

Johann Chapoutot's *reductio ad Hitlerum*: When ideology prevails over historical rigor

Review of **JOHANN CHAPOUTOT**,
Libres d'obéir: Le management, du nazisme à aujourd'hui,
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Thibault LE TEXIER

Johann Chapoutot's new book makes two main claims: not only that Nazism was a "managerial moment," but also that it was "one of the seedbeds of modern management." He fails to prove either of these hypotheses. The first part of the book describes a Nazism that is not particularly managerial, while the second describes a management that is not particularly Nazi. Regarding the "managerial moment" claim, Chapoutot focuses on just a handful of SS jurists whose ideas had more to do with military command than management, and whose influence on management seems minimal. As for the second claim, it relies on a flawed syllogism: an SS jurist becomes an influential management instructor in postwar Germany; some elements of his managerial theory were already present in his pre-1945 writings; therefore, management is tied to Nazism. In attempting to tackle a vast question, Chapoutot offers a history that is riddled with blind spots, partial, and sometimes even tendentious.¹

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BOOK

"The history of management began well before Nazism, but it continued and was refined during the twelve years of the Third Reich, which was a managerial moment but also a seedbed of the theory and practice of management in the postwar period" (p. 16).

To support his two claims, Chapoutot concentrates on a group of jurists that formed around the journal *Reich, Volksordnung, Lebensraum (RVL)*. The first chapter describes how the members of this group, faced in 1941 with a shortage of civil servants to administer the Reich's growing territory in the

1. I would like to thank Jean-Claude Barbier, Pierre Labardin, Alexander Müller, and Olivier Sibony.

east, planned to reorganize public administration using a model developed at the beginning of the nineteenth century by reformers of the Prussian army and state. The Third Reich itself was very disorganized, as the second chapter rightly points out. Numerous agencies with poorly defined prerogatives competed against government bodies (a form of “polycracy”), and many Nazis were highly critical of the state’s bureaucratic rigidity. Among these critical voices, Chapoutot is particularly interested in the SS jurist Reinhard Höhn, one of the editors of *RVL*. As we learn in the third chapter, the intellectuals associated with *RVL* were critical of the state, which they accused of fettering the vital impetus and natural selection so dear to the Nazis. They advocated spontaneous order, freedom, the kingdom of nature, and a return to the medieval German community, where the individual was “free to obey” a guide (*Führer*). According to Chapoutot, these recommendations are indications of a new “managerial age” (p. 61). The fourth chapter covers a wide variety of topics. Chapoutot starts by asserting that the Nazi jurists associated with *RVL* saw in *Menschenführung* (which is, according to the author, a translation of the English term “management”) a way to put an end to the class struggle and bring about the “people’s community” (*Volksgemeinschaft*). He then turns to the social Darwinism espoused by the Nazis and their desire to discard “non-performers” (p. 66). Next, he points out that there was also a need to motivate German workers; to that end, the German Labor Front, which replaced all German trade unions in 1933, decided to supplement the merit-based promotion system with improved working conditions and recreational activities.

The fifth chapter traces Reinhard Höhn’s career. Born in 1904, in his youth he was a member of an antisemitic and anti-communist organization. He joined the NSDAP in 1933 and went on to become one of Himmler’s protégés and “one of the most promising managers in the SD” (p. 81), the intelligence agency of the SS. Despite being ousted from the SD leadership, he was made colonel (*Standartenführer*) in 1939 and ended the war with the highest rank in the SS (*Oberführer*). After the war, Höhn stayed in Germany and lived under a false identity for five years. He opened an alternative medical practice in a small town in Westphalia, where his treatments included the laying-on of hands. He then started giving talks on military history at the beginning of the 1950s. In 1953, he was appointed director of an “industrial think tank” (p. 87); three years later, it established the Bad Harzburg Academy, a continuing education center for managers, which was run by Höhn and to which he recruited three other former Nazis. “By the time of its founder’s death in 2000, the school had taught around six hundred thousand managers from Germany’s leading companies” (p. 88).

The sixth chapter concerns the book Höhn published in 1952: an intellectual biography of Gerhard von Scharnhorst, a Prussian general at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Von Scharnhorst was a reformer who developed the concept of *Auftragstaktik*, in which Höhn was a firm believer. A pragmatic and adaptable form of “mission tactics,” it recommends giving

officers and non-commissioned officers relative autonomy within the framework of objectives defined by the supreme command. The seventh chapter shows how Höhn, placing himself “dutifully in the service of the new ideals of the time—the economic growth of the eponymous ‘miracle’ and the triumph of Western liberty” (p. 105), recycled the concepts of *Auftragstaktik* in the form of a “management by delegation” that became the trademark of the Bad Harzburg Academy. The eighth chapter narrates the Academy’s decline after the public revelation, in 1971, of Höhn’s Nazi past, which had been known within the institution for a long time. It went bankrupt in 1989.

The epilogue pulls together various critiques of management, capitalism, and neoliberalism: alienation, reification, exploitation, the encouragement of competition between individuals, the cult of performance and profit, the destruction of nature. Inveighing against “bullshit jobs” and work “devoted to benchmarking, performance reviews, and the inevitable PowerPoint meeting” (p. 141), Chapoutot praises the social and solidarity economy and calls for a fuzzily defined “anarchic Arcadia, free of subordination and management” (p. 140).

To date, the book has sold more than twenty thousand copies in France and enjoyed extensive media coverage. It has been translated into German and Italian.²

A CATCHALL SUBJECT

There are several problems with the book, especially on the methodological level. The first is that it relies on an extremely loose definition of its subject, management. As Chapoutot uses the term, management refers variously to the government of a territory, the running of public administration, military command, social Darwinism, and the organization of work in a team. He tends to liken management either to the division of labor or to the drive for performance. The concept is only defined at the very end of the book, where it is described as “a reflection on the structures of work, the allocation of tasks, the definition of remits and responsibilities” (p. 128)—a very vague definition that makes no mention of performance and that seems more like a description of the division of labor than of management.

The author chooses to concentrate on a specific term, *Menschenführung*, which he claims is a “translation and Germanization of the American term *management*” (p. 64). In fact, *Menschenführung* is a generic term, nowadays largely outdated, meaning leadership or people management.³ The word has

2. Source: GfK.

3. An entry for “Menschenführung” can be found in the *Collins German–English Dictionary*: <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/german-english/menschenfuhrung>. I would like to thank Jean-Claude Barbier for his advice about how to translate this word.

acquired numerous meanings since the beginning of the twentieth century, by no means all related to the organization of work.⁴ For example, it was used in the interwar period by managers of small or medium-sized enterprises to refer nostalgically to the camaraderie between soldiers in the First World War: “what it means to lead men” (*was Menschenführung heisst!*).⁵ In the first half of the twentieth century, the German equivalent of the English “management” was, rather, *Betriebsführung* or *Betriebsleitung*. Frederick Taylor’s seminal work *The Principles of Scientific Management* was translated into German as *Die Grundsätze der wissenschaftlichen Betriebsführung*.⁶ But Chapoutot does not bother with semantics; he sometimes translates other German words (like *Verwaltungsführung*) as “management,” and is thus able to use the term to cover a whole grab bag of phenomena.

Historically, management was not simply a way to allocate work or improve performance. It articulates four aspects: 1) an attempt to measure, record, and rationalize work, from recruitment to rest breaks; 2) the premise that individuals and organizations can be easily molded or influenced, for example by training or through the physical arrangement of the workplace; 3) a desire to monitor work, particularly using objectives, indicators, and standards; 4) an almost obsessive regard for efficiency.⁷ Each of these aspects predates management and can be found outside it, but management, in the strict sense, combines all four.

Moreover, management must be understood simultaneously as a way of thinking about work, a set of practices, an arsenal of tools, and a group of professionals (middle managers). But Chapoutot devotes no attention to managerial tools, and he amalgamates private-sector executives, administrative officials, politicians, and officers (for example, p. 21). He focuses above all on discourses, especially the writings of Höhn and his colleagues at *RVL*, and on practices spotted here and there, in different countries and at different times. The result is a haphazard jumble of concepts including “joy in work” and the provision of recreational activities in Fascist Italy and under the Third Reich, Silicon Valley’s “chief happiness officers,” Amazon warehouses, and the recent management by terror of a German supermarket chain. The lack of rigor or of a systematic approach to the choice of facts and texts gives the impression that the author has carefully selected, out of an infinite array of materials, only those that can be used to support his theses.

4. For example, for the 1910s to 1930s: Rudolf Steiner, *Theosophie: Einführung in übersinnliche Welterkenntnis und Menschenbestimmung* (Stuttgart: Der kommende Tag, 1922 [1904]); Willy MÜLLER, *Rationelle Menschenführung als Grundlage einer erfolgreichen Personalpolitik* (Berlin: Buchholz & Weisswange, 1930); Ernst JAHN and Alfred ADLER, *Religion und Individualpsychologie: Eine prinzipielle Auseinandersetzung über Menschenführung* (Vienna and Leipzig: Passer, 1933).

5. Cited in Armin GRÜNBACHER, *West German Industrialists and the Making of the Economic Miracle: A History of Mentality and Recovery* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 131.

6. Frederick W. TAYLOR, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1911).

7. Thibault LE TEXIER, *Le maniement des hommes: Essai sur la rationalité managériale* (Paris: La Découverte, 2016). Other management specialists have shown that management cannot be reduced to a simple pursuit of efficiency: see Alfred D. Chandler Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1977).

AN UNGROUNDED AND SUPERFICIAL HISTORY OF IDEAS

What Chapoutot is looking for in these materials are “familiar elements, things one seems to have heard or read elsewhere” (p. 14), as he says of a vade mecum issued by the Reich Ministry of Food and Agriculture in 1941, in which he found the terms “elasticity,” “performance,” “objective,” and “mission.” If we are to believe Chapoutot, the mere fact that these now-familiar words were once used by a Nazi is enough to prove the “modernity of Nazism.” Whether the vade mecum’s recommendations were followed or not seems to be unimportant, as does the fact that there is nothing surprising about such words being used by a German officer of the period. The history of these concepts matters little to Chapoutot.

While the first part of the book is devoted to the “managerial” ideas developed by the journal *RVL*, Chapoutot does not seem interested in their actual application or their penetration among the German elites or the general population. What was the journal’s circulation? Was it widely cited? Were its ideas covered in the mainstream press? Were its suggestions applied in government, the army, or companies? We are not told. Some of the examples used, like “joy in work” or the provision of recreational activities for workers, are subjects that *RVL* clearly never addressed. The author fails to mention that the journal only ran for six issues. According to a historian of German public law, “the journal was elitist in conception and its primary purpose was to allow the leading circle of SS jurists to communicate among themselves; it was not aimed at indoctrinating broad segments of the population, nor was it intended to serve as a discussion forum for scholars of state and administrative law at the universities or for practitioners.”⁸ Four reference works on the economy of the Third Reich do not cite it at all.⁹ As for the management manuals written by Höhn in the 1960s, how many copies were sold? Which were the most widely read, and who read them? Were they translated into English or French? Were they reviewed in the press or in influential journals? How many companies put their lessons into practice? We are not told either. On all these subjects, Chapoutot’s book gives a strong impression of superficiality.

MANAGEMENT OR MILITARY COMMAND?

The author’s debatable choice to concentrate on the term *Menschenführung* seems to have been motivated by the fact that it was used by the authors who wrote for *RVL*, which Chapoutot has selected as the prism through which to

8. Michael STOLLEIS, *A History of Public Law in Germany, 1914–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004 [1999]), 323–24.

9. Alan MILWARD, *The German Economy at War* (London: Athlone Press, 1965); R. J. OVERY, *War and Economy in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Adam TOOZE, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (London: Allen Lane, 2006); Michael THAD ALLEN, *The Business of Genocide: The SS, Slave Labor, and the Concentration Camps* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

understand management. This choice is itself equally debatable. These jurists were essentially concerned with law, public administration, and the army. Reinhard Höhn, the focus of the second part of the book, was a professor of constitutional law with an enthusiastic interest in military history, but before 1950 he apparently knew nothing of the world of business.¹⁰

The reflections on *Menschenführung* of the handful of intellectuals associated with *RVL* cover various topics that were dear to the Nazis (vital impetus, social Darwinism, eugenics, racial purity, praise for the original German community, spontaneous order, anti-statism), but they were hardly managerial. Judging by the subjects covered by the book, they made no mention of topics such as recruitment, training, the measurement and analysis of tasks, evaluation, results monitoring, remits, indicators, reporting, the arrangement of workspaces, or salaries. Under the Third Reich, Höhn seems to have been essentially interested in international law, the adaptation of German law to the racist doctrines of the *völkisch* movement, the tightening of police law, and the legalization of terror.¹¹ The closest thing to a reflection on management in his writings from this period is taken directly from *Auftragstaktik*, the Prussian approach to military command based on delegation, trust, initiative, and the “freedom to obey,” as described in the first part of the book.

Chapoutot spares no effort in his attempt to show that these reflections on *Auftragstaktik* were in fact the core of “the Nazi conception of management” (p. 19). Typically, in his desire to present Höhn’s biography of General Scharnhorst as a management manual, Chapoutot wields a plethora of over-interpretations and conflation, as when he talks of “those modern armies, companies” (p. 93), likens the officers and non-commissioned officers of the Prussian army to “executives” (pp. 99–100), speaks of Bad Harzburg as an institute for the “training of executives in the practice of economic war” (p. 100), or defines *Auftragstaktik* as a “system of command—of military management” (p. 103). In actual fact, what he is so desperate for us to see as management belongs indisputably to the field of military command, as he himself occasionally admits. For example, he says of Höhn:

After 1945, and especially after the opening of his management academy in Bad Harzburg in 1956, he transposed this military and administrative model [*Auftragstaktik*] to the private sector and reinvented himself as a philosopher of service and industrial management. In dozens of works and thousands of seminars, he transformed *Auftragstaktik* into “management by delegation” (pp. 132–33).

10. An extensive study of business administration under Nazism only mentions Höhn once: Peter MANTEL, *Betriebswirtschaftslehre und Nationalsozialismus: Eine institutionen- und personengeschichtliche Studie* (Wiesbaden: Gabler, 2009), 728.

11. Ingo J. HUECK, “‘Spheres of Influence’ and ‘Völkisch’ Legal Thought: Reinhard Höhn’s Notion of Europe,” in *Darker Legacies of Law in Europe: The Shadow of National Socialism and Fascism over Europe and its Legal Traditions*, ed. Christian JOERGES and Navraj Singh GHALEIGH (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2003), 71–85; 71–72.

In short, Höhn only became interested in management, in the strict sense, from the 1950s. The first part of the book, therefore, represents a spurious attempt to make him into a major theorist of Nazi management.

THE FIRST BLIND SPOT: TAYLORISM, FORDISM, AND THE RATIONALIZATION MOVEMENT

Why did Chapoutot choose to approach the “Nazi conception of management” by studying an obscure journal run by jurists with little interest in work and its organization, who seem not to have cited a single management theorist, who were not really concerned with companies, and whose writings on administration were hardly, if at all, applied in practice (p. 96)? This emphasis is even more curious given Chapoutot’s concealment of the many managerial philosophies and experiments that did flourish in the cradle of the Weimar economy. It is as if the Prussian approach to military command could only be convincingly dressed up as a Nazi managerial theory by entirely ignoring the world of business, even though the latter had been the hotbed of management since the end of the nineteenth century.

In the 1880s and 1890s, German psychologists and physiologists carried out experiments in an attempt to identify the factors that influence the “performance capacity” of the “human motor,” to use two expressions from the time.¹² In the 1920s, the American economic model’s considerable influence in Germany contributed to the diffusion of these ideas throughout the wider public. Although Chapoutot does mention, if only in passing, the productivity missions conducted in the United States by German engineers in the 1920s (p. 72), he says nothing about Fordism or the “rationalization movement,” both of which were then sweeping over Germany. This is a huge and unjustifiable blind spot. The US economy was held up as a paragon in the Weimar Republic; a pilgrimage to the United States became an obligatory rite of passage for German engineers and businessmen, and numerous university exchanges and internships with American companies were arranged. At that time, writes Mary Nolan, “the debate about German economic reform was conducted in the idiom of Americanism and Fordism.”¹³ From the perspective of a Germany mired in endless economic crises, Fordism’s combination of the rational organization of work with mass consumption offered a vision of brilliant success that seduced bosses, engineers, and workers alike. The translation of Henry Ford’s autobiography, *My Life and Work*, was a sensation in Germany

12. Anson RABINBACH, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

13. Mary NOLAN, *Visions of Modernity: American Business and the Modernization of Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5. See also Peter BERG, *Deutschland und Amerika, 1918–1929: Über das deutsche Amerikabild der zwanziger Jahre* (Lübeck-Hamburg: Matthiesen, 1963).

and became a bestseller, with more than two hundred thousand copies sold,¹⁴ including one gifted to Hitler in 1924.¹⁵ In the same year, Himmler, already closely associated with the NSDAP, wrote to a friend: “So you’re reading Henry Ford... one of the most worthwhile, weighty, and most spirited predecessors in our fight.”¹⁶ Ford, observes Mary Nolan, was “something of a hero of German popular culture in the mid-1920s,” less for his notorious antisemitism than for the impressive success of his company.¹⁷

By contrast, Taylorism had a lukewarm reception. Perceived as technocratic, hostile to trade unions, and costly to implement, it was only adopted by a few large companies. It was only after the hyperinflation of 1923 and the crisis of 1924–1925, when the rationalization movement was on the rise, that Taylor became known outside engineering circles—and as numerous observers commented then, the organizational methods used in Ford’s factories owed a lot to him.

According to one contemporary, the rationalization movement was largely a synthesis and adaptation of Taylorism to the German system:

It is in the German universities and business schools—where the chairs of commercial and industrial economics have long been mulling the problem over—that this work of synthesis is taking place, with the help of economists and technicians and the fervent support of industrial executives. There is now an influx of articles and books, conferences and organizations all sheltering under the banner of rationalization.¹⁸

In 1921, the German state created the Reichskuratorium für Wirtschaftlichkeit in Industrie und Handwerk to coordinate the drive to rationalize trade, industry, and agriculture, but also home economics. Chapoutot, who never mentions the domestic sphere, seems to be unaware that it had been a hotspot for the development and application of managerial theories since the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁹ In the second half of the 1920s, around six hundred private organizations, eighty-five government offices, and sixty-seven research institutes were working on rationalization.²⁰ The Deutsches Institut für technische Arbeitsschulung (Dinta) (German Institute for Technical Labor

14. Thomas P. HUGHES, *American Genesis: A Century of Invention and Technological Enthusiasm, 1870–1970* (New York: Viking, 1989), 288.

15. Victoria DE GRAZIA, *Irresistible Empire: America’s Advance Through 20th Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005), 76.

16. Cited in Josef ACKERMANN, *Heinrich Himmler als Ideologe* (Göttingen: Munsterschidt, 1970), 37, and in ALLEN, *The Business of Genocide*, 14.

17. NOLAN, *Visions of Modernity*, 32.

18. André FOURGEAUD, *La rationalisation: États-Unis, Allemagne: essai de synthèse doctrinale* (Paris: Payot, 1929), 18. **Translator’s note:** Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign-language material in this article are our own.

19. For example, on household management in the period dealt with here, see Martina HESSLER, “The Frankfurt Kitchen: The Model of Modernity and the ‘Madness’ of Traditional Users, 1926 to 1933,” in *Cold War Kitchen: Americanization, Technology, and European Users*, ed. Ruth OLDENZIEL and Karin ZACHMANN (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 163–84; NOLAN, *Visions of Modernity*, 206–26.

20. Peter HINRICHS, *Um die Seele des Arbeiters: Arbeitspsychologie, Industrie- und Betriebssoziologie in Deutschland 1871–1945* (Cologne: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1981), 125, cited in NOLAN, *Visions of Modernity*, 133.

Training) was one of the main drivers of the movement. Incorporating the key elements of Taylorism and Fordism, Dinta emphasized “human rationalization” and conducted a project devoted to the “industrial leadership of men” (*industrielle Menschenführung*).²¹ Dinta’s explicit goal was to forge new workers who were better adapted to rationalized work. In 1926, it published around fifty newspapers with a total of four hundred thousand copies; in 1934, it published double that number, with a total circulation of one million.²²

The Nazis were undeniably the immediate heirs of these ideas and experiments. One management historian has shown that the economic system of the Third Reich “was a direct descendant of the longstanding operations of the rationalization movement.”²³ And according to Mary Nolan, before we even mention the many other expressions of the rationalization movement, “it is evident that Dinta’s attempt to rationalize the economy without Americanizing the worker had a significant influence on engineers and industrialists in the Weimar Republic and [...] on industrial relations and worker education under National Socialism.”²⁴ It is therefore incomprehensible for a study of the ties between Nazism and management to conceal, as Chapoutot does, the role of Taylorism, Fordism, and the rationalization movement.

THE SECOND BLIND SPOT: “JOY IN WORK”

Chapoutot points out that one of the editors of *RVL* advocated the idea of “joy in work” (p. 25) and that the department responsible for recreation within the Third Reich’s only trade union was tasked with “thinking about décor, ergonomics, safety at work, and recreational activities at the production site. An astonishing example of the modernity of Nazism: this was long before the age of table football, yoga classes, or chief happiness officers, but the principle and spirit are one and the same” (p. 74). According to Chapoutot, the Nazis were inspired by the *Dopolavoro* of the Italian fascists (pp. 72–74) to develop “a form of work ‘through joy’ (*durch Freude*) that prospered after 1945 and is still familiar today, when ‘commitment,’ ‘motivation,’ and ‘engagement’ are thought to depend on the ‘enjoyment’ of the worker and the ‘caring atmosphere’ of the organization” (p. 20). Current management techniques that advocate well-being at work are thus, according to Chapoutot, the more or less direct (the link is not clear) outgrowths of Nazism and fascism.

In fact, the idea that working conditions and workers’ outside lives influence productivity has been around at least as long as factories; entire books

21. NOLAN, *Visions of Modernity*, 180.

22. NOLAN, *Visions of Modernity*, 196.

23. Judith A. MERKLE, *Management and Ideology: The Legacy of the International Scientific Management Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 199.

24. NOLAN, *Visions of Modernity*, 203.

have been written on the subject in the United States since 1900.²⁵ In 1914, for example, an engineer and close associate of Taylor asserted that “feelings, such as happiness and contentment, and even hearing rhythmic sounds, music, etc., are an aid toward increasing output.”²⁶

Chapoutot omits the fact that various well-known bosses in Germany before the 1920s, including Alfred Krupp, Walther Rathenau, and Robert Bosch, were passionate advocates of the organization of recreational activities for workers and the improvement of their living and working conditions.²⁷ He also fails to mention that the concept of “joy in work” had long been promoted by Protestant thinkers like Friedrich Naumann, who was one of the founders of an organization dedicated to that principle in 1907.²⁸ Mary Nolan has emphasized “the centrality of the theme of joy in work in debates about technical and human rationalization” in the 1920s, and she has shown that this principle was one of Dintz’s favorite topics.²⁹ An astonishing example of the modernity of the Weimar Republic.

THE THIRD BLIND SPOT: A NON-AUTHORITARIAN CONCEPTION OF WORK

The book presents Höhn and his colleagues as the inventors of a form of “participatory” management (p. 131), which, as we have seen, was simply a reinterpretation of *Auftragstaktik*. Nevertheless, Chapoutot does not tell us that the principles of consent and subsidiarity, which formed the foundation of *Auftragstaktik*, were also in fashion in Germany in the 1910s and 1920s, with supporters such as the major Protestant figures Theodor Lohmann and Friedrich Naumann, as well as high-profile progressive managers like Walther Rathenau.³⁰ They were the basis of the concept of *Arbeitsgemeinschaft* (literally, working community), a federation of joint bodies comprising company directors and workers that became one of the pillars of German social law during the Weimar Republic after it was formalized by decree in 1918. At

25. See for example Edwin L. SHUEY, *Factory People and Their Employers: How Their Relations Are Made Pleasant and Profitable: A Handbook of Practical Methods of Improving Factory Conditions and the Relations of Employer and Employee* (New York: Lenthion & Co., 1900).

26. Lillian Moller GILBRETH, *The Psychology of Management: The Function of the Mind in Determining, Teaching, and Installing Methods of Least Waste* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1994 [1914]), 174.

27. See for example K. W. MICHAELIS and O. E. MICHAELIS, *Alfred Krupp: A Sketch of His Life and Work, After the German of Victor Niemeyer* (New York: T. Prosser, 1888), 20–24.

28. David MESKILL, *Optimizing the German Workforce: Labor Administration from Bismarck to the Economic Miracle* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018), 47.

29. NOLAN, *Visions of Modernity*, 179. See also Joan CAMPBELL, *Joy in Work, German Work: The National Debate, 1800–1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

30. See Harry KESSLER, *Walther Rathenau: His Life and Work*, trans. W. D. Robson Scott and L. Hyde (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1930 [1928]), 179–84 and 257–58.

the beginning of the 1950s, it was brought up to date under the new name of *Mitbestimmung* (codetermination).³¹

Although these developments are crucial to an understanding of wage relations in interwar Germany, Chapoutot only refers to *Mitbestimmung* once (p. 110), while *Arbeitsgemeinschaft*, progressive bosses, and Protestant leaders get no mention at all. He is thus able to suggest that Höhn and his *RVL* colleagues developed “a non-authoritarian conception of work” (p. 20) inspired essentially by Nazi doctrine. Because this conception of work continued to permeate Höhn’s postwar writings, Chapoutot feels justified in claiming that Nazism served as a “seedbed of the theory and practice of management in the postwar period” (p. 16). This syllogism is not just flawed, in that Chapoutot never shows what was specifically Nazi about the conception of work proposed by Höhn and his colleagues; it also relies on the concealment of extremely important facts. This kind of constant cherry-picking from any historian would raise questions. But from a historian who wants to prove that Nazism is “embedded in our time and place” (p. 19), this concealment of the ways in which Nazism was itself consistent with ideas and practices that were widespread during the interwar period is frankly astounding.

THE FOURTH BLIND SPOT: MANAGEMENT UNDER NAZISM

“Debates about the organization of work, the optimization of factors of production, and the most efficient productive society were frequent and intense during the Third Reich” (p. 77), says Chapoutot, correctly, at the beginning of a chapter that strangely enough does not cite a single contemporary source on the topic.

In Germany, the beginning of the war made efficient industrial production more essential than ever. Starting in 1941, Hitler ordered his successive ministers of armaments and munitions, Fritz Todt and Albert Speer, to apply various rationalization and mass production techniques, inspired mostly by Taylorism and Fordism, to factories producing war matériel.³² Robert Ley, the man ultimately responsible for the organization of the Nazi Party and the head of the German Labor Front (which replaced German trade unions after their dissolution at the beginning of May 1933), supported the establishment of training centers for managers. Oswald Pohl, meanwhile, was head of the SS Main Economic and Administrative Office, while also overseeing the organization of the concentration camps. There is a long list of such examples of the development and application of managerial methods under Nazism.

31. See Edwin F. BEAL, “Origins of Codetermination,” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 8, no. 4 (July 1955): 483–98, particularly 486–87.

32. OVERY, *War and Economy in the Third Reich*, 343–75.

Although Chapoutot notes that Speer was, from 1942, “the great organizer of the war economy, the modernist technician, the astute administrator—in short, the supreme manager of the industries of the Reich” (p. 18), he is not interested in Speer himself and only mentions him on this one occasion. Likewise, he only refers once each to Todt, Ley, and Pohl (respectively pp. 43, 40, and 17) and does not look in detail at the managerial methods they promoted, their agents, or their tools. This is a fourth blind spot in the analysis, and it is as unjustifiable as the others. At the very least, Chapoutot should have compared the forms of work organization promoted in *RVL* and those that were actually implemented by engineers, civil servants, politicians, officers, and senior Nazis.

The administrators of the Third Reich indisputably borrowed elements from the managerial theories that were popular in the 1910s and 1920s in Germany and other industrialized countries. But this borrowing had little to do with the small group of jurists studied in this book, whose ideas were not concerned with management in the strict sense and were anyway never put into practice. In the second part of the book, Chapoutot thus tries to show that “the Nazi conception of management continued to have consequences and relevance after 1945” (p. 19), without having bothered to properly define what the “Nazi conception of management” is and while concealing many of its sources of inspiration.

REINHARD HÖHN: A FRAGMENTARY PORTRAIT OF A PIVOTAL FIGURE

What, then, was the exact nature of the links between Nazism and management after 1945? Chapoutot’s hypothesis is vague:

The former administrators of the Greater Reich were particularly popular in the private sector, which appreciated their excellent training (usually as lawyers), their experience at the head of Reich agencies, and the twelve years of good business that had been made possible thanks to rearmament and the fruitful cooperation between German industry and the SS concentration camp system (p. 84).

Which companies, in which sectors, courted which administrators and for which roles? Did German companies after the war adopt the tools developed in the many agencies of the Third Reich? Chapoutot does not say. According to him, the pivot linking Nazism and management before and after the war was essentially a single man, Reinhard Höhn. Unfortunately, the portrait he presents of Höhn is riddled with gray areas. For example, how did Höhn make the transition, around 1953, from treatments such as the laying-on of hands to the industrial world? Did he have personal connections with bosses, perhaps through the network of former SS officers or army contacts? Chapoutot tells us nothing about this crucial turning point in Höhn’s life. Biographical details scattered throughout the book suggest that the former SS officer was not recruited for his administrative ideas or his ties to Nazism, but for his

skill as a teacher, his cultural knowledge, his intelligence, his humor, and his “charisma” (p. 91). That is all we find out about the subject.³³

Neither does Chapoutot specify how Höhn learned about management, which books he was inspired by, whether he met any US academics, if he ever went to the United States, if he socialized with bosses and managers, or what contacts he made in the business world after his appointment as head of an “industrial think tank” in 1953. It would have been useful to know how Höhn recruited and managed the teaching faculty at his training institute. Chapoutot notes that “two hundred thousand managers were trained by Höhn and his teams between 1956 and 1972” (p. 133), the Academy’s boom years. But what curricula were used to train these managers? What sort of teachers were recruited? How many people taught at the Academy? The book tells us nothing. Chapoutot does emphasize that three other former Nazis also gave classes there (two gave talks on a part-time basis and the third joined the Academy in 1970), but he provides no details about what they taught or their careers within the Academy. Two teachers and two speakers who were former Nazis: it is not a large number for a training center that taught two hundred thousand managers in fifteen years. In fact, Alexander Müller, the author of the only biography to date of Höhn, says that the Academy had eleven regular teachers and thirty-five speakers in 1960, and at its height in 1971 its numbers had grown to around thirty teachers and around one hundred speakers.³⁴ This does not prevent Chapoutot from arguing that a significant number of German bosses in the postwar period “sent their managers to listen to the valuable lessons of former SS officers” (p. 90). This, then, is what the book boils down to: after the war, some former Nazis taught at a prestigious “business school” run by another former Nazi, and, Chapoutot implies, their teachings were inspired by Nazi doctrine. There were, therefore, direct links between Nazism and postwar management. Q.E.D.

Except the line of reasoning fails to hold up, again. First, it is misleading to compare the Academy to “INSEAD, or any business school offering MBAs for managers” (p. 90). Bad Harzburg was not a business school but a continuing education center for managers, and particularly for middle managers; its students spent no more than a few weeks there. The large number of students who went through its doors suggests that it was not highly selective, and Harm Schröter notes that “its short, ad hoc program, although very popular, was by

33. For information about Höhn, I have used Alexander MÜLLER, *Reinhard Höhn: Ein Leben zwischen Kontinuität und Neubeginn* (Berlin: Be. Bra Wissenschaft Verlag, 2019); Adelheid VON SALDERN, “Das ‘Harzburger Modell.’ Ein Ordnungssystem für bundesrepublikanische Unternehmen, 1960–1975,” in *Die Ordnung der Moderne: Social Engineering im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Thomas ETZEMÜLLER (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2009), 303–29; Michael WILDT, “Der Fall Reinhard Höhn: Vom Reichssicherheitshauptamt zur Harzburger Akademie,” in *Rückblickend in die Zukunft: Politische Öffentlichkeit und intellektuelle Positionen in Deutschland um 1950 und um 1930*, ed. Alexander GALLUS and Axel SCHILDT (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2011), 254–71.

34. Correspondence with the author.

no means equivalent to an MBA.”³⁵ Chapoutot points out that the Academy offered training not just in management but also in marketing and nutrition science, but he omits to mention that the range of courses offered was actually even wider than that and included labor law, sales, engineering, economics, secretarial training, public relations, and accounting.³⁶ Höhn’s influence was certainly considerable in Germany in the 1960s, and it even extended into Austria and Switzerland, but hardly beyond that. If the catalogs of the Library of Congress and the Bibliothèque nationale de France are any indication, his manuals were not translated into English or French. And his influence seems to have declined rapidly in the 1970s. According to a survey of 355 West German industrial firms carried out in the mid-1970s, only 16 percent were applying the Bad Harzburg model either fully or partially.³⁷

Moreover, did Höhn and his three former Nazi colleagues teach students about “vital impetus,” the “original German community,” social Darwinism, or eugenics and “racial purity”? It seems not. Chapoutot notes that one of the former Nazis taught marketing and another nutrition science, but he does not see that as grounds to suggest a link between Nazism and marketing or Nazism and nutrition science.³⁸ As for Höhn, who taught management, Chapoutot writes that there is “in his postwar writings no longer any hint of the antisemitism or racism that were so fundamental to the Nazi worldview” (p. 135). By contrast, he “retained from Nazism the idea that, in the struggle for life as in the economic war, one must perform well and encourage others to perform well” (p. 135). As if that were a specifically Nazi idea...

The book also makes no mention of the international success during the 1950s and 1960s of Peter Drucker’s theory of “management by objectives,” which presented itself as a non-authoritarian form of work organization. It would have been interesting to know what, if any, influence it had on Höhn.³⁹ (The German translation of the bestselling book that popularized the method went through seven editions between 1956 and 1970.⁴⁰) According to Armin

35. Harm G. SCHRÖTER, *Americanization of the European Economy: A Compact Survey of American Economic Influence in Europe since the 1880s* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), 103.

36. Wolfgang GRUNWALD and Wilmar F. BERNTHAL, “Controversy in German Management: The Harzburg Model Experience,” *Academy of Management Review* 8, no. 2 (1983): 233–41, here 233; GRÜNBAUER, *West German Industrialists*, 68–69.

37. Armin TÖPFER, “Das Harzburger Modell in der Unternehmenspraxis: Eine Bestandsanalyse,” *Der Betrieb* 38 (1978): 1802–3.

38. For example, the links between Nazism and marketing have been studied in S. Jonathan WIESEN, *Creating the Nazi Marketplace: Commerce and Consumption in the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). To cite just one example, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann started her career writing antisemitic articles for *Das Reich*, a newspaper founded by Goebbels, before becoming a distinguished communication studies theorist after the war—see Christopher SIMPSON, *Science of Coercion: Communication Research and Psychological Warfare, 1945–1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 22.

39. Peter F. DRUCKER, *The Practice of Management* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954).

40. Mauro F. GUILLÉN, *Models of Management: Work, Authority, and Organization in a Comparative Perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 144.

Grünbacher, the classes given at Bad Harzburg included references to US models, social policy, and the peculiarities of postwar Germany, all blended with conservatism and paternalism—in other words, nothing intrinsically Nazi. Grünbacher specifies:

Höhn's supposed "German" model relied in many details on US ideas and philosophies but because it was similar to (or even based on) the German army's *Auftragstaktik* (mission tactics), a concept which many entrepreneurs knew from their own military experience, he could successfully market it to conservative German entrepreneurs.⁴¹

Chapoutot cites Grünbacher's study in his bibliography, but he does not discuss this statement which casts doubt both on the hypothesis that Höhn's managerial theories were Nazi in origin and on the claim that German bosses in the postwar period "sent their managers to listen to the valuable lessons of former SS officers," as if the Nazi past of Höhn and his three colleagues was the principal selling point of Bad Harzburg. In fact, Höhn seems to have been a conservative, nationalist, and antisemitic intellectual who was passionate about military history and converted to Nazism out of opportunism once Hitler came to power.⁴² He adapted his ideas about *Auftragstaktik* to the Nazi administration until 1945, before adjusting them again in the 1950s to suit the business world, where they made much more of an impact. There is no doubt that he was a pernicious and criminal Nazi before 1945 and an influential management instructor in postwar Germany. But that alone is not enough to justify calling Nazism one of the seedbeds of "modern management."

UNJUSTIFIED ANALOGIES AND UNDERHAND COMPARISONS

Chapoutot's book relies on the concealment of crucially important facts, but also on often imprecise analogies, and on partial or even deliberately misleading comparisons. One striking example is the author's claim that "Reinhard Höhn was a sort of legal Josef Mengele" (p. 78), a comparison with little basis in fact and no apparent purpose other than offering an easy way to demonize Höhn. Likewise, the only non-German work on management cited in the book is *L'Ère des responsables* by Maurice Papon, a Nazi collaborator.⁴³ Among the tens of thousands of books on management published since the beginning of the twentieth century, why highlight this particular one? Why does it deserve more attention than Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management* or Peter Drucker's bestseller on management by objectives? Did it become the bible of senior French civil servants? Does Papon cite Höhn or recommend

41. GRÜNBACHER, *West German Industrialists*, 57 and 68, quote on 70.

42. Joshua A. KATZ, "The Concept of Overcoming the Political: An Intellectual Biography of SS-Standartenführer and Professor Dr. Reinhard Hoehn, 1904–1944" (thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1997), 48–51 (<https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/998>).

43. Maurice PAPON, *L'Ère des responsables: Essai sur une méthodologie de synthèse à l'usage des chefs dans la libre entreprise et dans l'État* (Tunis: La Rapide, 1954).

similar managerial practices? Chapoutot does not say. Papon's book seems to be mentioned solely in order to enable the author to draw a specious link between collaboration and management. As with Mengele, the halo effect takes the place of demonstration.

Another example: Chapoutot uses the expression "shock of simplification" (p. 28) to refer to a bureaucratic reform during the Third Reich, but he does not specify whether the phrase was used at the time or whether he has simply borrowed it from François Hollande in order to insinuate, despite the risk of anachronism, the existence of a continuous line from Nazism to the present day. In his desire to produce "a sense of contemporaneity" (p. 13), Chapoutot makes use of the modern nuances of more or less managerial terms, ideas, and practices that existed during the Third Reich and still exist today—without telling us whether they also existed prior to Nazism or what makes them specifically managerial. A vade mecum issued by the Reich Ministry of Food and Agriculture may well have contained the words "elasticity," "performance," "objective," and "mission"; but does that justify the historian's insistence on a kinship between Nazism and management?

I will cite one last, particularly egregious example of flawed and underhand reasoning. To demonstrate the concrete influence of the Bad Harzburg method on the organization of German companies, the author mentions just one case: the supermarket chain Aldi, recently censured for its management by terror, its lack of respect for the legal obligation to authorize works councils, and its use of harassment and pressure. Were these practices recommended at Bad Harzburg? Obviously not, and Chapoutot even admits that the Bad Harzburg model "was no worse than any other; on the contrary," it presented itself as less authoritarian (p. 137). This does not, however, prevent the author from proposing a false syllogism: "Aldi has been a proud follower, since its origins, of the Bad Harzburg approach to management" (p. 125); Aldi practices management by terror; therefore, the Bad Harzburg approach is related to management by terror. When Chapoutot refers a few pages later to the France Télécom trial and working conditions at Amazon, he has no need to prove any kind of link between these companies and the Bad Harzburg model: the attentive reader will already have understood that management = evil = Nazism. The halo effect again.

Although Chapoutot announces in his introduction that his book is not an indictment of management (p. 18), he sometimes struggles to hide his disdain for "an economic and managerial sphere where great minds are not in the majority" (p. 90). And the epilogue is, in fact, an indictment of management. We read, for example, that:

In this world [the contemporary world], "management" is king, and the most painful problems a person can encounter (physical and psychological suffering up to and including suicide) are the very same ones it seems to create. [...] Should we "manage" our lives, our loves, and our emotions and be high performers in the economic war? These ideas lead to the reification of the self, the other, and the world—the widespread transformation of all

life, all beings, into “objects” and “factors” (of production) until the point of exhaustion and devastation (p. 136).

Peppered with these kinds of unnuanced assertions, the epilogue becomes little more than an ideological pamphlet, offering a critique of management that appeals to the reader’s indignation rather than her intelligence. The historian leaves the stage. Make way for the prosecutor.

Reading these accusations, it becomes easier to understand the book’s blind spots: the demonstration was always one-sided. The aim was to reveal what remained, after the war, of a supposed “Nazi conception of management” (which was in fact a reinterpretation of an approach to military command) and, to that end, to conceal the conceptions of management that Nazism simply inherited or that disappeared with it. The investigation was only interested in incriminating evidence.⁴⁴

Chapoutot apparently did not want to give an account of management from the end of the nineteenth century to the present day, with a section devoted to Nazism along the way, although that would have been interesting given the historical details we have discussed. What he wanted to do was to give an account of management from Nazism to the present day, and what he actually did was give an account of *Auftragstaktik* from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the 1970s. (The book should have been called *Freedom to Obey: Management, from Nazism to the FRG*.⁴⁵) The hypothesis of “the modernity of Nazism and the way it is embedded in our time and place” (p. 19) is never proven—and is anyway very vague: Modern in relation to what?

By presenting a fragmentary and skewed portrait of a Nazi jurist with a keen interest in military history who, after the war, became the director of a training center for managers, Chapoutot teaches us very little about Nazism or management. Management may destroy human beings, Nazism is odious, and the two are mutually compatible. That much is undeniable.⁴⁶ But that does not make it acceptable to dishonestly exploit Nazism and history in the interests of a partisan indictment of management.

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44. Most of the studies of work and neoliberalism cited in the bibliography are also scathing about management, generally treating it as no more than a simple tool in the service of shareholders. Some of these books are, in reality, hardly about management at all.

45. “Nouveautés,” *Livres de France* 1–3, no. 448 (2020): 68.

46. For example, on the compatibility of Nazism and management, see ALLEN, *The Business of Genocide*.