Branded revolutionaries: Circulated gurus as management tools in soft capitalism

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Abstract
The call for revolution has become a standard technique in corporate capitalism. Management fashions and gurus turn revolutionary ideas into saleable packages of corporate consulting. Here, the focus is on the case of Gary Hamel. I show how an individual guru becomes the central symbolic pole of the circulation of revolutionary ideas. Publishing companies, consultancies, universities and different media package and disseminate the revolutionary guru. I suggest that the revolutionary guru helps manage the flexible post-Fordist organisation. The circulation of revolution also entails paradoxes. In Hamel’s case, the call for revolution often, when put into practice, serves the interests of the managers.

Keywords
Capitalism, circulation, consultants, Gary Hamel, management fashion, management guru, revolution

The dream of making a revolution is one of the constituent elements of modernity. In recent years, the revolutionary call has become, somewhat ironically, a standard technique in corporate capitalism. As Nigel Thrift (2005) has pointed out, fast and flexible capitalism often flirts with countercultural ideas and circulates them. In this article, I show how management gurus have circulated revolutionary ideas among organisations and turned them into toolkits for corporate management.

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Corporate managers rely increasingly on the growing profession of consultants who promote and sell their work to corporations (Heusinkveld and Benders, 2005). Consequently, management fashions and fads have become a flourishing business (Abrahamson, 1991, 1996; Huczynski, 1993; Kantola and Seeck, 2010; Kieser, 1997; Newell et al., 2001). Consultants package their ideas into fashions, which are marketed as toolkits for management. At the heart of the marketing is often a guru, a well-known celebrity consultant who embodies the fashion, helps to package it in saleable forms and circulates the fashion effectively through different media.

Often business gurus package and disseminate ideas of revolution. I focus on the case of Gary Hamel, one of the leading business gurus in the strategy industry. He is a very good example of how revolutionary ideas are used in contemporary capitalism. Stephen Sheard (2007) has analysed how Hamel’s understanding of revolution resonates with the Republican conception of revolution. I, however, show how Hamel performs revolutionary ideas and circulates the revolutionary imaginary to brand, market and sell his work.

The case with Hamel demonstrates how revolutionary concepts help to control flexible corporations. Corporations have become thinner and leaner as they have outsourced many operations. These flexible post-Fordist corporations need to encourage and facilitate change, and exercise managerial power by ‘soft’ techniques (Costea et al., 2008; Courpasson, 2000; Heelas, 2002). Hamel’s revolutionary ideas provide toolkits for managers who strive to control and guide the continuous and permanent change. The branded guru himself becomes a soft tool for managerial power. Brands regulate and control organisational life and customer preferences (Aronczyk and Powers, 2010: 10–11); similarly, the use of a well-known guru enhances the self-image of the manager as well as helping to legitimise management operations and motivate employees.

Finally, I discuss the paradoxes inherent in this concept. Revolutionary calls involve twists and paradoxes which stem from the tension between fantasy and reality; revolutions are powerful fantasies of shared power and joint action, yet their promises are difficult to make reality. In corporate management, revolutions often serve the interests of the manager rather than those of the people.

The revolutionary call since the 1960s

The idea of a revolutionary change is, in itself, older than modernity. It has taken many forms and has been one of the most widely circulated ideas on modern societies. Peter Wagner (2008: 42–43) traces revolutionary ideas back to the Judeo-Christian eschatological tradition. The monotheistic religions deciphered a radical change between the existing world and another transcendental world. This idea was supplemented by the idea of people making that change. In short, the coming, significantly different society could be made by conscious collective action.

In modernity, revolutions gave institutional expression to the broader culture of individual autonomy; revolutions promised to liberate human beings from imposed ties (Wagner, 2008: 238–239). This secular, modern version of revolution emerged in the Enlightenment. It paved the way for the first political revolutions in the United States and in France, as well as for many other political revolutions, including the 20th-century Marxist communist revolutions.
Political revolutions and revolutionary movements, however, have remained only one proprietor of the revolutionary call in modernity. In the 20th century, especially after the 1960s, revolutionary appeal became an increasingly prominent cultural practice in many societies and institutions. Particularly, Freudian notions of repressive culture suggested that revolution needed to take place culturally. For instance, the ideologues of the countercultural hippie movements claimed that one should free one’s mind and find alternative ways of living (Heath and Potter, 2006: 58–61).

At the background of the anti-authoritarian feeling was the experience of the Nazi regime. Unquestioning obedience to the system, embodied, for instance, in the figure of Adolf Eichmann, was seen as the main reason for the Holocaust (Frank, 1997: 13). After the Second World War, ‘Big Brother’ systems came to be seen as a major societal threat (Heath and Potter, 2006: 51–54, 327). New generations were suspicious of the existing institutions and promoted more individualised lifestyles. As Frank (1997: 13) suggests, revolutionary ideas were circulated widely and became ingrained in the cultural mainstream. For instance, in suburban America, the ‘average’ and ‘ordinary’ Americans eagerly became enthusiastic for cultural revolution. Revolution became ‘probably the most overused word in the 1960s’:

There was a Creative Revolution in advertising as well as the Peacock Revolution in menswear, a sexual revolution, a revolution in rock music and agriculture and filmmaking and furniture design and fiction writing. (Frank, 1997: 208)

Besides political and cultural revolution, there is also a third major current of revolutionary ideas in contemporary modernity. Ideas of industrial revolutions have become a major way to understand how societies change. Industrial revolutions are not people’s movements, yet they suggest that societies are constantly changing as entrepreneurs innovate and replace old structures. Josef Schumpeter, an Austrian political economist, suggested that technological advances destroy existing modes of production and new entrepreneurs replace them. In the 1970s, Schumpeterian ideas started to gain momentum because of the oil crisis and the emergence of the new information technologies. Since the 1980s, Schumpeterian ideas have been used in theories of innovation, which have become prominent in many societies and suggest a need for fundamental changes (Freeman, 1984, 1990; Krugman, 1995; Stoneman, 1995). Consequently, contemporary political manifestos often call for policies, that would foster societal change and innovativeness.

As the many uses of revolution suggest, the entire concept has been highly influential in recent decades. Wagner (2008: 42–43) suggests that the idea of revolution should not be conceived only as a political program; instead, revolutionary ideas are an ideational undercurrent which has run through history, not only as political phenomena, but also as broader cultural ideas. Consequently, I track revolutionary ideas that promote fundamental change of the existing structures and institutions. Moreover, I look for ideas that suggest change from below through people’s joint action.

**Revolution and capitalism**

Since the 1950s, corporate management has adopted revolutionary ideas. Many corporations picked up the post-war anti-authoritarian feeling and started to foster a
revolutionary style in their marketing and management practices. During the 1950s and 1960s, management thinkers built their own versions of the Frankfurt School critique of obedience and mass society. One well-known example was William Whyte’s book, *The Organization Man*, which deciphered the problem of obedience and technocratic efficiency in corporate life. Gradually, management theory started to demand bureaucracy-smashing and individualism (Frank, 1997: 20–21).

In their analysis of France, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello offer some useful insights, which are pertinent also in this case. The 1968 generation condemned the bourgeois family, the state and the firm as closed and ossified worlds of tradition, legalism, bureaucracy, calculation and planning. Corporate capitalism, however, recuperated by developing new styles of management and authority based on flat hierarchies, flexibility and teams (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007: 145).

This rise of revolutionary ideas in corporate life is linked with the structural changes in capitalism: the increasing mobility of capital and industrial production. Mobility and change are the inherent features of modernity (Berman, 1982). However, in recent decades, they have reached a new level. The major change took place in the 1970s as the post-war Fordist–Keynesian system started to give way to new logics of production. The advent of new information technologies sped up the flow of goods and services (Harvey, 1990: 124, 147, 240). Subsequently, many industries followed suit and changed themselves into flexible network enterprises that deliver ‘just-in-time’ products for niche customers (Castells, 1996: 151–279). Today, the guiding principle is ‘just-in-time’ efficiency – including lean management, which cuts all the ‘slack’ out of the organisation (Bauman, 2000: 116–123. As the investment–profit–investment cycle has accelerated, and profit rates declined (Giddens, 1991: 11), many companies are uncertain what their main business will be in 5 or 10 years. Consequently, companies need to be fast and flexible. Many of them are in a state of constant flux as they look for new technologies, develop new products and reach out for new markets.

Also, management practices have changed. Wherever possible, teams and projects, easily decomposed as well as flexible to change, have replaced the organisational pyramids and hierarchies. This change has not been total; the hierarchies and pyramids of solid modernity still continue to exist in many enterprises’ industrial branches (Thrift, 2000: 674). In many cases, however, the new management practices of flexible capitalism have been implemented to create hybrid organisations, which combine hierarchies with more flexible and soft management ideas and techniques (Courpasson, 2000: 158–159; Courpasson and Clegg, 2006: 327).

An important element in the change has been the increasing circulation of new ideas in capitalism. Nigel Thrift (2005: 32–35) suggests that ‘the cultural circuit of capitalism’ is characterised by the speed-up and growth of communication. Financial media, information technologies, economic research and the business management industry all create packaged performances: books, videos, tapes and events (Thrift, 2002: 19). This cultural circuit of capital moulds the content of people’s work lives and produces cultural models that affect the rest of people’s lives (Thrift, 2005: 93).

The central agencies in the circuit of capitalism have been management consultants and gurus (Thrift, 2005: 37–39, 95). Management consulting has grown into a major strategy business. Management gurus, business schools and management consultants
compete fiercely as they convert ideas into new products that can be easily sold. Professional consultants and consulting firms package management knowledge into a saleable form and propagate these solutions in different media (Heusinkveld and Benders, 2005: 285). These management fashions are disseminated widely, often internationally (Abrahamson, 1991, 1996; Huczynski, 2006; Kantola and Seeck, 2010; Kieser, 1997; Newell et al., 2001). An important driving force in capitalism’s circuit has been the image of a counterculture. The circuit has drawn from New Age practices as well as from Heideggerian ideas on authenticity (Thrift, 2005: 63, 144–146). Oftentimes, it is just management consultants and gurus who facilitate and foster revolutionary change in the organisation. Since the 1980s, it has become commonplace to talk about ‘management gurus’ (Jackson, 2001: 8–13) and a number of such gurus have employed the narratives of revolution (Fairhead, 2007). In itself, the notion of a guru is a Sanskrit term for ‘teacher’ or ‘master’ linked to the Indian guru tradition, which became prominent in the West especially in the 1960s with the countercultural hippie and New Age movements. Gurus are often spiritual teachers who swim against the stream of conventional values and pursuits. Subsequently, management gurus also often profile themselves as alternative thinkers and demand that old structures need to be wiped away.

Michael Hammer and James Champy (1993) are a good example as they sum up their mission in their best-selling book *Reengineering the Corporation: A Manifesto for Business Revolution*. Corporations need to ‘disregard all the assumptions and traditions of the way business has always been done’, and instead develop a new organisation thatachieves ‘a quantum leap forward’. The gurus present their message with the catchy phrases, ‘Giants need to learn to dance’ (Moss Kanter, 1989), management needs to be ‘liberation management’ (Peters, 1992) and business leaders need to ‘lead the revolution’ (Hamel, 2000). In the following, looking at the work of Gary Hamel, one can see how management gurus use countercultural ideas and circulate them as carefully packaged management techniques.

The rise of management gurus: Gary Hamel

Management gurus are a relatively recent phenomena. Since the 1980s, consultants have become increasingly important in the management of flexible corporations (Ernst and Kieser, 2002; Huczynski, 2006; Jackson, 2001: 8–13; Kantola and Seeck, 2010; Osborne, 2004; Saint-Martin, 2000). Management research has pointed out various reasons for the rise of consultants and gurus. Many point out that in flexible capitalism, managers need the help of gurus. In Fordist industrialism, the experts claimed to have technical knowledge independent of the practitioners and clients (Bauman, 2000: 113–116; Scott, 1998: 4). Now experts often work as outsourced consultants, who can be employed and dismissed flexibly, as well as conducting a range of tasks from accountancy to corporate communications. Managers’ jobs have become more hectic and sporadic, focusing on the immediate, and managers need to have well-packaged ideas to help them in their work. Consultants and gurus help managers to control their unpredictable and unstable world (Clark and Salaman, 1998: 142–143; Jackson, 1996). Gurus assist with organisational change; they device strategies, implement them, trim the organisation’s slack and motivate employees towards change. They can also provide positive role models for
managers, enhancing their sense of self (Huczynski, 2006; Jackson, 2001: 33–36). These mediators work as enablers, catalysts and brokers of ideas, circulating ideas and practices from organisation to organisation.

How does one become a guru, then? The gurus themselves like to claim that they are experts who master a body of practical theory and skill. This claim, however, is a matter of debate. Instead, many point out that the performative style of the guru is crucial for their work (Clark and Greatbatch, 2004; Clark and Salaman, 1998: 142–143; Jackson, 1996, 2001). Gurus do not possess a body of formal and authoritative professional knowledge because there simply is no such knowledge. Thus, their work is geared around language and performances which present them as authoritative experts and professionals. Good ideas are needed, but ideas alone do not suffice: they need to be presented, packaged and disseminated in the right way to be saleable. Ideas need to make a communicative difference (Osborne, 2004: 440–441). Gurus depend on their apparent command of expertise; they succeed if they manage to make a good impression (Clark and Salaman, 1998: 143–147; Huczynski, 2006). For this reason, gurus and management fashions are produced as media-driven events that capture the attention of the organisations as well as the wider media public (Clark and Greatbatch, 2004: 408–409).

The making of a management guru is a well-planned process. The guru often personifies a management fashion, typically a popular management technique (Abrahamson, 1996; Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999; Jackson, 2001). At the heart of a management fashion is often a fashion setter who epitomises the fashion and acts as a central icon in its dissemination, and – in more mundane terms – sells well. The person is turned into a carefully fabricated brand which utilises various techniques and media in his image management (Clark and Greatbatch, 2004: 408–409; Greatbatch and Clark, 2005). The personal brand of the guru becomes the central pole of the circulation. Books, audiotape programs, video-based training packages or presentations on the corporate lecture circuit are star-based products which circulate the guru’s image.

Gary Hamel is a globally well-known management guru who has been in the strategy business since the late 1980s. He uses a range of branding techniques, skilfully constructing his image and packaging his message into saleable formats. With the aid of his consulting company, publishing house, speech promoters and academia, his personal brand is circulated via books, journal articles, media appearances, speech making and websites. Hamel’s most well-known books are Competing for the Future (1996a), Leading the Revolution (2000), The Future of Management (2007) and What Matters Now? (2012). Every one of his books has been sold internationally, and altogether they have been translated into over 20 languages.

For the guru, books have premier status as they formulate the message of the guru (Clark and Greatbatch, 2004: 416). Books help to brand the guru; they serve as ‘an entry-ticket’ into the broad range of media, and promote the guru as a credible choice for actual consulting work in companies (Clark and Greatbatch, 2004: 416). Books are also a crucial source of income in the guru business, as bestsellers sell millions of copies around the world (Clark and Salaman, 1998: 140).

For the reasons of marketability and profitability, books are planned carefully and written jointly with professional editors and ghostwriters. The crucial thing is to publish
with large multinational publishing houses; they have the experience of marketing to a mass audience rather than specialist, academic niche readers. Thus, Hamel publishes with Harvard Business School, which has a long history of ‘salesology’, packaging and selling its research into sales, and marketing its professors as ‘gurus’ (Friedman, 2004: 151–166; O’Connor, 1999: 117–118).

The editors, the best of whom have experience with creating bestsellers, help the guru to formulate the concept of the book. With management consulting, the crucial thing is the main target audience: managers. They have a lot on their table and thus writers are advised to be clear and use simple language. The editors suggest how to condense and sum up the book in few guiding principles. They also encourage and give suggestions on storytelling and metaphors, as well as on the visualisation of the ideas (Clark and Greatbatch, 2002: 134–135, 2004: 408–416). Hamel’s books have been clearly produced along these lines; they tell concrete stories and use metaphors that visualise issues. All of the books have created clear themes that are repeated throughout the book: core competencies, the future, or revolutionary change and innovation. Often, the text is presented in the form of numbered principles or tasks for the management. Hamel’s books also appear regularly every few years in order to rejuvenate and reinforce the guru’s message.

The role of the editors is clearest in The Future of Management, which is co-written with Bill Breen, editor and founder of the Fast Company magazine. Hamel credits Breen for helping him ‘to bring to life the stories of management innovation’ (Hamel, 2007: xiii). Consequently, the book is brimming with colourful metaphors and concrete stories.

**Telling the story: the true revolutionary**

At the core of Hamel’s brand is revolutionary change. He promotes the idea of revolution starting from a specific inner quality of his personality, a message that is repeated in his writings and performances:

I get a kick out of being a contrarian – a fact that drives my friends and colleagues a little bit crazy. Turns out, people don’t always appreciate it when you take a crowbar to their unexamined beliefs – I know I don’t. Challenging conventional wisdom is dirty work, but someone has to do it. (Management Innovation Exchange, 2013)

The idea of revolution structures the storyline also in Hamel’s books and writings. Hamel cultivates the revolutionary fantasy, quoting other writers who were themselves revolutionaries to provide further emphasis of his point. He also often talks about the people and their empowerment against the established system and its leader.

The basic plot of his writings typically dooms the existing system and presents an alternative to it. Hamel started to use the notion of revolution in the 1990s, with industrial revolution as a driving force. In a Harvard Business Review piece titled ‘Strategy as Revolution’ (1996b), Hamel suggests that companies should embrace revolution by looking for ways to redefine products, services, market space and even the entire structure of an industry.
How is this possible? Hamel borrows from the language of political revolutionaries to guide the transformational process. Hamel classifies companies into rule makers, rule takers and rule breakers. The corporate world is ruled by the ‘rule makers’ – companies such as IBM, CBS, Merrill Lynch and Coca-Cola – the incumbents that are in power. They are followed by the ‘rule takers’ who compete directly with them. However, the most interesting companies are the ‘rule breakers’, such as IKEA, Swatch, The Body Shop and Dell Computers. They are not restricted by respect or convention – instead, they overturn the industrial order and, as such, they are ‘the malcontents, the radicals, the industry revolutionaries’ (Hamel, 1996b: 70). They challenge the old and invent the new formulations and products.

Hamel suggests that the vast majority of companies’ strategic planning is in the hands of technocratic senior managers at the top of the organisational pyramid. These privileged people, with their corporate aircraft and spacious suites, are reluctant to change (Hamel, 1996b: 74). Thus, companies should look into revolutionaries who are people at the bottom and periphery of the pyramid, as well as newcomers from outside (Hamel, 1996b: 75–77). Hamel asks corporate leaders whether their company is more ruling class than revolutionary (Hamel, 1996b: 70). Consequently, he lists ten principles that can help a company to ‘liberate its revolutionary spirit’ (Hamel, 1996b: 69–70).

In his writing, Hamel borrows from political revolutionaries and quotes, among others, Thomas Paine, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Martin Luther King and Jesse Jackson in ways which help companies view the market in terms of revolutionary change. He deciphers the essential problem as a fight between the old establishment and the new challengers. As Emerson said, ‘There are always two parties, the party of the Past and the party of the Future: the Establishment and the Movement’. Hamel then asks the classic question: ‘To which party do you belong?’ (1996b: 74)

Hamel (1996b: 79) also quotes Thomas Paine, who was involved with both the American and French Revolutions, and who said, ‘Let them call me a rebel and welcome, I feel no concern from it; but I should suffer the misery of devils, were I to make a whore of my soul’. For Hamel, in the corporate setting, the ‘whores’ are the distracted senior managers who protect the past. Activists must step forwards to produce change from that standard.

Hamel also focuses on the idea of the people’s movement and democracy. He suggests that at the top of organisations are people who have the largest investments in the past and reverence for industrial dogma. Every company needs to find the revolutionaries within the organisation, to get people engaged in change and make the strategy democratic. As Hamel claims, ‘People should have a say in their destiny, a chance to influence the direction of the enterprise to which they devote their energy’ (Hamel, 1996b: 77). Hamel suggests that the concept of one person, one vote, is only a minimum condition for democracy; democracy is not only about the expression of opinion, it is about the opportunity to influence opinion and action.

Similar ideas are carried on throughout Hamel’s career. In Leading the Revolution, Hamel maintains that a new age of revolutions will end the age of corporate feudalism, as many corporations are suffering because of brain dead business leaders with unhealthy benefits (Hamel, 2000: 41). In contrast, corporations should listen to the young, people on the periphery, and newcomers. A prime example of this is Silicon Valley, which is
framed as ‘refugee camp for revolutionaries who couldn’t get a hearing elsewhere’ (Hamel, 2000: 263–264).

This narrative also appears in The Future of Management. The book opens up with a denouncement of the hierarchies that still exist in corporations, where ‘the big calls are still made by people with big titles and even with bigger salaries’ (Hamel, 2007: 1). Frontline employees may be smarter, but they are expected to line up obediently behind executive decisions (Hamel, 2007: 4). Hamel claims that companies are managed by ‘a small coterie of long-departed theorists and practitioners’ of the early years of the 20th century. They are ‘the poltergeists who inhabit the musty machinery of management’. It is ‘their edicts, echoing across the decades that invisibly shape’ the way the company works. Hamel refers to Taylorian efficiency and Weberian bureaucracy as still reigning (Hamel, 2007: 4–14).

After drawing a dismissive view of management, Hamel (2007: 15) moves on to the ‘revolutionary imperative’ and starts to describe the way forward. According to Hamel, there is a need for a totally new approach, which emphasises innovation and change. He draws experience from MacGregor Knox and Williamson Murray’s book The Dynamics of Military Revolution, which traces the historical changes in warfare. Hamel concludes that the revolutions in armies have been management innovations, and that this applies to current corporate life as well. The key for the change in management innovation is that it liberates the corporate life from its current dismal state (Hamel, 2007: 20–30).

In his latest book, What Matters Now, Hamel addresses the ongoing financial and corporate crises in America and Europe, paying close attention to the moral basis of business. Again, however, the emphasis is on change and renewal. He quotes Gordon Wood’s book, The Radicalism of the American Revolution, and reminds readers that the American revolutionaries regarded disinterest as a noble virtue and were not seeking to achieve their own interests (Hamel, 2012: 10).

The narratives of management gurus tend to have a standard form that is akin to revolutionary narrative. Gurus denounce forcefully previous principles of organisation, management and structure (Clark and Salaman, 1998: 141). The presentations destabilise and challenge the existing world view, point out the guilty ones, and present a new order in ways which enable the audience see familiar ideas and concepts in new ways (Clark, 1995: 118–126; Huczynski, 2006: 151–167). This line of reasoning challenges the existing world also in ways similar to the primary elements in revolutionary thinking: the Judeo-Christian ideas of guilt and salvation (Wagner, 2008: 42–43). Hamel’s writings follow these storylines suggesting a need for revolutionary change. The big corporations, including their feudalism, Taylorism, bureaucracy and the corrupted voracity of the finance sector, are doomed using strong and powerful language and metaphors. Hamel also includes phrases from the political world. For instance, Hamel (2000: 192) says that ‘as an activist you must build your own ideology’.

Next, he produces his solutions as a change towards a new world. The narratives of revolution become tangled with the more mundane language of management strategies. Hamel constructs lists of crucial things that need to be taken into account by management. The lists include such things as ‘design rules for radical innovation’, which organise innovations into portfolios (Hamel, 2000: 303). Hamel also suggests a task list for the corporate leaders. At this point, he returns to a relatively well-trodden path of strategy
analysis. Revolution is organised by following a rational plan which systematically encourages innovation (Hamel, 2000: 283–324). This approach clearly draws from rational planning ideologies (Kantola and Seeck, 2010; Scott, 1998) and even takes them one step further, suggesting that innovation and change can be planned and managed rationally and almost formulaically.

In this manner, Hamel circulates the political and cultural ideas of revolution, implanting them into the more conventional processes of strategic management. The concept of the revolution is thus a catchy and saleable metaphor that is used to augment the more traditional strategy analysis method.

**Circulating the branded guru**

Books on revolutionary change formulate the key message of the guru, but books alone are not sufficient for circulating the brand. Gurus also need to cultivate their brand by other means, as well as circulate it via range of media (Clark and Salaman, 1998: 140).

An important part of the branding is to create a sense of expertise; the guru must have exceptional skills and he or she must appear legitimate, convincing and trustworthy. Many gurus have an academic standing – professorship or other affiliation with a university – and some also publish in academic journals. At the same time, gurus work in the consulting business and market themselves to wider audiences (Huczynski, 2006; Sheard, 2007). Accordingly, Gary Hamel promotes himself as a leading expert on business strategy and notes his links with prestigious universities, such as his PhD from the University of Michigan, as well as his visiting professorship both there and at the London Business School. He also notes that he has been associated with the Harvard Business School, which is a substantive credential for a management consultant (Speakers Associates, 2013). For the customers, managers and other business professionals, academic credentials serve as a performative strategy. The image of a guru as a professor becomes an important part of the brand that is sold to predominantly non-academic customers.

Often gurus also run or are partners in consulting companies, which help to put the guru’s ideas into practice. Hamel is the founding member of Strategos, a consulting firm that has grown into global scale and was built on a ‘solid foundation of academic theory and real-world practice’ through ‘a group of talented professionals and professor Gary Hamel’ (Strategos, 2013). For the companies, the gurus are ‘concept champions’ or ‘soul-of-fires’ who embody the brand or products of the company (Heusinkveld and Benders, 2005: 300; Stjernberg and Phillips, 1993). The consulting work is certainly a good money-earner, but it also increases the credibility of the guru. Management gurus utilise their consulting exercises as case studies, which they then present in their writings and marketing. The case study method packages knowledge for the potential consumer, and legitimises the guru (Contardo and Wensley, 2004: 212). Hamel’s books are also full of examples from different companies and he lists publicly the companies that he has been advising, another way to prove his worth as a guru.

Gurus are also orators who conduct management seminars and give public lectures to continue spreading their message and their brand, increasing their own saleability (Clark and Salaman, 1998: 140). Hamel is a skilled speaker who uses effective rhetoric such as
contrasts, puzzles and storytelling to make his points (Greatbatch and Clark, 2005). Hamel sells and markets his speeches and presentations through a company on the Internet (Speakers Associates, 2013). He also has exemplary live presentations on his webpages and on YouTube to market his ideas (Management Innovation Exchange, 2013).

Gurus also use other media to circulate their brand. As does Hamel (2007: 271), gurus often appear in regular media and use the media for their own marketing efforts. Different media play different roles in the circulation of their brand. Prestigious and widely circulated business journals are important for the credibility of the guru. Prestigious journals such as the Harvard Business Review also help to disseminate the guru’s basic ideas to wider, more popular media. Many gurus recount how a published piece in that particular journal created such a media frenzy that the interest led to the publication of a book (Clark and Greatbatch, 2002: 134).

Hamel always notes in his presentations that he has written for the Harvard Business Review – with 17 published articles, he is the most reprinted author in the Review’s history. He also makes note of other prestigious dailies he has written for, such as the Wall Street Journal, Fortune, The Financial Times and ‘many other leading publications around the world’. Hamel also markets himself by circulating quotations from business papers. He has been hailed as ‘the world’s reigning strategy guru’ by The Economist, ‘the world’s leading expert on business strategy’ by Fortune and ‘a management innovator without peer’ by The Financial Times (Management Innovation Exchange, 2013; Speakers Associates, 2013).

The media – business media in particular – create rankings, which are then used in the marketing efforts of the gurus. Hamel has been ranked 15th on the list of top management thinkers by Thinkers50 and was in the top ten most influential business gurus from Forbes. His books have been among the 25 most influential business management books by Time Magazine, and Amazon.com selected one of his books as the best business book of the year. All these rankings are used to market Hamel as a premiere speaker (Speakers Associates, 2013).

Conclusion: fantasies and paradoxes

Looking at Gary Hamel shows just how a range of media are employed in the circulation and promotion of a management guru. Books, writings, speeches, media appearances, experience in corporate consulting and academic prestige are all employed to enhance the brand of the guru for circulation of ideas. Business schools, publishing houses, consulting companies and media package the latest ideas and push the guru around the world through a succession of bravura performances. The only thing one needs to do is make sure to keep this cycle spinning. Every few years the gurus need to produce a new book to fuel the demand for their services (Clark and Greatbatch, 2004: 415).

For Hamel, the call for revolution has become the central node of his brand. Revolutionary ideas are packaged into a saleable format and circulated via different media outlets. Hamel has branded himself as a true contrarian and revolutionary whose message has remained much the same over his career. He condemns the upper classes and echelons of the corporate world and his calls for revolution are combined with
rational how-to lists of principles and strategic planning. At the same time, Hamel has turned revolution-making into a profitable global business. Ideas about revolution-making and people’s power have been circulated from political and cultural spheres and lent to the practices of management consulting. The branded performances of the guru actively constitute objects, identities and spatiotemporal environments (Aronczyk and Craig, 2012: 93; Lee and LiPuma, 2002).

Why revolution? Analysis of Hamel’s success points to several explanations. Management gurus and fashions resonate socially and have links with zeitgeist (Grint, 1994). The circulation of a revolutionary call fits well with the spirit of cultural revolution that has become a strong cultural current in many societies following the 1960s. The solid and heavy modernity (Bauman, 2000: 6, 113–125), or organised modernity (Wagner, 2008: 65–68), or high modernity (Giddens, 1991: 14–34) have turned into a more mobile and reflexive modernity (Bauman, 2000; Beck et al., 1994). As a result, many authorities have been challenged by a more egalitarian and anti-authoritarian spirit. Revolution has become an important fantasy for individualised and anti-authoritarian societies (Žižek, 1997: xv). The free, revolutionary subject is often pitted in media against the alienated world and its calculating rationality (Kaplan, 2012). Thus Hamel can devise his image as a contrarian, as a truth-teller, and speak on behalf of other rebels as well.

Revolution is also an appealing fantasy for the management of flexible capitalism. In current capitalism, Schumpeterian ideas on industrial revolution have been put into use. Organisational cultures are continuously made and remade through shifting relations, practices and mediation technologies (Mazzarella, 2004: 355). Products, markets and customer preferences are in a constant whirlwind; corporations need to reinvent their products, market niches and organisational structures in order to keep up. All of this requires new styles of management, and this modern time of flexibility is also the time of a new kind of power (Sennett, 1998: 59).

In flexible organisations, the present rules: one needs to be ready to let go of one’s past, and there is a constant revolt against the routine (Sennett, 1998: 59–63; Thrift, 2005: 32–33). In such conditions, the revolutionary call works well. The revolutionary call has become – somewhat paradoxically – a standard practice of corporate management. Accordingly, Hamel often borrows from the imaginary of political revolution; his writings and speeches are passionate pleas for change and empowerment.

The promises of revolution – liberation, empowerment and communal feelings – also fit well with soft management techniques. In flexible organisations, managerial power is exercised increasingly by ‘soft’ and ‘fast’ techniques (Costea et al., 2008; Courpasson, 2000; Heelas, 2002). They are typically performative (Thrift, 2000, 2005), emotional (Illouz, 2007), and revolutionary (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007; Kantola, 2009; Thrift, 2002). Management cannot lean solely on pyramids, discipline and control. Instead, management needs to produce and enhance identities, appeal emotionally and motivate employees (Kantola, 2009).

Revolutionary ideas are usable as soft management techniques. They are often used to ignite joint action (Jasper, 1997: 5–7). Revolutionary calls move the boundaries of identification and empathy; they channel and intensify feelings, selling a morality that creates an emotional bond (Eyerman, 2006: 199–200). This produces communal loyalties,
demarcating fantasies of ‘we’ and ‘they’ (Eyerman, 2005: 43, 204–205). Such binary oppositions are powerful tools for organising action and imposing order (Jasper, 1997: 357). Hamel has successfully cultivated the emotional power of revolutionary zeal. He clearly tries to engage and energise people with his mission that challenges existing corporate power structures.

There are, however, some paradoxes which have hampered all revolutionaries. These stem from one basic dilemma: the call for revolution is easy to make, but hard to realise. Revolutions, as with so many powerful ideas, are also fantasies that do not always fill up their promises.

Management gurus and fashions can be regarded as fantasies that provide idealised identities (Jackson, 2001). Fantasies of revolution can be powerful motivators and can be used in the management of organisation (Fairhead, 2007). For instance, revolutions are often led by strong, inspiring figures, who embody a particular ideology and show courage, passion and love (Jasper, 1997: 92). These leaders, however, can turn into autocrats who are unwilling to decentralise their power. This particular contradiction is prevalent in managerial revolutions as well.

In management consulting, the paradox is that while gurus might propagate revolutionary change, they at the same time emphasise the importance of the role of the CEO. Consulting has developed a circulating repertoire of iconic business leaders: Jack Welch of General Electric, Percy Barnevik of Asea Brown Boveri, Steve Jobs of Apple or Anita Roddick of The Body Shop are circulated as handy exemplars of revolutionary leaders (Hamel, 1996b: 71–74; Peters, 1992: 44–50). Hamel picks up corporate managers who are the ‘corporate rebels’, such as Ken Kutaragi (Sony’s digital bandit), or George Dupont-Roc, known as ‘Shell’s renewable radical’ (Hamel, 2000: 170–186).

This emphasis on leader, while contradictory to the power to the people ideas, stems from the logics of circulation. The heroic CEOs feed storytelling and make the message of the guru more comprehensible and seducing to the employees. In marketing, the CEOs simply are the main target group who use consultants and pay them. While emphasising the leaders and their role, the gurus appeal to manager’s self-esteem and enhance their sense of self (Huczynski, 2006; Jackson, 1996). Gurus’ narratives focus on the role, status and identity of senior managers, telling managers why they are important, why they matter and why their skills are so critical (Clark and Salaman, 1998: 153).

In real life, the heroic profiles of leaders can also become façades of trust, misleading their followers. For Gary Hamel, this paradox was made evident when he praised Enron for its revolutionary practices (Hamel, 2000: 215–227). Enron was broadly praised for its innovativeness – Fortune magazine named the company ‘America’s Most Innovative Company’ for six consecutive years – but it was bankrupted in a corporate scandal involving accounting fraud – certainly not an innovative or revolutionarily sustainable practice.

Another paradox of revolutions is their problem with success. The gravest danger for revolution is its realisation – the moment when revolutionaries actually manage to seize power. Revolutionary regimes often follow a standard trajectory: institutions age and subsequent generations challenge them (Wertheim, 1974). Karl Marx noted this ironic twist and he suggested that the modern bourgeois will be overthrown by their own actions. Bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of
production and, at the same time, all the relations of society. Thus, at some point, modernity will turn against its prime movers: the bourgeoisie (Berman, 1982: 21).

Consequently, as revolutions mature, revolutionary leaders and organisations try to postpone the moment of victory. As Slavoj Žižek (1997: xv) has suggested, capitalism is characterised by the perpetual self-revolutionising dynamics that construct a sense of a permanent crisis; thus, it tries to endlessly postpone the final moment of fulfilment. Hamel has clearly chosen this path; he repeats the revolutionary story time after time, and seems to be stuck to an endless cycle of revolutionary circulation. At the same time, however, management fashions and gurus tend to become old-fashioned, lose their momentum and new angles need to be invented. Thus the gurus face the same dilemma as all other maturing revolutionaries: how to safeguard the brand of a rebel against institutionalisation, money-making, prestige-gaining and mingling of elites that tend to become the end point for all successful revolutionaries. In this cycle of continuous revolution-making, the brand becomes a controlled and controlling device (Aronczyk and Powers, 2010: 11). The brand helps the guru to sustain the central ideas and to reinvent them every few years, and helps him to control the markets and circulate the ideas – yet at the same time he must do so in a highly controlled way: by reinventing the revolutionary fantasy. Only as long as the guru repeats the revolutionary moment can he sustain his market value and continue in the business of making revolution.

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References


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