

Critical Consulting: New Perspectives on the Management Advice Industry

*Edited by Timothy Clark and Robin Fincham
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REVIEWED BY FIONA CZERNIAWSKA

This book is a splendid endeavour, taking academic research on the consulting industry out of the dusty journals in which it so often languishes. Timothy Clark is Reader in Management at King's College, University of London, and Robert Fincham is Senior Lecturer at Stirling University in Scotland. Together, they've collated an eclectic range of articles by leading researchers. As the editors point out, academic interest in consulting has been growing in line with the increasing significance of consulting in the economy.

Lately, this interest has focused around consulting "as a type of social discourse the elements of which reflect issues of power and the construction of knowledge" and particularly on the techniques used by leading consultants to win and maintain their guru status. And it's in relation to this that this book is at its most fascinating, analyzing consul-

tancy as a form of rhetoric—as persuasion designed both to establish the consultant in a position of relative power and to convert otherwise ephemeral management ideas into distinct fads.

The book also tries to answer the question of how and why such rhetoric works, as gurus, however persuasive, can be only part of the reason why particular ideas take off in the market. "These ideas resonate with fundamental human drives. At deeper levels of awareness . . . [consultants' rhetoric] reflects profound needs and motives." When our clients listen to us, it's not just because we're being persuasive but also because what we say strikes a chord. This was certainly true if we cast our minds back to the heyday of business process reengineering: How much of its popularity had to do with the intellectual rigor of its methodology, or even the vast improvements in efficiency cited by its evangelists? BPR emerged just at a point when American organizations were feeling most threatened by external (largely Japanese) competition—flatter organizations, the empowerment of workers now responsible for processes in their entirety, and freed from the constraints of a managerial class system. Surely these ideas appealed to American values of liberty and entrepreneurship, as much as to American managers.

But, at the same time, this book also demonstrates some of the weaknesses of academic research on the consulting industry. There's a tendency to be parochial: Some of the articles focus exclusively on the U.K., which sits strangely in the context of an industry that is becoming increasingly global for all but the smallest firms. And priced as it is, we have to wonder how many in the U.K. will buy the book. There's also an issue about timeliness. One of the chapters deals with total quality management, a phrase rarely heard among practicing consultants these days. Granted, TQM-type work still goes on, but largely in other guises (Six Sigma, product design and innovation, and so on). This is a shame, because the examples detract from, and distract from, conclusions that have far broader implications. Finally, there's little concession here for the people to whom some of those broader messages should be most relevant, namely clients and consultants. Would plainer English and more practical examples really dumb-down the message so much? What is it about academics that they won't even modulate their own rhetoric to make their findings more accessible to a wider public?

But as *Critical Consulting* itself makes clear, the issue is one of power. This is a book written by academics, for acade-

mics; it's designed to establish academic authority, not appeal to consultants. Of course, this is a fault, not so much with this individual book, but with a whole body of research on the consulting industry currently being carried out in academic institutions by people with little practical experience in commercial consulting. And that's a great shame, for there are stimulating ideas on almost every page of this book, which, if known more widely, could stimulate much-needed debate and self-awareness within the consulting industry. Academics use rhetorical constructs just as much as consultants do, and are as much a part of the management advice industry. People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.

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