

A FRENCH JOURNAL ON MANAGEMENT: SURVIVING AND THRIVING – THE CASE OF *GÉRER & COMPRENDRE*

OVERLOOKED

For anyone familiar with journals in management, *Gérer & comprendre* stands out. Its many graphics are offbeat in relation to the text; and its articles appear under unusual headings: Overlooked...; Trial by fact; Other times, other places; Live; In quest of theories. In addition, the date of creation on the cover is intriguing: 1794. These peculiarities are to be set down to the environment in which the journal was created and the opportunities at that time. After explaining this, this article concludes that, rather than trying to blend in with a set of standards, international exchanges would be more beneficial if they capitalized on the diversity of traditions and institutions around the world.

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RESEARCH IN MANAGEMENT AND THE SOIL FOR VINTAGE PRODUCTION

Let us spin a metaphor with wine as a cultural product. Some soils are well-suited for growing varieties of grapes that would not survive elsewhere. But to produce quality, the state of know-how must be excellent, and winemakers must feel severely judged if they are to resist temptation. When exporting wine to far away places, they might be tempted to let up on quality. Consumers on the other side of the earth will not

react right away, and might not even have taste buds that can tell the difference. The requisite vigilance in such matters is best left up to the guardians of customs and traditions in the local environment. In this way, wines with a sense of identity can be produced, and connoisseurs can recognize the origin and year of production (BROUSSE 1999). Globalization is tending toward a standardization that is gradually erasing the origins of wines, and thus threatening vintages with a sense of identity (apart from top-quality wines with originality).

In like manner, local conditions are more or less conducive to such and such research. Quality research will develop only if the appropriate talents are attracted and high requirements are set. A journal might be essential for the emergence of a new current of

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thought. In France, this was the case in the discipline of history with the *Annales*. Journals such as *Sociologie du travail* or *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* have staked out an identity because they are known for conveying an original style of research.

In the United States, a journal's quality is measured by the proportion of articles turned down for publication. Since the best-known American journals have a rejection rate of more than 90 %, they are, it is concluded, the best journals. However this only measures the American model's attraction and not necessarily its quality or originality. The American soil is not very conducive to certain types of research, in particular studies calling for a long stint of fieldwork that is not very compatible with the pressure to publish or perish. Such research is said to be "qualitative", and its results cannot be reproduced. Nonetheless, a positivistic approach pushes social scientists to use questionnaires and statistics – a reassuring approach in a context where numbers are sacred and the model of physics prevails (BERRY 1992 & 1995a).

SPECIAL CONDITIONS DURING THE GERMINATION OF *GÉRER & COMPRENDRE*

Around 1970, each of the two French *Grandes Écoles* in engineering set up its own research center in management: in 1967 the Centre de Gestion Scientifique (CGS of the École des Mines de Paris), and in 1972 the Centre de Recherche en Gestion (CRG of École Polytechnique). Since research at the time was seldom based on observation and experimentation – a fact engineers trained in experimental procedures were shocked to learn – these centers devised methods to remedy this situation.

The major obstacle was that organizations were not open to the curious, let alone to experimenters. Medicine had made progress thanks to dissection, but few organizations were willing to undergo vivisection, unless the advantages of having social scientists present in their midst could outweigh the disadvantages. For this reason, researchers developed what they called "clinical studies" during which long-term relations were woven with an organization around its problems (BERRY 1995b). This research soon led social scientists to stand back from the positivistic model. It revealed the value of a maieutic approach based on a dialog. During a clinical case study, dialogs were organized in the field to discuss findings. Somewhat later, seminars were held where researchers and "practitioners" from the organization could discuss observations or theoretical approaches. From 1981 to 1988, a seminar "The ethnography of organizations" held more than eighty meetings with the objective of taking a fresh look at organizations. It proved seminal owing to its examination of noteworthy examples, such as the operation of

the French government(1). From 1983 to 1988, the "Group of thought on the automation of production" collected reports on automation in factories and exposed the considerable gap between words and deeds. Given the audience of these seminars, the idea gradually arose of creating a journal with a style similar to this research.

At the time, there was hardly any journal suitable for publishing the research produced in the two aforementioned centers. This research was far from the standards set in the United States. Even in France, it seemed a little odd. It would have been hard to obtain backing for founding a journal from scratch. Fortunately, an opportunity cropped up: *Les Annales des mines*, founded in 1794 and financed by the Ministry of Industry, was about to expire. At a time when France was shutting down its last mines, there was a dearth of topics and, even more, of inspiration. However public authorities did not want to let the oldest journal in France pass away. After all, it still had 1500 subscribers. Why not offer them new contents? Although *Les Annales des mines* was founded to circulate knowledge about mining, why could it not now do the same about management? I managed to defend this idea with the help of persons who attended the seminars.

DOING IT WITH STYLE

While looking back over the history of *Les Annales des mines*, we discovered that we were, in a way, going back to its roots. Next to nothing needed to be changed in Charles Coquebert's editorial in 1794:

"It was necessary to gather facts, multiply observations in the light of analogies. We have been in a hurry to build vast theories, but our enamorment with them is so mixed up with research that the observer no longer finds what he was looking for. [...] Trusting in deceptive guides, funds are dissipated in buildings, in the costs of controls, in sterile expenses. [...] Eager to spare our fellow-citizens such errors, which discredit the art of mining, we will, with them, follow the humble pathway of observation; we will draw few conclusions; we will have many a doubt; and we will make them wary of a self-assured tone so easy to assume and so dangerous to listen to."(2)

Although *Les Annales des mines* was a monthly, the decision was made to bring out a quarterly called

(1) The results included several articles by Michel MATHEU and Philippe ROQUEPLO in *Gérer et comprendre*, issues 5, 9 and 23 respectively: "Cabinet ministériel" ["Ministerial cabinets"], "Regards sur la complexité du pouvoir" ["Views on the complexity of power"] and "Urgences et raison d'État" ["Emergencies and reasons of state"].

(2) The full text was reprinted in "Deux cents ans de regard sur l'industrie" ["A two-hundred-year look at industry"], *Annales des Mines* (the series *Réalités Industrielles*), July-August, 1989.

Gérer & comprendre(3.) The first issue came out in December 1985 following eighteen months of preparations.

From the very start, the idea was to adopt a style open to various disciplines and approaches; economists, sociologists, anthropologists, psychosociologists and historians were welcome. But the journal had to be kept from resembling a potpourri. The aim was to attract a readership of “practitioners”. Articles should be well written, and should spare readers the long lists of quotations that make the reading of academic texts so tedious. Nonetheless the journal should be capable of convincing academics (suspicious of pleasant-to-read articles) to take it seriously. We counted on gaining the benefit of the doubt owing to both the prestige of the aforementioned *Grandes Écoles* and backing from the National Center of Scientific Research (CNRS).

To publish a journal with style, we came upon the idea of arranging the articles under headings.

– The heading “Overlooked...” underscores our attachment to observation, as illustrated by the article “Robots in practice, the reality hidden behind the myths” in our first issue (BERRY 1985).

– “Trial by fact” emphasizes experimentation, the testing of popular methods, as in “Isolating communication systems”, an article that showed how computer systems can have effects contrary to those expected (PAVÉ 1986).

– “Debated” underlines the importance of discussing ideas, as in “L'évangile selon Saint Mac” (Kervern 1986), a critique by the chairman of the board at Aluminium Pechiney of the best seller, *Le prix de l'excellence*.

– “Other times, other places” bids a welcome to historians, ethnologists and travelers. This heading seeks to stimulate thinking, even if this means shifting points of view, as in an unexpected, extraordinary testimony about Renault from a retiree (SÉJOURNET 1987).

– “In quest of theories” seeks to draw attention to theories out of line with prevailing ideas. Under this heading, incipient currents of thought are aired, for example: the groundbreaking article on innovation by Madeleine AKRICH, Bruno LATOUR and Michel CALLON (1988).

The decision to carry illustrations was made to remind writers and readers that a journal does not have to be boring to be serious, abundant evidence thereof coming from 18th-century philosophers. The use of illustrations “offbeat” in relation to the text reinforced the message that the journal wanted to provide food for thought rather than offer precooked answers.

Gérer & comprendre's first articles were intended to illustrate this style. To forestall the risk of running out

of material, the journal was launched only after having enough articles in stock for a year of publication. A rule was formulated: priority would be given to articles from outside the circle of the founders (even though the latter were among the first authors). The intent was to protect the journal from the suspicion that its pages were reserved for a small group from the “caste” of the *Grandes Écoles* and their allies. In fact, it took a few years before people were convinced that the requirements for accepting an article were the same for everyone. When the rejection rate is high (80 % at present), the author can entertain the consoling thought that the article was turned down because he/she does not belong to the right network!

THE JOURNAL'S FULCRUM: ITS EDITORIAL BOARD

Academia makes a distinction between journals with/without a committee of reviewers who select articles. Journals without peer review usually do not count for an academic career. For this reason, the decision was made to set up a committee for selecting articles but with the following rules.

The formation of a small standing group of reviewers

Academic journals normally ask outside reviewers to evaluate the papers submitted for publication. At *Gérer & comprendre*, a group with a dozen members reviewed all articles(4). Forming this committee was an opportunity to open toward other currents of thought, in particular Michel Crozier's Center of the Sociology of Organizations. This committee was brought up to number with practitioners and independent researchers with a sense of critique. Every paper submitted to the journal is assigned to two committee members, who set their opinions down in writing before the next meeting.

A collective discussion of submissions

This committee met every month (at present, every six weeks), all members invited. After the two reviewers explain their opinion about a submission, the committee deliberates. Thanks to this method, a speedy response can be given: less than two months as compared with seven or eight in traditional journals (when reviewers fail to send their comments, or the editor-in-chief, stuck with diverging reviews, has to look for additional reviewers). These deliberations make for lively meetings. The French love to discuss ideas, whence a strong *affectio societatis*, which has

(3) *Annales des mines* went on to create the quarterlies *Réalités industrielles* in 1990 and *Responsabilités et environnement* in 1996.

(4) This committee currently has nineteen members. Now and then, help is solicited from outside reviewers.

turned the editorial board into a guardian overseeing the journal's editorial policy and style.

Debating partners

When the reviewers' opinions diverge so far that nothing can be done to bring them together, a referee is appointed to submit an opinion at the next meeting. If deliberations end with the paper being accepted for publication, the negative reviewer may publish a commentary; and the author may reply to it. Instead of a single article, there might be three(5).

The replies to authors are an invitation to exchange ideas. There are four sorts of replies: "Yes" (seldom given for the first version submitted), "No", "Yes, but..." and "No but...". The last two include comments asking the author to work on the text or discuss it. This exchange passes through the editor-in-chief, since reviewers do not know the author's name, nor does the author know the reviewers' names.

At the start, *Gérer & comprendre* opposed blind-refereeing, since it seemed to shy at debate. However French institutions have, one after the other, internalized American standards, including the intangible double-blind procedure. *Gérer & comprendre*, after a long period of opposition, adopted this procedure, since it did not represent a threat.

A JOURNAL IS NOT A BED OF ROSES

After having established its place in France, *Gérer & comprendre* has come face-to-face with globalization. While looking through the first issues to find material for this article, I was impressed by the authors' intellectual freedom and triumphant tone. Since *Gérer & comprendre* conveyed nascent paradigms, it spent its first three or four years on the fringes of managerial circles. It then obtained institutional recognition and figured on the official list of journals that count for promotions in academia. Its editorial board grew to accommodate these institutions, while choosing persons in phase with the journal's philosophy.

Gérer & comprendre now counted in careers(6). The papers submitted soon grew in number as did... the rejection rate. Lest this recognition curb the freedom of thought expressed in its pages, initiatives were taken to keep the flame of originality burning. The journal celebrated its tenth anniversary in 1996 with an issue on management during the 17th and 18th

centuries that provided the opportunity to discover genuine exploits, such as Colbert's building in seven hours a ship with thirty canons to convince the king to invest in the navy (VÉRIN, 1996).

The question of globalization has gradually taken center stage. In particular, the major business schools, in order to attract topnotch foreign students and obtain recognition for their diplomas, have been preoccupied with international rankings and standards as they have tried, one after the other, to be certified AACSB or EQUIS (respectively, American and European accreditation). While boosting American publications, this has led to doubts about whether it is worthwhile to publish in French.

With a sense of foreboding, I went on a fact-finding trip to the United States in 1991 to explore the possibilities for marketing ideas "made in France" there. I was often greeted with interest, even enthusiasm, especially since "clinical" case studies were not easy to conduct in the American setting. Nonetheless it was hard to imagine publishing such articles in journals there. I studied the market for a translation of *Gérer & comprendre* into English, but librarians convinced me that the chances of success were next to naught. In effect, American professors only read what counts for tenure – and a French journal hardly counts. I came back with the following ideas (BERRY 1992):

– Copying the American model would signal an intellectual decline. Given the different configurations of the American and French systems, we can undertake research that is hard for them to do; vice-versa.

– Imitating would mean adopting the position of the "dominated", a not very profitable stance, as treatises on strategy show.

– We should set store on differences and thus reinforce our strong points. To this end, journals presenting top-quality research are to be supported; and their articles, to be made known internationally. This implies reckoning with English.

– *Gérer & comprendre* would not be a very good vector, since English-speakers cannot pronounce the title and its relations with *Annales des mines* are complicated. For this reason, the proposal was made to use the more significant label, *École de Paris du Management*(7).

The Paris School of Management was launched in 1993, and *Gérer & comprendre* held to its course. To put it mildly however, our pursuit of the foregoing strategy has not been a bed of roses. French business schools tend to push their professors to publish in American journals (what is positive) but also to

(5) For example, Gilles MARION, "Totalfina+Elfina; comment lutter contre l'évidence" ["Ttotalfina+Elfina: How to fight against the evidence"]; Hervé DUMEZ's comments "Communication financière et analyse de discours" ["Financial communications and discourse analysis"]; followed by "Réponse à Hervé Dumez" ["Reply to Hervé Dumez"].

(6) Except for the members of the CRG, where the founder of the journal had imprinted his style of research, whence a suspected consanguinity even though the articles from CRG members were, of course, submitted to reviewers unaffiliated with the center who evaluated the submissions without indulgence. Nothing is ever simple...

(7) For more information, see <http://www.ecole.org>.

underrate publications in French journals (what is not necessary). *Gérer & comprendre* was underrated in one such school (even though it was the journal most frequently used in courses there), for a single reason: it is in French. Similar tendencies exist in universities.

What riled *Gérer & comprendre's* editorial board most was an initiative taken by the CNRS. To rationalize its work of evaluation, the CNRS's Economics and Management Committee drew up a classification of journals. French "generalist" journals, including *Gérer & comprendre*, were ranked in the fourth category at best. Only journals in English could hope to be ranked in the first category. The lack of diffusion of the French language was the main justification given for this underrating of French journals.

Reactions were strong, among others: an open letter followed by a petition and a 2004 article in *Le Monde* (8). This had unexpected results. Support came in from Germany, Scandinavia and even England. It also triggered an increase in the number of papers submitted to *Gérer & comprendre*, which had tended to decrease under pressure from Americanization. The number of papers submitted from outside France is on the rise, not only from French-speaking lands. We might be at the point where the pendulum is swinging back, a familiar trend in history.

FOR PLURALISM

Globalization is pushing us toward a standardization that helps consumers find their bearings, even among vintages. However this is evidence of an intellectual decline, since conditions for "works of the mind" vary in extraordinary ways around the world. An institution attracts talented persons in one land, but repels them elsewhere. In a given country, value is, or is not, set on a career in research. Management systems encourage, or discourage, innovation. Researchers live in relative isolation, or fit into a group. Local conditions facilitate, or impede, the opening of new fields of inquiry. Practitioners are, or are not, interested in research. Critical inquiry is, or is not, tolerated. Etc. This diversity is a potential source of wealth, but we must distinguish between two aspects of scientific work: the production of ideas and their diffusion. The first implies that arrangements for promoting a sense

(8) Respectively: Michel BERRY, "Classement des revues, le CNRS va-t-il perdre son âme?", September 2003; and Michel BERRY, "La recherche en gestion doit échapper aux standards américains", *Le Monde Économie*, 31 March 2004.

of excellence are held in esteem: people never produce better than in their own language and according to their own native genius. As for diffusion, it supposes that vectors can be found for reaching the targeted public. English, the most widely used language, is, of course, the vector of broadest circulation.

Nonetheless, the supposition that the most widely diffused journals and languages are those that push toward high quality stems from a dismaying confusion between the production and circulation of ideas. *Gérer & comprendre* makes no claim to universality; but it does claim to defend a sort of research that can thrive on French soil, or even gain wider acceptance. The places where research receives backing from prestigious institutions with a long tradition of excellence have advantages for reaching out to the world by affirming their originality. "Old" Europe has a major role to play given its prestigious, original institutions and the variety of its traditions of excellence. However it must also have the will to do so. ■

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