

There is Nothing so Practical as a Good Theory

Lewin

Henri Fayol, the Manager *Jean-Louis Peaucelle and Catherine Guthrie*
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When [Lewin \(1951\)](#) made his now classic observation about “good” theory, he explained that theory is “good” to the extent that it enables us to understand, explain and predict reality. At about the same time, English-speaking managers and academics were introduced directly to [Fayol’s \(1949\)](#) ideas about managerial work. His treatise, *General and Industrial Management*, in which he outlined the key functions of management as planning, organising, coordinating, commanding and controlling, slotted comfortably into the category of “good” theory, having a significant impact on managers and the practice of management around the world. Indeed, [Carroll and Gillen \(1987, p. 38\)](#) argued that Fayol’s functions “represent the most useful way of conceptualising the manager’s job”, while [Wren \(1994, p. 193\)](#) stated that “Fayol’s elements of management provided the modern conceptualisation of a management process; his principles were lighthouses to managerial action”.

In the meantime, however, [Mintzberg \(1973, 1975/1989\)](#) dismissed as “folklore”, [Fayol’s \(1949\)](#) conception of managerial work. Management is not, [Mintzberg \(1973\)](#) said, about functions. Rather, it is what managers do. He said his findings were “as different from Fayol’s classical view as a cubist abstract is from a Renaissance painting” ([Mintzberg, 1975/1989, p. 9](#)). Since then, much debate has centred on “Who is right, Mintzberg or Fayol?” ([Duncan, 1999, p. 32](#)). Having engaged actively in the debate over the years ([Lamond, 2004, 2003a, 2003b, 1998](#)), I was most interested to be able to examine [Peaucelle’s and Guthrie’s \(2015\)](#) construction of Fayol as manager, especially as it is introduced by a Foreword from renowned Fayol scholar, [Wren \(2015, pp. 7-11\)](#), and concludes with the first English translation of the third part of *Industrial and General Management*, along with a transcript of Fayol’s final interview in 1925. I have not been disappointed, as Appendices.

The book, of ten chapters, is, unsurprisingly, organised around Fayol’s functions of management, and embedded in chapters on the industrial context of nineteenth-century France, and the wider corporate functions – the financial function and corporate governance, the commercial function, the technical function and the security function. Emphasising the relationship between his theory and the

actions Fayol took as a manager on a day-to-day basis, the authors' stated objective is to:

[...] describe Fayol's actions and compare them with his doctrinal thought [...] [to see] [...] his scientific method at work in the way his experiments helped build his theory, and examples that clearly illustrate the main aspects of his management doctrine.

Throughout the book, Peaucelle and Guthrie (2015) succeed admirably in demonstrating that Fayol's was not merely a theory of management, but a *good* theory of management in Lewin's (1951) terms. In this it is quite reasonable for them to conclude that Fayol's theory "corresponds to the daily reality of Henri Fayol's company and it still remains a guide for managers today" (Peaucelle and Guthrie, 2015, p. 182). Indeed, it gave me pause to reread my own work regarding a "reconciliation" of Henri (Fayol) and Henry (Mintzberg) where, in a discussion of preferred and enacted managerial style, I posited that Fayol gave us management as we would like it to be and Mintzberg gave us management as it is (Lamond, 2003a, 2004). Given access to the materials in Peaucelle's and Guthrie's (2015) book, I am likely to have reached the view then, as I do now, that Fayol's longitudinal study provides the basis for a much more comprehensive series of insights into the nature of managerial work than latter-day, time-limited, cross-sectional studies. In this sense, Fayol offered not just a lighthouse to managerial action but, in terms of Schon's (1983) reflective practitioner, an exemplar of the capacity to reflect on action and so engage in a process of continuous learning.

There are some typos (e.g. Contents Chapter 4 *The Management* (sic) of Managers and J. Storrs rather than C. Storrs, p. 1), but it would be churlish to spend any more time on those beyond a brief note.

In her review of *General and Industrial Management*, Carter (1986, p. 456) observes that:

A rereading of Fayol's work is a convincing argument for the inclusion of a required course on the "Classics" in graduate schools of management. When Fayol's and similar "Classics" are juxtaposed with contemporary management writings, an enlightening assessment of "just how far management has advanced" is possible.

Thirty years later, Carter's observation is apposite and *Henri Fayol, the Manager* would be a most valuable addition to the reading list for such a required course. With that in mind, the final paragraph of Wren's (2015, pp. 10-11) Foreword makes two salient points that are entirely apt on which to conclude this review:

- (1) Peaucelle's and Guthrie's (2015) work "makes a lasting contribution to management history and theory by replacing aphorisms with details about how Fayol's experiences became his management doctrine".
- (2) Fayol's theory "is sound because of its longevity in teaching and practice and our continuing unfolding evidence about its foundation".

Accordingly, I suspect Lewin would classify both contributions as most practical.

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Further reading

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