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HAUTE COUTURE OR PRET-A-PORTER:
CREATING AND DIFFUSING MANAGEMENT
PRACTICES THROUGH THE POPULAR PRESS

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Abstract

Management fads are increasingly a hot topic within Organization Theory. Recent articles have described the production process of fads, the role of “ideological” waves in explaining their emergence, and the development of management rhetoric supporting the fads. Despite this growing interest, management fads are seen as an outcome of the action of Universities, business schools, and consulting firms in producing formal management knowledge; the role of the popular press, meanwhile, remains largely unexplored.

Our paper aims to fill this gap by exploring the role of the popular press in producing and legitimating management fads. We argue that the popular press is a primary factor in diffusing and legitimating management fads. The popular press also represents a new laboratory for the construction of management practices. Being deeply rooted in the social context, magazines and newspapers link management practices with social acceptance, coupling management and society at large.

We use both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to analyze the data. The data set consists of a collection of articles on Human Resource Management published during the last decade in leading newspapers and magazines in Italy. We suggest that the dynamics of the diffusion and popularization of management practices in Italy over the last decade represents a fair example of the processes that have taken place throughout the Western world.

For the last twenty years, the popular media (periodicals, newspapers and magazines) have at different times compared top managers to scientific organizers, pragmatic decision-makers, smart strategists and skilful craftsmen. Likewise, the popular media have legitimated management practices ranging from scientific models to practical rules of thumb. There has been a popularization of business topics in all Western countries, expanding the role of the popular media. From being mere legitimators of management practices, they are

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becoming producers of management practices and theories. As a consequence, the production of management theories is slowly but significantly moving away from the ivory tower of Academia to enter the world of mass consumption through the doors opened by the popular media. This paper tries to capture the main conceptual elements of this move, which, we argue, is transforming management practices and theories from sophisticated, tailor-made haute couture to easily available, ready-made prêt-à-porter.

The popularization of business topics is something that has drawn scholarly attention since the 1980s. Some have focused on defining the patterns of influence between academics and practitioners over time (Barley et al., 1988; Barley and Kunda, 1992). Management books and academic journals have been analyzed to expose the language and rhetoric of management theories (Astley and Zammuto, 1992; Gill and Whittle, 1993; Huczynski, 1993) and best practices such as Lean Production (Benders and van Bijsterveld, 1997), Business Process Re-engineering (Fincham, 1995), and Managerial Excellence (Furusten, 1995). Others have dealt with the diffusion of management fads, investigating the legitimating role of rationality and innovativeness (Abrahamson, 1996) and their standardizing effects (Walgenbach, 1997; Sahlin-Andersson, 1997). It has also been suggested that the overall impact of management fads on business practices has led to the “trivialization” of management (*Wall Street Journal*, 1993; Hilmer and Donaldson, 1996).

Although the existing literature has discussed the entire process of dissemination of management theories and practices, it has focused mainly on academic and practitioner-oriented publications. The role of the popular press still needs investigation, since researchers have described the academic press as the main producer of scientific models, while the popular press has been depicted in the role of diffuser and institutionalizer (Abrahamson, 1996). We argue that the popular press not only gives social legitimacy to management theories and practices, but also plays a role in the production of management fads. In other words, while the academic press diffuses management theories and practices as “haute couture”, the popular press works the “prêt-à-porter” side.

The task of defining the role of the mass media (radio and television broadcasting, cinema, press and, recently, the Internet) in institutionalizing social ideas has been on Sociology’s research agenda since the beginning of this century. The role of the press in the diffusion and institutionalization of social ideas has received attention from the fields of Political Science and Political Sociology (Habermas, 1975; Fine, 1996; Diani, 1996). There have been studies, for instance, of the role the popular press, particularly newspapers and magazines, plays in the construction of political consent and the shaping of the political agenda, by setting the priorities and proposing new topics of interest. Newspapers and magazines have also been seen as amplifiers of the symbolic features of political action, legitimating—or delegitimizing—political choices and decision makers. Moreover, political discourse has been greatly affected by mass media rhetoric in that it has to a certain extent been “trivialized” (Enzensberger, 1994).

The conclusions reached in the political domain can, in some aspects, be applied to management ideas. The popular press and management action appear tightly coupled from at least three perspectives. First, as Eccles and Nohria (1992) point out, the popular press plays a major role in setting the pragmatics of managerial discourse, and shaping the rhetoric for the diffusion of management practices. It is also the main arena where management narratives are built and ideological statements are diffused to make management theories and practices taken-for-granted (Czarniawska-Joerges and Joerges, 1989; Czarniawska, 1997).

Second, the popular press popularizes management discourse by legitimating members of the management community as experts (Brint, 1994) on both economic and day-to-day matters. For instance, in recent years business people in the US and Europe have influenced political debate on non-economic topics (e.g. foreign affairs and education) and have also championed new vogues in clothing and leisure, competing with actors and sportspeople in this role. The Italian case is particularly spectacular: a leading entrepreneur, Silvio Berlusconi, became Prime Minister seven months after his movement entered the political arena.

Third, newspapers and magazines may also perform an important function in the management of organizations in crisis. Studies have been made of the way top managers use the press to strengthen their organization's identity both internally (Chen and Meindl, 1991; Elsbach, 1994) and externally (Pauchant and Mitroff, 1992; Lahusen, 1996), in an attempt to avoid the negative consequences of poor performance.

Although the popular press (newspapers and magazines) has such a multifaceted impact on managerial action, its role in creating and diffusing management theories and practices has received relatively little attention. The creation and diffusion of management theories and practices is seen as located primarily within academic institutions and business schools (Pfeffer, 1997) working as haute couture ateliers for the business community.

Assuming the latest view, we aim to define the role of the popular press in the creation and institutionalization of management theories and practices. We shall describe a process in which academic institutions and the popular media concur in creating and institutionalizing management theories and practices, following two different patterns of interaction with the business community. We also hope to contribute to research into the factors that explain the institutionalization and de-institutionalization of management theories and practices.

Our paper is structured in four sections. First, we conceptualize the process whereby management theories and practices are created, combining contributions from the Sociology of Culture and the New Institutional School of organization theory. In the second part, we address the issue of the legitimation of management theories and practices and the role of newspapers and magazines, using an Institutional approach. Third, with reference to the Italian case, we hypothesize that: 1) the popular press concurs in creating management theories and practices, and 2) the diffusion of management theories and practices can also be partly explained by the endorsement of newspapers and magazines. Finally, we summarize our findings and conceptualizations.

The creation and diffusion of management theories and practices: A sociology of culture perspective

The cultural production of social and scientific ideas has been widely studied by Sociology (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Mukerji and Schudson, 1982; Schudson, 1989; Barthes, 1983; Crane, 1992) and the Philosophy of Science (Feyerabend, 1996; Kuhn, 1970). These studies have outlined two extremes: an "aesthetic" pattern of creation for "soft" social ideas and a "rational" pattern for "hard" scientific ideas. The former uses art, craft and even magic to explain the emergence of new ideas (Feyerabend, 1996; Guillet de Monthoux, 1997). The latter refers to the rational toolkit of hypothesis tests assuring incremental development and paradigm stability. Between the two extremes we find the grey area where Academia, interest lobbies and political elites play their role.

In spite of their presumed “scientization”, management theories and practices do not follow a path of incremental development but go through cycles of creation and diffusion enhanced by social conformity and even by episodes of mass hysteria (Nohria and Berkley, 1994). Consequently, management theories and practices are produced, legitimated, diffused, and discarded within a complex process in which counteracting and ambiguous rules coexist. Building on the Sociology of Culture, we propose a model that describes the role of the actors involved as shaping each phase of the cultural process, determining the vehicles of diffusion, the source of legitimacy, and the rise of new ideas. From this point of view, the creation process is primarily one of legitimacy-building, presided by the actors involved, rather than a selection process guided by rationality and innovativeness. Depending on the channel that plays the main role in diffusion, the timing and depth of legitimation may vary; likewise, different theories and practices may have different channels of diffusion, depending on their contents (Mazza, 1997).

Using the analogy of the habitualization-typification-objectivation process defined by Berger and Luckmann (1967), we conceptualize the creation and diffusion process of management theories and practices as consisting of three phases: 1) production, 2) diffusion, 3) legitimation. Management education institutions (Universities and business schools), consulting firms, and the business and popular press are the main actors in this process.

In the production phase, academic institutions, business schools, and consulting firms make sense of existing management theories and day-to-day experiences. They elaborate and codify formal managerial knowledge following the rules of production of academic knowledge (Furner and Supple, 1990). The management theories thus created are not necessarily new; they are often old theories “recycled”, updated and put in a new context. In this phase, scientific knowledge on management practices is also translated into a quasi-technical, more “relaxed” language to be diffused to practitioners as informed opinion.

In the diffusion phase, managerial knowledge is spread by management education institutions. In their programs, these institutions combine scientific knowledge on management with practical knowledge and rules of thumb, employing a less technical language. In this way, management education institutions provide management theories with both the reputation of full-fledged, scientifically validated theories and the relevance of down-to-earth recommendations. In this phase, managerial knowledge begins to spill out of the business community, partly because of the social legitimacy of some of the institutions providing management education, and partly because of the interactions between those institutions and the local context.

In the legitimation phase, management theories become fully diffused outside the business community. Technical arguments are replaced by “ideological” statements grounded in entrepreneurial success stories and managerial legends. Management theories and practices may turn into fads on being endorsed by the popular media, which provide them with: 1) ideological statements, 2) rhetoric based on socially accepted symbols, and 3) visibility in the wider social context. As a result of being endorsed by the non-technical mass media, management theories and practices become taken-for-granted, their contents become landmarks for imitation. In a word, they become socially institutionalized. At this final stage, as a consequence of their legitimation, management theories reach large numbers of decision makers as guaranteed solutions. As gatekeepers of social legitimacy, the popular media assure readers that a particular management solution is most likely to succeed.

In many cases, legitimated management theories and practices are codified for replication and application. This turns them into “short-term” standards, supported by dedicated organizations and diffused by *ad hoc* publications and textbooks (Walgenbach, 1997). However, standardization is not always the final outcome of the legitimation of management theories and practices. Many are quickly discarded and delegitimated, while others become by-products for future academic “recycling”.

A dynamic view of this three-stage model hints at the description of the interactions between the actors within and across each stage. First, the importance of the popular media in legitimating management theories and practices affects the production stage of the process by shaping the topics treated by academic journals (Barley et al., 1988). Newspapers and magazines not only work together with academic institutions in defining the state of the art of management theories, but also set the agenda for academic institutions. The recent anniversary issue of the *Harvard Business Review* provides a convenient map for reconstructing these interactions by historically locating the diffusion of management theories and practices, influential academic articles and books, and business events supposedly reported also by the popular media.

Second, the popular press plays an important role in linking the business community to emerging management theories and practices. In some local contexts characterized by a crisis among traditional educational institutions and the growing influence of the mass media on socio-economic issues—e.g. in Mediterranean countries such as Italy and Spain—newspapers and magazines have begun to frame and recycle theories on their own account, taking advantage of their position as an interface between academia and the “end-users”. Newspapers and magazines have thus begun to compete with other institutions in the creation of management theories and practices. These theories’ lack of academic and scientific status is, in this case, replaced by the endorsement of socially legitimated actors such as *maîtres à penser*, politicians, successful entrepreneurs, etc. We contend that this dynamic is spreading in the European context, owing to the growing power of the popular media to shape managerial and political language and discourse.

The next section discusses whether the dynamic described above is relevant for the development of organization theory, and whether or not the topic of the role of the popular media in explaining the creation and diffusion of management theory and practice has a relevant role to play in this field.

There is no doubt that the phenomenon of the rapid expansion of business education, both formal (business schools) and informal (popular business media such as weekly magazines or specialized sections in newspapers), merits attention (for data on its enormous growth, see Nohria and Berkley, 1994). While the exact mechanisms through which the business education industry influences actual managerial decisions, and the extent to which it does so, are still largely unknown, it can be assumed that they too deserve academic scrutiny.

Besides this factual interest, we could ponder whether the conceptualization of the way management theories and practices are created and diffused has any relevance for the field of organization theory. The answer we give is affirmative. It is relevant in two respects. First, for the understanding of decision-making and managerial action. Second, because it could be an important element in the debate on the best economic and social frameworks from which to approach organizational phenomena. We shall explore these two reasons in inverse order, adopting the New Institutional School perspective on organizational studies (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Powell and DiMaggio, 1991).

The theoretical development of organization theory during the last decade can be interpreted as a reaction against a dominance-seeking economic understanding of organizations and management; a reaction, in sum, against the economic theory of the firm. This reaction has been specially urgent in recent years, when transaction-cost and agency theories enjoyed wide acceptance, not only in academic circles but also as the “espoused theory” of practitioners (Davies et al., 1994). Approaches such as the New Institutional School, Population Ecology, Network Theory, etc., have provided a wealth of conceptual variables and dynamics that are not premised on a purely instrumental, economic and calculative rationality and that have been useful in explaining a range of economic institutions, from markets to hierarchies. The main tenet of these sociological approaches is that economic variables are not the only ones, nor even perhaps the most important ones, for explaining economic and organizational phenomena.

Among the sociological schools of organization theory that have supported the theory of the social embeddedness of economic action (Granovetter, 1985), the New Institutional School has perhaps been one of the most successful. It has refined concepts such as isomorphism, mimetism, legitimacy, symbolic action, diffusion, organizational knowledge, taken-for-grantedness, and has demonstrated their influence on organizational behavior and processes. Besides this role in interdisciplinary disputes, the single most important contribution of the “aggiornamento” of the Institutional tradition has been the study of the concrete mechanisms through which isomorphism takes place. Meyer and Rowan (1977) pointed out that formal systems of co-ordination and control are adopted not so much because of the predictability and accountability they supposedly bring about, but because of the social legitimacy they provide to the organization. By exhibiting these systems, organizations show their conformity with prevailing academic theories and hegemonic social ideologies and values that justify the behavior of organizations.

In a different vein, Zucker (1977) explored the micro mechanisms by which subjective conceptions about behavior in organizations, meanings individually felt, and the entire bundle of thoughts and feelings that the Old Institutionalists called “values” become taken for granted, indisputable social facts, culturally persistent: in sum, institutionalized. As Alvarez (1997a) points out, Zucker’s was, among other initiatives, the beginning of the groundwork that made informal and tacit business knowledge an important management topic in the mid-nineties in both theoretical and applied domains (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1994).

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argued the importance of processes of rationalization of organizations, of their accommodation to legally and socially prevailing views on what forms or structures and systems to adopt. The authors maintained that these dynamics, propelled by the need to deal with uncertainty and constraint in both operative and value domains (that is, including educational institutions as well as the media), are conducive to a convergence of managerial practices. This would explain why organizations are so homogeneous, isomorphic, and convergent independently of their economic performance.

After these landmark pieces, most of the papers belonging to the New Institutional School published in influential journals in the US (Tolbert and Zucker, 1983; Tolbert, 1985; Zucker, 1987; Meyer et al., 1987; Powell, 1988; Dobbin et al., 1988; Covaleski and Dirsmith, 1988; Westphal et al., 1997) studied the diffusion and adoption of homogeneous organizational structures (for instance, certain departments) and practices (for instance, budgetary procedures and TQM) under environmental pressures.

The New Institutional School's concern with diffusion was based on the following strategy: its main theoretical tenet—that organizations do not act only on instrumental-rational motives, but also in order to comply with prevailing socially based or institutional field-based norms of organizational behavior—could be proven if research could show that “central,” powerful, legitimated and legitimating organizations put pressure on more “peripheral,” less powerful, legitimation-hungry organizations to adopt a particular formal hierarchy or system, at least in part because of the legitimacy of the “central” organization and not only because of the technical effectiveness (performance) of these hierarchies or systems. In this way, the organizational strategies would be shown to be tools for complying with the social context rather than rational choices between economic alternatives.

From the acknowledgment of the role of the social context in organizational choices, the New Institutional School derived a sophisticated and detailed map of decision-making tactics to cope with the isomorphic pressure arising from the external environment (Levitt and Nass, 1989; Goodstein, 1994; Dazin, 1997). More interesting for our purposes is mimetic isomorphism, which takes place when, due to technological complexity and goal ambiguity, organizations imitate the behavior of other organizations perceived as being successful or legitimate (Haveman, 1993). The issue of legitimation, therefore, has also received special attention (Deephouse, 1996; Mazza, 1998 forthcoming).

These works have opened the way to the acknowledgment of the important role played by informal business education and popular business media, and of some of their mechanisms for social circulation—such as fads and fashions—in the diffusion and legitimation of isomorphic organizational knowledge, standards and values, and in the convergence of organizational practices. It was through this line of research that these topics—which is to say, the “Sociology of Business Knowledge”—became relevant to the New Institutional School and, through it, to organization theory (for a more detailed account, see Alvarez 1997b).

The importance of such mechanisms derives not only from their “macro” sociological dimensions, but also from their role in “micro” decision-making and managerial action at the organizational level. Managerial action has often been represented as a simultaneous combination of different types of knowledge acquired from different channels (Schon, 1983). These types of knowledge range from assumptions about human behavior that operate as deeply embedded habits, originating from a variety of not necessarily academic sources such as popular business media, and even from sources that are not of a management or economic kind (Alvarez and Merchán, 1992); to informal social knowledge based on social capital; to formal administrative knowledge, such as personnel management techniques of the kind taught, for instance, at business schools. Frequently, each of these different categories of knowledge has its own channel of production, propagation, reception, and consumption, spreading and gaining acceptance independently.

They sometimes get diffused and institutionalized together, producing loosely coupled “packages” filled with heterogeneous ingredients that sometimes coalesce into what could be called “movements.” The New Entrepreneurship movement in the 1980s (Alvarez, 1996), the de-conglomeration wave (Davies et al., 1992), and the corporate merger trend (Brewster and Allan, 1996) are examples of this. Often, these waves of popularization of business knowledge have a shorter time-span but a more intense diffusion, as is the case with fads and fashions. Sometimes, the packages were made up of conceptually more closely aligned sets of ideas, amounting to “models” of management (Guillén, 1994). In other cases, they were crystallized into the standardizing wave within management knowledge (Furusten, 1997).

Why is it that the popular media and the management theories and practices they create and diffuse are getting so important in decision making and managerial action? Why are managers relying more and more on this non-traditional source of management knowledge, available in non-scholarly social structures, instead of using predominantly formal management knowledge?

In 1954 Roethlisberger pointed to uncertainty, ambiguity and imperfection as the most characteristic features of managerial tasks, as James March was to confirm years later. Uncertainty with regard to the data provided by the environment, always insufficient to forecast the future with accuracy. Ambiguity, because even the data available have equivocal meanings. Imperfection, to the extent that the real impact of managers' own actions on the environment cannot easily be fathomed either—since organizational actions are often the result of multiple, often redundant causalities.

The uncertainty, ambiguity, and imperfection that characterize managerial tasks push managers to seek clues for action in the social structure, which provides them with different types of knowledge, both formal and informal, with different degrees of legitimacy (Hannaway, 1989). Being a manager depends not on formal knowledge accreditation, but on personal and social wisdom, in which “informal” knowledge plays a part. Therefore, managerial action tends to become the realm of politics and tactics, where managers gain consent through socially legitimated courses of action rather than self-fulfilling, instrumental, economic rationality (Fligstein, 1997).

In sum, the relevance of the topic of the popular media lies not only in its contribution to the study of the diffusion of business knowledge by the Sociology of Culture and the New Institutional School of organization theory. It also—maybe primarily—comes from the influence of the popular media at the heart of managerial decision-making, specially at times when successive waves of economic and organizational crises and bonanzas have delegitimated the role of formal knowledge in management practices, and managers start looking outside academia for legitimated sources of theories on which to base and justify their actions.

Sources of legitimacy of management theories and practices

As outlined in the preceding paragraphs, the changing context of managerial action is forcing managers to look to non-traditional sources of legitimacy for management theories and practices. This consideration makes the concept of legitimacy the interpretive key-point for our analysis. As a typical interdisciplinary concept, legitimacy is largely controversial. Political Science (March and Olsen, 1989; Lipset, 1994), Sociology (Weber, 1922; Bell, 1977; Della Fave, 1986), and Organization Theory (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Hannan and Carroll, 1992) have provided contrasting perspectives. Some scholars have linked legitimation to the rightful possession of power (Berger, 1981); others, to social acceptance, conformity, and tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). Hybels (1992) has said it is a “profoundly malleable tool” whose “inherent vagueness” has allowed scholars to give meaningful explanations when more precise tools failed. In other words, legitimation appears as a toolbox where any researcher can find the definition that best suits his or her purposes (Mazza, 1998 forthcoming).

In fact, each discipline has developed its own language for defining the production and diffusion of legitimacy. These languages are often so different that even theoretically

related approaches cannot speak to each other. The theoretical debate thus appears as “subtly but profoundly balkanized”, and the contrasting views end up “fragmenting scholarly discourse and disrupting the flow of information from theorists to practitioners” (Suchman, 1995).

Within Organization Theory, there emerges a duality implicit in the concept of legitimation. Legitimation is both an outcome of the process of institutionalization (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Jepperson, 1991) and the cultural process that leads to institutionalization (Meyer and Scott, 1983; Scott and Christensen, 1995). As an outcome, legitimation is a property of organizations that reduces competitive pressures, provides additional resources for facing challenges, and increases the chances of survival (Hannan and Freeman, 1989; Tucker et al., 1990).

As a cultural institutionalizing process, legitimation refers to “the degree of cultural support for an organization—the extent to which the array of established cultural accounts provide explanations for its existence” (Meyer and Scott, 1983: 201). Cultural support is based on cognitive coherence with the socially shared worldview. From this perspective, legitimation is also thought of as a “retrospective process” (Staw, 1980), providing management with norms and symbols for ex-post rationalizations of their actions.

Although legitimacy appears to stay on the top of a Tower of Babel of definitions and “distinguo”, identifying the sources of legitimation is a less complicated task. Legitimacy is embedded in a system of norms defined by key institutions in the social context. Institutional rules, rather than values or ethical dictates, frame the field of legitimated action (Thomas et al., 1986). Action is not legitimated by being grounded in abstract societal desiderata or in the supposed intentions of socialized members. Rather, it is legitimated by being grounded in specific rules. What are the specific rules of legitimation at the wider society level?

The New Institutional School has provided a first answer centered on the concept of conformity. Legitimacy is gained by displaying conformity to the external environment, following technical procedures, legal rules, political correctness, best practices, etc. Conformity also provides rational accounts of failures: plans relying on institutionalized techniques are more likely to be perceived as rational and appropriate, even in the face of bad performance.

A second source of legitimation proposed by sociologists and organization theorists is power. Building on Weber (1922), legitimation is seen as tightly coupled with power, being an attribute and an outcome of institutionalized power. In management, power refers to both institutional relations and economic performance. Actions purporting one or both of these factors gain legitimation.

A third source of legitimation discussed by sociologists of culture and organization theorists is social support. Wide social support and consent to a course of action is created by the endorsement of powerful collective actors. They, and society as a whole, define the rules for the evaluation of organizational actions.

These three sources refer to the dynamic of legitimation at a social level. They are also conceptually linked with the three dimensions of organizations: practical (adoption of practices), political (power construction), and symbolic. We will try now to zero in on the legitimation of management theories and practices. Recent works on this topic (Barley and

Kunda, 1992; Abrahamson, 1996) link the legitimation of management theories and practices to the success of scholarly research in providing a “veneer” of rationality.

Following on from the discussion above, we would like to propose three additional categories of sources of legitimation of management theories and practices: 1) symbolic conformity, 2) successful implementations, and 3) endorsement by powerful social actors.

First is symbolic conformity. Management theories and practices are legitimated when they are adopted by many business firms, or when newspapers and magazines report their adoption. So, firms tend to follow them to master the state of the art in management with a kind of bandwagon effect. As conformity may be both substantive and symbolic, it is worth emphasizing how business firms primarily adopt practices through symbols and myths. Then, they tend to customize management practices according to their own internal procedures and norms. In this way, the practices they implement often have only the label in common with the original conceptualizations. The use of intrinsically ambiguous labels such as Lean Production, Business Process Re-engineering, or Total Quality Management leaves more room for symbolic conformity (Benders and van Bijsterveld, 1997; Walgenbach, 1997).

The successful implementation of management practices—in terms of spectacular effects on performance—is our second additional source of legitimation. Top management is often guided in their strategic decision making by the “legends” of successful innovations, often reported by newspapers and magazines as the “new frontier” of management or “star” cases. The dramatization of such business successes also creates a powerful narrative for managerial action, now lining the shelves of libraries in the form of books by “gurus” and the autobiographies of top managers (Huczynski, 1993).

Endorsement by powerful actors provides management theories and practices with a third source of legitimacy and taken-for-grantedness. The basic reasoning is that organizational leaders in their field establish the practices that other organizations should follow or imitate to show their alignment. This is the mechanism DiMaggio and Powell (1983) labelled “mimetic isomorphism”. In other words, if powerful actors invest in a practice, the expectation is that it should provide a positive return in economic terms or in social acceptance.

In highly industrialized countries, the most powerful actors are typically of three types: a) Fortune 500 firms; b) organizations with institutional relations with the State or management education centres; c) young and profitable firms with a track record of successful innovations. Fortune 500 firms provide legitimation because of their traditional top-notch status. Organizations with institutional relations provide legitimation by adopting new practices in advance. Their institutional linkages uncouple these organizations from the commitment to short-term performance, so they can assume the risks of trying to be innovators. Through these linkages, these organizations are also well embedded within the larger social context, so their practices implicitly have a wider social acceptance. Young and profitable innovators provide legitimation because they play the role of pioneers in the field. They adopt practices in advance, legitimating other organizations interested in innovative management to adopt them.

In the next chapter, we shall operationalize these sources of legitimation and the role of the actors involved in the process by analyzing the adoption of theories and practices in Human Resource Management in the last decade. We have chosen Human Resource Management because of its implicit non-economic nature and because it has represented an

open label, comprising theories and practices that have succeeded in different business contexts from Japan to Southern Europe.

Data collection and analysis

Building on the above theoretical debate, we aim to describe how the popular press concurs with other educational and business institutions in creating and diffusing management theories and practices. We also aim to identify the legitimation sources of management theories and practices, and to confirm that they actually operate.

Among the wide range of management theories and practices that have become fashionable in recent years, we have focused on one: Human Resource Management. It shows, first, a well grounded theoretical tradition, and second, wide recognition by both the academic and popular press. Since the early eighties, owing to the pressures to use all possible competitive capabilities, Human Resource Management has become an increasingly important topic. Recently, interest in it has heightened due to the need to manage the impact on personnel of the widespread restructuring of firms and similar policies that have been implemented in the nineties (Pfeffer, 1992).

We have also, in this first attempt at an empirical study of this issue, limited ourselves to one country in order to fix the context of analysis and restrict the impact of social, political and cultural variance. We selected Italy for three reasons. First, popular press coverage of business issues has grown spectacularly in the last fifteen years, and has been credited with promoting the modernization and internationalization of Italian capitalism. Second, the deeply traditional confrontation between the union movement, anchored in leftist ideologies, and business associations has since the early eighties placed Human Resource Management at the center of critical displacements in social practices. The globalization of the economy has facilitated changes in legal rules, increased the legitimation of flexibility in both external and internal labor markets, and encouraged the use of non-monetary incentives. Third, since Italy belongs in the group of advanced economies—with the peculiar role played by the strongest Communist party in Western Europe, now a Social Democratic party leading the governing coalition—it offers an opportunity to observe the implementation of management theories and practices in an affluent economy in which economic issues are intertwined with political debate, in a rapidly evolving context. Our analysis covers the nine-year period from 1988 to 1996. This allows us to analyze theories and practices in a period when the field of Human Resource Management, independently of its increasing popularity, has not, we believe, experienced major theoretical shifts.

The data have been collected from articles on Human Resource Management in two periodicals selected on the basis of their circulation. First, *Il Sole-24 Ore*, the leading economic and business newspaper in Italy (in terms of circulation) and the fourth largest daily (excluding sports newspapers). Owing to its professional focus, it is often bought as a second newspaper, along with a general newspaper such as *Il Corriere della Sera*, our second source of data. *Il Corriere* is one of the oldest newspapers in the country and has for a long time been the leader in circulation. It is an authoritative source of opinion on politics and economics, partly thanks to the contributions of prestigious journalists. Both these newspapers are published in Milan and both have a liberal ideological orientation. By collecting articles from these two sources, our aim has been to cover both specialized and general sources in the popular press.

The articles were selected by searching for “Human Resource Management” in the two newspapers’ CD-ROM databases. This search enabled us to extract all the articles that mention the keywords, either in the title or in the body of the text. As a second step, we analyzed the selected articles to check whether Human Resource Management was indeed a significant issue. Some articles were discarded; only those that dealt mainly with the topic in question were retained. The retained articles were analyzed through content analysis. This interpretative methodology focuses on the links between the words in a text, on the assumption that it is possible to interpret a written text by reconstructing its narrative structure. We also tried to take account of time by looking at temporal patterns in the frequency distribution of articles.

In order to describe the role of the popular media and the referred legitimacy sources, we focused on the following two issues:

- a) the number of articles mentioning Human Resource Management over time,
- b) the causal relations cited in the texts between Human Resource Management practices and organizational performance.

First, we checked (using ABI Inform) the evolution of the literature on the topic, by looking at the frequency of articles on Human Resource Management in leading academic journals (*Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Academy of Management Review*, and *Strategic Management Journal*), as well as in more practitioner-oriented outlets (*Harvard Business Review* and *Academy of Management Executive*). While these journals are not widely read in Italian business circles, they have a growing influence on local academic debate and on the education of young researchers and assistant professors.

Table 1

Year	Number of Articles
1988	4
1989	3
1990	1
1991	2
1992	5
1993	9
1994	2
1995	4
1996	10
	40

The frequency and number of articles show that Human Resource Management is a more “mature”, less “visible” topic from an academic viewpoint. Human Resource Management practices seem to have already received attention in US publications.

Second, we selected all the pieces that had Human Resource Management as their major topic in *Il Sole-24 Ore* and *Il Corriere della Sera*.

Table 2

Year	Il Sole 24 Ore	Il Corriere della Sera
1988	16	1
1989	20	
1990	39	2
1991	36	4
1992	43	3
1993	42	
1994	41	1
1995	31	
1996	34	
	302	11

It is interesting to note the growth in the number of articles on Human Resource Management in the period up until 1994, as it occurs when the concern for corruption was at its most intense and control of unethical behavior was a major topic in large organizations. Another interesting point is that when, after 1992, *Il Corriere della Sera* carried fewer pieces on Human Resource Management practices, the number of pieces on business ethics increased, thus paralleling the wider debate on corruption and the “mani pulite” investigations.

The total number of pieces on Human Resource Management seems to point to two possible dynamics. First, it confirms that the topic of Human Resource Management has been widely covered in the Italian popular press. It appears at least 31 times a year between 1990 and 1996, an average of twice per month, and in only two newspapers. The selected US journals, in contrast, report only 33 articles over this entire period. The increase in the number of pieces in the academic media (Table 1) in the last two years, 1995 and 1996, leads us to suspect a revitalization of the topic (a new wave, or a recycling of old wine into new bottles?). From these data we suggest that in the Italian context Human Resource Management practices are promoted and legitimated mainly by the popular press, while the scientific community plays a minor role. Moreover, the authors of the pieces in the popular press are not linked to the academic community; they are journalists either in touch with firms’ Public Relations Departments or reporting interviews with CEOs and entrepreneurs.

Second, the decrease in the number of articles in the popular press in the last two years could be interpreted as a sign of a decline of interest in Human Resource Management practices. Like fads, the interest in Human Resource Management practices appears to be short-lived, and the attention in practice could be considered as linked with popular press coverage. New topics (in this particular case, one of the most important is business ethics) surface regularly, rapidly “ageing” what was, not long ago, novel and fashionable. In the case of Human Resource Management we could predict that it will continue to decrease, unless the new interest manifested in the academic press turns it into an unusually long-lasting popular topic.

The last step in our data analysis is to look at the legitimation sources of the implementation of Human Resource Management practices. We identify a particular source of legitimation when a practice that is being diffused is presented by the popular press as having an explicit positive effect on the accomplishment of particular business objectives. These objectives are the legitimation sources, for their accomplishment is the primary

rationale in the adoption of practices. From our analysis of the articles in the sample, we drew the following map of sources of legitimation:

conformity to corporate values
large firms' adoption
performance

A first source of legitimation is the inclusion of Human Resource Management within the set of values constituting the so-called “corporate culture”. The articles rarely explain what corporate culture requires in practice, defining it mostly in negative terms, that is, in terms of the avoidance of past undesirable practices. Human Resource Management is usually mentioned as its main element, especially for its potential as a competitive tool. In these articles, Human Resource Management is dealt with as a kindred activity of already legitimated practices such as excellence, management education, total quality, and others. In this sense, Human Resource Management practices are legitimated by symbolic conformity, their alignment with existing legitimated practices.

The articles presenting this source of legitimacy tend to assert the “strategic” role of human resources and their centrality as a competitive weapon. During the crisis of the early nineties, investing in human resources was presented in Italy as the only enduring competitive strategy to meet the challenge of globalization. The titles of the articles reflect this assumption, linking human resources to effective organizational change and future challenges.

A second source of legitimation is the adoption of Human Resource Management practices by large firms. Due to the peculiarities of the Italian context, it is interesting to note how this role of leader is played almost exclusively by FIAT. The practices adopted by FIAT are seen as the “state of the art” of good management. In addition, FIAT’s innovations in flexible automation have blended issues of personnel management with the management of innovation. Together with FIAT, small and medium-sized innovative firms are other examples of the legitimation of Human Resource Management. The role played by FIAT and these innovative firms is that of powerful actors endorsing the implementation of particular practices. The legitimation of Human Resource Management is consequently obtained through the description of these firms’ successful practices.

The articles that refer to large firms’ adoption are often built on the interviews and statements of CEOs and General Managers. Due to the role played by FIAT, interviews with the top management are usually reported within those articles. In a similar vein, these articles report the opinion of the Board of Confindustria (the entrepreneurial association). In these pieces, attention for human capital is presented as the main success factor for any firm competing globally. These interviews seldom give technical arguments, merely providing checklists of best organizational practices to follow.

The last source of legitimation for Human Resource Management to emerge from our sample is the performance of firms that adopt it. While the articles emphasize the coherence of Human Resource Management with business competitiveness, they rarely describe the details of the actual success of these practices. In this case, Human Resource Management is ideologically described as one of the basic components of the overall competitiveness of the industrial system. The only explanation provided is the importance of Human Resource Management for business systems like those of America and Japan. This source of legitimation shifts attention away from the successful implementation by a large number of firms, or by role-models, to a more general claim for innovativeness and the

renewal of the managerial paradigm. The tone of the articles mentioning this source of legitimation is typically normative, outlining quick solutions and purposeful rules of thumb. An interesting aspect is that in Italy the link between performance and Human Resource Management is often made with reference to the restructuring and privatization of the Health Care System and Public Administration. Human Resource Management is therefore considered a key success factor in the successful implementation of privatization, both in economic and in political and social terms.

The articles on the privatization wave in the public sector in Italy largely adopt managerial discourse to explain the superiority of the market model compared with state ownership. In these terms, managerialism is linked with innovativeness, and Human Resource Management practices are the most progressive part of this innovation. The articles deal with both private and privatized companies, showing the potential of Human Resource Management practices—such as teamwork, personnel reward systems, etc.—to increase the efficiency and profitability of organizations. In these articles, more technical information on practices is provided, often repackaging and recycling labels from the academic press.

Tables 3 and 4 below report the main content of the articles, classified by sources of legitimacy and their frequency:

Table 3

Legitimacy Source	Content	Argumentation	Key words	Rhetorics
Conformity to corp. values	Descriptions of the future competitive challenges for any business firm	Human Resources Mngt as new competitive weapon	“Strategic” “Competitive challenges”	Unproven statements
Large Firms’ Adoption	Interviews with CEOs and General Managers	List of updated Best Practices	“New Frontier of Mngt” “Human Capital as core”	Ideological
Performance	Case histories on successful implementations	Technical descriptions	“Success” “Efficiency gains” “Profitability”	Quasi technical

Table 4

Year	Legitimacy Sources			Total
	Conformity to Corporate Values	Large Firms’ Adoption	Performance	
1988	6	6	7	19
1989	5	6	7	18
1990	5	8	8	21
1991	5	9	7	21
1992	5	11	8	24
1993	7	7	7	21
1994	5	4	9	18
1995	4	4	6	14
1996	5	4	5	14
	47	59	64	170

These data show that legitimacy sources are fairly evenly distributed between and over the years. We argue that this distribution implies a stable legitimacy pattern; that is to say, the popular press has legitimated Human Resource Management practices in the same way over the period under study. This supports the hypothesis of the institutionalization of the role of the popular press as a legitimizer.

Discussion and conclusion

The data available, though limited and in need of more sophisticated and extensive quantitative and qualitative treatment, seem to support our main argument that the popular press, as well as academic literature and scholarly research, has to be taken into account in explaining the creation and diffusion of management theories and practices. In particular, we have found that, in Italy, Human Resource Management practices have had a place in the popular press independently of the interest shown in this topic in academic literature. At least in part, the data support our argument that the popular press plays a role in creating short-lived management theories and practices as fashions and fads. In this role, the popular press takes advantage of the fact that popular magazines and newspapers are on business people's desks every day. More importantly, we contend that the popular press reflects sources of legitimation of theories and practices that are different from those adopted by the standard academic press. This means that the popular press and so-called informal business education also work to produce management ideas and, consequently, management practices.

Our data also show that the kind of theories and practices that the popular press helps create are characterized by a low level of technicality and abundant ideological statements. We argue that in many cases they are based on the recycling of old theories, legitimated by implementation success stories and the opinions of influential CEOs and General Managers. In other words, the Human Resource Management theories and practices produced by the popular press seem to be ready-made, easily available products, like prêt-à-porter clothes sold in smart boutiques and department stores. In contrast, the scientific and scholarship-based theories and practices created and diffused by the academic press appear as prestigious, costly haute couture garments, to be sold in sophisticated ateliers—the aula magna of Universities and business schools and consulting firms.

The analysis attempted here, and the findings, have at least two limitations. First, the analysis focuses on only one country, so it is difficult to make generalizations. Second, the time span chosen and the focus on the press are too narrow to apply a historical and sociological perspective to the role of the mass media in the diffusion of management theories and practices.

As to the first point, we do believe that our focus on one country seriously limits the scope for generalization. Italy has certain internal dynamics—regarding management education for executives, the poor knowledge of English as a business language, and the role of the popular press in setting the political and economic agenda—that favour the “proactivity” of the popular press towards the business context. In contrast, the Anglo-Saxon and German popular press seems to amplify existing theories and practices, their role being that of propagator and legitimizer.

Although this country bias is easy to see, we believe that the increasing influence of the popular press on social, political and economic matters is a phenomenon occurring all over Europe, due to the disappearance of the boundaries between society, politics and

economics. The traditional role of the press of setting the political agenda is now more and more one of providing economically informed arguments for political alternatives. Political discourse tends to borrow economic arguments and ideologies to overcome the crisis of political categories in this century and to frame new challenges for the next millennium (see the rhetoric of European Monetary Union and the EURO). Within this context, management theories and practices can be seen as tools to gain influence for individual journalists, newspapers and magazines, with converging patterns throughout Europe. From this viewpoint, the Italian example is not far-fetched; similar dynamics might be found in Greece, Spain, Denmark, France, and even in some East European countries facing the challenge of a market economy. However, we propose that more cross-national studies are needed to outline both the differences and the similarities among countries.

As to the second point, our study looks at two legitimated newspapers to explore some basic dynamics. Further research could focus on a wider range of publications, looking for differences among them, relying on the existing literature (see Barley and Kunda (1992) for practitioner-oriented magazines, and Huczynski (1993) for management books). An historical perspective introducing time as a major explanatory factor would be helpful. Comparison among newspapers, magazines, journals and other popular media such as television and radio broadcasting is called for to draw a more complete picture of the dynamics in the field. Within these media, content analysis could be supported by ethnographic studies and interviews with people who deal with management theories and practices, in order to explore the social network surrounding their creation and diffusion.

Our main hypothesis is that the popular media concur with the academic press and consulting firms not only in the diffusion of management theories and practices but also in their creation. Though more support from empirical analysis is needed, we believe that our argument opens avenues of research in at least three directions. First, it looks at the process of diffusion and creation of management theories and practices from the perspective explored by the Sociology of Culture, dealing with the history of ideas. This perspective, which has already proven fruitful in the debate on the “scientization” of culture and the rethinking of popular culture, shifts management theories and practices away from the technical field into the realm of socially constructed “credo”. Since management theories and practices are, at least partially, the premises for managerial action, it can be argued that this shift is also moving managerial action away from the narrow rules of instrumental rationality. Where it is going now is a “hot” debate within the sociological field (White, 1992; Alvarez, 1997b); we believe that if managerial action is getting more political, the mass media and their role are going to be at the top of any manager’s agenda.

Second, our analysis does not explore in depth the content of what is produced and diffused by the popular press. What kind of theories and practices is the popular press producing? Are they standards, effective heuristics, rules of thumb, or common sense? The relationship between the actors involved in the creation and diffusion of management theories and practices needs further investigation as well. Many hypotheses are on the ground: according to Barley, Meyer and Gash (1988), management topics “oscillate” from the popular press to academic media and back again, with their popularity in either medium being inversely related. Some authors focus on the competition between universities, business schools and consulting firms in setting the state of the art of management theories (see Pfeffer (1997) for a summary of the current debate). In an insightful study, Engwall (1992) described a cooperative pattern between educational institutions and business firms for the joint production of management knowledge and managerial elites in Sweden (see also, in a similar vein, Locke, 1996).

However, the setting of the relationship between the actors involved is still controversial. Academia, consulting firms, publishing houses, management gurus writing best-sellers, business schools and the popular press work together to define successful theories and practices. We argue that there is no clear boundary between the actors involved in creation and those involved in diffusion. Each actor concurs in the process of institutionalization of management theories and practices, with differences relating to the social and historical context. Further research might investigate the existing patterns of relationships and roles among these actors, and the differences in the management knowledge they channel.

Finally, we suggest that the interest of the popular press in management topics is itself worthy of deeper exploration in both historical and sociological terms. The rise of a “popular business press” made up of magazines and special issues of newspapers—as happened in Italy and Spain during the eighties—can be seen as part of a process of standardization in the diffusion of management ideas. This rise is also linked with the diffusion of the liberal model, as opposed to the corporatist or statal ones (Meyer, 1997). In this sense, whenever a popular business press develops, it is likely to emphasize the standardizing qualities associated with the liberal organizing model, based on a shared sense of values among the competitors and on patterns of openness and commitment opposed to secrecy. Other political cultures—e.g. corporativism and statalism—would therefore not generate a popular business press (Meyer, 1997).

In this paper we have discussed the role of the popular press in both the diffusion (in line with the main theoretical contributions) and the creation of management theories and practices. We have proposed a sociological view in order to emphasize the dynamics through which practices diffuse across social actors. By adopting a legitimacy perspective on the phenomenon, we have also tried to shed light on how the various practices arise in the first place. We have proposed an interpretation of the process whereby the popular press creates short-lived, quasi-technical theories (*prêt-à-porter*), while the academic press creates scientifically-based models (*haute couture*). To be implemented as best practices, both need social legitimation coming from conformity, large firms’ endorsement, and legends of successful implementations.

The proposed perspective does not explore the actual outcomes of the implementation of theories and practices, sailing on the surface of the “language games” (Astley and Zammuto, 1992). Nevertheless, as the metaphor in our title indicates, we would imagine that management theories and practices are ephemeral creations of people trying to meet their customers’ demands; and that even if *haute couture* is definitely more sophisticated and attractive, *prêt-à-porter* is more comfortable and affordable.

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