Wolfgang Amann, Michael Pirson, Claus Dierksmeier, Ernst Von Kimakowitz, Heiko Spitzeck (eds)

*Business Schools Under Fire: Humanistic Management Education as the Way Forward*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 496pp. (£65.00 (hbk)

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Following the onset of the GFC, attention has once again focused on the role played by business schools, intensifying concerns about the moral shortcomings of both academics and graduating students (Currie, Knights and Starkey, 2010). This edited volume, published by the Humanistic Management Network, is a response to those concerns, presenting a manifesto for the transformation of business schools based to the principles of humanism. It begins with the question: “how can business schools reposition themselves to produce the education needed to deal with the current financial crisis, preventing further economic mayhem, while successfully engaging with the challenge of social and environmental sustainability?” (p.4). The answers, according to the contributors, are to be found in a humanistic approach to management education (HME), which promotes the development of an economic system based on respect for human dignity and well-being.

Humanistic management rejects the objectification of humans as ‘resources’ to be deployed instrumentally in the pursuit of profit. To further human dignity, people must have the capacity to freely define the purpose of their existence. In a work context, that means pursuing collective decision-making in all institutions, including corporations, based on the participation or representation of all affected parties. Advocates of humanistic management believe this is possible within the ‘market economy’, provided the economy is a means towards the creation of ‘markets within societies’, rather than an end in itself. Humanistic management seeks to transcend the fractured conceptions of shareholders and stakeholders to present a holistic view of humans as not just investors, managers or consumers, but first and foremost, as citizens.

*Business Schools Under Fire* is written for those with a stake in the future of business schools, but is primarily targeted at business school deans and executive directors. It is as much about ‘doing’ management education as it is about ‘thinking’ or ‘rethinking’ it. It is a call not just for reflection, but for action. An assumption underpinning the volume is business schools are influential institutions. Lamenting the fact that business schools are an easy target for the media, the editors accept that “we educated the business and possibly political leaders responsible for co-creating the current economic conditions” and that “business schools are just too crucial a part of the economic system not to be a part of the solution – a main part” (p.5). My sense is that the volume overstates the power of business schools, both their part in the creation of the problem and their ability to be the solution. After all, many of the corporate villains of the GFC were not business school graduates and even where they were, there are limitations on the ability of schools to control the future actions of their alumni.

The book is comprised of 3 parts, incorporating 32 chapters, sandwiched between introductory and concluding chapters written by the editors. Part 1 presents the philosophical, historical and conceptual foundations of HME, locating this within debates on the role of business in society. Claus Dierksmeier shows, through a historical analysis of the development of economic thought, how modern economics lost its normative concern with responsible freedom and human dignity and became preoccupied with a narrow, materialistic understanding of economic behaviour based on *homo oeconomicus*. Dierksmeier sees the GFC as the manifestation of this impoverished understanding of human nature and highlights the need, once again, to anchor economic thought in human values. This is not a narrow call for more classes on ethics, CSR and sustainability, but a call for an infusion of normative guidelines based on human values throughout the entire business school curriculum. This raised the question on whose values should these guidelines be based? Dierksmeier puts his faith in the UN’s 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. While accepting that this “codified global consensus on human dignity” (p.33) is built on Western philosophical foundations, this need not, he argues, undermine its global validity. He rejects the arguments of cultural relativists, arguing that “global problems often require global institutions and worldwide normative agreements for their solution” (p.34).

Part 1 concludes with two chapters which provide survey data to lend support to the push for HME. Net Impact, an advocacy group for sustainable business, presents the findings of an online survey, taken by 1650 undergraduates across 45 US colleges. The survey found “there had been a profound shift in undergraduate support for business working towards the greater good” (p.65). While less than a quarter of those surveyed believed that today’s business leaders demonstrate ethical behaviour, three quarters see themselves as a future leader who will improve the social and economic challenges facing the world. This is followed by a similar survey run on MBA students by Net Impact and the Aspen Institute, which found that three quarters of respondents believe being socially responsible leads to corporate profitability. The effect of these surveys is to articulate the business case of HME to reassure both business school deans and their stakeholders that the ideals presented in this volume are compatible with corporate profits. If you do well, you will do good, is the message.

Part 2 is made of up 13 chapters, comprising a mix of conceptual and empirical contributions which look forward to envision the future of HME. Rakesh Khurana repeats his much-publicised call for the fulfilment of the promise of management as a profession. Amanda Goodall usefully reminds us that management is not a ‘core business’ such as law or medicine, but exists to support core business, and as such, is unlikely to attain the status of a profession. Goodall goes further in challenging Khurana’s desire for management to professionalize, arguing that a contributor to the GFC was the over-promotion of professional managers to senior levels of organizations who lacked expert knowledge. Also in Part 2, Mary Gentile provides an overview of Giving Voice to Values, a programme funded by Babson College in the US which helps students identify strategies for raising values-based issues in the workplace. Based on the assumption that most people want to act at work in a manner consistent with their values, the programme sets out to suspend the cynical belief that this is impossible in the face of corporate demands.

A highlight of Part 2 is a reflection by Ross McDonald on his experiences as a humanistic teacher. McDonald is critical of mass management education, with its large lecture format disempowering and rendering anonymous young learners and forcing them to submit to “formality, rigidity and the exercise of authoritarian power as bureaucratic inevitabilities” (p.130). He also takes aim at assessment, which is designed to deliver to the business community a pool of pre-rated, intelligent and compliant candidates who have applied themselves diligently to doing what they are told. McDonald recounts his experience at a previous institution where he gave all students the same final mark on the first day of the class. This, he says, gave the students freedom to fully express themselves as learners, though he notes the university did not appreciate such a radical departure from the norm. McDonald also provides a counter-point to the strong drive within this volume for the establishment of guiding principles for HME. Many of the chapters make reference to, and affirm, the United Nations sponsored Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME), which provides the normative direction for HME. For the editors, PRME initiatives and oaths are a necessary but not sufficient component of humanistic management, with their appeal lying in their public commitments. McDonald fears that while it might be possible to create a list of HME principles, this might lead us “towards a rigidity that is counter to the spirit of open humanistic education” (p.146).

Part 3 is organised around a theme of achieving and sustaining progress in HME. Included in this part are perspectives on HME from Asia, Africa and Latin America, which usefully supplement the European and North American perspectives which dominate the volume. Ifedapo Adeleye, Kenneth Amaeshi and Chris Ogbechie present an interesting commentary on management education in Africa, debating a return to humanistic concepts such as *Ubuntu (*which, literally translated, means “I am who I am through others’) that have its origins in rural, agrarian communities. Such concepts are currently marginalized because of African business schools’ fascination with Western ‘best practice’ in the area of responsible business, which is unsurprising given the dominance of multinational corporations in Africa. Advocates of African humanism reject Western conceptions for failing to address the underlying problem of individualism and the authors of this chapter conclude that the journey towards HME in Africa is a long and challenging one.

This African perspective presents a refreshing dose of realism to the lofty idealism which underpins many of the chapters. It is also valuable for highlighting the tensions between the desire by many proponents of HRM for a universal approach, and recognition of the need to respect local contexts and differences. It also reveals highlights the tension between a deeply held, philosophically informed vision of HRM and one that is pragmatically adapted to the reality of life in a global economy still dominated by a neo-liberal orthodoxy, which has arguably intensified in the years since the onset of the GFC.

This is a timely publication which is likely to be well received by the business school community. Business schools ‘under fire’ for their lack of morality are conscious of improving their public image, and professing their commitment to the values of HME is a convenient means of achieving that. *Business Schools Under Fire* asks us to put our faith in business schools to effectively regulate the conduct of business through getting graduates to subscribe to a moral code to do good, with a reassurance that companies who do good will do well. It is little wonder therefore, that HME initiatives have won the backing of organisations such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), which has also keenly pushed for greater incorporation of business ethics in the curriculum. Part of HME’s appeal stems from it being a model of self-regulation. If organisations are run by humanistic managers, then the implication is that they can be trusted to govern themselves, rather than being subjected to heavy oversight from state-based regulatory mechanisms. Based on my analysis of the GFC that a lack of regulatory oversight of business was a key contributory factor, I am reluctant to put my faith in HME. In putting such an emphasis on agency, it is easy to neglect the influence of structural constraints. At times respecting human dignity might coincide with the imperative for firms under capitalism to be pursue profits, but everyday there are examples of when it does not. I am not arguing against the possibility of the humanistic manager, but would be concerned if these efforts stymied serious consideration of the role of government in delivering desirable societal outcomes from business activity.

If HME is only incorporated to the extent that it is compatible through the generation of higher profits, because of its usefulness in convincing governments that heavy handed regulation of business is unnecessary, or in reassuring consumers that the can continue to consume without guilt, safe in the knowledge they are buying from good corporate citizens, the aims of the project will not have been realized. *Business Schools Under Fire* is strongest when these tensions are given voice and debated. The editors are aware of the limitations and barriers of HME, as well as its potential contradictions, although they choose not to dwell on them, and that is fair enough. Their main purpose is laid out in the final sentence of the book: “If we have managed to inspire you to drive your humanistic educational efforts forward, we have succeeded” (p.468).

Currie, G., Knights, D., & Starkey, K. 2010. Introduction, a post-crisis critical reflection on business schools. ***British Journal of Management****,* 21, S1-S5.