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Recensioni

Dennis Tourish (2019), *Management Studies in Crisis: Fraud, Deception and Meaningless Research*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 304 pp.

A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The point is that the process is reversible[1].

There are books that you wish you had written, just as there are brilliant, insightful essays that bring into sharp focus certain thoughts and ideas of which you have sometimes had an inkling or a dread, but which you are not brave, smart or experienced enough to unravel. Everyone outside the scientific community – from policymakers to students – should read such books, especially when they shed light on the *raison d'être*, meaning

and usefulness of scientific research. Dennis Tourish's *Management Studies in Crisis* (2019) is one of these books. As its subtitle suggests, the work is an investigation of *Fraud, Deception and Meaningless Research* and aims to unleash a storm among scholars, as signalled by the mighty lightning bolt tearing through the night sky in the cover art.

The author makes his inquiry while notably matching the rigour of scientific research with the readability of a novel and a commendable sense of humour, as when he argues: «I am tempted to suggest that writing to our mothers, even those that have passed away, would be a better use of our time than writing many of the papers that appear in our hallowed journals» (p. 158).

The book is divided into ten chapters in which the author highlights the malaise that afflicts management studies. He also calls for change and suggests individual and collective efforts that might be made to effect it. Chapter 1 describes several cases representing the historical roots of processes that the intensification of measurement, examined in Chapter 2, has only worsened. Chapter 3 highlights the effect on the quality of academic life and research. Whereas Chapter

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[1] Orwell G. (2018) [1946], *Politics and the English Language and other essays*, A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook, p. 6, <https://www.fadedpage.com/showbook.php?pid=20180223>, 31.08.2020.

4 discusses research misconduct and malpractice, Chapter 5 investigates such practices in management studies. The illusion and «pretentious nonsense» (p. 6) of theory development is illustrated in depth in Chapters 6 (one of the liveliest in the book) and 7. Chapter 8 discusses evidence-based management and chapter 9 goes further by emphasising the need to address important issues. Lastly, Chapter 10 presents several possible paths that might be taken.

This review will focus less on fraud and deception, which are punishable by law, and take a closer look at meaningless research, its origin, its procedures, and even its writing code. As Tourish reveals, «formulaic and empty research for its own sake» (p. 78) has become a game and, like every game, it has its own rules. The fact is that «people playing the game can forget that they are doing so, and allow themselves to be (re)defined by the new rules that they have initially opposed» (p. 36)!

Going back to the development of this scientific sport, it is important to mention the «audit explosion» (p. 35). Over the past twenty years, scholars in several countries have been experiencing profound changes in university systems. While we are becoming increasingly familiar with rankings, ratings, metrics and other similar measurement tools adopted in different disciplines, many books and initiatives have been devoted to the analysis of the university system, especially to research evaluation and sustainability[2]. However,

there has been less focus on the impact of the measurement culture on individual disciplines – their objectives, methods and practice. Dennis Tourish's book fills this gap by analysing the current state of management studies, with an accurate and well-documented meta-scientific essay which sounds out the state of health and the wellbeing of research in the field of management. By researching research, he rends the "veil of Maya" to uncover a wasteland where «saying something meaningful is subordinated […] to publishing frequently in the 'right' places. This is a Legoland model of scholarship, in which façades matter more than substance» (p. 66). As Tourish points out, «people do whatever it takes to meet the number, regardless of quality, and ignore other important issues in order to focus on whatever it is that is being measured» (p. 38).

In the beginning was… the Journal. When analysing instrumental motivations, Tourish quotes Carl Cederström and Casper Hoedemaekers (2012, p. 231), who argue that scholars do not start with an idea that they work on and think through, then put into words. They «start with the journal (did we mention a four-star, or at the very least a three-star?) and then think what might fly with the profile of that journal» (p. 58). Submitting a paper to a top journal also means investing as much work in replying to reviewers as we do in writing an article. It «seems almost like becoming a hostage, with rejection (i.e. termination) the ultimate sanction for disobedience» (p. 54). Tourish warns about the drawbacks of the ferocious perpetuation of this rite, whose result is that, in the name of career building, we write what reviewers want us to write, destroying our «life, passion and individuality in a submission before it sees the light of day» (p. 54). Quoting a

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[2] This journal has even hosted a special issue on this matter. *The sustainability and evaluation of Italian scientific journals in the field of SSHs* (2018), «IL CAPITALE CULTURALE. *Studies on the Value of Cultural Heritage*», n. 17, <https://riviste.unimc.it/index.php/cap-cult/issue/view/88/showToc>, 31.08.2020.

brilliant essay by Mauro Boarelli against the ideology of merit, we can easily agree that «in the pursuit of simplification and utilitarianism, thought dies»[3].

Another «unhealthy obsession» encountered in the academic world is theory development, which risks amounting to nothing more than «a great deal of pretentious gibberish» (p. 133). Echoing Michael Billing (2013, p. 51), Tourish unmasks the «obvious points» which hide behind «convoluted language» (p. 23), when big words just «cover over a lack of discovery» (p. 137). Indeed, many scholars feel compelled to make their methods and theories «more complex than they need to be as a form of intellectual exhibitionism» (p. 158). When doing this, it is not unusual for scholars in management studies to fashion «formulaic, cautious, dull and unreadable» (p. 148) papers that «seem to be written by sadists who enjoy inflicting pain on masochists» (p. 3), addressed only to the «microtribes with which [they] most closely identify» (p. 26) and only read by «a small coterie» (p. 127). Some important masters are evoked in Tourish's close examination of academic papers, like George Orwell, whose *Politics and the English Language* (1946) should become a classic to nourish our students' thinking, speech and writing. However, it is also important not to forget that the decay of language – which is also a decay of thought! – is not restricted to the confines of the English language, and has infested the language of science in several nations.

Even more problematic is the fact that sophisticated academic lucubration addresses trivial «obscure topics» (p.

192) rather than engaging with «bigger issues» (p. 2). Indeed, far from being just a matter of «impenetrable jargon» (p. 192) – «prose that lacerates the reader, […] over freighted with references to a canon of sources whose work is treated as Holy Writ» (p. 246) –, the core question is about «problematizing» (p. 146):

Instead of challenging […], the researcher identifies some tiny gaps in the knowledge claims that it makes and then proceeds to fill them, like a plasterer obsessed with miniscule cracks in a wall. Often, no one has ever noticed these gaps before because they aren't that important, and no one really cares anyway if they are filled or not – including the authors of such papers themselves (p. 146).

A few words should also be spent on research misconduct, both in quantitative and qualitative research, such as QRPs (Questionable Research Practices), plagiarism, *p*-hacking and HARKing (Hypothesising After the Results are Known). Thoroughly analysing this problem with the support of generous examples, Tourish echoes the popular *Houston, we have a problem* (p. 105) and calls for «a shift in our own mind-sets» (p. 234). On the one hand, he points to the need to «be much less pompous» (p. 212): looking at Darwin's «vivid, inspiring and memorable» (p. 159) model, we should write «with more variety, and with a little more humour, curiosity, and passion» (p. 160). On the other hand, he refers to the need to «address issues that matter» (p. 212), by carrying out better «transdisciplinary» and «multimethodological» (p. 32) «research which speaks to real problems, and that uses evidence to guide decision making» (p. 210). These two aspects are neither separate nor to be read as mere form and content, but are closely interconnected and interdependent. Can we conduct intelligent investigations of big issues

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[3] Boarelli M. (2019), *Contro l'ideologia del merito*, Bari-Roma: Laterza, p. 43 (own translation).

without being curious? Can we support decision-making effectively if we are stuck in the twists and turns of hollow and tortuous reasoning?

The answer to these rhetorical questions also contains the reason for this book review in this journal. It might seem odd that a review of this kind of book is hosted in a scientific journal whose focus is the value of cultural heritage, but careful consideration reveals that this is the perfect venue for its publication. As stated in its mission, the journal was started ten years ago «to provide a field of discussion on the issue of the integrated conservation and enhancement of cultural heritage among scholars in different disciplines»[4]. For this purpose, the journal is directed not only at academics, but also at public and private-sector professionals and practitioners in the field of cultural heritage, in order to offer them innovative and effective interpretation and management solutions. The dialogue between scientific disciplines and with the real world has always been a priority for the journal in order to be more valuable to society. In addition, the professional and academic history of its founder corroborates a perspective that aims to combat the self-referentiality and abstractness of management studies, as well as its weak impact on cultural heritage management and policy. It is a cultural battle that is still worth fighting.

After reading Tourish's book and while awaiting real change in our systems of incentives, we should, as scholars, learn to be more modest and unpretentious. Sometimes it is better to accept that we do not yet hold the next great innovation in our hands, and that, for now, we are simply unable to add developments to the current state of scientific knowledge, rather than showing off fictitious conceptual innovations. We should admit that «the disinterested pursuit of truth and knowledge» (p. 251) takes time that cannot be dictated by the-rush-to-publication-at-any-costs of research capitalism. As argued by Maggie Berger and Barbara K. Seeber in their *The Slow Professor*, «we need time to think, and so do our students. Time for reflection and open-ended inquiry is not a luxury but is crucial to what we do»[5].

Although Tourish's book focuses on management studies, the entire scientific community should reflect upon the spread of cognitive standardisation that is taking place across several disciplines. Everyone can find something worth learning from it, something that might help us effect change, because – as Orwell reminds us – the process is reversible.

I would like to close this review by quoting an excerpt from an Italian book published a couple of years ago. In *Per fortuna faccio il prof*, Nando Dalla Chiesa reports an episode that represented a turning point in his academic life. He had written an article on the relationship between the 1968 protest movement and terrorism. He was very proud of it, because for tens of pages he grappled conceptually with certain issues that had normally been avoided by the leaders of the great protest. The article was published in 1981 in «il Mulino». Given the prestige of the scientific journal, he immediately took a copy to his father. On asking him for his opinion, the answer was "affectionately scathing": «If I, someone leading the

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[4] *Perché questa rivista / Journal mission* (2010), «IL CAPITALE CULTURALE. *Studies on the Value of Cultural Heritage*», n. 1, p. 7, <http://dx.doi.org/10.13138/2039-2362/33>.

[5] Berg M., Seeber B.K. (2016), *The Slow Professor. Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p. x.

fight against terrorism and holder of two university degrees, find it hard to understand, who exactly are you writing for?». As Dalla Chiesa concludes, it was the mother of all lessons[6].

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[6] Dalla Chiesa N. (2018), *Per fortuna faccio il prof*, Firenze-Milano: Giunti-Bompiani, p. 73 (own translation).