Business Schools and the Myth of Management Education

Processing plants for the faking of intellectual authority.
Thomas Frank

I have referred at several times in this book to a salient fact. Almost all of the study of organizations (whether this means research study or the following of courses) takes place in university business and management schools. This was not always the case, since many classic studies of organizations were conducted in sociology, psychology, economics or other departments and disciplines, but now it is overwhelmingly true. This, I suggest, means that the study of organizations is itself organized; that is, it can only be understood in terms of the particular institutional arrangements and purposes of business and management schools. I have suggested several times that the understanding of organizations I want to urge differs from ‘the mainstream’, and this means, primarily, the business school mainstream. Initially this may seem a matter of small importance. What can it possibly matter where a subject is taught? We wouldn’t expect physics to be different if it were taught in a Department of Physics or a School of Science. But the study of organizations is different, precisely because – despite the claims of positivists – its subject matter is not value-free but value-laden. So when it gets studied in business schools it gets studied in particular ways. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the context in which organizations are studied and to explain why it matters.

Almost all business schools claim, and most – although by no means all – of their students expect, that management education produces better managers (this claim is perhaps made more at MBA than undergraduate level). Like studying law or medicine, management education supposedly contributes to the ideal of producing the professional manager. Admittedly, it has never been the case that, unlike doctors and lawyers, you are required to take a management degree to practice as a manager, but the implicit and usually explicit promise made to people who study at business schools is that they will acquire a knowledge that equips them for practice. If you are such a person I would guess that you already entertain some doubts as to whether this expectation will be realized – doubts presumably compounded if you have been recommended this book by your lecturer. Sadly, perhaps, your doubts are fully justified. For there is absolutely no evidence that taking a management course has any effect at all upon making people better managers, and it is even possible that it makes people worse managers. Business schools are for the most part founded on a myth which distorts organization theory. But, paradoxically, recognizing the myth actually enables managers and others to gain something from the study of organizations. This may seem like bad news, given that students have typically paid quite a bit of money and/or foregone earnings because the courses they take have been marketed with the claim that they will enhance managerial performance. The good news might be that although studying management doesn’t make better managers, it does often make more employable and higher-paid managers, so all is not lost. But comforting or not, this is a very odd state of affairs. People who study medicine or engineering or law or science expect, and are probably not wrong to expect, to be better doctors, engineers, lawyers or scientists than they otherwise would be. Similarly, if I am ill, or want to build a bridge, make a will or know about physical laws, then I will have more confidence in a trained rather than an untrained doctor, engineer,
lawyer or scientist. Yet I hardly care – and I am certain I am not unique – whether my manager has studied management or not. This doesn’t necessarily mean that management education is useless, but it does mean that its use is different to what is typically claimed for and expected of it. It also means that there is something about management education which needs to be better understood. For there is no doubt that management education is important. In the UK (in 2005/06, the latest year for which figures are available), about one in seven undergraduates study management or business, making it the single largest subject, and many more students take a management or business option as part of their degree, whilst some 27,000 students are registered for an MBA and another 23,000 take other postgraduate degrees in management (Association of Business Schools, 2008). The UK produces more MBAs than the whole of the rest of Europe put together, and the US produces some ten times more than the UK. The MBA is becoming, in Europe, and has become, in the US, the key to entry to the upper echelons of business and, increasingly, the public sector. In Europe and the US, as well as Australia, New Zealand, India, China and many other countries, the numbers of management students and management degree programmes continues to rise. In the UK, prospective cabinet ministers of the embryonic Labour government prior to its election in 1997 were sent to a management school to learn how to manage their ministries. In the US, for the first time in history, the President (George W. Bush) holds an MBA, from Harvard. With all this demand, they must be doing something right. Well – no, actually. Not if the deal is about making better managers. It has given me, and I hope will continue to give me, reasonably lucrative employment, so perhaps I shouldn’t complain (I’ll come back to this later). But management education is deeply flawed, and will continue to be so until some fairly fundamental truths are recognized. I suppose that central to these – and how arrogant this sounds, but of course I believe in my arguments or else why would I make them? – is what I have been trying to emphasize in this book. Namely, that the conceit of management knowledge to offer a way of exerting systematic, predictable control over organizations is just that, a conceit: flawed, incoherent in theory, unrealizable in practice. At the heart of this are the issues of unintended consequences, agency and resistance discussed throughout this book. And I want now to make a very fundamental point about these issues. Most critiques of management flow from some version of a political position (either left-wing defences of working-class rights or right-wing defences of individual liberty) which rejects the case for managerial control (to put it at its most generic). I share, rather eclectically, elements of both these political positions. But that is not the point. The point is not simply whether or not management should exert control of others, it is whether it can. My assertion in this book is that it cannot; and in terms of this chapter, this means that I assert that the pretensions of management education to teach techniques for effective management are unfounded. Note that my claim here is quite different from those (of whom there have over the years
been many) who argue that management education is in need of reform so as to make it more helpful to managerial effectiveness. I am arguing that any such reform would be doomed to failure, because its aim is unrealizable in principle.

**What’s the problem?**

Apart from the arguments I have been making throughout this book, consider this: if it were possible in principle to create a managerially effective form of management education, why has it not yet happened? It is not as if management schools are a new phenomenon. They started in the 1880s, when the first such school, Wharton, opened in Pennsylvania, endowed by Joseph Wharton who, by a pleasing coincidence – which I mentioned in Chapter 1 – was the owner of the Bethlehem Steel Works where Frederick Taylor had conducted his work on scientific management. Or is it such a coincidence? The context for the development of management education was very much that of the emergence of complex, large-scale industry and, associated with that, the growing separation of ownership and control. This led to a growing need for professional managers, which in turn fed the development of management education. On this account, there should indeed be a link between managerial effectiveness and management education. But, of course, things are not that simple. To take just one aspect of this complexity: if management education is an inevitable function of the need for managers in large-scale industry, then why was (and is) it so much more prevalent in North America than in Germany, France, Japan and (at least until recently) the UK, even though some of these economies industrialized as early, or earlier, and as extensively, as the US? But all that said, the Wharton ‘coincidence’ is an interesting one because it should alert us to the fact that, just as management bears the imprint of nineteenth-century North American industry, so too does much management education (Engwall and Zamagni, 1998). This has had important consequences for the shape and development of management education, and continues to do so. One issue is that, as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, a great deal of formal management education takes place within universities. There was a long (and not yet dead) tradition of such education being conducted in commercial training institutions from the outset of the industrial revolution (see Pollard, 1965) and, especially outside the US, that tradition persisted for a long time with neither assistance nor threat from the university sector. By the time university management education got going in a big way elsewhere this meant that the US model was dominant, since it was just about the only model going, and this led, in particular, to the MBA becoming the flagship postgraduate management qualification.

This was not just for want of a better model, however. It is also intimately bound up with the ‘American management mystique’ (Locke, 1996) to which I alluded in Chapter 3. If American management was superior to that of other countries, and if this was supported by the American management education system, then ergo American management education must be superior. The fact that each link in this argument is, at the very best, debatable didn’t stop it being influential. In any case, there was power politics at play. Much of the development of, at least, European management education was bound up with the Cold War in the period following the end of the Second World War. American foreign policy at the time was concerned that continuing instability and economic crisis in Western Europe would render it vulnerable to Communism. Such a view informed the reconstruction of Europe under the Marshall Plan.

On a much smaller scale, it contributed to the growth of business schools, often underpinned by American finance and employing US trained faculty – INSEAD in France being a prime example. In the UK, it was not until the 1960s that significant developments in management
education began with the establishment of graduate business schools at London (LBS) and Manchester (MBS), and this development was less linked to the politics of post-war reconstruction and more to ongoing concerns within the UK about falling relative productivity levels. Yet, again, and especially in the case of LBS, the model was North American.

It continues to be the case that management education is dominated by a US model – the curriculum, the textbooks, the case studies are typically derived from North America. That is not to deny a good deal of variation, especially within Europe, but, particularly for those schools aspiring to elite international status, the US model still dominates, at least so far as MBA courses are concerned. Undergraduate provision is more varied, again perhaps especially in Europe, partly because it tends to draw on indigenous social science traditions. However, as anyone who has studied on any management course will know, a great deal of the subject matter and research base is from the US.

That last observation points to the fact that, although I have been talking so far about management education, there are very important and obvious links between management education and the knowledge generated by management research. Much of what is taught on management courses is the product of management research; most university management educators are also researchers and vice versa.

From this point of view, too, management education bears an American imprint not least because, in simple quantitative terms, management research has been going for longer and in a greater volume there than anywhere else in the world.

So take any textbook on organizations and consider a topic which appears in just about all of them: motivation. Maslow, Herzberg, Vroom, Lawler and Adams will all feature, but you will be hard pressed to find much work done outside the US. Does this matter? I’m certainly not denying that there is plenty of good and interesting research done in North America. I’m not ‘anti-American’, to use a phrase with unfortunate antecedents and much contemporary currency. But the US dominance of organization theory does mean that a great deal of it reflects particular intellectual traditions and, especially in more recent decades, some particular features which I will come to in a moment. Additionally, it is not just the researchers but the people on whom research is conducted that matters here. The organizational theorist Roy Jacques (1996), in one of the best studies of management thought I have read, makes the telling observation that what is known about organizations in terms of its classic research base is largely what is known about white, North American, male manual workers and students in the 1950s and 1960s.

Perhaps it will seem as if I have moved away from the issue of whether management education makes people better managers, towards some more general complaints about management research in general and North American management research in particular. But these issues are all bound up together. At the very least, if the knowledge base of management education is primarily North American, does this not suggest that there are some limitations on the extent to which it can be generalized to other cultures and continents? Moreover, I should clarify that what I am saying here is not really something about the US but about the dominant orthodoxy. This orthodoxy overlaps to some large extent with US research, just
because of the historical dominance which I have pointed to. This now means that the ‘best’ research journals are by definition mainly North American and the work they carry has to conform to certain norms. This, with an inevitable circularity, becomes the ‘best’ research and is reproduced in the textbooks. Now all this might well be true in many other fields, especially sciences, but there it does no great harm because there is quite a degree of international consensus about what constitutes good science. In research on management and organizations that is not so.

Ironically, during the period that American management education was being exported to other countries, within the US itself it was the subject of some concern. Specifically, as a series of reports (for example, Ford Foundation, Carnegie) in the 1950s highlighted, the concern was that what was being taught had little scientific status, academic rigour and a poor research base. What was needed was to produce a reliable body of scientifically-tested knowledge which could then be taught to managers who would have the basis on which to decide and act in ways that would have predictable results. This view, which I described as positivism in the Introduction to this book, derived from a particular, and at the time quite widely held, belief about the nature of social science in general. It was enthusiastically taken up within US business schools where, increasingly (for this had by no means been true before), organizational and management research was done.

Today, much of the consensus that social science can be thought of that way has evaporated. But this has had very little impact upon what are now the institutionalized norms of US business schools and the research journals they run – norms which, because of the position of the US in management education and its wider economic, political and military dominance, are highly influential around the world. Thus research in the US continues to be dominated by large-scale quantitative studies, hypothesis testing and the search for causal relationships between variables. In other words, the dream of positivist science remains firmly in place, to define what ‘good’ research is and to form the bulk of textbook knowledge.

But now we come full circle. For what is striking is the observation with which I began this chapter. For all that we have had, say, in five decades of research in this mould, there is still almost nothing in the way of predictive laws and established causal relations that can be found in organizations. Therefore there is no body of knowledge which, when mastered by students, can be used as a reliable basis for action by managers. Instead, there are reams of abstract statistics which tell us – well, nothing at all. There are all kinds of theoretical and philosophical ways we can explain this – I’ve touched on them lightly throughout this book – but in some ways one hardly needs to grasp these to take on board a brutally pragmatic truth. The positivist way has not worked.

So why does it persist? At one level it is because those involved have got a huge amount invested in it – not just financially, though that too is true, but psychologically. But, at another level, it persists because it is a convenient fiction for all concerned which allows management education to get on with what it is really about. For if what I have said is true, then how can the enduring success of management education be explained when it apparently fails to ‘do what it says on the tin’? In the next section I will try to explain it.

so what’s going on?

Consider this:
In Honduras, when filling out a particularly large order on a tight deadline, factory managers have been reported injecting workers with amphetamines to keep them going on forty-eight-hour marathons. (Klein, 2000: 216)

This story might be regarded as a one-off anomaly of no particular
interest, were it not for the fact that it fits a pattern of abuse for which Klein, and many others, have provided considerable evidence.

For example, the International Labour Organization has identified the existence of some 850 ‘export processing zones’ in which some 27 million people work (cited in Klein, 2000: 215). It is in these zones that the bulk of the world’s ‘sweatshops’ are to be found and, whilst the amphetamine example would be at the extreme end of the spectrum, working conditions are notoriously poor. For example, in the Nike factory in China during the 1990s, workers were paid 16 cents an hour for a 77–84 hour week (1998 figures). Overtime was not paid extra, there were fines for refusing to work overtime and corporal punishment was used (Klein, 2000: 474, where 16 similar examples are listed). Such practices are not illegal within export processing zones, and they are mandated by the growth of international free trade agreements underpinned by institutions such as the World Trade Organization. The politics of these issues are of course fraught and, at the present time, in flux. But for present purposes, it is enough to say there is well-documented evidence for the existence of these kinds of organizational experiences as a reality for many of the world’s employees.

Yet these experiences rarely figure in management textbooks used in business schools where a more sanitized, if not sentimentalized, version of the organization is to be found. Peter Senge, for example, approvingly quotes a CEO who tells us that:

> The total development of our people is essential to achieving our goal of corporate excellence … the fullest development of people is on an equal plane with financial success … practicing the virtues of life and business success are not only compatible but enrich one another. (Senge, 1993: 143–4)

The tone here is rather gushing, but it is clearly consistent with the messages found in many corporate mission statements (‘our people are our greatest asset’) and, in various ways, in the nostrums of textbooks on organizations and human resource management. Very few other subjects within the management curriculum give any consideration at all to working conditions, except through the desiccated language of ‘variable costs’ and similar euphemisms. How are we to square this with the realities of, at least, a significant part of the world economy? Why, if such practices are, apparently, necessary to corporate competitiveness, do business schools not openly teach them? Surely they would if management education was really about producing more effective professional managers. But I have already claimed they are about something else:

**management education and socialization**

What could this ‘something else’ be? The most extreme way of understanding management education would be to see it as an entirely cynical charade. Thus, so long as no one knew, management students could spend their courses, say, sitting in a dark room and it would not matter since the value of management education is purely symbolic and credentialist – just a matter of putting letters after people’s names. This, of course, would be difficult to sustain both because it would always be likely to be found out and also because the negative identity it would offer participants and providers would be almost unbearable. Yet a less extreme version of this does, it has been argued, pervade management education. Watson (1996) refers to a ‘contract of cynicism’ in management education wherein students accept, and faculty delivers, knowledge which both know to be virtually useless. For students the pay-off is the qualification; for faculty a controllable and unchallenged encounter. Although it seems plausible that some degree of cynicism of this
sort can be found in management education, I doubt that it would survive and, indeed, grow if it were really so pointless. I think there is a point: the capacity of management education to socialize those subjected to it. The point is less the skills and knowledge it imparts and more its capacity to develop a certain kind of ‘person’, deemed to be suitable for managerial work and encultured into some version of managerial values. Indeed, it might be that the very willingness to undertake management education stands as a proxy (to employers) for a certain sort of orientation toward the world and commitment to its reproduction: a demonstration of being ‘the right kind of person’.

In this sense, management education may be taken as a symbolic indicator of possession of particular sorts of values, rather than possession of knowledge or skills. An interesting analogy is that of the accounting profession. Here, it is commonplace for firms to recruit accountancy graduates even though there are well-established data suggesting that such graduates perform, on average, less well in subsequent professional examinations than non-accountancy graduates. An empirical study of accounting firm recruitment showed that this was because hirers thought that accountancy graduates had shown an early commitment to the ‘idea’ of an accounting career and shown themselves to be the ‘right kind of person’, an attribute of considerable importance for fitting into, and advancing within, the profession.

My reasoning here is very much in line with what I said about the production of self-management in Chapter 3. Through socialization processes, which of course do not begin and end with management education, individuals acquire a view of what is normal and natural in the world – specifically, in this case, in relation to the world of organizations, and they position themselves and their behaviour accordingly. On this account, management education does have a functionality beyond the contract of cynicism, albeit one which is quite different to the conventional understanding of that functionality. In the latter, management education bestows skill as a bundle of techniques acquired by students for future deployment. In the former, management education develops the ‘skill’ of appropriate selfhood – a technique of self-construction and identity and value formation. Such an understanding of management education is one which has considerable support from quite a variety of standpoints. Thus a leading US business school Dean likened (approvingly) the socialization processes of management education in the US to a ‘bootcamp’ and argues for the need to direct and enhance this socialization in evermore controlled ways (Leavitt, 1991). With considerably less approval, feminist scholarship has indicated the ways in which a masculinist set of values is built into management programmes and reproduced there (Sinclair, 1995). On this account, based on an empirical study in Australia, not only does management education validate values of control and domination, but it also uses case studies of predominantly male leaders and, in the classroom, routinely silences or discounts the contributions of female students.

Moving to a more general level, Whitley et al. (1981) analyse management education in terms of its relationship to wider structures of social inequality and elite reproduction. They found that MBAs (in particular) were increasingly forming an elite (and, of course, we would expect that process to have developed much further in the two decades since this study), which necessarily implies the formation of some shared set of values or understandings, since this is definitional to identifiable elites. All this does of course beg the question of whether management education – or even just the MBA – in general constitutes a common experience. After all, it might be that different programmes inculcate very different kinds of values and that we cannot speak of management education in the way that I have done. My sense is that...
are significant pressures against diversity. These come, in particular, from the growing importance of accreditation schemes and rankings or league tables (Wedlin, 2006). Such developments offer apparent guarantees of quality and transparent information, yet by definition they entail conformity to particular measures and, for that reason, homogenization. In any case, a key aspect of elite formation lies in one of the other relatively hidden aspects of management education: the way that it gives access to an alumni network of contacts. This aspect actually relies on a degree of heterogeneity, such that graduation from school X provides, uniquely, membership of school X’s network. Actually, it would be surprising if what I have said was wrong, because it is well known both that socialization is a facet of educational processes generally (Bowles and Gintis, 1976) and that high level education is linked to the formation of social elites. In the UK, for example, it is possible to see a broad shift in the education of elites, from the study of classics as a prelude to colonial administration, to the study of social sciences as a prelude to entry into the bureaucracy of the welfare state, to the study of management as a prelude to entry into global corporations and consultancies. Clearly each of these represents a different mode of cultural reproduction and, hence, of socialization into different sets of behaviours, norms and values. This is indexed by the fact that one thing that management students often agree about is the way that their courses bestow a greatly enhanced sense of self-confidence upon those who take them. In terms of educational theory, management education offers individuals an entrée into a managerial ‘habitus’, or way of life, entailed within which is the possession of certain sorts of ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1986) or social ‘know-how’. This consists most clearly of habituation into the particular – and, for an outsider, peculiar – language of contemporary management practice. The capacity to talk and understand this language is a major accomplishment of management education. For business schools are one of the producers of managerial language, as well as being perhaps its most important distributor.

management education and legitimation

Habituation into managerial language is experienced as confidence enhancing for students, for obvious reasons. Anyone who has been abroad knows how confidence sapping it is to be unable to communicate. Management education offers entry into the language code of business, whether it be in terms of the latest jargon and buzzwords or the arcana of computing, accounting and finance. But there is more going on here than the development of individual confidence. Particularly within the context of global organization, a shared managerial language, as well as the values with which that language is associated, offers a basis for communication and trust even when conditions of work are fragmented spatially and temporally as in the ‘post-bureaucracy’ (Grey and Garsten, 2001). This kind of ‘scripting’ goes beyond language to the extent that it offers roles, orientations and a nascent sense of community. Moreover, because of the historically amassed status of universities, business schools are able to legitimate this language (etc.) by bestowing the hallmark of intellectualism, perhaps even science, as I suggested earlier.

It should, however, be recognized that not just any language will do. Indeed, more important than terminology are the ideological messages expressed through language and which remain relatively constant as business language changes. In general terms, management education acts to endorse both market relations and managerial dominance as normal, natural and inevitable features of social organization and, more particularly, nowadays to promote the kind of fast capitalist story I discussed in Chapter 5 as normal, natural and inevitable (not least through the intense pressure on MBA programmes to be constantly busy). Management is often depicted as ideology-free technique; this is one of the legacies of understanding organizations.
simply in terms of formal rationality, as discussed in Chapter 1. I am a very long way from being the first person to question such a view, yet it continues to be standard in management programmes. Yet this very ‘neutrality’ is in fact political, for it is a way of concealing the inevitably value-laden terrain of organizations. That this is so becomes obvious if we consider the way that the rise of management education in the UK was very closely related to the development of a politics which saw management and markets as preferable to unions and public provision. At the same time, education was seen more and more in vocational terms by politicians and, ultimately, by universities and students. The issues here go very deep, and are central to understanding the way management education works. Thomas Frank’s excellent polemic, *One Market Under God* (2001) – from which I drew the opening quotation of this chapter – suggests that recent years have seen the advance of an ideology of ‘market populism’ in the US, UK and elsewhere. By this he intends not only the simple assertion of market primacy but also the linkage between markets and democracy. Under this ideology, markets represent the expression of popular will via the economic actions of individuals, and opposition to the market is therefore cast as anti-democratic and elitist, whether it is expressed by governments, intellectuals or professional groups. This is important because it advances a political and moral, as well as an economic, rationale for the market. Within this rationale, management thought occupies a very important place, Frank argues, for it legitimates corporate power. In particular, he singles out the breathless formulations of a new economy where organizations have souls and management is about informal partnership rather than domination. Business schools, of course, have long been an important source, through research, of this kind of managerial thinking and, through management education, are certainly one of its key conduits. They are able to perform a sort of double movement. On the one hand, they bear the imprint of an engineering ideology that represents management as no more than morally neutral technique, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. On the other hand, they stand ready with an overtly moralistic stance in which the values of market populism and humanistic management are endorsed. And this should come as no surprise since the same duality has characterized much of the history of management thought, as I argued in Chapter 2. So – and this is the key point – in both versions, ‘neutral’ and ‘humanist’, stories such as that of the injection of amphetamines to prolong shifts are ‘written out’. Neither the picture of the morally neutral technician nor of the morally inspired humanist could be sustained when confronted with this. And so management education either holds at a distance the real effects of, for example, neutral-sounding ‘outsourcing’ or condemns them as the reverse of good management practice – as anomalous events which can be easily dealt with by enlightened ‘best practice’. Business schools are therefore able to play a pivotal role in the ideological projects (note the pluralization) of globalized capitalism in promoting and, especially, socializing students into a sanitized representation of corporate management. That this should have occurred must be regarded as being at least in part serendipitous: it was not a part of a scheme or conspiracy. It is certainly true that there was a deliberate plan from the inception of business schools that they should raise the social status of business managers relative to established professional groups. Engwall (1997: 90) noted that for the many philanthropists who funded early business schools ‘their intention was primarily to raise the status of business men’ rather than having any particular concern with what was taught in the new institutions. For example, writing of Gustav Mevissen, creator of the business school at Cologne at the turn of the century, Robert Locke concluded that ‘concerned to raise the low status of
businessmen, he thought ... to raise the businessman’s social status by conferring college degrees on members of the business estate’ (cited in Engwall, 1997: 91). This, of course, is a very different explanation of why management education emerged than that which sees it as to do with the functional need for better managers, and it is consistent with the arguments I made in Chapter 2 about the aspirations of management as an occupational group.

In this context the wider possibility of management education acting not just to boost the status of managers, but as a proselytizer and training ground for ‘market populism’ and for management as an ‘idea’, has emerged piecemeal. It may in part be due to the well-intentioned predisposition of academics in liberal cultures to articulate humane versions of what the organization is or should be. Yet these intentions cannot explain why, throughout the world, corporations and governments provide substantial financial support for business schools. Such support stems in part from the perceived need for the greater deployment of generic managerial skills in, especially, the public sector and management consultancies. This might initially be apprehended in terms of attempts to spread market discipline and ‘business values’, and this was probably true in the early periods of the New Right ‘project’. However, it has subsequently taken on a distinct quality. As a term, ‘generic management skills’ itself implies the idea of management technique as a neutral artefact, ready to be put to use in pursuit of ‘values’ of all kinds, whether charity, health, banking or industry. But at the same time, in terms of ‘market populism’, it represents an incursion against supposedly entrenched privilege.

Management is the way in which ‘arrogant doctors’ and public sector ‘elites’ may be made accountable. Yet there is an irony in this for, in the process, what is created is a new category of expert – the manager or the consultant – who, whilst not professionalized in the classical sense of the term, is possessed of techniques, language and values denied to others. In this sense it is right to cast management as a form of elitism even though part of its claim to value is anti-elitism. I should reiterate that none of this is to posit a conspiracy or a simple alignment between management education and any particular set of interests. Debates in social theory have long emphasized the polymorphous nature of power and the fragmented character of interests (see Clegg, 1989). As with other institutions and social practices, management education operates within a complex terrain, and one growing more complex by virtue of the ‘end of management’ thesis I discussed in Chapter 5. This has lead to business schools increasingly positioning themselves as developing ‘entrepreneurs’, ‘leaders’ or, perhaps, ‘change agents’. Nevertheless, their core operation remains the production of suitable personnel for, depending on their particular market, consultancies, investment banks, the public sector or industry. So, as a matter of expediency and not grand conspiracy, they must embody ideological positions which, at best, do not threaten the actual or perceived requirements of such employers who are often also involved in business school funding. However, the requirements of employers are themselves quite variegated: therefore it will not serve to see management education as the mouthpiece for a coherent, univocal set of interests. Indeed, aside from the issue of fragmentation of interests, business schools are themselves active players and as such cannot be understood simply as ‘mouthpieces’. Management education has had the good fortune to be carried by a tide of time and circumstance which have favoured it, rather than other forms of education or entitlement, to prosper. As the idea of management as a cultural good has been in the ascendant, so too has the demand for management education. As the hegemony of the market has been in the ascendant, so too has the demand for management education. Management education does not offer a useful ‘technical’ training, and nor could it. But, in purporting to do so, it does offer
status and credentials to individuals and pre-selects and socializes those individuals for certain kinds of organizational employment. Through its socialization processes it contributes to the provision of shared languages and understandings amongst managers. It is therefore dependent upon wider cultural and political trends and can only be understood in the light of these. Moreover it offers some legitimation of those trends. It might, however, also be said that management education is as a result highly vulnerable to shifts in the ideological terrain or, perhaps more likely, in the value put upon general and generic management, especially by consultants and the public sector – hence, again, the increasing accent upon a different set of descriptors for what business schools offer.

Understood in this light, it is easy to understand why something like the ‘Honduran story’ – and more routine sweatshop practices – are so resolutely written out of management education. If management education is about status and legitimation, it must perforce be distanced from the more ethically dubious practices found in at least some real workplaces. Neither the status of managers nor the image of management as an idea are readily compatible with some of these practices, even though their existence suggests that they have an economic rationale. By the same token, the predominantly liberalminded (in relative terms) faculty of business schools and, more certainly, the cultural capital of universities as sites of civilized values mitigate against overt endorsement of the increasing excesses of labour discipline in fast capitalism.

The analysis I am offering here differs more or less sharply from that provided by the more conventional critics of business schools (of whom there are many). Such criticism is now routine from within the heartlands of the business school mainstream as commentators such as Starkey and Tiratsoo (2007: 5) note. Of course the fact that the problematic nature of the business schools only receives much attention when it is articulated by the mainstream is another part of the problem, partly because it reflects a subservience to received wisdom. More importantly, it means that the critiques never radically reconsider the nature of business schools, so that they rather romantically imagine that the solution lies in making the business school more ‘socially responsive’. A similar weakness can be found in the admittedly more intellectually sophisticated work of Rakesh Khurana (2007), which calls for more ethically-engaged and professionally orientated (rather than simply market-focused) business schools.

Whilst I have some sympathy for such analyses they are inevitably limited by an unwillingness to recognize the fundamental limitations of instrumental control and the nature of ideological co-option. Indeed, in terms of the latter, the call for a more ethical and socially responsive business school is simply to call for a re-enforcement of the role of business schools in ideological legitimation through an updated version of the humanistic part of that legitimation.

**Conclusion**

The study of organizations nowadays takes place largely within the context of particular institutions, namely business and management schools. These schools have an interest in configuring organization theory in a particular way – as if it yields managerial control. That is, it says that studying organizations will make better, more professional managers. I have argued that this is a myth and that the real purpose of business schools is quite different, that it is about legitimation and status. For mainstream organization theory that doesn’t make much difference, perhaps. It points to a body of work that emphasizes both the need to master it (status) and, over much of that work, the case for ‘humanistic’ management of the workforce (legitimation).
Mastery of mainstream organization theory supports managers by suggesting that they both know more and are more humanely attuned than those who have not achieved such mastery. In this respect, modern business schools do no more than contribute to the ideological projects of managerial elitism referred to in the first two chapters of this book: the technical and ideological case for management. However, using organization theory in this way can only work if an extremely partial and highly suspect approach is adopted. This approach stresses human behaviour as a variable that can be influenced by certain manipulations. This is evident in every mainstream discussion of organizations. Create motivational structure A and you will produce motivation level B. Use leadership approach A and you will produce organizational performance B. Create knowledge sharing system A and you will produce learning organization B. Such a view is commonly expressed by both instructors and students on management degrees as the provision of a ‘toolkit’ for managers; the very metaphor which betrays a mechanistic world view.

How inadequate this all is. I want to stress the inadequacy because the issue is not that this approach is heartless – but it works. The issue is that it doesn’t work and cannot work. The entire notion of a toolkit requires that the objects to which the tools are applied are just that: objects. But they are not, they are people. So whilst this means that they should not be treated as objects, it also means that to do so will yield unsatisfactory results from a managerial perspective. For the agency of others means that the mastery of the manager will always and necessarily remain elusive. Concede this very basic insight, which appears to me unarguable, and the vast edifice of conventional organization theory is revealed as simple nonsense. All the regression analyses and hypothesis testing amount to no more than an elaborate game, requiring intelligence to play – and some of it is highly intelligent – but having no more meaning than a crossword puzzle. The only value it has is to contribute to the bigger project of the technical and ideological justification of management.

But if most studies of organization have this character, at once pointless and yet contributing to managerial ideology, why have I spent so much time urging the study of organizations? The answer is that although the mainstream has little value beyond ‘the faking of intellectual authority’, there is a considerable amount of organization theory that is of real value. It can tell us about the lived experience of organizations, and in this way illuminate our own and others’ worlds. Which means that it can also be of value to professional managers not, as conventional wisdom would have it, by offering tools to control those around us, but by offering insights into why this controlling mentality is doomed to failure.

The way that the study of organizations is organized mitigates against that insight. For business schools purport to teach organization theory as a means of securing control. Rid ourselves of that presumption and we approach organization theory in a way which is more honest, more realistic and far more interesting. This observation brings me back to the issues with which I began the Introduction to this book. My concern there was that almost everything written about organization theory was terminally dull. I was puzzled by that, because I claimed that life in organizations was incredibly interesting. If you have followed me to this point then perhaps we have an explanation for my puzzlement. The way that the study of organizations has been subsumed into the narrow calculus of business school education explains why it has been denuded of everything that makes it interesting. If it is a tool of status and legitimation for managers, is it surprising that it speaks inadequately to our experience of going into work tomorrow? So the professional managers produced by business schools are professional only in a very narrow – though not altogether insignificant – sense. They are not better or more effective managers or, if they are, only coincidentally. They may gain access to a network of alumni
contacts but, if so, no more than they would had they spent the time studying something else. They may very well be more versed in the superficialities of managerial language, which may boost their selfconfidence and, in some cases, their career prospects. But they will have learned something which fits them well for the corporate labour market over and above a language. They will have learned an orientation, and their study of organizations will have contributed to this. This orientation is, above and beyond everything else, an enrolment into, perhaps especially for MBAs, a confirmation of a world view. That world view will typically encompass everything that this book has argued against. A view of organizations as a separate domain from that of philosophy, politics and culture. A view of organizations as amenable to engineering-like control. A view of people as a target for manipulation, and values as an organizational resource. A view of change as that which cannot be questioned, and must be enforced. A view that there is no alternative to fast capitalism.

So perhaps all this may be taken to mean that I am unsympathetic to business and management schools and their products. Well, yes, of course that is true. But unlike some advocates of ‘critical management studies’ (CMS) I heed the warning that:

When the B-schools become empty, when the corridors contain dead leaves and the roofs leak, then they will be converted to sociology departments or housing for the elderly and CMS will have done its job [but] if the limit of your ambition is to put yourself out of a job, the prospects … do not seem to be bright. (Parker, 2002: 132)

That is not my ambition – either for myself or for business schools. Organizations are, and will likely remain, central to social and economic well-being in some form or other. But what form? I have taught many students over many years and my concern is that they are shortchanged. Many of them are talented, intelligent, ethical and likeable people who are fed a form of education that does little justice to these attributes. More fundamentally, I am convinced that organizations, and only organizations, can give us the many things that constitute the ‘good life’ in the way discussed at the end of Chapter 5. Business schools are a place where administration, politics, philosophy, ethics, psychology and much else of interest and importance can meet to contribute to the good life. My complaint is that by promoting a truncated version of organizational possibilities, these schools as currently constituted not only fail to contribute to the good life, but actively impede