

Barbarian, or modern?

by David Chopin

Can Nazi barbarianism resurface in our modern world? Yes, according to Johann Chapoutot, in the pleasant guise of management, as one of its key promoters started out as a Nazi technocrat

About: Johann Chapoutot, *Libre d'obéir: Le management, du Nazisme à aujourd'hui*, NRF Essais Gallimard, 2020, 176 pp., 16 €.

Associating “Nazism” and “management” in the same study is a perilous undertaking as both these terms are so inflammatory, at times to the detriment of the quality of the analysis. This is the feat Johann Chapoutot’s short book accomplishes, with his subtle handling of the compossibility of a 20th century that saw the emergence of managerial ideology, and the still lively question of the conditions under which Nazi barbarism can exist in our modernity.

At the outset, the historian specifies that “the history of management began well before Nazism” (p. 16) and his book in no way claims to resume the history of management, or of Nazism. He wants to study the “managerial moment” that includes the IIIrd Reich, through a biography, that of the intellectual technocrat Reinhard Höhn. With this, Chapoutot adds another book to his body of work, in dialogue with numerous other academics,¹ seeking to understand the continuity of 20th century

¹ In his work, “*Modernity and the Holocaust*” (1991) Zygmunt Bauman had suggested rereading the genocide industries, not as an external, barbarian process in comparison to modernity, but as a new, indeed ‘modern’ relationship of means to ends. Johann Chapoutot belongs to a new generation of historians of Nazism who substantiate this view. Among them, in “Believe and Destroy (2013) Christian Ingrao describes this generation of a new academic elite as does Götz Aly’s (2005) work that

modernity through Nazism. After writing on law and art, his new book seeks to provide a new reading of the history of Nazism, in other forms that include the ideology of management.

The character, Reinhard Höhn, a law professor, allows Chapoutot to pursue his analysis beyond 1945 to include the period after the Second World War. Höhn was recruited by the SD (*Sicherheitsdienst*, “security service”) in 1932, a year before he joined the Nazi Party, and then the SS in 1934. He went on to become Reinhard Heydrich’s senior assistant. From 1941 to 1943 he was director of the review *Reich, Volksordnung, Lebensraum* (*Empire, Social Order, Vital Space*), affiliated to the NDSAP, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Wehrmacht, where he asserted himself as a specialist of the administrative organisation required for the future *Greater Space* (*Grossraum*) that focused on issues of “people management” (*Menschenführung*). His tireless intellectual work led him to a senior civil service position, and in 1944 he reached the level of *General* (*oberführer*).

The interest of this book is that we rediscover the same character, his Nazi past concealed, as the founder of one of the most prestigious business schools in West Germany, which he established in 1956 in Bad Harzburg. There, he trained a large section of the country’s economic elite in new management methods. Like in many other countries, the methods were adapted to local culture—in this case German, and presented in numerous bestsellers like Höhn’s *Menschenführung im Handel* (with Gisela Böhme, 1962) or his *Das tägliche Brot des Managements*, published in 1978 and translated into several languages. The subject of the book is the *continuum* of the principle of modernity: between the destiny of the German academic elite of the inter-war period, the IIIrd Reich and Rhineland capitalism. Three key movements emerge over the eight chapters of the book: the thinking of the IIIrd Reich administration, the implementation of Nazi practices, with the issue of people management (*Menschenführung*), and then the post-war conversion to the translation of management sciences.

describes the actors and projects involved in this ‘rational’ enterprise promoted by the new Empire of the IIIrd Reich in Western Europe. Several other works focus on the technocrats of extermination as a “business”, with portraits of Oswald Pohl (Allen, 2005) or Hans Kammler (Smelser, Syring, 2000).

Attempting to go beyond the idea of the State

The historiography of the IIIrd Reich has long shown that the Nazi approach during the war was based on a “polycracy”, reinforced by a profusion of metastatic institutions (Ingrao, 2017), among which competition escalated and intensified.

Johann Chapoutot had already worked on the corpus of the proto-State Nazi ideology: the Germans are a fantasized people, a people of tribes and families who respected the law of Nature (Roman law was responsible for racial degeneration, with the Judeo-Christian institutions). Hitler’s rise to power was a way of restraining the State (*Gleichschaltung*). Nazism is a “movement” and not a Party. Quoting Hitler, according to whom “It is not the State that gives us orders, but we who give orders to the State”² (p. 34), Chapoutot recalls that the State was subjected to competition with parallel institutions, in a sort of political Darwinism.

Reinhard Höhn had already published this vision in 1934, in an article titled: “Die Wandlung im staatsrechtlichen” “The Transformation of Constitutional Thought”. According to him, the concept of the State was born with the Renaissance, the time of the individual and the legacy of the Princes. According to this academic, this idea was no longer valid in the modern period, with the new era that he called that of the “community” where power gave way to “the exercise of command” (*Führung*).

This decentering of the focus of politics — with a shift from the State as an *end*, to Power as a *means* – was born out of the Darwinist conception of the Nazi ideology. The latter was critical of the artificial institution of the State that allows all individuals outside the “body of the people” (*Volkskörper*) to survive: viewing laws, social security measures, and all non-viable beings, apart from the German race, as harmful. The “Reich’s vast vital space’ does not mean the State (in its Renaissance form) but “reign, era, and kingdom” (the medieval form of *regnum*). Within the *Volksgemeinschaft*, order was to be immanent and spontaneous, the State would only have the right to exist if it no longer hampered the laws of Nature (p. 53).

While the exaltation of “Germanic freedom” draws from an ancient legacy that dates back to the “freedom of the forests” described by Tacitus in *Germania*, and to the 18th century thinkers (Boulainvilliers, Montesquieu and Fichte), it is also remarkably modern, as in the 20th century the State and bureaucracy would be out-dated. For the

² All of the quotes taken from the book were translated by the translator of this text.

national socialists, a leader is the *leader-companion* (Führer-Genosse), responsible for ensuring the application of the will of the community. Beyond the public and the private, beyond employers and employees, there exists a *productive community* (*Betriebsgemeinschaft*) that must no longer be organized by the theoretical corpus of the *administration* (*Verwaltung*), but by the alchemy of a new idea debated at the beginning of the 20th century: people management, designated by the term *Menschenführung*.

From people management under Nazism...

“People management” (*Menschenführung*) is the same as *management*, but not limited to it. Other works³ have widely studied the intense debate around this idea, and Chapoutot stops at emphasising Nazi ideology’s investment in this notion. Rejecting Marxist cleavages, the Nazi view of the world is a constant battle against nature, disease and other peoples. The aim of people management is to select and train these *compatriots* (Volksgenossen) to make them as efficient as possible. Social, biological and medical engineering were the cement of the sciences mobilised to bring this productive being into existence.

This Nazi *management* focuses on the idea of race and blood, while the worker draws his satisfaction from belonging to a community that dictates who has the right to live and to exist. Thus, “*non-efficient beings*”, “*lives unworthy of life*” and “*asocial*” beings were to be selected for elimination using the tools of biological, social and economic science (p. 66). Work is the leaven of the Germanic community: work camps seek to re-educate this group — the sick, the lazy and opponents must be eliminated. A new science—*menschenführung*—must help gratify, motivate and create this vast productive German community.

Like all managerial ideologies, the national socialist vision of work does not stop at purifying the world of the “incompetent”, it also punctuates work in a form released from the Marxist capital/work opposition, with an immense corporatist organisation based on “strength through joy” (*Kraft Durche Freude*) that replaces trade unions. An improvement in work conditions, opportunities for professional progress, leisure activities, access to luxury goods like cars, with the *KDFwagen*, designed by Porsche, then the *Volkswagen*, were the promises of the Nazi mass economy.

³ Particularly the book by Mommsen (1990) on the contribution of the social sciences.

... to management training for market economy executives

The discreet Höhn took advantage of the amnesty law of 1949 to convert, thanks to the former SD network and sought after legal skills. In 1953, he became the director of the Société allemande d'économie politique, an employer *think tank* dedicated to spreading managerial practices. In 1956, in the aftermath of the Marshall Plan, he founded a school in Bad Harzburg (Lower Saxony) for the West German industrial elites, along the lines of the Harvard Business School, or the INSEAD in France. Although within the space of a few years he shifted from a Nazi career to praise for industrial management, apparently Höhn did not renounce any aspect of his ideas and theories.

In a study of the war *Scharnhorsts Vermächtnis (The Legacy of Scharnhorst)* (1952), he attempts to show that, just like the Prussian defeats by Napoleon, the Nazi defeat of 1945 was provoked by the obsession with centralised command. The lower ranks' sense of initiative, capacity for action and decision-making, gave the units greater mobility. The system functioned less as a moral relationship of coercion on the part of the hierarchy, than by motivation thanks to systematic re-education that taught people to be enterprising (for the new German army). This was the management method that Reinhard Höhn went on to teach at Bad Harzburg, applying the same doctrine of "*delegating responsibility*" to private enterprise within a free market. As was the case in most capitalist countries, different versions of managerial ideology were introduced from the 1930s onwards. Johann Chapoutot mentions the Frenchman Henri Fayol, but in reality it was a translation of his thinking in the Anglo Saxon world.⁴

Reinhard Höhn was an "inexhaustible teacher and a compulsive writer" of managerial ideas, which in no way contradicted the ideas expounded during the Nazi period. Some of his numerous works on management became bestsellers, and were read by all the leaders and elites in the making in the country. Like in all the countries that benefitted from the Marshall Plan, management gurus emerged⁵ to translate and adapt publications by Harvard Business School or the MIT management school. One such example in France was the engineer Octave Gélinier, who taught at the Ecole des mines, the country's top engineering school.

⁴ And more specifically General Electric's "decentralisation" model (Cordiner, 1956) and General Motors' (Drucker, 1954) "management by objectives" model.

⁵ Luc Boltanski (1982) provides a detailed presentation.

What is important is not the banality of the managerial ideology translated into German by Reinhard Höhn, but the continuity of his arguments from one period to the next. He still held forth on *Menschenführung* and continued to draw from the social and biological sciences (p. 108). Criteria of Aryanness gave way to personal development methods (*Lebensführung*), using “*mental effort techniques*” (Höhn, 1985), marked by the psychological characteristics of leadership (*führung*). The “productive community” of the IIIrd Reich no longer existed, but Höhn went on to celebrate the work community made up of “*collaborators*” and their “*managers*”. This community found its expression in the social market economy of a FRG market that had opted for co-decision (*Mitbestimmung*) as the basis of company organisation.

Even more important, the delegation of responsibility, more generally called “management by objectives” only suggests an autonomy of means and not of ends. Reinhard Höhn writes: “Superiors never take decisions in their collaborators’ fields. They never do more than their management duty, which mainly consists in setting targets, providing information, coordinating and supervising.” (p. 113). This is how he elucidates modern management, maintaining the contradiction of “*freedom to obey*”: decision making is supposed to be “*delegated*” to the lower ranks, and circumscribed by control from above, in the form of “*job descriptions*”, the organisation of “*collaboration*” and objectivising each individual’s “*responsibility*”. With this, Höhn remains faithful to his critique of the State and the bureaucracy, but it now serves the “modern economy”. This covert *new public management* considers that the administration should change its “*management*” and “*organisational*” system, to become nothing more than a “*partner*” in the market economy.

Shedding light on both modernities: management and Nazism

The 1970s were to be more difficult for Reinhard Höhn: in 1972 the weekly *Die Zeit* sounded the death knell for the German translation of (so-called “*delegation of responsibility*”) management methods, to promote American “*management by objectives*” slogans, at the time when the Bad Harzburg Institute was shut down due to revelations of its links to former Nazis (p.121). In the conclusion to his book, Johann Chapoutot draws a parallel with the figure of Maurice Papon (President of Sud Avion/Aérospatiale). He wonders about these elites who support “*reactionary*

modernity”: an “archaic” goal, pursued using the most modern means of people management. Finally the work only presents a single biography, Reinhard Höhn’s, and the reader can legitimately wonder to what extent the argument can be generalized.

Indeed, Johann Chapoutot shows the ongoing influence of a single Nazi theoretician, but he does not provide a historical summary of the relationships between the theorisation of management and Nazism. To do this, he should have provided the genealogy of the founder of “management” in its modern sense (Frederick W. Taylor, and not Henri Fayol as the author states) and the Taylor Society, founded by him, which largely restructured the German economy at the beginning of the 20th century.⁶ He makes no mention of Henry Ford’s influence either, although the latter was one of the most influential propagandists of anti-Semitism in the United States and throughout the world, who had a powerful impact on the first Nazis in Germany.⁷ Even this generalisation is ambivalent, as a large number of authors of management theory developed precisely in opposition to Nazism.⁸

In what concerns the relationship between the practice of Nazism and management, the value of Johann Chapoutot’s work certainly lies in the fact that he does not provide yet another summary: substantial summaries have already been dedicated to company involvement (IBM, Thyssen Krupp, Bayer); the materialist view of Nazism has been addressed in recent authoritative works, the recycling of managerial elites post 1945 is also an established fact.⁹ Nonetheless, all these works obscure the “*managerial moment*” as such.

⁶ Johann Chapoutot lingers on the idea of “*Menschenführung*”, but never mentions an institution like the DINTA (Deutsches Institut für Arbeitsschulung) under the Nazi regime, a version of a certain Taylorism under the vulgate of the IIIrd Reich (Nolan, 1994). Just like the works on the USSR, specifically dedicated to the engineer Aleksei Gastev, the figures of Stakhanovism and managerial discourse.

⁷ Particularly with his newspaper: the “*Dearborn Independent*”, as well as his book that compiles his anti-Semitic insults: “*The International Jew: the foremost problem*, Henry Ford had a huge influence on the first Nazis in Germany. He is the only American Hitler mentions in his *Mein Kampf*, and his involvement with Nazism earned him the Grand Cross of the Order of the German Eagle, the highest distinction under the IIIrd Reich.

⁸ Without seeking to be exclusive, we can mention Kurt Lewin and his “*Democratic Leader*” (1939), Peter Drucker and his concept the “*End of Economic Man*” (1939), or Abraham Maslow and his “*Hierarchy of Needs*” (1943).

⁹ On the involvement of companies (Plumpe, 2005); on the materialist view (Tooze, 2012); on the recycling of managerial elites post 1945 (Berghahn, 1986).

Although ideologies and theoreticians are necessarily out of step with reality,¹⁰ by taking the risk of only discussing the biography of a single theoretician, Reinhard Höhn, at the intellectual level Johann Chapoutot's argument seeks, in fact, to shift our vision of Nazism from the barbaric exception to a possible form of modernity. In a radical vision of new societies, in Germany Nazism has indeed revived the most contemporary debates of its time, through questions related to the management of people born in the 20th century, at a time that has seen the emergence of organisations with far more levels of hierarchy than ever before. Similarly, the social and biological sciences are drawn upon to define real "scientific methods" that go beyond an "art" of intervention. Just like Soviet communism or American capitalism, Nazism has seized upon these questions and ideas, offering its own solutions.¹¹ Hence, Johann Chapoutot's work recalls the key role managerial discourse plays in the 20th century. As it is a discourse on means and not ends, it has long been a poor relation of the social sciences and historical research. This book emphasises the major importance of the managerial moment in the explanation of Nazism and, at a wider level, our modernity. This is doubtless its greatest quality.

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¹⁰ The Nazism theorized by Reinhard Höhn is necessarily out of step with factual history, just as "managerial discourse" has always been out of step with company practices (Chopin, 2017).

¹¹ See specifically Yves Cohen's (2013) work that emphasises modernity and the connection to the managerial moment of ideas supported by the Nazis.

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