

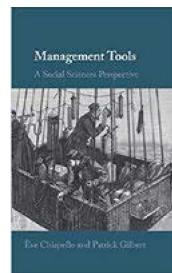
Ève Chiapello and
Patrick Gilbert · 2019

Management tools. A social science perspective

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Reviewer **Alina Marktanner**

Cologne: Max Planck Institute for the Study
of Societies
amt@mpifg.de



How to study management tools from a sociological perspective? Ève Chiapello and Patrick Gilbert present not one, not two, but ten possible answers to this question.

Offering a concise overview of some of the most prevalent sociological theories of the past few decades, they sketch out their possible applications to matters of management. This volume first appeared in its French version in 2013. Favorably received by the French speaking research community, Cambridge University Press presented a revised English edition five years later. The careful translation is idiomatic throughout and allows for an agreeable read. More than that, it makes accessible or recalls theoretical approaches that enjoy particular popularity in French scholarship to non-French speakers, such as the psychosociological or the conventionalist tradition. Having said that, the authors also invite us to follow the trails of Marx, Foucault, Desrosières, Latour, Giddens, and others.

Mind you, this is not your book of choice when looking for a captivating storyline. Rather, it serves as a finely crafted reference guide for students and researchers

in the fields of sociology, political sciences, or organizational studies who have an interest in approaching management as an object of analysis. As a result of their various teaching activities, the authors conceived the volume as material for doctoral and postdoctoral researchers. Yet, given its modular set-up and clear and simple presentation, graduate students can easily work with it, too. Teaching staff will equally benefit from consulting Chiapello and Gilbert in setting up courses in economic sociology and adjacent fields.

The book is divided into three parts: an introductory chapter detailing the authors' theoretical assumptions; the main body of the work comprising the ten social science propositions on how to make sense of management tools, which Chiapello and Gilbert term "theses"; and a synthesis suggesting ways to integrate the approaches discussed. Before they show *how* sociologists may study management tools, the authors elaborate on *why* they should do so. They consider management tools "intangible techniques," bound up with social action. Positioning themselves in the tradition of science studies, more specifically in line with authors concerned with the agency of materiality, Chiapello and Gilbert warn us of three standpoints that gloss over the complexity and social embeddedness of management tools: denial of technology, technophilia, and technophobia. Mobilizing the anthropology of techniques, they propose to understand management tools as "a specific group of organisational objects that have characteristic traits and can be described in three ways": functional ("what is the tool's use?"), structural ("what does the tool consist of?"), and processual ("how should it be used?") (p. 27).

The authors then lead the reader through the ten "theses,"

taking up one theoretical approach at a time. In the structured fashion that marks their writing, they distinguish three categories: critical views with which management tools can be analyzed as instruments of domination and discipline; institutionalist perspectives which may elucidate the structural dimensions of management tools; and interactional approaches which can focalize the human-object relations forming around management tools. In this, the authors achieve their declared aim of pinning down each theory's core message in a couple of pages without simplifying it. Conveniently, they round off every thesis by highlighting its key points and display the essence of each approach in useful tables. Moreover, brief excerpts of published case studies illustrate possible empirical applications. The three guest-authored sections by Bénédicte Grall, Marion Brivot, and Carine Chemin-Bouzir do not disappoint and blend in seamlessly with the writing style of the main authors.

What most starkly sets apart the English from the original edition is the last part. Previously, that chapter was devoted to four case studies putting the arguments made to the test. In the revised volume, Chiapello and Gilbert decided instead to reveal some of their recent research and produce a synthesis of the preceding sections. Their goal here is to get to the bottom of what they call the "agency" of management tools and they do so by examining their immediate ("first-order") and indirect ("second-order") effects. It may be questioned, however, if another theoretical account really does serve the purpose of a textbook better than some practical examples would.

These positive observations notwithstanding, another critical note is in order. Chiapello and Gilbert concede repeatedly that the theories chosen were not orig-

inally designed for the analysis of management tools and admit to a certain conceptual "eclecticism" (p. 203). This very openness certainly speaks for the sociological nature of their endeavor as they refrain from building on recent advances in organization and management studies and return to the classics instead. Nevertheless, it may leave aficionados of conceptual precision dissatisfied at times. The authors do seem to have an underlying idea of their object of analysis that remains narrower than they claim. Repeated enumerations point towards that: management tools, for Chiapello and Gilbert, may thus include "appraisal interviews, quality norms, coaching" (p. 58); as relevant specialists they count "computer scientists, management controllers, process engineers" (p. 191). Hence, the authors implicitly focus their study on the context of the corporation and disregard other organizational contexts where management practices play out, such as public administration. Although the authors claim to construct the notion of management tools by the very act of analyzing it, it thus remains blurry throughout. These considerations do not, however, diminish the many achievements of Chiapello's and Gilbert's contribution. *Management Tools* could become a standard reference work for students and scholars of economic sociology, management studies, and organizational psychology alike.