we might argue that practitioners fail to gain access to truthful accounts of their lives and work because they subscribe to the wrong sorts of journals. Equally we could hazard the opinion that the glitz and glamour of the consulting world has duped practitioners (Hilmer and Donaldson, 1996). Yet, while acknowledging that these explanations for academic scholarship's relative failure to make an impact on practitioner behaviour and understanding may have elements to recommend them, we should, I think be wary of these attempts to attack practitioners for showing a preference for certain forms of analysis, since each explanation hinges on an account of managers as irrational actors, who are denied or deny themselves access to "the truth". Stepping outwith the confines of this attack on the supposed irrationality of management, the behaviour of management practitioners and their propensity to side with the advocates guru theory in preference to its debunkers, suggests that critical scholarship should take guru theory more seriously and should make more strenuous attempts to identify and to recognise the ways in which those things labelled as fads and rhetoric, appeal to practising managers (Grint, 1997). Thus, we might argue that in seeking "to out" the myths of the guru industry, critical scholars have failed to engage with management practitioners, because the arguments advanced – *this is all just fads and rhetoric* – have failed to take managerial problems seriously, and so, have failed to recognise the capacity, which guru theory has to construct persuasive representations of reality, which resonate with the experiences and ambitions of managers (Grint, 1997; Collins, 2000a).

Our fifth objection to the fad motif, therefore, argues that in claiming to know best, and in claiming a monopoly on organization studies, critical scholarship (with notable exceptions) has tended to produce blinkered and self-privileging accounts of organization, which, consequently, exercise little effect over practitioners. In order to make more significant in-roads into management understanding and action, therefore, this analysis suggests that critical scholars should seek to rethink the way they engage with management practitioners and with management gurus, so that they might come to develop an appreciation of the ways in which the gurus exercise their effects within organizations.

Reflecting this analysis of the need to analyse both the limits and the significance of guru theory, Wilkinson and Wilmott (1995) have offered a discussion of TQM which seeks to enlarge rather than to debunk the guru analysis of quality in the workplace. Rejecting the value of simplistic debunking, therefore, Wilkinson and Wilmott have produced an account of change at work, which exposes TQM to a critical commentary, while seeking to address and to reflect the needs and orientations of management practitioners. It is worth noting, however, that in adopting this analytical approach, Wilkinson and Wilmott are not inclined to pander to managers, nor are they inclined to see themselves as the servants of power (Baritz, 1965). Instead their work argues that it is possible to take the problems and aspirations of managers seriously, whilst encouraging the adoption of a calculus, which aims to encourage the subtle reconstruction of both management and academic orientations to TQM. This attempt at reorientation, they tell us, is central to their attempt to make a more useful and far-reaching contribution to the debates on TQM than has, hitherto, been achieved by debunking. Indeed, Wilkinson and Wilmott tell us that they seek a more extensive engagement with the advocates and the users of TQM in the hope that “a more balanced assessment and holistic understanding of TQM” (Wilkinson and Wilmott, 1995, p. 790) might be engendered.

In a similar way De Cock and Hipkin (1997) have also argued that TQM is worthy of more serious scrutiny rather than dismissive debunking. In an attempt to make a contribution to debate and to practice, which goes beyond “outing” TQM as a fad, therefore, De Cock and Hipkin have sought to analyse the ways in which those things ordinarily debunked as fads acquire meaning and substance. Thus they have attempted to go “beyond the beyond” discussion and have argued that TQM is important, powerful and substantial, because this “fad” offers a persuasive rendering of a reality, which has the capacity to (re)orientate understanding and animate action.

These discussions of TQM suggest that the polarised – rhetoric versus reality – forms of analysis promoted by the fad motif fail to grasp the significance of guru theorising because they fail to recognise the ways in which *mere* rhetorics and fads, so-called, can serve to constitute our understanding of reality (Legge, 1995). Thus we might argue that the fad motif limits our appreciation of the problems of managing and organizing, because it fails to support forms of analysis, which can effectively meet, reflect and challenge the diverse experiences of organizations and change. Our fifth objection to the fad motif, therefore, reflects an understanding that buzzword debunking, denies managers, and others, access to the analytical tools and understandings they would require in order to make them more sophisticated in their appreciation of the complexities of organizing and discerning in their consumption of management knowledge (Jackson, 1996).

6. The real world revisited

Our sixth objection, returns once again to the notion of reality built into analyses, which seek to dismiss innovations in management knowledge.

My niece, from an early age, has been a skilled observer of the behaviours and lifestyles of others. Recently I have noticed that she seems, increasingly, to be struck by the lack of good taste and good sense of those around her. When she comes across something she regards as particularly stupid, or especially tasteless, my niece rolls her eyes towards the heavens and says to the object of her scorn – *what colour is the sky on your home planet?*

Increasingly, I find that I am drawn to the form of analysis, which her rebuke suggests, because from where I stand, my niece seems to come from a different planet. On my world, platform *Kickers* seem dangerous and uncomfortable, “boy bands” seem curiously androgynous and “club anthems” are just annoying. Yet on her world, platform shoes are the height of sartorial elegance, “boy bands” cause palpitations and “techno” music is “cool”. As I reflect upon the view of the world, which my niece holds, therefore, the notion that there might be an objectively, real world, which a managerial initiative might serve to obscure, becomes a vain distraction.

Rather than claim the existence of a real and objective world, which fads deny, therefore I am convinced that we would be well advised to investigate the ways in which, the seemingly empty fads of the guru industry work to construct world-views. Reflecting this call for a different means of engaging with the guru industry, Du Gay (1996) argues that the buzzwords of management should be subject to serious academic scrutiny. Buzzwords, Du Gay tells us play an important role in the processes of organizational transformation because they create world-views, which have the capacity to challenge and to reconstitute forms of self-understanding.

Our final point of criticism, therefore summarises, to some degree, our concern with fads, since it cements our understanding that buzzwords do not and could not obscure an objectively, real world. Instead, our final point of criticism argues that buzzwords should be viewed as working to (re)constitute our subjective understandings, and our place and role within the world. Du Gay, therefore, gives us good reason to regard buzzwords as being both important and substantial, because he invites us to consider the ways in which these (so-called faddish) neologisms impact upon our subjective understanding of situations and events. Indeed, he argues that management’s gurus invoke buzzwords in a way which seeks to redefine and reconstruct the management of business and the business of management. Yet at the same time Du Gay also gives us good reason to be wary of these substantial concepts. Indeed he suggests that buzzwords are troublesome, not because they are mere fads, which obscure an objective reality, but because they present a totalising account of management and the marketplace, which obscures the many realities of organizing and managing.

Concluding comments

This paper has sought to encourage a reappraisal of the guru industry, which seeks to reverse our understanding of the nature and significance of guru theorising. Noting that the guru industry has been attacked by academia because of a claimed tendency to produce insubstantial fads, which: deny the reality of organization; and distract managers from the real business of managing, this paper has sought to question the validity of the fad motif and has sought to counter the notion that guru theorising is to be ignored or dismissed. To this end the paper has been based around six objections to the fad motif. These objections to the fad motif have, in various ways, explored questions concerning the nature of management and the character of management scholarship and have sought to dispute the notion of reality, which underpins the whole debunking endeavour.

Disputing the notion that there is a real and objective reality, *out there*, which buzzwords may obscure, the paper has argued that guru theory should be taken seriously because it has a capacity to (re)constitute our understanding of reality and our sense of self. This analysis of the nature and significance of the “fads” of management suggests that academia should reconsider its approach to the gurus. Rather than seeking to debunk the gurus, the analysis presented here suggests that scholars will make more significant contributions, both practically and academically, when they seek a more extensive engagement with the gurus of management and where they seek to understand the ways in which the so-called fads of management act to constitute realities.

Note

1. This, of course, is but a small sample of the academic papers, which have invoked the fad motif as a convenient means of analysing recent developments in management.

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