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Preface

Trends and Fashions in Management Studies

Greater than the tread of mighty armies is an idea whose time has come.

—Victor Hugo

“New Institutionalism,” “Knowledge Management,” “Actor-Network Theory,” “eGovernment,” “Balance Scorecard,” “Corporate Social Responsibility”: Are these passing fads or future institutions? Perhaps they are fashions: lasting longer than fads, they may or may not become institutions. But if they are fashions, are they fashions in theories or fashions in the practice of management? And if there are fashions in theories, are they paradigm shifts or merely variations on universal themes? What is the source of such fashions—management practice, other fields of theory, politics, or popular culture? Why those, and why now? Does management research always follow trends, or does it initiate trends as well? This preface addresses these issues, formulating both tentative answers and new questions, based on “Trends and Fashions in Management Studies,” a European Institute for Advanced Studies in Management (EIASM) workshop held in Lisbon, Portugal, October 20–22, 2005, whose participants contributed papers to this issue.

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Fashion under siege

Fashion, a popular manner of doing something, is a phenomenon that rarely receives a neutral treatment. As Czarniawska and Joerges (1995) pointed out, fashion is a phenomenon treated with disdain and neglect in contemporary social theory, and that disdain generalized to fashions in organization studies. Yet an understanding of fashion seemed to be key to the comprehension of many puzzling developments in and among organizations. As paradoxical as it may sound, fashion can be seen as the inseparable part of the iron cage, as Max Weber called an institutional order, an experimental field where new practices are tried out before they become institutionalized (Czarniawska 2005).

The topic of management fashions was first embraced by Henry Mintzberg (1979) and later by Eric Abrahamson (1991, 1996a, 1996b) and Kjell-Arne Røvik (1996). Others followed—for example, Sue Newell, Maxine Robertson, and Jacky Swan edited the special issue of *Organization* under the title “Management Fads and Fashions” (vol. 8, no. 1, 2001).

In most of those studies, however, fashion has been portrayed as an irrational deviation from rational managerial behavior, as indicated by a frequent repetition of the alliteration “fads and fashions” (for reviews and critiques, see Clark 2004 and Sturdy 2004). Because of the stubbornness of the phenomenon, however, its denigration to the status of deviant behavior did not solve the problem; it was too frequent and too persistent to be classified as pathology. This predicament was noted by Paul Nystrom, who therefore set out to find “a rational explanation of fashions” (1928/1930, 193).

Accordingly, managerial fashions have been “rationalized” by framing them into the supply-and-demand model (for instance, Abrahamson 1996a, 1996b). Many authors tried to show that there must be *something rational* in a fashion—if not a promise of efficiency, then at least of legitimacy, another element of modern rationality—otherwise the managers would not follow fashions. In the same vein, this phenomenon so hard to capture has become tamed through its “division in stages” (e.g., Gill and Whittle 1993). Thus, fashion could be explained within a rationalist frame: there is a market for it, because it is rationally (although not in a simple sense of the word) demanded by managers and supplied by consultants. First comes the demand, afterward comes the supply, and eventually the demand decreases as the market becomes satiated—thus, stages. In another take, more conspiracy minded, the suppliers control the demand (Kieser 2002).

One could speculate that it is the Lutheran or Calvinist morality, often suspected to be lurking behind theories of economics and management, which shapes the negative perception of fashions by management theorists. So it may well be, but in terms of the history of science, the culprits are easier to pinpoint. Thorstein Veblen established fashion as the way to promote “conspicuous consumption” and contrasted it with valuable productivity: “The leisure-class canon [fashion] demands strict and comprehensive futility; the instinct of workmanship demands

purposeful action” (1899/1994, 159). He was not alone in his judgment; indeed, he expressed an opinion typical of his time.

In his search for the rational theory of fashion, Paul Nystrom adopted Veblen’s insights without hesitation, arriving at a “business rule . . . that a style, to succeed as a fashion, must have qualities that advertise either conspicuous leisure or conspicuous consumption for the user” (1928/1973, 204). It seems not to have occurred to him that conspicuous leisure might itself be a fashion, replaced in time by “conspicuous employment,” so typical nowadays.

Consequently, the trickle-down effect, posited by Georg Simmel (1904), diverted all attention from the trickle-up and especially trickle-across effects (Partington 1992, 150). The trickle-down effect echoes Herbert Spencer’s “reverential imitation”—for example, the modification of a costume introduced by a monarch, no matter how absurd, would spread downward (1880, 205–210). According to Ada Heather Bigg (1893/1973), such reverential imitation was a thing of the past in 1893. It seems, however, that it returned recently via the celebrity cult.

Besides, the trickle-up effect is not new: Freudenberger (1963/1973) gave examples of English gentlemen looking like “stage-coachmen, jockeys and pickpockets” in 1739 and of them wearing peasants’ jackets in the seventeenth century. He also quoted Sombart (1913), who claimed that courtesans and mistresses dictated women’s fashion. In the same vein, J. C. Flügel wrote, “In case of men’s clothes especially . . . changes occur as much from below as from above” (1930/1973, 232). Finally, Simmel claimed that, for both women and men, fashion is usually invented at the margins (in the “demimonde”) and only legitimized by its adoption by higher classes from which it then trickles down to the middle classes.

For all our critique, it needs to be said that the application of the notion of fashion to the ways managers do their jobs was a daring move, as the classics spoke only of fashion in relation to clothes, architecture, and design. But even most daring management theoreticians did not suggest that research can be subject to fashions. In what follows, we not only dare to suggest it, but we also show that the topic of fashion in research is not new. We begin by tracing the history of changes in dealing with this topic.

Fashions in research

In one of the classics of fashion theory, Sombart’s (1913), *Luxury and Capitalism*, the fact that the scientists followed “the science fashion of the time” seemed to be taken for granted. But Sombart clearly understood fashion literally, as a prevalent way of doing something. Yet, the idea of scientists following fashions as an obvious development did not last long, or perhaps the idea remained, but the frivolous word “fashion” had been replaced by the serious expression “paradigm.”

This change of attitude can be clearly observed forty years later, when Pitrim Sorokin, a leading Harvard sociologist of Russian origin, with an impressive educa-

tion in the classics, published a book called *Fads and Foibles in Modern Sociology* (1956). It contained a vitriolic critique of the quantitative turn in social sciences, resulting from “a slavish imitation” of the natural sciences. Fads, and slavish imitation, were clearly bad habits to be pruned from sociology.

We are fully sympathetic with Sorokin’s bitterness over younger people not quoting his impressive opus (he called it “a scientific amnesia”). We also share his critique of “quantophrenia.” However, writing fifty years later, we would like to point out some missing aspects in Sorokin’s reasoning. His work was undertaken in the faith that “if the cleaning operation is performed competently, in the long run we will all benefit from it by freeing ourselves of errors mistakenly taken for truths” (1956, vi). Sorokin’s cleaning was extremely competent, but it changed nothing.

Young researchers are still playing Columbus, discovering well-known Americas, and the typical rhetorical device is to announce at the outset of one’s paper that the world was blind and deaf until the present researcher and his or her colleagues arrived at the scene. Also, the main targets of Sorokin’s critique, the then fashionable Group Dynamics people and system theoreticians, survived much longer in the memory of social sciences than did Sorokin. (He may be rediscovered, however, when the wheel of fashion turns again.) We would suggest that the Group Dynamics and system theory better fit the spirit of the 1950s, although we are perfectly aware that this is postfactum reasoning, as all descriptions of fashions must necessarily be.

There is a fascinating conflict buried in Sorokin’s reasoning. He approvingly quoted Moreno as having said: “Just as there are people who can have no children, so there are people who cannot create any ideas; therefore, they adopt them” (Sorokin 1956, 5). And, at the end of the book, Sorokin firmly stated: “Even a competent imitation of a model-theory remains an imitation and not an original creation” (1956, 305). Yet, while continually quoting the ancient precursors of modern thinkers, he (unwittingly?) corroborated Robert Merton’s thesis that all ideas are present somewhere all the time (Merton 1985). Thus, originality is always a contestable claim; imitation, directed by fashion, will continue to shape the intellectual scene. Moreover, Sorokin’s “study of the comparative domination of [principles of determinism and indeterminism] from 580 B.C.E. to 1920 C.E. shows that they alternate in their rise and decline and in their domination” (1956, 254)—a clear indication of fashion cycles.

We agree with Sorokin that what is imitated (because it is fashionable) can be absurd or wrong. Revealing this fact could possibly change the direction of imitation but never remove the mechanism of fashion. Sorokin’s book is about fashions that dominated the social sciences in the 1950s. Many of them vanished or have changed since then, but the phenomenon of fashion remains. Instead of moralizing about it, we should be studying and trying to understand it. In the next section, we develop the argument showing the importance of fashion.

Defending fashion

Convinced as we are of the importance of the phenomenon, we return to the early theoreticians of fashion as a cultural phenomenon to see which of their insights can be imported into organization theory. The voyage begins with Veblen's and Simmel's predecessor, Gabriel Tarde: "In our European societies . . . the extraordinary progress of fashion in all its forms, in dress, food and housing, in wants and ideas, in institutions and in arts, is making a single type of European based upon several hundreds of millions of examples" (Tarde 1890/1962, 16).¹ His explanation for changes in fashion was the same as for inventions, and he clearly saw its paradoxical character:

In the case of industry and fine arts, it is for the pleasure of change, of *not doing* the usual thing, that the part of the public which is influenced by fashion adopts a new product to the neglect of some old one; then when the novelty has become acclimated and appreciated for its own sake the older product seeks a refuge in the cherished habits of the other part of the public which is partial to custom and which wishes to show in that way that it also *does not do* the same thing as the rest of the world. (Tarde 1890/1962, 293 n2)

In Tarde's view, fashion was contrasted with custom. He did not discuss fashion as such, but it inevitably accompanied imitation in his writings, to the point that it is often joined by a hyphen, as in fashion-imitation (in contrast to custom-imitation).

The inventions and innovations that are imitated are allegedly superior, first because of their qualities (Tarde called them "logical reasons" but we would call them pragmatic), and second because of who coined or circulated them (Tarde's "extralogical reasons," but in today's parlance we would call them power-symbolic). It is impossible to tell the difference between the logical and extralogical reasons at any given time, as the power-symbolic superiority tends to masquerade as a superiority of quality. The third type of superiority, according to Tarde, characterizes ideas that have many allies in other ideas—we would now say that such ideas are well anchored or that they do not threaten the institutionalized thought structure. This "power of associations" has been documented by the actor-network theorists (Czarniawska and Hernes 2005; Latour 1986). Also, densely populated settings (big cities), social networks, and organization fields facilitate and encourage imitation.

After Tarde, Veblen and Simmel addressed the topic of fashion and examined it in great detail. Due to their mode of referencing, or rather nonreferencing, it is impossible to know if they were aware of Tarde's work. Whereas for Veblen fashion was a negative phenomenon at the service of conspicuous consumption, Simmel seemed to continue along Tarde's train of thought because he saw in fashion a democratic and democratizing phenomenon, intensifying with the progress of civilization. This was primarily because fashion connected two opposing tendencies, equalization and individualization, which gave it a paradoxical character: "Fashion is the imitation of a given example and satisfies the demand for social adaptation . . . At the same

time, it satisfies in no less degree the need of differentiation, the tendency for dissimilarity, the desire for change and contrast” (Simmel 1904/1971, 296).

Simmel’s theory was adopted by Herbert Blumer who postulated that fashion is a *selection mechanism* that influences the market and distorts the demand and supply curves, both using and serving economic competition (Blumer 1969). Its important element is a *collective choice* among competing tastes, things, and ideas; it is oriented toward *finding* but also toward *creating* what is typical of a given time. One could add that fashion operates at institutional fringes. On the one hand, its variety is limited by the iron cage of existing institutions, which fashion actually reproduces; on the other hand, fashion is engaged in a constant subversion of the existing institutional order, gnawing at its bars. This is the second paradox connected to fashion—its simultaneous salience and lack of importance.

The notion of translation (Czarniawska and Sevón 1996, 2005) helps us to understand yet another paradox: fashion is created even as it is followed. The subsequent translations simultaneously produce and reproduce variations in fashion, as repetition creates and re-creates difference. Tarde (1902/1969, 157) pointed out that this should not be seen as a contradiction but merely as the difficulty of discovering an original idea within a dominant style. This is why Lyotard (1979) insisted on differentiating between an invention and an innovation (Tarde, or at least his translators, treat them as synonymous)—whereas an innovation remains within the prevailing style, an invention changes such style.

Fashion stands for change, but as fashion is also repetitive, in a long-range perspective it stands for tradition as well. Indeed, as noted by Agnes Brook Young, fashion is not related to progress although it stands for modernity:

In a real sense, fashion is evolution without destination. The world generally considers that progress in material things consists in changes that make them more useful, or better looking, or less expensive. In the long run fashion never attains these objectives. Its idea is slow, continuous change, unhampered by the restrictions of either aesthetics or practicality. (Young 1937/1973, 109)

Young’s notion of “evolution without destination” is close in spirit to Tarde’s “evolutionary diffusionism,”² although she too quoted only Simmel. Fashion operates through dramatized “revolutions,” but “in a real sense, fashion is evolution” (Young 1937/1973, 109). Tarde would agree because in his view, fashion first opposes custom. Then, if successful, it becomes a custom, only to be opposed by the next fashion.

Fashion, then, has been revealed as a highly paradoxical process. Its constitutive paradoxes are invention and imitation, variation and uniformity, distance and interest, novelty and conservatism, unity and segregation, conformity and deviation, change and status quo, and revolution and evolution. And it is indeed translation (i.e., a transformation caused by displacement), along with negotiation, that is used to resolve these paradoxes in each practical action. As Simmel observed, “social institutions may be looked upon as the peace-treaties, in which the constant antagonism of both principles has been reduced externally to a form of cooperation” (1904/1971, 296).

The predilection for military metaphors typical for social sciences put negotiation early into the focus of attention, but it was not until the arrival of studies of science and technology and the linguistic turn that an obvious point could be made—namely, that in order to negotiate, the parties must at least believe that they are speaking about the same thing. Translation comes first because fashion could not proceed without constant translation, which permits it to appear in many different guises in different times and places.

Students of culture have repeatedly pointed out that fashion is a hybrid subject: it can be seen and studied not only as a cultural phenomenon but also as a system of production (Leopold 1992, 102). A curious mirror-like symmetry characterizes studies of these two aspects in cultural theory and in organization theory. Cultural theory has devoted a great deal of attention to fashion as a cultural phenomenon but little attention to fashion as a production system (Leopold 1992). In organization theory, fashion as a system of production is actually well researched, but its cultural aspect is treated sparingly.

Mazza and Alvarez (2000) have shown that in contrast to earlier mechanical models of fashion production, the supposed consumers of managerial fashion are in fact its coproducers (Clark 2004 corroborates their point). We want to go even further and adopt the circuit model of culture, which points out that consumers are always producing or at least coproducing what they consume (think of user-participative software design) and producers are consuming what is needed for their production (Johnson 1986/7).

As the contributors to this issue clearly demonstrate, fashion can come to research from management practice or the other way around, as researchers can actively promote certain practices that may become fashionable among managers. The circuit is not even closed, because inventions and inspirations can come to both theory and practice from other fields and other practices. These circular influences are not random, but both reflect and shape the spirit of the times—that is, the main preoccupations and interests of a given era.

This issue

The EIASM workshop started with two questions: “From where do management-research fashions come?” and “From where do managerial fashions come?” One tentative hypothesis postulated that the two phenomena form a circuit in which the producers of culture are also its consumers and vice versa. In such cases, management researchers would be following managerial fashions, literally and metaphorically, by studying them and adopting them for their own purposes, whereas the manager might be inspired by research fashions. Another hypothesis, complementary rather than competitive, is that both are influenced by developments outside the circuit, such as general cultural trends and emerging scientific paradigms. The papers collected corroborate both hypotheses and add many new, intriguing angles.

Chris Carter maps for the readers the trajectory of Foucauldian thought in British organization studies. Noting that fashions are as prevalent in organization studies as with the managers they study, he seeks to understand the fashion for Foucault. He discusses the context that proved so congenial to the adoption of Foucauldian thought. Discussing central contributions of Foucauldian thought, he identifies the ideas that were translated into British organization studies. He pinpoints the ways in which Foucault was first consecrated and then institutionalized into organization studies. Turning full circle, he speculates as to whether the Anglo-Saxon scholarship on Foucault will translate back to France and result in changing the original Foucauldian ideas.

Karin Holmblad Brunsson also focuses on France as the country of origin not of a specific research fashion but of the research that gave rise to the phenomenon of managerial fashion and the resulting research fashions. Henri Fayol's idea of management as a set of activities to be found in all contexts left managers searching for more specific ways of doing their job, thus fashions. Had they listened to Fredrick Winslow Taylor instead, they could have tailored their activities to a specific context and no general fashion would be discernible. As things now stand, there is a multitude of prescriptions for executing management, and it is these prescriptions that have been named, disparagingly, "fashions" by management researchers. These prescriptions neither reflect nor form managerial practice but attract the attention of both practitioners and theoreticians, thereby detracting it from focusing on actual management.

Tamar Parush suggests that research on managerial fashions is itself a research fashion. A well-established body of knowledge about management ideologies has been reformulated as knowledge about management fashions. Parush believes that the two theories of management ideologies and of management fashions can engage in a dialogue that will benefit them both.

Carl Rhodes and Alexandra Pitsis ask instead: "How about dropping them both?" In a sense, Rhodes and Pitsis reconcile all perspectives by taking a wholly different tack. Quoting anthropological research, they remind the reader that imitation—the mechanism behind the fashion—always involves magical hopes. They suggest that management researchers might abandon attempts to become either fashionable or scientific (which is sometimes the same thing and sometimes not) and, instead of putting their faith in the magic of imitation, work more on developing their own voice and their own style. We could not agree more.

Are management fashions decoupled from managerial practice, as Holmblad Brunsson suggested? In part 2 on this topic, to be published in the next issue of *ISMO*, papers address the issue.

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Notes

1. Veblen was fourteen years younger and Simmel fifteen years younger than Tarde. (For more on Tarde and the relevance of his work for organization studies, see Czarniawska, 2004 and Latour 2002). Tarde often alluded to Herbert Spencer's *Ceremonial Institutions* (*The Principles of Sociology*, pt. 4, 1880), primarily in order to disagree.

2. Tarde differed from the diffusionists (an early school in anthropology opposing evolutionists), pointing out the variation inherent in each displacement; and from the evolutionists, pointing out the role of action (i.e., imitation). Thus, he speaks of "evolution by association" (Tarde 1893/1999, 41) à la Stephen Jay Gould, or "diffusion by transformation," which is synonymous with translation.

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