

Alaric Bourgoïn

Les équilibristes. Ethnographie du management [The tightrope walkers. An ethnography of management], Paris, Presses des Mines, 2015, pp. 308

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I approached this review of *Les Équilibristes* by Alaric Bourgoïn, somehow lost in a double translation between the French language used in the book and my Italian and between my Italian and the English used in this review. Something that is well known, and yet, this time such feeling was exacerbated by semantic issues related to one of the core topics tackled by Bourgoïn: the idea that the main goal of the job of managing consultants – the profession on which the research is focused – is “value enacting”, *mettre en valeur*, in the original French.

Such formulation does not refer to the production of value in economic and financial terms, although this is a relevant dimension of the notion of value. However, Bourgoïn does not deal with the definition of the notion of value *per se*, being aware that this could be a sort of impossible mission. Vice-versa, he is interested in understanding how management consultants “enact the value” of their practices.

Mettre en valeur – here tentatively translated as “value enacting” – is a way to address, in French, issues related to valuation, an English neologism introduced by John Dewey, which does not have a French corresponding term. Rather than using ‘valuation’ or ‘valorization’ (the latter existing in French), Bourgoïn has preferred to use *mettre en valeur*, which, in turn, does not have a translation in English. He has chosen this expression in order to stress the active, situated and relational dimension of valuation and, at the same time, to refer to what he calls “*the double tension of the object* at the heart of the value enactment of management consultancy” (p. 141, my translation), namely the fact that both the consultancy service and the consultant need to be transformed in objects of value.

The reference to Dewey’s valuation is a clear indication that Bourgoïn takes a pragmatist stand, common to many recent sociological approaches to economics, and particularly delved by the ANT derived approach to economics, as developed by Michel Callon, who signs the preface of the book, and by Fabian Muniesa, supervisor of the Ph.D. thesis from which the book is taken, who signs the forewords.

Pointing to the fact that I was lost in such double translation is relevant for framing the main thesis proposed by the book: the work of management consultants revolves around the notion of value in an emergent as well as polymorphic way. The value of the work of management consultants can be depicted as an achievement that emerges in various forms

and has several implications for their stakeholders: clients, consultancy firms, practitioners, scholars, researchers, etc. Therefore, the work of management consultants is both a performative practice that is embedded in heterogeneous organizational settings and a continuous (yet unstable) construction and reproduction of a repertoire of practice across different settings. In other terms, Bourgoin argues that is possible to identify both continuity and discontinuity – as well as improvisation – in the work of management consultants. Discontinuity and improvisation are due to the fact that the value of this work cannot be objectified, since consultants are not experts, who own a specific and codified *savoir* and provide to their customers a uniform and commensurable service. However, their activities are not mere ‘ephemeral’ performances, built on subjective abilities. In his view, the successful deployment of a number of socio-material practices in heterogeneous organizational settings is the basis for the foundation of the value of the activities of management consultants.

His analysis stems from a very thorough experience as management consultant. Bourgoin worked around two years for a large French consultancy firm. In this period, he simultaneously played two roles: on the one hand, he was employed as a consultant and, on the other, he was a researcher. As such, he had the opportunity to direct follow very complex projects of organizational design and restructuring.

Therefore, the relevance of the study carried out by Bourgoin – described as an auto-ethnography – goes beyond his investment in hours and hours of observation. The point is that his presence in the field was not limited exclusively to an activity of participant observation, since he actually worked as a consultant while conducting his research. As such, his research recalls the methodology of clinically inquiry proposed by Schein (2001), as well as a more ‘traditional’ action research approach. Being a consultant allowed him both to gain access to deeper strata of data (Coget, 2009) and to ‘change the system’ (Schein 1995). Bourgoin actually pursued both goals, even if he did not overtly declare to his clients that he was conducting a scientific research study.

It is important to stress another element that highlights the peculiarity and the complexity of his methodological positioning: he was able to explore several organizations, having the possibility of directly analyzing the relationship between consultants and clients in heterogeneous settings. He fruitfully exploited this opportunity and this allowed him to study the dialogical yet dialectical construction of this fundamental interaction. It is thus difficult to file the methodological position of Bourgoin under a specific category. Basically, he did not conducted a proper clinical inquiry, because he did not declare to the clients his engagement in a scientific research. However, his study cannot be considered a mere process of participant observation. It is important to underline that he was aware of his peculiar position and this led him to adopt a reflexive approach (Cunliffe 2003).

The familiarity that Bourgoïn has acquired with this field and this profession can be caught in the structure of the book. Chapters are organized in a sequence that outline a sort of dialogue between empirical data and theoretical conceptualizations. In the introduction Bourgoïn shortly outlines two streams of the literature developed by organizational researchers on the topic of management consultancy. These streams are presented as juxtaposed poles: a more traditional functionalist approach is confronted with a more recent critical approach. This juxtaposition is somehow a rhetoric construct for demonstrating the existence and the broadness of a space in-between that Bourgoïn aims at filling emphasizing the processual and socio-material dimension of consultancy.

This space is explored in the first chapter of the book: an immersive journey in the work of a management consultant. Bourgoïn presents an ethnographical account of one of the most important projects he has been involved. His experience is clearly very vivid and this allows him to lead the reader into the multiple layers of complexity of the work of a consultant. Reading this chapter, it is possible to notice the intensity of this job as well as its fragility: consultants are called by their clients to provide solutions, yet they have to legitimate their presence within the organizations they enter. As Bourgoïn argues, this ambivalence comes from a persistent contradictory perception of their professional status. On the one hand, consultants may be considered as experts who are providers of a reliable support to organizations. On the other hand, they risk to be perceived as “charlatans” who play persuasive performances mainly oriented to legitimize their role and the effectiveness of their action. His account offers an in-depth analysis of the way consultants interplay between these contradictory interpretations of their work.

In the second chapter, Bourgoïn proposes five practices through which processes of value enactment are carried out: a) the commercial formulation of the service; b) the graphical presentation of the diagnosis; c) the report of the activity; d) the situated development of skills; e) the production of the authority of the consultant. These practices are performed under a tension between the necessity of producing value and the necessity of being considered valuable.

Readers of *Tecnoscienza* will find particularly interesting the parts dedicated to two of the practices that clearly emphasize the material dimensions of this profession: the graphical presentation of proposals of changes and the construction of a report for accounting the amount of hours spent for a consultancy. The first practice deals with the use of a specific software (typically Microsoft Powerpoint). Instead of claiming the limits of the use of this technology for organizing and presenting data and information in organizational settings, Bourgoïn describes the use of Powerpoint as a complex semiotic process (p. 169).

The production of a report of the time spent for carrying out a consultancy is an even more complex process. This is a practice that is purposed

to 'justify' the value of the work of a consultant. As such, Bourgoïn argues that the presentation of a timesheet is a performative practice with several meanings that connects a micro-practice (the daily recording and classification of work hours) with a macro-practice concerning the allocation of resources within an economic transaction between clients and providers of consultancy (p. 197). According to Bourgoïn, producing a timesheet conveys rigor to the professional action of the consultant as well as it 'disciplines' the clients. From this point of view, a timesheet appears a boundary object that connects two social worlds (Star and Griesemer 1989), developing a standardized representation of a commercial agreement. However, in spite of this standardization, the creation of a timesheet is a practice that reproduces the tensions that may emerge when the different ambitions of clients and providers of consultancy activities collide, both at the micro-levels and at the macro-levels of the interaction between those actors.

In the end, I can say I really appreciated reading this book. Firstly, it draws light over a profession that is scarcely considered by social sciences. Secondly, it is a brilliant representation of the socialization into a profession. I particularly appreciated the ability of Bourgoïn to zoom across different levels of observation, connecting micro dimensions to broader issues of theorization, as suggested by Nicolini (2009). Overall, as readers of *Tecnoscienza* will also appreciate, the most valuable merit of this book is that, by assuming "a conception of value enacting essentially borrowed from STS" (p. 140, my translation), it stresses the material basis of the construction of a relational professional activity.

However, it is important to report some (very few) critical points. First, the work of Bourgoïn presents a slightly weak methodological framework. The narrative construction of the book combines different sketches. While the first chapter is a dense immersion into a large and complex project, the following chapters are based on more and diverse consultancy experiences. This combination reinforces the solidity of analysis proposed by the author, but it provides a sometimes kaleidoscopic representation of the work of consultants. As a consequence, the possibility of identifying a pattern of practices for enacting value to these activities appears more critical and problematic.

This weakness is emphasized by a sort of feeling of 'closure' of the overall analysis. It offers a limited understanding of the diffusion of management consultancy across industries and companies, as well as it does not provide a critical reflection over the scalability of his interpretation in, for instance, smaller organizational settings.

Finally, The richness of Bourgoïn's work could provide a valuable contribute to the debate about the tension between process of value enacting and the practice (as well as the procedures) for pricing economic activities. Although this a typical economical question and domain, economic sociologists are striving for providing a more sociologically orient-

ed analysis of this topic (e.g., Uzzi and Lancaster 2004; Beckert 2011). However, his choice of adopting an auto-ethnographical lens impels him to catching the possibility of bridging this analysis with this emergent field of research.

In spite of these comments, I suggest reading *Les Équilibristes*. In my opinion, it is a successful as well as enjoyable book.

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