

*Fads/Faddisme: Comparing Business Enthusiasms in the United States and France*

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The rise of organizational fads, gurus, and elaborate consulting facilities constitutes one of the most interesting features of contemporary business. The phenomena have been examined from several angles, particularly in the attempt to explain the nature and extent of change and to assess the means of distinguishing solid content from promotional hyperbole. It is generally agreed that the succession of fads stems from some combination of a rather new and immature discipline of management study – indeed, from tensions between management as an academic field and management as a demonstration of businessmen’s own best practice – with an accelerating sense of novelty and crisis that makes confident panaceas particularly appealing. We still lack convincing explanations for the popularity of often simplistic formulas, for the rapidity of particular organizational fashions, for the frequent directional zigzags.<sup>1</sup>

Comparative analysis can further an understanding of what contemporary faddism entails. Most 20th-century business fads have been American in origin, reflecting the size and power of the nation’s corporate economy and the unusual proliferation of research universities and business schools. Yet while American example has drawn wide attention, responses have hardly been uniform. Examining different susceptibilities to faddism is important in its own right – in promoting an understanding of current business contexts –

and will also extend an understanding of the causation involved in generating or downplaying organizational fashions.

France offers a revealing comparative example in this context. The nation and its business leaders have close historic and contemporary ties with the United States. Yet there is also a distinctive organizational tradition, combined with frequent, vociferous objection to American cultural hegemony. Given traditional French business isolation, the willingness to accept new levels of American influence is striking in recent history—but so is the selectivity involved. Exploring what has caught on, and what has largely fizzled, illuminates additional aspects of faddism, not only in France but in the United States as well. Explaining comparative differences and similarities advances the analysis of faddism's causation in each national case—an area where existing accounts, despite some promising indications, have tended to fall short.

The purpose here is to probe the sources and meanings of business faddism. We draw on deeper historical roots to lay out significant patterns of comparison between U.S. management fads and the French management experience. The comparative case illustrates why the French developed an ambivalence, a pull and resistance toward managerial enthusiasms developed in the United States. While historians have examined French Americanization, the management story has yet to be laid out, and at the same time a rich tradition of business history has not extended to the later 20th century.<sup>2</sup> The comparative approach to business fads and gurus is also untapped.

There is, to be sure, an available comparative framework, but it tends to simplification. Analysis of contemporary French (and other non-American) business tends to pull between two poles. Many studies, and even more proclamations, particularly from the management and organizations arena, have assumed that national distinctions count for little where organizational imperatives are concerned. Context can essentially be ignored. If a country like France is not yet like the United States, in corporate fashions, it should be. American gurus and consulting firms have been performing in Paris for many decades, with an exponential increase since the 1970s, often confidently proclaiming the applicability of American innovations. And, for most of the major fads, an imitative French chorus has echoed this theme: there is a single business truth (whatever it is at any particular moment), it is most likely to be American, and France should fall in line as quickly as possible. Even consulting firms that are sensitive to French distinctiveness still tend to take an American (or at least Anglo-Saxon) along for show.<sup>3</sup>

Yet there is also an important body of comparative work, dealing with France, the United States and other industrial countries, that tends to insist on the striking and durable differences among national organizational cultures.<sup>4</sup> Countries like France do have some distinctive organizational traditions, which unquestionably mark their reactions to American business fashions. Yet some of the comparative work verges on stereotype – German bureaucracies, for example, as uniformly rule-bound. And the genre does tend to imply both considerable uniformity and considerable changelessness in national traditions. This case can be strongly put, but it often relies on confirming

impressions rather than systematic study. A cute example can seem compelling: the French branch of a Swedish company bent on informality, in which management personnel at all levels carefully call each other by first names and the familiar pronoun “tu” while at work, only to revert to the formal “vous” and titles like Monsieur le directeur général when encountering each other off the job. Or a revealing joke, in this case aimed at France’s famed enthusiasm for rational generalizations: “This may work in practice, but I doubt it will work in theory” as a reason to reject a particular organizational innovation.<sup>5</sup>

Obviously, the two dominant approaches – the borderless management wisdom and the distinct and lasting national cultures – cannot both be right; yet there have been few attempts to work out their relationship. Tracing French reactions to American fads offers an obvious opportunity for intermediate analysis, in which undeniably distinctive impulses combine with powerful spurs to innovation – producing significant change, even convergence, which however fall short of full Americanization. Explaining why change occurred, but also why it diverged from the full range of American patterns, in turn contributes to the understanding of French management and faddism alike, the twin goals of this analysis.

### The French Context

New levels of American influence, and with it contemporary business faddism, hit France in the 1970s. The changes inevitably operated within some well-established patterns of management activity, including the fruits of previous American example.

Characteristic styles help explain why innovations would not lead to complete Americanization, but they also highlight the extent of change that might be involved—the complementary features of French faddism that must ultimately be explained.

French corporations have long emphasized a more centralized, authoritarian management style than has been characteristic of the United States. It is important not to stretch the stereotypes too far: hierarchical firms may offer some informal touches, while middle management, often described as passive, may take pragmatic initiatives when formal arrangements seem to be breaking down. But the dominant comparative generalization has basis in fact. French managers are much more concerned with having precise answers to questions posed by subordinates than are their American counterparts, as a means of maintaining appropriate hierarchy. They maintain this impulse even when working for international companies that stress a different culture. Thus, employed by an American corporation with an open door policy, French managers diligently leave their doors open without changing their ideas about managerial authority.<sup>6</sup> As in other Latin countries, middle managers seek far more direction from superiors than do Americans (or North Europeans). Thus the first French reaction to a business problem is to check with a higher-up, in contrast to the German impulse to seek clearer bureaucratic rules or the English tendency to cite inadequate group communication and a need for retraining.<sup>7</sup> French business meetings, similarly, tend to involve more stress on information exchange, to provide a context in which managers can later make their own decisions, than the American-style action-oriented meeting expected to generate an action plan directly.<sup>8</sup>

Distinctive French characteristics owe much to the historic inspiration of government and military hierarchies. French industrialization, though active from the 1820s onward, was limited by constraints in natural resources and other problems, and lagged organizationally behind a highly centralized state. Top personnel long preferred government service to private employment, which both reflected and perpetuated this imbalance. The great French heroes were kings and chief ministers who furthered centralization and hierarchy – Richelieu, Louis XIV or Napoleon.<sup>9</sup> One venturesome comparativist even argues that the French pattern goes back to the hierarchical gap between lord and peasant, with managerial lords still expecting servility in response.<sup>10</sup> Hierarchical proclivities were compounded by the rise of technocrats and planners after World War II. Companies taken over by the state thus rarely saw much change in management approach. France lacked the more flexible organizational experiments that marked the World War II experience in the United States, which in turn set a basis for early interests in structural change. A number of comparative studies emphasize the French proclivity to see organizations as pyramidal structures, and to view business problems as issues for rational solution than as invitations for interpersonal maneuvering.<sup>11</sup> Emphasis on hierarchy is also held responsible for a French managerial preference for communication in writing (in grammatically correct, elegant language if possible) rather than oral exchange. French managers employed in American companies often find it difficult to adapt to the informal if superficial friendship style that seems to override hierarchy; French professional friendships, in contrast, take years to form.<sup>12</sup> Finally, French hierarchical emphasis is combined with a strong impulse toward secrecy,

revealed for example in the very limited information provided to shareholders; both features tend to emphasize the decisive authority of the chief executive.

### Early French Managerial Models

French strength, relatedly, lies more in science and technology than in organizational innovations outside the hierarchical standard. French critics of their own management tradition have sometimes claimed that the nation has “no exportable management model”. This is not strictly true. One of the leading authorities on management before World War II was Henri Fayol. Perhaps better known in the United States than in France, Fayol nevertheless summarized a French organizational style. Trained as an engineer who rose through the ranks in the Commentry coal mining company, Fayol regarded himself as the organizations counterpart to Taylor, doing for management hierarchy what Taylor had done for scientific structures on the production side. Writing in 1916, Fayol stressed the comparability of government and business hierarchies. The key to successful administration (management was not yet a French term) were division of labor, authority, discipline, unity of command and direction, subordination of individual to the general interest – in short, centralization and a clear chain of command. Only one superior can oversee the whole operation, and he must be able to discipline subordinates: “centralization belongs to the natural order.” Fayol praised Taylor’s emphasis on efficiency and careful planning, but faulted him, revealingly, for his tendency to divide command.<sup>13</sup>

Not surprisingly, in this context, French firms had eagerly imported industrial engineering innovations from the United States, beginning in the first decade of the 20th century and extending through the 1950s. “Taylorisation” was a French term by 1910. From Taylor, French manufacturing operations extended the authority of foremen and supervisors over ordinary workers – enhancing hierarchy, while using time-and-motion studies to speed up the work itself. Again revealingly, other American innovations that built on or modified Taylor’s recommendations, particularly by paying greater attention to workers’ attitudes, were not widely picked up or even commented upon in France. Elton Mayo’s work, for example, had little impact, and there was no flowering of personnel operations in France before World War II, in contrast to the United States. Some observers claimed that undiluted Taylorism not only suited needs in French manufacturing, but resonated favorably with the positivist tradition in culture.<sup>14</sup>

Unquestionably, then, something of a French management model existed before the rise of contemporary American business faddism and a more comprehensive interest in imitation. The model was distilled and furthered by observers like Fayol. However, lest we fall into the eternal differentiation trap characteristic of some comparative study, two qualifications are essential. First, American management was itself very hierarchical in this period. Choosing between American and French arbitrariness toward labor, including an unwillingness to share power or spontaneously negotiate, would in fact be very difficult. (Labor union weakness is in fact a shared characteristic, despite French labor’s political clout, and the similarity has facilitated some common recent management trends. Both countries have rich 20th-century histories of clashes over collective bargaining and

other union demands.) As capitalist, industrial countries France and the United States, with considerable prior contact, overlapped in management features. This explains the potential for recent imitation. Distinctive emphases in the French patterns, particularly after World War II, were not immune to change, and in some ways provided a clearer target for reevaluation than did slightly blurrier American counterparts. American students of management themselves seized on Fayol, whose influence in the actual organization of firms in the 1930s was probably greater in the United States than in France. A French-American distinction in management impulses after World War II may emerge more clearly, but it does not derive from a mist-of-time contrast.

Second, the French management model was not the only contributor to the context in which the rise of faddism would be received. After all, development or rejection of fads is a product of numerous components. A number of other components must be noted, some pointing to a greater hierarchalism in contradistinction to the United States, but others more complex. Below, we address the critical roles played by the state; business cycles; intellectual trends; and the larger social context. For example, particularly into the 1950s and to an extent since, a larger percentage of French firms were small, even familial, than was true in the United States. This might confirm an authoritarian impulse in one sense, as the powers of father figure and employer merged, but it also meant a great deal of decentralization in practice. This, in turn, might make some of the needs American fads addressed, in attacking centralization, less salient.<sup>15</sup>

The Role of the French Government

French government played and plays a greater role in business than in true in the United States. Planning directives, from agencies like the *Office du Plan*, are more elaborate. More administrative procedures apply in the human resources area. It is more difficult, for example, to fire for incompetence. This political context might again confirm French managers' insistence on their own authority where possible, given resentment at state interference, but it also might mute the need for certain fads designed to protect employees against arbitrary initiatives. The advent of a socialist administration in the 1980s, at a peak period of faddism, in some ways confirmed French employers in a reluctance to change unnecessarily.<sup>16</sup> The 1982 Arnoux law required that works councils be consulted over technical issues, and while little actually happened the result might reduce an interest in participatory management fads. Yet government measures might also promote an interest in new styles. Another socialist measure, requiring that 7% of the salary budget be devoted to retraining, helped stimulate an unusually strong French interest in the movement toward human resources operations.<sup>17</sup>

### The Role of Business Cycles

Business cycles have not operated exactly the same ways in the two countries. Many French managers argued, into the 1990s, that their economy was more stable (at least since the 1950s) than the transAtlantic counterpart, and this reality, or perception, might again cushion the interest in fads. France unquestionably enjoyed higher economic growth rates from the 1950s to the late 1980s, and against an older stereotype, French businessmen eagerly sacrificed security for growth. With a few exceptions, we will see that French managers often professed a lower sense of crisis than their American

colleagues, in the decades in which faddism emerged. France also historically faced a slightly less diverse labor force, though high rates of immigration since the 1930s produced effects not dissimilar to those in the United States; certainly, however, perception of diversity as an issue emerged more slowly in France, which again qualified the national response to some of the fads and consulting initiatives that originated across the Atlantic.

#### The Role of Academic or Intellectual Trends

There was also an important difference in intellectual trends. French intellectuals and academics after World War II were far more left-leaning than their American counterparts.<sup>18</sup> They had little interest in or sympathy for business management issues. Their approach to sociology in general was not only more Marxist but also more theoretical than that characteristic in the United States – and it was also specifically antiAmerican. What empirical organizational study there was more often aimed at unions or political groups than at business. American work was seen as too utilitarian and reductionist, with perspectives that lacked an adequate historical sense. The implications here too were diverse. On the one hand, France simply did not spontaneously generate the kind of management study that originated in the United States. This might make American models more salient, for lack of native alternatives. On the other hand, the larger intellectual hostility might limit responsiveness to the models, for lack of academic support – even amid businessmen hostile to the left but proud of their intellectual respectability. The first postwar French management researcher to gain international attention, Michel Crozier, illustrates both potentials. He strongly imitated (and added to)

American research styles, as his Center for the Sociology of Organizations, founded in Paris in 1962, looked at specific cases of organizational change and urged a “modernization” of French patterns. But he encountered a great deal of Marxist intellectual criticism for what was seen as a pro-management, unFrench stance. This climate shifted, to be sure, in the 1980s, with the international failure of Marxism, but it did not disappear.<sup>19</sup>

### The Larger Social Context

Finally, larger considerations color the comparative context, for faddism responds to broad social forces, and not just business exigencies. Business faddism is hardly the first kind of faddism to emerge in modern societies. Consumerism, urging faddish successions of products and leisure interests, and popularized psychological and medical expertise, both launched faddish commitments in industrial societies by the end of the 19th century if not before. Business managers, later committing to fad processions, were in part reflecting the tenor of the larger society that surrounded them. But while faddism is part of industrial modernity, it is not invariable. France developed less generalized faddism, and later, than did the United States. To be sure, the nation led in clothing fashions, producing successions of styles from the mid-19th century onward. But the commitment to faddism in other product lines was slower to emerge. Nor was childrearing expertise as volatile as it became in the United States, with generational oscillations between strictness and permissiveness from the 1890s onward.<sup>20</sup> The United States moved into advanced consumerism earlier and more fully than France did. (The French actually resisted this aspect of American marketing in the 1930s.) The United States also

generated more popularized experts, eager to build an audience by arguing that the previous decade's advice was dangerously off the mark; French childrearing advice, for example, depending more fully on medical doctors, was more consistent. The same held true in arenas such as dieting: while Americans grew accustomed to routine about-faces – such as the sudden discovery that after a decade of urging people to eat meat, for protein, rather than pasta, the formula was entirely wrong, and that the reverse was true – French popularizations were more stable.<sup>21</sup> The self-help impulse, producing a vital component in American business faddism, was and is also less strongly developed in France; bookstores lack the vast shelves their American counterparts devote to the latest wisdom on how to make oneself rich or successful. The difference is one of degree, not of kind, but it has proved significant. Businessmen in the two countries operate with different expectations about the durability of expertise and the likelihood of obsolescence in expert prescriptions, because they have grown up in somewhat distinctive consumerist contexts.

### The Role of Educational Structure

Completing the overall context, striking and longstanding differences in the educational backgrounds of businessmen in the two countries figure prominently in management styles and potential reactions to most fads. Education both caused and reflected traditions in business and in relevant aspects of intellectual life. France's system of higher education was fixed before industrialization, and industrial needs have been shoehorned in, whereas the reverse has been true in the United States. French managers' position depends far more closely on educational background than is true in the United States. A disproportionate percentage of top managers – over 80% -- come from the

select Grandes Ecoles, in contrast to the wider range of educational settings that generate American business leaders.

French educational emphasis, particularly in the Grandes Ecoles, has several further effects. First, training is highly quantitative and theoretical; this might incline its recipients to be less interested in fluctuations in management styles, particularly when these derive from pragmatism or popular psychology without much reference to more elegant, abstract models. Second, an unusually large proportion of French managers has been trained as engineers, headed by graduates of the great Ecole polytechnique. Engineers, in turn, tend to focus on issues of production and science, not human relations. And third, the gap between top executives, issuing from the Grandes Ecoles, and middle management, whose members stem from other educational backgrounds including regular universities and business schools, is unusually large. This automatically reinforces hierarchy, and it also raises issues of motivation from the middle management group – called *cadres* – for whom promotion opportunities are typically limited, whatever the success in introducing organizational innovations, because of the distinctions in educational origins. Finally, it has been argued that the rigor of the educational levels that generate top management, and the clear superiority of the great schools, combine to generate an unusual degree of self-confidence (or autocratic arrogance) in French business leaders. While elitism in education operates in the United States, it is not exceptional for graduates of lower reputed schools to run companies and advance to the top. This point, like the earlier suggestion about differences in anxiety levels to which it relates, must be fleshed out in terms of actual reactions to potential business fads.<sup>22</sup>

In the United States, business fads have been closely though incompletely related to the rise of business schools, particularly since World War II. By 1990s, 650 American business schools were generating 67,000 MBAs per year. In France, where only a handful of business schools had attained *Grandes Ecoles* status by 1990 and where management tracks in units like the *Institut d'Etudes politiques* were seen as inferior to the training for government positions, a few dozen schools generated about 6,000 MBAs annually. Their training and aspirations were not markedly different from those of their American counterparts, not surprisingly since 80% of French management professors had spent time studying in the United States.<sup>23</sup> But the differences with the United States were obvious despite this overlap, for French management graduates were far less numerous, even allowing for different population size, and their prospects, particularly in French rather than international firms, were much less bright. They would have less impact, collectively, on national business life.<sup>24</sup>

When educational differences add to the overall mix, it is obvious that the French climate for business fads was not the same as the American. Education, management tradition and the wider culture intertwined. But differences in context were not the whole story, partly because they were usually matters of degree rather than stark contrasts. Context, further, was not unchanging, as French business faced many of the same inducements to faddism as did American, with the added pressure of the overwhelming presence of the American models themselves.

## Causes of Change

Insistence on significant differences in tradition and context lead logically to emphasis on belated and incomplete encounters with contemporary management ideas. This story would not be entirely untrue—some French observers, touting or lamenting the national bureaucratic impulses, have sketched similar contours—but it would be seriously misleading. A number of factors, cresting in the 1960s and 1970s, prompted change. A tally of causes must account both for the new receptivity to ideas from the United States and for the particular slant that French imitation took.

Two major currents coalesced: new patterns of contact, that emphasized American superiority and the reality of American economic outreach, and significant new needs.

French openness to imitating successful foreign models began with industrialization itself, when the main target was technology and the main source was Great Britain. We have seen that interest in American contributions also began early. The enthusiasm for taylorisation reflected the acknowledged power of American organization, at a point when French factory industry was eager to borrow to advance. Active imitation of industrial engineering and assembly line procedures continued, with the advance of French industry itself, through the 1950s. French delight in taylorism was enhanced by reliance on large numbers of immigrant workers, in the 1930s and again from the 1950s onward; the immigrant factor, powerful in United States regimentation early in the 20th century, reverberated longer in France.<sup>25</sup> Immigrant workers from Poland, Italy, and North Africa gained increasing roles in factory centers even before World War II. On

another front, American retail procedures, such as chain stores, had won attention in the 1930s, and though the French on balance insisted on some distinctive bows to quality rather than mass-produced goods, some very similar operations resulted. Segments of French business were, then, conditioned to look abroad, and particularly across the Atlantic, well before World War II. One study has noted a remarkable persistence in French views of the United States, since the early 20th century: source of youth and dynamism but also center of vulgar materialism.<sup>26</sup>

The power of American example increased with the painful economic gap that prevailed from the end of World War II into the 1950s, when at some points it was doubted that Europe could ever recover a competitive position. Marshall Plan aid to France brought additional economic contact. The new *Commissariat de la productivité*, in the late 1940s, urged attention to American organizational models, and sent a number of missions to the United States.<sup>27</sup> Peter Drucker's major book on organization, urging suppleness and attention to employee contributions, was translated in 1957.<sup>28</sup> It was at the end of the 1950s that the France began to replicate American-style business schools, with the formation of INSEAD in Fontainebleau in 1959, complete with case methods and a steady stream of American faculty which continues today. (One French business journal, friendly to imitation, persists in regularly describing INSEAD as a "Harvard clone" at the end of the 1990s.) The Gaullist prime minister Michel Debré, during the 1960s, supported the further development of business schools in various French cities. It was at this point also that Michel Crozier became the first French scholar to join his American counterparts in management-oriented research and pleas for more participatory

management styles; his own research center was paralleled by the formation of management research units in several existing schools, including engineering schools like the *Ecole polytechnique*.<sup>29</sup>

### The 1960s: Imitation and Protest

The 1967 publication of Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber's *Le Défi américain* (*The American Challenge*) marked a further move toward acknowledging the superiority of American organizational models, a move both symbolic and real. It occurred, obviously, in a context already favorable to imitation, so its impact should not be exaggerated, but it unquestionably contributed to a new surge in the later 1960s. Various members of the Servan-Schreiber clan joined in attacking French management traditions, for their excessive hierarchy and commitment to routine, in the 1960s and 1970s. It was from this group that a new business journal, *L'Expansion*, would emanate, eager for innovation and imitation, though other, existing journals very nearly matched this newcomer in the attention offered to American management examples and expertise. But Servan-Schreiber's book, actively pushed via the latest American-style publishers' marketing methods, really propelled attention to a new plane. The book sold extremely well – better than any French publication in the 1960s, with 400,000 sales in 1967 alone. And its message was not just the superiority of American industry, and the need for France and Europe to wake up to its power, but the location of superiority not in technology but in organization. American structural flexibility and the decentralization of business decisions were contrasted with French rigidity: Taylorism must be attacked through

democratization and a liberation of initiative. “Do we or do we not have confidence in the maturity and intelligence of the majority?”<sup>30</sup>

Servan-Schreiber’s exordium was supported by the massive student and labor risings that began in May, 1968, though the near-revolution reduced attention to the book itself. The need for change seemed obvious, in business and education alike, and reduction of central authority was a common theme. Jean-Louis Servan-Schreiber, editor of the American-friendly *Expansion*, assumed that fundamental change was imminent, and urged wider participation in management decisions. The example of organizational change elsewhere in Europe, as in Volvo, was also cited. It was at this point also that American purchases of French firms accelerated (this indeed was one of spurs to the publication of the *American Challenge* and to its eager reception). Finally, American consulting firms began their inexorable march into European markets; the late 1960s and the 1970s were crucial here. The first French consulting firm, Bossard, had actually been launched in 1946, but the invasion of Boston Consulting, Anderson and others easily eclipsed home-grown models. (By 1995 there would be 550 firms in France, both domestic and foreign but with American branches dominating the top ten.) Management seminars became common, and their prestige varied directly with the number of American experts present. In 1969 leading French firms formed a new association, *Entreprise et Progrès*, designed to humanize management if not to unseat Taylorism directly.<sup>31</sup>

Concurrent changes in French political and economic conditions explain not just how but why new patterns of imitation occurred, gaining eager attention as serious responses to new problems. The American superiority that Servan-Schreiber touted would have counted for little had a perception of new needs not emerged at the same time.

The 1968 rising cut deeper than its American counterpart, if only because the focus was fiercely domestic and because the protest assumed more revolutionary proportions, with temporary seizure of parts of Paris and worker occupation of many factories.. The message pointed in two related directions. First, protesters attacked excessive hierarchy and organization directly, in universities such as the Sorbonne but also in society more generally. Second, the movement led to a new round of labor agitation (similar to the briefer American crest in the late 1960s) that raised demands about work quality and decision making, rather than the more familiar instrumental issues. Formal protest was enhanced by what employers perceived as new and unacceptable levels of turnover and absenteeism. This led directly to employer interest in new management approaches that would respond to, or, even better, preempt collective and individual unrest. The more diffuse anti-bureaucratic protest helped stimulate a vigorous research current, pointing toward greater worker autonomy and more enriching work assignments. Speculations about postindustrial society contained more focus on work issues than did comparable American research.<sup>32</sup> The Gaullist government, never an unmitigated friend of private enterprise, got into the act, sponsoring several of the labor studies and then, in the mid-1970s, a major inquiry (the Sudreau report) directed toward making corporations more responsive to shareholders and employees alike.<sup>33</sup> Even without American reference

points, based on the French dynamic alone, the common wisdom now held that workers should become clients, not just brute resources, that decentralization and the use of small groups were essential to promote the human dimensions of business—that Taylorism, still fine for focused decisions about specialization or efficiency measurements, must be abandoned as an overall orientation. Groups like the *Fondation nationale pour l'enseignement de la gestion des entreprises*, founded in 1968, specifically responded to the perceived need for change. Even the hallowed position of engineering training was called into question by the Sudreau commission amid appeals for less technocracy and more pragmatism.<sup>34</sup>

With this, a number of other, related trends coalesced. The interest in change coincided with increasing shifts from manufacturing to white collar emphasis—as in the United States a bit earlier. The literature on innovation in the early 1970s frequently referred to the need to acknowledge a more educated labor force—again in the fruit of developments since World War II—particularly the expansion of secondary and university enrollments—that occurred a bit later than in the United States, but with similar force. While French materials paid less attention to racial diversity in the labor force as a spur to change, the advent of larger numbers of women workers (here, with timing similar to that in the United States) also promoted management adjustments designed at least to acknowledge women's presence. The perceived need for innovation also owed much to a growing realization of global economic forces—more than in the United States, long-sheltered French business would use fad and imitation, to some extent regardless of specific content, as a means of connecting with international trends.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, the 1970s brought a slowing of economic growth, punctuated by the oil crises. French businessmen felt the change more keenly than their American analogues because it interrupted over two decades of substantial progress and profit.

A combination of changes, then, caused the need for change in response. Several of them—particularly, the spillover from the 1968 rebellions—also suggested the appropriate directions, by emphasizing major adjustments in management style. These in turn coalesced with the growing adulation of American innovation, and set up a period of unprecedented openness to imitation. Against all expectations, in a country fiercely proud of its cultural independence, American example took command.

#### The Importation of American Fads

It was during the 1960s and 1970s that English words began to pepper French management vocabulary, a development all the more striking given official national resistance to foreign intrusions and faddish neologisms. “Le management” began to replace the perfectly good word “gestion”, though there was some discussion about whether “manage” had French roots. Articles could begin to refer routinely to “problem-solving” (untranslated as “la procédure bottom-up”). And the fascination persisted. By the 1990s one could talk of “downsizing,” with the French verb “downsizer,” or “benchmarking,” with the verb “benchmarquer,” “outplacement” (and “outplacer”), “learning organizations,” “empowriser” and so on. While French managers’ facility with English was mixed (67% were not fluent), their enthusiasm for the bastard *franglais* burned bright. By the 1990s, one comparative study suggested that they were more

familiar with management best sellers than their British counterparts. Study trips to the United States became common—a California visit by 15 top executives in 1980 had wide resonance—and a growing number of aspirant managers attended American business schools.<sup>36</sup>

For a passion for translation began to seize French publishing in the management category, and with it much of the same apparatus of promotions, lectures and best-seller hyperbole that characterized the emergence of the gurus in the United States. This had been presaged by the translation of Drucker's work earlier, and the resultant interest in management by objectives (*direction par objectifs*, or DPO), which gained further momentum in the 1970s. Frederick Herzberg's ideas about employee self-realization and task enrichment, as alternatives to the hierarchical French version of Taylorism, gained ground, seen as responsive to the pressures that had bubbled up in 1968.<sup>37</sup> Peters and Waterman's work on excellence (*Prix de l'excellence*) became a quick best-seller, and visits by gurus like Peters drew wide attention.<sup>38</sup> American companies like Hewlett Packard and General Electric were referred to frequently, as beacons of innovation.<sup>39</sup>

Translations and citations were routinely supplemented by derivative, but enthusiastic French work, sometimes backed by a promotional association. Movements for strategic planning and for quality thus found active French advocates in Godet; Archer and Sérieyx; and Sicard, some of whom had academic connections but many of whom, like some American counterparts, were consultants. France produced no real gurus—Pierre Vernimmen, in finance, came closest—but it developed, among promoters, a similar mix

of educators, freelancers, and businessmen-turned-advocates. Groups like the *Institut de l'entreprise* or the European Foundation for Quality Management supported their efforts. The main message was clear, as it echoed key themes in the American Challenge: too many French executives operated without clear direction, with undue rigidity, and with insufficient attention to the initiatives their employees might contribute.<sup>40</sup>

### The 1980s: Quality and Other Impulses

Another surge in the interest in organizational change and foreign models occurred in the early to mid-1980s, as the failure of communism brightened the luster of American capitalism. Previous oil crises, the rise of international competitive levels, and the surge of Japan opened the way for innovation – just as in the United States. French commentators took some nationalist delight in pointing out how Japan seemed to be outdoing the United States, and informational visits to Japan became popular. But in the main, organizational responses came through the medium of American recommendations. There was also a distinctive French ingredient: organizational innovation appealed to businessmen appalled at the new socialist regime of François Mitterand. Discussions of decentralization and spreading initiative could be used against the threat of excessive government control and planning.

In this context, the French showed particular enthusiasm for quality circles, seen as a crucial means of unlocking the creativity of subordinates, increasing flexibility and attacking Taylorism and undue centralization. To be sure, quality circles might also emphasize new efficiency and control; they could be touted as means for checking

product deficiencies, which might enhance the role of supervisors. (This aspect of the quality movement touched base with longstanding French interest in measuring standards, reflected in the *Association française de la normalisation*, 1926, and the *Association française du contrôle industriel de la qualité*, 1957, backed by government-sponsored labeling.) This ambiguity (again, as in the United States) may well have promoted the appeal of quality circles. But the movement was not just more of the same, as it emphasized structural change and attention to qualitative, rather than the previously dominant quantitative measurements and attacked the overemphasis on technical analysis preached by the *Grandes Ecoles*. Emphasis on the circles' capacity to allow "direct expression" was seen as a blow to Taylorism and socialist heavy-handedness alike. Companies like Solmer (steel), the Raffinerie de Provence (petroleum), the Saint Nazaire shipyards, Peugeot, hotel chains and many others employed substantial numbers of consultants to set up circles, to the extent that one business journal noted the "guruization" of French corporations.<sup>41</sup> The *Association française pour les cercles de qualité* was set up in 1981, mixing academics and managers; over a hundred firms had circles in operation. By 1983 500 companies were maintaining 3000 circles, with the complex task of improving product control, seeking means to economize (one company, Pechineux, claimed 300,000fr. savings through the suggestions emanating from quality circles), and giving employees new voice. Appropriately enough, one business journal in 1983 described the movement as "situated between fad and change". Interest persisted: Syntec, a professional organization of 50 consulting firms, was still working on forming "quality clubs" and the processes necessary for quality assurance in the 1990s. And managers were teaching quality seminars in secondary schools.<sup>42</sup>

During the 1980s also, many French companies and consultants worked to introduce some of the principles of “excellence” (many of which dovetailed with quality circles). Attention to personnel measures and the formation of human resources departments also increased. Personnel functions, once an afterthought often assigned to a former military officer, now took on new significance.<sup>43</sup> Use of psychological tests in hiring increased, a belated (but explicit) imitation of the American movement than had begun almost half a century earlier.<sup>44</sup> Professional organizations formed, like the *Forum de la gestion des ressources humaines*, and research in the area advanced rapidly. One observer cited an “explosion” of human resources activities in the 1970s.<sup>45</sup> Strategic management had its votaries, as did the “intelligent workplace”. By the 1990s one Lyons firm (the *Institut de socio-économie des entreprises et des organisations*) reported over two decades of devotion to strategic management, designed simultaneously to cut costs and enhance the loyalty of personnel.

Business schools shifted curricula accordingly, claiming they were following the lead of curricular changes at places like Harvard.<sup>46</sup> A business journal noted the popularity of teaching strategy still in 1994, but warned that its faddish quality might doom it to rapid decline. And several books and associations began to tout Total Quality Management by the end of the 1980s. By the mid-1990s, one study cited 50 companies with TQM programs, with 12,000 employees.<sup>47</sup> None of the developments later in the decade

matched the earlier and ongoing enthusiasm for quality circles, but seminars, publications and consulting operations clearly reflected interest.<sup>48</sup>

Imports continued in the 1990s. It was at this point that the idea of benchmarking caught wide notice, from tentative origins in the mid 1980s, as against earlier corporate impulses for secrecy. An American company, Data Edge, was employed to help pharmaceutical firms exchange information. While several accounts argued that the practice was not really new – and that there used to be a perfectly good French term for it, competitive analysis (*analyse concurrentiel*) – consulting firms urged wider usage. In 1994 the consultant Colba-Mid organized the first benchmarking seminar in Europe, dealing with administration and customer satisfaction. “Questioning coming from the outside is always useful.”<sup>49</sup> By 1994, 54% of the larger French companies used benchmarking.<sup>50</sup> Translation of American works on reengineering prompted attention to this approach as well, though as we will see the French response was both hesitant and belated. INSEAD put reengineering into its curriculum in 1993. One 1996 article, in best faddist fashion, claimed however that reengineering was beginning to fade because it was so widely known; companies wanted something new, as reengineering had “fallen into the public domain, like a generic medicine.”<sup>51</sup> Frederick Reichhold’s work on employee loyalty and participation, echoing old quality circle concerns, caught attention in this context.<sup>52</sup> An interest in motivational “coaching” also spread from the United States; by 1996 the inevitable *Société française de coaching* had 136 members.<sup>53</sup>

American-inspired fads dominated the business scene in France at least from the 1960s onward. To the extent fads were current at all—and there was lots of resistance and continuity alike—United States origin was a common denominator. French experts might claim some distinctive twists. An early 1990s interest in “enterprise projects” and values seemed to have no particular American referent. But overall, organizational innovation, or faddism, largely meant some degree of Americanization. An editor at *Expansion* put it succinctly, in 1994: “If we have become one of the countries with the highest standard of living in the world, we owe this to the management models learned in the business schools and in the American books.”<sup>54</sup> The magazine worried that not all French managers had mastered the lessons yet, but it did not hesitate to pinpoint their source.

## Change

Imitation of American business enthusiasms obviously qualifies some of the crudest cultural approaches to national management styles. France had its own tradition, but it was capable of developing an eager audience for selective alternatives. How it chose, adapted and ignored cannot of course be discerned from a sketch of faddism itself; for the sketch might misleadingly suggest that the French blindly followed the American lead, differing only by a slight lag in time. But before turning to this essential analysis, it is important to note how the patterns of imitation, including the procession of different specific enthusiasms, fit into a pattern of genuine, measurable change. Even if, as we will see, some initiatives proved hollow (as was true in the United States as well), even if

strong and distinctive continuities persisted, French management patterns proved open to significant adjustment.

Education provided a crucial test, in reflecting and furthering adjustments. Already in the 1970s key engineering schools set up management research and training groups, like the *Centre de recherche de gestion* (interestingly, “gestion,” not management) at the prestigious *Ecole polytechnique*. By the 1980s observers noted that management training was altering the outlook of engineering graduates, as they became less riveted on technological solutions, indeed less arrogant. Business school curricula shifted, particularly toward the area of human resources and communication (obligatory, for example, in the third and fourth years of the chain school, Institut Supérieur Européen de Gestion.)<sup>55</sup> Business schools (which *Expansion* claimed “owed everything” to American example) also gained ground in their own right, by the 1980s. By 1989 13 management schools were accredited by the *Conférence de grandes écoles*, a marked advance from the list of four in 1980, and the number of graduates of business schools in general was rising rapidly. Also in 1989, the business track at the *Institut d’Etudes politiques* surpassed the government track for the first time.<sup>56</sup>

Change affected business itself. By the 1980s, foremen were being retrained, “detaylorized”, in a pattern similar to that in the United States a few decades earlier. They were increasingly placed as facilitators in production teams, and by 1987 their number had declined by 20%. Many corporations were also abandoning functional divisions in favor of more horizontal structures based on market categories.<sup>57</sup> By 1990, over 50% of

all corporations had Human Relations divisions, and France actually had emerged as the European leader in renaming personnel activities, expanding operations, and placing the division head on the board of directors.<sup>58</sup> Training programs for middle managers (encouraged by the government expenditure requirement) also expanded rapidly by the later 1980s. Some managers were actually joining to share experience with other firms, as in the Simarks group established for parttime training and evaluations commitments.<sup>59</sup>

Individual companies changed. L'Oréal became known for its anti-bureaucratic approach. Renault set up semi-autonomous work groups in 1973. Carrefour, a retail chain, deliberately hired business school graduates not from the Grandes Ecoles, because it found them more flexible and easier to motivate. A major Marseilles bank hired an academic consultant in 1983 to reduce problems of absenteeism. The result was a radical new organizational structure involving more frequent group meetings, for decisions rather than information exchange, and a great deal more internal cooperation. BSN-Gervais Danone experimented with new teams from 1972 onward, while the state railway agency (SNCF) used decentralized participatory techniques as part of a major systems change in the 1980s, under the banner "One can no longer reform companies in a technocratic fashion." The Bull computer firm, using consultants, by the early 1990s worked for a "non-pyramidal" structure and team collaboration. Aérospatiale, a large and "arrogant" company, restructured in the 1980s, spurred in part by the new government requirements for worker voice. It first reserved nine work hours a year, per employee, for meetings. In 1985 it introduced psychological training for all managers, focused on delegating authority and running participatory meetings. Quality circles, ultimately

numbering thirty, dealt with technical and work issues, with the leaders urged to facilitate, not dictate. Trips and inhouse journal articles rewarded workers who contributed good ideas (though the company, like most in Europe, opposed extra pay for this purpose). Reengineering had its adepts also, in the 1990s. In 1995 Moulinex downsized, as part of a reengineering process, and like its American predecessors immediately saw its stock values soar (by 21%).<sup>60</sup> Clearly, as more general figures on the introduction of quality circles or benchmarking suggest, the interest in new management measures was not mere windowdressing. By the 1980s France had far more quality circles than any other European country.

Revealing also was the increasing capacity of French consultants to take on something of a leadership posture, complete with slogans and acronyms. Michel Godet suggests a case in point, as he advocated a “future scenarios” method by the 1980s that smacked of the (widely translated) work of American futurologists and strategic planners, applied to specific companies. His method had been worked out in the later 1970s with the Department of Futures Studies in the SEMA Metra Consulting group. His approach helped the Elf group anticipate vulnerabilities in Algeria. In the early 1980s he applied his method to the Renault car companies, setting up “strategic prospective workshops” that used a “tree of relevance” method to decide what projects were contributing to company objectives. Godet-led seminars with middle managers considered structural issues, in Operation IESC (Industrial, Economic and Social Change), which led to some downsizing. Another Godet application helped the Lafarge cement company project a decline in demand for their product with resultant plans for diversification. Methods

employed in these projects included software programs like MICMAC, for seeking key variables, and MACTOR, for analyzing actor strategies; elaborate charts allowed the weighing of factors and options, while the a model dubbed POPOLE identified components of decision making.<sup>61</sup> More generally, consulting in France, while ranging widely from accounting to law to information systems, focused heavily on issues of strategy, organizational structure, and human resources.<sup>62</sup>

Change, imitation, and the rise of disproportionately American or American-style consultants and various gurus were all in play, from the 1970s onward. In 1997 *Expansion*, ever optimistic, cited one manager's view of the future: "In the years to come, hierarchical links will give way to a work relationship based on autonomy." The forecast echoed sentiments expressed, often around themes of Americanization, for the previous thirty years. They may have been overconfident, but they did accurately convey a theme of change that had come to inform a number of key components of French business organizations and training.<sup>63</sup> While France did not develop international leaders in management change, as Britain and Scandinavia did by the 1990s, it actually, and by national business traditions quite surprisingly, topped the charts in several key implementation areas.

### The French Style

Imitative faddism, French traditions, and the nation's new business needs inevitably merged, producing a French approach to management changes that differed from its

American counterpart despite obvious overlaps. Three points loom large. First, many fads were explored rhetorically, with few or no adjustments in fact. Second, particularly by the 1980s, a number of fads were critiqued and renamed – which did not deprive them of substance, but suggested a need to adapt. Third and most important, available models were used selectively, and the full range of American faddism was not carried through. Amid extensive imitation and real change, a distinctive set of French interests emerged, that would dampen sheer faddism and guide the process of innovation itself.

*Ambivalence.* The tension between enthusiasm for new management models in principle and reluctance in practice was hardly distinctively French; it operated widely in the United States as well. But frustrated reform-minded observers sometimes claimed that their nation was unusually laggard, bedeviled by the traditions of elitist company directors and autocratic style and structure. From the 1970s to the 1990s, recurrent laments focused on the merely rhetorical commitment to new structures such as quality circles, or on the routine-mindedness of managers who feared to change despite knowing what they should do. Many quality circles, *Expansion* reported in 1987, applied to only a minority of workers, involved in technical innovation, while assembly-line procedures continued to command the majority. Other firms picked up the product control and efficiency side of the circles, which simply enhanced taylorism, while ignoring their expressive potential; correspondingly, the *Ministère des affaires sociales* ruled that the presence of circles did not fulfill legal requirements for employee voice. Other half-measures were noted. Peugeot had genuinely decentralized by the early 1990s, but top management continued to pride itself on special cleverness, intervening even in the

choices of model colors. A 1987 article put the case directly: French executives, while claiming interest in employee participation, continued to look for decisive authority as the key to success. The chief executive was alone responsible for innovation: “He is the only one who has the power to do it.” “The bosses are unanimous: development, strategy form the central core of their reserved domain. They are the ones who decide, who impose, sometimes, in certain serious cases, in the greatest solitude.”<sup>64</sup> But other reports located the key implementation problem elsewhere, commending top executives and claiming that it was middle management that dragged its feet. And it is important to remember that tensions between the need for leadership in introducing participation, and participation itself, surfaced in the United States as well, as the French noted in evaluating Jack Welch’s work at General Electric.<sup>65</sup>

Not surprisingly, early commentary, as the imitation process just began to move into high gear, was particularly gloomy about the pace of change. A number of assessments noted widespread failure to adopt management by objectives in the 1970s. Managers feared face-to-face conflict if they moved in this direction; the lower cadres, accustomed to passivity, sought to protect themselves from the further interaction with higher authorities that performance evaluation might entail, while the latter refused to acknowledge that subordinates might have valid ideas. Both management groups tried to protect autonomy: “I know my job, if I am controlled, this means they have no confidence in me.” So performance appraisals, even when introduced, differed from American patterns particularly through greater imprecision and with less impact on inequalities within management. But performance assessments increased in the 1980s, as

innovation became more familiar and the pressures of international competition increased.<sup>66</sup>

The French also pursued a distinctive course in the Human Resources area. One evaluation (which again noted that French companies had elevated human resources operations more than most European enterprises) argued that France and the United States were about the same in wishing to promote empowerment, but that France sought to combine the approach with far more emphasis on vertical hierarchy and centralization, less interest in flexible work practices.<sup>67</sup> The French also moved slowly in their adoption of assessment centers for selecting new managers and evaluating current ones either for competence or for retraining; only 19% of French companies, all quite large, had moved to this method by 1995. The reasons were twofold: first, reliance on educational results and contacts continued to seem valid, combined however with a traditionalist belief that a good manager had a certain unmeasurable quality, a “je ne sais quoi”, that could only be discerned in repeated interviews. But second, surprising preferences for quantitative tests long established in French practice, notably handwriting analysis, continued to compete with American-style assessments. (Graphology ranked just behind interviews in company preferences, into the mid-1990s, as the French continued to believe that handwriting revealed traits not apparent in other data.) While assessment centers were copied from the United States as early as the 1970s, the French argued that they promoted an unpleasant feeling of “being judged”. But again, there was gradual change, toward American-style norms and practice. Competitive pressure and alterations in personnel functions prompted companies, like many banks or the international Novotel chain, to adopt assessment

procedures by the 1980s (though sometimes, to remove judgmental implications, they were renamed *Centres d'appréciation des compétences en situation*). The new law that required expenditure on retraining contributed to this trend. Other traditions yielded. By the late 1990s, only 10% of all personnel advertisements were requiring handwriting samples, as even this remnant of cherished 19th-century positivism waned.<sup>68</sup>

Even as adaptations cut into initial resistance, claims of hollowness persisted. Management styles, responsiveness, and use of consultants were all indicted. In 1988, Jacques Volle, a quality consultant since 1958, argued that quality circles had ceased to be effective, because authoritarianism undermined them. Top managers persisted in responding to suggestions defensively, citing personal achievements to justify sticking to current policies. Volle noted, to be sure, that the same thing had happened in the United States a bit earlier, that only the Japanese had really applied quality circles to the whole personnel. And he admitted that individual French companies had really redefined themselves, focusing on management from the top down in the name of quality and mutual participation and spending substantial sums on retraining. But he argued that, overall, the need to restructure must precede any specific innovation, for change to have any chance.<sup>69</sup>

On another front: despite verbal enthusiasm for Total Quality Management in the 1980s and 1990s, French companies were indicted for paying only lipservice to customer data. Only 9% of all concerns studied customers closely; and whereas 70% measured client satisfaction and 89% did market studies, only 35% used the results. The majority

had a complaint office but only 1% forwarded them to relevant divisions. A mere 6% of French companies had adopted the American practice of sending fake customers to test service. Only a few companies – Renault, Club Med – had really moved to innovate. “Customer orientation is only in its beginning stages in France.”<sup>70</sup>

Relations with consultants were often ambivalent. In other areas, too, French companies often seemed to employ consultants and then systematically ignore their advice. A number, for example, regularly ordered reports from the McKinsey group, “But I know of none that has followed them.”<sup>71</sup> In response, consulting firms might ease up a bit in their insistence on American best practices. Arthur Anderson, in 1995, insisted that its agents were not “fanatics for every conceivable American model” though it was true that “many best practices [a phrase left in English] come from American groups, for they are often the best performers in the world.”<sup>72</sup> And one report, in the mid-1990s, argued that French firms were rebelling against consulting, in the name of returning traditional decision-making power to top managers.<sup>73</sup> Yet, despite the apparent ambivalence, U.S. consulting firms continued to expand efforts in France with firms such as Arthur Anderson opening on the Champs Elysées.

Most industrial countries, including the United States, displayed a gap between profession and practice, when it came to faddish innovation. Given evidence of substantial change, even leadership in certain categories, there is no reason to believe that levels of French recalcitrance were unusually high. Some shortfalls reflected the ambitions involved: a bank director rejected a *projet d’entreprise*, because there was

insufficient prior community of interests, while vowing to continue better-prepared decentralization efforts.<sup>74</sup> The only clear comparative difference involves not levels of French resistance, but distinctive reasons for it, reflecting the more hierarchical tradition and greater managerial self-confidence. Thus benchmarking, though widely noted, was less widely practiced than in the United States – reflecting customs of fiercely-guarded privacy. An early-1990s poll suggested that 49% of all managers judged themselves competent enough to do without external advice – a pattern noticeably different from the consulting-crazed United States.<sup>75</sup>

*Insistent Frenchness.* Along with gaps between apparent interest and real practice came a frequent desire, in commentary, to cushion against any impression that France was revolving to every American whim. Some of this was bombast, like the articles around 1980 that trumpeted the rise of Japan and American discomfort (though it quickly became apparent that Japanese models were more difficult or less relevant than adaptations in the United States, with imitative recommendations once again on the rise).<sup>76</sup> (“La fin du modèle”) Some reflected leftist disgruntlement that actually confirmed some successful importations, because they fell short of larger ideals and at the same time impeded protest. Thus Jean-Pierre LeGoff condemned manipulative efforts, writing of a steady decline in the workplace “from the failure of May 1968 to the gentle barbarism of [contemporary] management.”<sup>77</sup> But three more pervasive and substantive differentiations emerged, that really did suggest a distinctive selectivity amid the enthusiasm for innovation.

Struggles to assert some measure of independence abounded. In 1989, for example, the *Association internationale (francophone) du management stratégique* was formed (based in Quebec) to respond to the dominance of the American Academy of Management. Wit might be used to soften the impact of imitation on national pride: “no managerial theory can long resist gallic humor.” Jean-Paul Sallenave, writing on “antimanagement” from his experience as a Frenchman working for Boston Consulting in the United States, suggested a new, French set of rules: “It is better to give orders than to receive them.” “It is better to avoid problems, for we’re rarely capable of resolving them.” His sharpest barbs were reserved for the sanctimony of the Total Quality Management movement.<sup>78</sup>

Jokes aside, the French worried considerably (as did some American observers to be sure), about faddishness, preferring a sense of consistency and logical sequence. Thus an article anxiously assessed reengineering as “innovation or fad?”. Michel Godet, though in some sense an ardent if undeclared faddist as consultant, delighted in poking holes at American claims of innovation. Strategic management was “silly” – for all management consists of deciding on strategic directions. The excellence fad easily became excessive, as Godet noted that many of the American companies devoted to excellence were in trouble by the mid-1980s. “Carried away by their ‘passion for excellence’, they turn it into a religion and their book [Peters and Waterman] becomes a catechism where company heads are transformed into mythical heroes playing the role of apostles.” Peters’ later book on chaos, urging tremendous flexibility and abandonment of mass production, was “delirium”, for coordinated planning is essential. And again, the caution about

faddism: “Good ideas and new ideas, unfortunately, are not the same thing.” Often, specific American suggestions were valid, like quality circles and some decentralization, though even then the innovation claims were usually ridiculous (“as if this were a historic discovery in the annals of management”). “Do we need to pay \$12,000 for each conference devoted to the articulation of these holy principles?” “I am convinced that most best sellers in the field of management are the equivalent of American TV serials.” “If the recipes presented by American business schools and management best sellers are as useful as claimed, American businessmen would be performing better and United States industry less sick.”<sup>79</sup>

Godet and Sallenave, to be sure, were only individual observers, and Godet’s comments, as an eager-to-be-hired French consultant, were self-serving. There were plenty of imitate-at-all costs promoters as well, as we have seen. But even reform outlets disliked presenting one innovation after another in terms of dramatic novelty. They did see in American faddism not only foreignness, but symptoms of American extremism that might link with televangelism and religious excess. They disliked the guru approach. Again, without denying diverse responses, there was something of a French style in the way American fads were received, similar to responses to oscillating American-inspired enthusiasms in other areas. Even when American superiority was granted (and Godet pointed to excellent performance models in the French backyard), aspects of hyperbole and sudden about-faces, the hallmarks of the faddish aspect of American management styles since the 1970s, were not appreciated. The *Nouvel économiste* suggested the main point, in 1995: Fads should not be accepted blindly, either because they are American or

because they are new. Rather, they should be assessed by results and executives should cut through the faddism to seek valid continuities among them.<sup>80</sup>

With some exceptions, then, French businessmen and observers did not resonate to the wave-like thirst for constant novelty that seems to describe American faddism – where according to one assessment the best predictor of a new fad is simply the lapse of time since the last one.<sup>81</sup> While publicists echoed American fluctuations, serious interest did not follow up. Rather, assurances that an innovation was not brand new, certainly not transient, assured wider attention. Relatedly, French commentators explicitly shied away from the religious intensity, the quest for a holy grail, that so often surrounded American presentations, as in the Total Quality Management movement. Constant warnings were directed against hyperbole, even in movements that were being recommended. Good ideas could be “killed” by pushing too far, too fast, and American extremism was a real danger here. Quality circles thus were great, but people must be warned against “Quality in excess”, which stemmed from a pseudo-science that risked imposing arbitrary controls from outside the company. Excess here could vitiate the very goals of change, by imposing new regimentation in place of the old. A number of observers commented on a “very emotional religiosity” that permeated American business fads, that would have no place in France.<sup>82</sup> Finally – the third substantive distinction, along with dislike of movement for its own sake and rejection of undue intensity, the plea for moderation carried with it explicit recommendations of flexibility and lack of dogmatism.<sup>83</sup> French managers, according to a number of consulting firms (including some American branches) are more comfortable with ambiguity than their American counterparts, less

keen on standardized templates. In sum, French business accepted innovation, even some fads, within a distinctive cultural context, that reshaped the movement considerably from its American prototypes.<sup>84</sup> Here was one possible explanation for the absence of real national gurus: it was hard to muster up the dogmatic enthusiasms of which faddish leadership was made.

*Selectivity.* The heart of the matter lay here: from the origins of the new interests in the 1960s and 1970s, French innovators – commentators and actual executives alike – sought a consistent basic goal, and tended to downplay or reject American imports that could not be turned to that goal. In the process, sometimes unwittingly, they used but also departed from the American models. The essential focus served as a litmus with which successive American fads were tested.

From the start, the goal was an alternative to hierarchy and “taylorism” – a vivid focus that accepted American techniques, but also transformed them. American and French innovators often shared a desire for decentralization, new attention to human resources, and movements for wider employee participation, but the French alone applied these specifics to a single past model – the taylorite model – and discarded many fads that did not seem to further the basic transformation from a bad or outmoded past to a brighter present and future. While virtually every American fad had its advocates and groupies, as we have seen, in fact the real thrust of imitation was surprisingly consistent.

Examples abound, from the early 1970s to the late 1990s. Articles on quality circles might be entitled “Good-bye mister Taylor”, blasting the “old certitudes of the Taylor era”. “The Taylorite heritage and the bureaucratic model have produced organizations particularly badly adapted to new socio-economic situations.” In contrast, the new goal, the alternative to taylorism, was “to mobilize the women and men of the company around their activities and their projects.” The thrust was to “detaylorize and humanize,” with “detaylorization” fulfilled in “the company that mobilizes everyone’s intelligence.” The goal, again, was not a series of fads, but a consistent effort to replace an outdated model with a new one. “All the skills, all levels of hierarchy must meet.”<sup>85</sup>

Hence the early enthusiasm for quality circles, that were immediately cast into a “detaylorizing”, participatory mode considerably different from the American prototypes, that were more focused on measuring performance and output (elements that the French assimilated, but under largely separate headings).<sup>86</sup> Circles would cut costs – Sérieyx claimed that existing efforts cost only 20% of what they saved – but through regular meetings of small groups of employees, not the statistical measurements associated with the movement in the United States. Hence, early on, a claim that the circles, though imported, were being implemented “a la francaise”.<sup>87</sup> The quality circle movement seemed to offer a response to international competition, given its apparent success not only in the United States but also Japan. It answered earlier pleas, as in Servan-Schreiber’s *American Challenge*, to address basic culture and structure, beginning with the penchant for centralization and hierarchy. It suited the moment, around 1980, when global pressures were mounting and when business sought alternatives to socialist pressure. It allowed French companies, haltingly and incompletely to be sure, to address

their own rather authoritarian heritage, which was the key point. And the interest persisted, still under discussion in the later 1980s. Other fads, widely trumpeted in the United States, might thus be folded into to the existing French trajectory. Thus, French advocates presented elements of Total Quality Management in terms of improving and extending the effort to modify taylorist organization. Here was another chance to reduce central direction in favor of releasing initiative throughout the company. It was not, supporters like Sérieyx suggested, a fad at all, but rather than integration of valid portions of a number of specific theories plus a large dollop of common sense. Response did not require a host of expensive conferences, for the truths were familiar; but the reminder was nevertheless welcome.<sup>88</sup>

Finally, it was the basic interest in a participatory alternative to “taylorism” and hierarchy that defined key responses to later American fads. Thus enthusiasms that seemed to gain a separate life in the United States, like Total Quality Management, received relatively little play. Key books were translated but not widely reviewed, and the crusading American tone was largely absent. Supportive associations formed, to be sure. But the zealotry of TQM advocates already ran afoul of the French style, and the merits of the movement largely fit into the decentralization, anti-taylorist efforts already underway. TQM did, to be sure, add a salutary interest in the customer, which French observers, even in the Ministry of Industry, acknowledged and praised, but this was an accretion, not a separate initiative. And in practice, most specific TQM ideas were divided into separate categories, not given the worshipful attention that the movement gained in some American quarters.<sup>89</sup> Business school curricula did not in the main add

Total Quality courses, as their American counterparts did so eagerly; previous adjustments, as in the addition of human resources components, largely sufficed.<sup>90</sup>

In the same context, a number of other American enthusiasms received at best passing attention. Strategic management did not catch on too widely, because most interested French companies thought they were doing it already. Consulting firms offered help, but without quite as much priority as in the United States, where it typically headed the list of services in management consulting firms.<sup>91</sup> The variety of leadership movements, addressed to individual self-improvement, were also at best modestly popular: French managers assumed, as we have seen, that they had the necessary attributes (or perhaps, if not graduates of the best schools, would not benefit from additional trouble). American oscillations between recommendations of decentralization and then a return to centralization were simply not echoed in France. “Pendulum swings” cited in American business literature from the 1950s onward do not crop up in French materials – save in observations about the United States. There was a French debate, to be sure, between the centralizing tradition and the new reform impulse, but managers were more interested in taking a stance within the debate than in zigzagging from one pole to the other.

Hesitations about faddism that diverged from the core French concern about authoritarianism versus participation showed clearly in the belated and skeptical response to the American reengineering movement of the early 1990s. Translations of the initial work came quickly, to be sure. But most French managers and commentators seemed to find the approach contradictory to the attention to a more participatory management style; rather, it was a new incarnation of taylorism, a “neo-taylorism” that should be rejected.

Some also criticized it as a technique without clear goal. But the main comment focused on reengineering's scorn for "human capital" – precisely the entity that earlier reforms had highlighted. French observers focused on the downsizing aspect, which they professed to find socially irresponsible (particularly when combined with the widely-noted "indecent" of American chief executive salaries and the social costs of excessive deregulation). Thus companies picked up reengineering late, again with some individual exceptions. The movement was termed in decline almost immediately, again because of its social liabilities and potential abuse. The French publisher of the original reengineering book actually refused to translate Hammer's new book *Beyond Reengineering*, citing lack of interest – a rare explicit move. American programs that succeeded reengineering, notably Reichhold's fidelity movement, won more approving attention, precisely because they rejoined the reform current that most interested French managers.<sup>92</sup>

It is important not to oversimplify. There was faddism in France, based particularly on repeated enthusiasms for (almost) all things American where business was concerned. The central innovation interest, in using new, often imitative techniques to modify key management traditions, was not uniformly triumphant, precisely because it did attack well-established beliefs and practices. But the basic debate that resulted was somewhat more consistent, somewhat less faddish and more guru-resistant, than the business climate on the other side of the Atlantic. From 1989 onward, *Expansion* began to talk recurrently of a more confident new managerial generation in France, less interested in importing foreign styles and eager to "forge their own model, better integrated with the

French temperament.” French business schools, correspondingly, were posed to break away from the unduly specialized and technical American models. The verbiage was vague, for the French alternative was not clearly presented. It reflected no small amount of national wishful thinking, at a point when American business was poised for new dynamism. But a French adaptation had occurred to a degree, and a partial distancing from faddish enthusiasms was part of the process.<sup>93</sup>

#### Factors in Management Innovation and Faddism

Examination of changes and continuity in French management styles contributes to the explanation of business faddism, as the important parallels as well as the differences play out in juxtaposition to American patterns. Both cases, for example, reveal the lack of correlation between surges of enthusiasm and current economic conditions. Faddism can accelerate during prosperity, as in the American turn to strategic planning and reengineering during the 1990s or the growing French interest in imitation in the late 1960s. It can recede in initial response to a downturn, as in France during 1992-1994. What matters is business perception of possible future problems – again, France in the 1960s is a clear case in point – and above all a somewhat freefloating anticipation of major changes to come.

For faddism most clearly responds, if sometimes rather obliquely, to a desire to prepare for the unknown, for a future that will differ fundamentally from the recent past. In this sense, it differs from earlier developments, like taylorism, that focused on clearly defined workplace problems. Fads reflect a growing sense of uncontrolled chaos and

unpredictability.<sup>94</sup> Anticipated uses of new technology, for example in changing the nature of communication, can play a role here. Obviously, the transition from a largely manufacturing base to service and information functions (with related changes in the composition and educational background of the labor forces) figures very prominently, as in the French identification of a need to jettison what they (perhaps unfairly) call Taylorism in favor of a more open-ended model. Specific business fads can seem unfocused, even superficial, but they are designed in hopes that innovation will improve capacities to deal with issues that cannot be precisely defined save as differing substantially from what has been familiar. French and American business has shared this general impulse during the past three decades, and the French zeal for imitation of prior American anticipations reveals the common context.

At the same time, of course, specific definitions of the past and projections of future needs vary, in part according to prior traditions. The French have been clearer in their focus on hierarchy and the dominance of engineering models as the framework to be modified; American targets are less explicit, more open to fluctuation despite or perhaps because of a more wholehearted devotion to the idea of change. French fads, furthermore, have more overt political content, in reacting to an interventionist state, than is true in the United States. France has also used imitative faddism, almost regardless of precise contours, as a means of dealing with prior parochialism, of joining an international mainstream. While references to globalization pepper American faddism, along with a desire to react to the unexpected success of foreign competition, the sense of an isolation

to overcome is less well developed. Precisely because faddism is intended to deal with diffuse problems and projections, its purposes reflect different national needs.

But faddism reflects more than statements of problems, however indirect. It also mirrors elements in cultural traditions and educational structures, and some of these run surprisingly deep. American consumer culture, including promotional opportunities in publishing and conferencing, are more fully adapted to faddism and guruism than is French. Expectations about fads and about the need for popularized expertise in other aspects of life differ, and this conditions business reactions.<sup>95</sup> The role of popular psychology differs in the two cultures, and this shows up for example in human resources commentary and the differing numbers of self-help management books. The relationship between business and academe is tenser in the United States than in France, and the result encourages individual entrepreneurs to go one up on academics by citing their practical experience while encouraging venturesome academics to out-guru (and outearn) the promotional entrepreneurs. French academics, though interested in applied work, are more comfortable with their own domain. Greater French caution about fads in part reflects a greater hesitation to defy academic respectability or to bend academics to whimsical winds. French business commentators, and perhaps managers themselves, display a greater historical sense than their American counterparts, reflecting possible cultural differences but also different degrees of mobility from one organization to the next. While French executives are also told to worry about faulty organizational memory,<sup>96</sup> discussions of fads are guided by a clearer sense of a prior historical model (taylorism) and by more frequent injunctions to recognize that a fad, while new, actually

contains elements already in practice, perhaps as a result of the previous fad. The greater continuity, in France, between quality circles and TQM is a case in point.

The role of business schools is vital. American business schools have been cited for their emphasis on constant innovation.<sup>97</sup> The rapid expansion of MBAs has not been accompanied by a movement for professionalization – which would involve greater standardization (in part around established knowledge), testing and the like. The huge variety of training programs is one obvious symptom. The quest for innovation and frequent curriculum changes in this sense substitute for professionalization, providing a sense of special knowledge without the rigidity (and potential bargaining power) that professionalization brings. The Academy of Management meeting in 1999 thus featured 150-200 new titles from each top publisher, claiming—through remarkably similar-sounding titles—access to the latest fads. These factors are present in France as well, as imitation and faddism have been part of a struggle to establish business schools and their graduates in an educational system far more fully dominated by engineering. But the business school role, while growing, remains smaller, and the competition requires greater curricular circumspection in business school ranks. Management training provides a clear target for French reformers, and real changes have occurred in consequence, but the context inhibits the freewheeling atmosphere that sees many American business schools straining to keep pace with the latest business fashions.

Finally, differential faddism reflects distinctions in managerial self-confidence. Adoption of recurrent fads helps American managers build a sense of leadership and woo

their subordinates – as some TQM adepts noted, this function can be independent of the precise content of a given fad. Fads also respond to a pervasive sense of worry and insecurity in American managerial ranks. French managers are more self-assured. Their reactions, whether justifiable or not, stem from greater postwar economic success plus the more secure rankings provided by the educational system. The hierarchical tradition assures a loyalty that fads need not buy. The result is not, overall, a total resistance to change, but a clearly selective approach to innovation and imitation.<sup>98</sup>

## Conclusion

French reactions to American business trends since World War I follow a classic cultural-imitation model. The power of foreign example is granted, and a variety of contacts expand awareness of what this example entails – in this case, including the procession of American management styles. Resistance includes outright attack and cynicism, a reluctance really to change much even when apparent imitation occurs, and a desire to shake off tutelage in favor of one's own defined style. Important elements of the pre-contact management culture persist. But there is change as well, based not on wholesale importation but on selectivity and blending with existing patterns. The result is hard to define, for it is neither traditional (classically French) nor entirely convergent (Americanized). But it has its own flavor, in this case including a somewhat distinctive reaction to faddish swings. Above all, the central problem is not for the most part portrayed as catching up to a superior model but using elements of this model to deal with a set of issues that are domestic and domestically defined.

Has the French approach worked better than the American? It is certainly tempting to emphasize its greater consistency, but also possible, as some French observers themselves have noted, to belabor undue timidity and selectivity. Clearly, further comparative analysis is warranted – and it is also possible to conclude, precisely because of the importance of traditional and structural factors in the development of contemporary faddism, that no single optimum can be identified in any event. It has been difficult to decide if fads have been useful even within the United States. Some analysis inclines to the affirmative, while noting however the legion of companies cited one year for their innovative leadership that have gone down the tubes three years later.<sup>99</sup> French economic results, overall, since the 1960s advent of faddism, compare very favorably to those in the United States; one account, even in the 1990s where the balance seems to incline toward recent American advantage, notes a 12% French lead in per worker productivity.<sup>100</sup> Certainly, it is possible to suggest a somewhat different mix of problems and strengths with regard to faddism. Greater American willingness to innovate relates to frequent changes in signals, as in the shift from participatory TQM to hierarchical downsizing with reengineering. French business, though not unwilling to change, may nevertheless hesitate unduly (a claim recently advanced concerning the reluctant commitment to reengineering), while however serving up less confusion to the labor force.

The French experience, however difficult to evaluate comparatively, offers one other important lesson. American observers, including businessmen, frequently belabor the French hierarchical and elitist proclivities.<sup>101</sup> How much the comments reflect

stereotypes, how much ongoing experience is not always easy to sort out. Recent management history shows clearly that there are distinctive French ingredients in the contemporary business equation but also that significant change and adaptation are also significant parts of the story. It is vital to keep the diversity and responsiveness of French business in mind, and imitative faddism has a significant role in the comparative story. Ultimately, the most interesting prospect may be the hesitant emergence of a newer assertion of differentiation, based not primarily on tradition but on a distinctive definition of the kinds of changes to be sought in contemporary management. Even at a time of national economic self-congratulation, the power of the American model may at last be fading.

## Footnotes

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