



# PROCEEDINGS OF PRAGMATIC CONSTRUCTIVISM

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## Getting out of mechanical management: lessons from Chinese thought

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### Abstract

Most management models draw on a mechanical view of organizational action, in which outcomes are given a prominent role, at the detriment of persons. These are generally viewed as instruments serving action and its objectives. As a result work is increasingly losing sense for a number of employees whatever their hierarchical position. Ill-being at work is developing to the extent that managing so-called 'psychosocial risks' has become a new branch of human resource management. Simultaneously meaninglessness hinders creativity at work and beyond, performance. Mechanical management is thus detrimental to both individuals and organizations – hence there is an urgent need to address this question.

The objective of this paper is to explore new ways of thinking by which management could avoid the ineluctable consequences of mechanical management. This is an analytical paper which draws upon a variety of contributions in management, psychology and philosophy. In the first Part I will recall the process through which mechanical management is detrimental to both organizational members and organizations, as well as present some proposals by work psychologists to loosen the knot by which mechanical management, which is supposed to be beneficial to organizations and individuals, is actually detrimental to them. Although psychologists open up fertile paths to renew management, their responses only address some aspects of the problem and may fail to change organizational practices in depth. I believe management needs to be questioned both more globally and more deeply.

To this end, I will turn out to philosophy to show, in the second Part, that mechanical management is a direct expression of Ancient Greece thought, which can be considered as the matrix of conceptions of action, world and time that have inspired all Western thoughts and realizations since then – and in particular, management. To break with mechanical management, Part Three will then offer views on Chinese thought - which provides radically different perspectives on action, time and the world and thus can open up innovative paths for thinking new forms of management. The conclusion will discuss the contribution, limits and academic implications of this analysis.

**Keywords:** Management models; mechanical management; Western thought; Chinese thought.

## Getting out of mechanical management: Lessons from Chinese thought

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2<sup>nd</sup> Conference, Actor-Reality  
Perspective in a Global Economy  
Pisa, October 2012

- Mechanical management increasingly produces ill-being at work > detrimental to persons (and organizations)
  - Private and public sectors
  - Highly time to develop non-mechanical perspectives
- ARP: more a world view than a theoretical framework
- Analytical paper

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- Structure
  1. Mechanical management: why it is detrimental and some (marginal) proposals
  2. Mechanical management: a direct expression of Ancient Greece thought
  3. Chinese thought and alternative perspectives for management
- François Jullien's work – French philosopher and sinologist
  - Chinese thought enables us to think what is « unthought » in the West (Greek inspired)
  - Early texts and language (how language frames thought)

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## « Performance measurement fever » and its consequences

- Cybernetics > planning and control
  - All performance dimensions measured
  - Shorter time periods
- Performance-based rewards
- Work prescriptions
  - Increasing gap between actual work and prescription...
  - ... and pressure on conflicting objectives (ex personalized service and standardisation)
  - Loss of sense at and of work
- Ill-being at work > « psychosocial risks » as a new branch of HRM
- Organisations' performance and development at stake

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## Mechanical management and its blind points

- Mechanical management does not address
  - Complexity and paradoxes, and particularly
  - Psychological complexity
- Mechanical management
  - Reifies persons and the social world
  - Outcome (production) first, persons as means (human « resources »)
  - Creates complexity (psychosocial risks)
  - Puts executives' responsibility at stake – ethically, legally, economically
- All sectors – business, health, police, education, research

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## Solutions from (French) work psychology

- Work: prescribed, actual, realized (outcome), experienced
- Outcome cannot be delivered without getting beyond prescription > personal creativity
  - « One's own work » > source of well-being and health
- There is a (very unfair) gap between actual and realized work
  - Activity is highly constrained by others' activities (Clot)
  - « It is impossible to evaluate [actual] work objectively » (Dejours)
- Work evaluation
  - Judgment of beauty (peers) and judgment of utility (not performance – hierarchy or customers) (Dejours)
- Spaces/moments for peers' debate about work (Clot)
  - Maintains occupational communities > sense at work
  - Management should not attempt to collect « best practices »



Partial

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## Management or the embodiment of Greek (Western) thought

1. Views regarding action
  - Action as an expression of the human will
  - Model (articulating ends and means) > implementation
  - Interest for causality
  - Context always second
  - Heroes as super(wo)men
2. Views regarding the world
  - Visible states
  - Divided into elements
  - (Dual) oppositions
  - Man facing (against) environment
3. Views on time
  - Closed and divided

Objectives, strategies,  
performance indicators  
Control and « monitoring »  
Causal models of  
performance and other  
« models »  
Past, present, future  
Short-term focus and urgency  
One best way > contingency  
« Actors » and leaders  
Change problematic

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## Chinese thought

1. Views regarding action
  - Ideal action: « relying on [*accompagner*] the propensity of things », making profit of the « potential of the situation », « wei wu wei » (action through non-action)
  - Theory and practice unseparated
  - Context is always FIRST
  - No interest for causality
  - Heroes are ordinary persons who become heroic « by accident »
2. Views regarding the world
  - Dynamics and flows, not states > invisible
  - Holistic view and relations of complementarity and balance (yin-yang)
  - Man *in* (with) environment
3. Views on time
  - Open, undivided and a source of opportunities
  - Change is the natural order of things

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## Discussion

- This philosophical detour might explain the irresistible success of managerialism (« management ideology », de Gauléjac)
- Analysis consistent with scarce research on management in China and Far East countries under cultural Chinese influence – using either economic or socio-cultural explanations
  - Modes of control rely much more on socialisation, guanxi, values and ethical behaviour than on results control (Laulusa)
  - Cost accounting in China: no interest for causal factors influencing indirect costs and poor interest for past performance as a source of learning for future (Ding, Malleret and Nørreklit)

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## Perspectives for non-mechanical management

- Pay attention to (mostly invisible) dynamics
  - Variation rates are not enough
- Stop measuring everything
- Give up « excellence » for « doing one's best »
- Think performance obliquely
  - Allow time and gratuity
- Place people first, outcome second
- Think AND instead of OR – should enable considering
  - Paradoxes, ambivalence and unconscious at work
  - « Psychological rationality » (Bourguignon and Jenkins)
  - AND social structures and systems
- Value ordinary heroes and stop glorifying leaders
- **MANAGE COMPLEXITY and RESTORE WELL-BEING AT WORK**

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## Limitations and conclusion

- Decontextualized (very Greek-style) analysis
- We will never « think Chinese » but we can use Chinese thought to revivify our approaches to management
- **Reflexivity**
- ARP: diverge from theoretical framework (actor-reality)
- How far are proposals above realistic?
  - Misunderstanding of China and stereotypes
  - Common points between Japan and Germany (Albert)
- What about society?
  - To what extent can we disentangle thought and society?
- Further research needed regarding hybridization

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