



Call for papers

International Conference

What do consultants do to the social world?

Properties, practices and contributions of « consulting » to the construction of reality

École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) – Paris

20th and 21st June, 2016

Social science has trouble studying and objectifying what is most commonly known as « consulting », and more specifically, it has trouble questioning what it does, exactly, to the social world. Indeed, consultants lay down their own terms and standards of assessment (Sauviat, 1994) as well as their own boundaries and denominations (Henry, 1992). They hold their stance as self-evident and at the same time, somewhat set apart from the rest (Henry, 1997), thus giving rise to fascination or, on the contrary, to severe criticism, as thoroughly pointed out by a great number of authors (Berrebi-Hoffmann, 2002; Fondeur, Sauviat, 2004; Villette, 2003). They also foster the idea of an eternally young, not to say ahistorical profession, when it was in fact structured back in the XIXth century (Henry, 2012; McKenna, 2006, 1995; Moutet, 1997). Besides, « consulting » appears alternatively as undifferentiated or as diverse, with underlying categories referring to or offering versions of the prestigious figure of « management consulting ». A figure which has been, by far, the most researched academically, at the risk of becoming reified - as if the close relationship between consulting and the academic world (Boussard, 2009; Engwall *et al.*, 2002; Henry, 1992) jeopardized the appropriate distance between the two. Finally, consulting

work, often presented as « intellectual » and mostly discursive or, as functioning by some kind of « magic », seems in fact to resort to stances believed to be natural rather than to explicit and clearly identified skills.

For all these reasons, and at a time when certain economic policies and beliefs appear especially strong and in line with many of the ideas advocated by consultants (constant quantified benchmarking, austerity policies following the « One Best Way », deindustrialization wished to appear as smooth), it seems even more appropriate to question these protagonists and to understand – with no over or underestimation – what they actually do to the construction of social reality. From there, it is important to carry out as jointly as possible the study of: the history of this particular field and the principles of its structuring, the qualities and careers of its many self-claimed protagonists, their daily activities, the content of their work, their words, their ways of thinking and ideology that underly the methods they develop or reinforce. Must aswell be explored, the social position they believe they fulfill, their social function, their interaction with their clients, the effect they have on them. The aim is also to analyse their practical and objective relationship with social institutions – from local to international, in different fields -, the circulation of ideas between these institutions and the consultants, as well as the effects of their action on various groups of people: « managers », « workers », « citizens », « consumers », representatives of such social classes and individuals from such administrative categories, etc.

By putting into perspective the studies recently conducted in different countries and centered on different « types » of consultants, this conference pursues two objectives: to question the obviousness of the existence of « consulting » as a whole, as a set of similar or uniform practices, and furthermore, to step forward in the exploration of how consultants impact the characteristics and the evolution of society. These questions can revolve around the four research axes listed below.

1. Does « consulting » exist? For a history of consulting and the questioning of its « boundaries »

Counselling for trade union representatives, farm advisory services, creative consulting, social diversity or professional equality consulting, information systems, organization and management consulting, financial audit, change management consulting, psychosocial risk consulting, industrial advisory, marketing, design consulting, recruitment, head-hunting, coaching, career counselling, professional training, outplacement, implementing of redundancy plans, media consulting, advisory services for the State, advisory services for local authorities, advisory services for national and international institutions, lobbying etc.: there is a vast array of so-called consulting activities which can appear far less homogeneous than sometimes suggested. Moreover, although some research has been carried out into the history of « consulting » and the

principles of its structuring and some of its recompositions (Henry, 1992, 2012; Kipping, 1999; Thine, 2014), such an undertaking is worth going yet deeper into.

How does the « specialization » of consulting practices occur, how do the subsequent practices become recomposed? What is consistently at stake, notwithstanding the specialization? What sets those practices apart from others, not labelled as « consulting » practices? What, across the globe, makes them similar to each other, or rather unique? Who are the protagonists and how do they justify themselves? Are there any specific processes of labelling or exclusion? When specialization occurs and develops through different segments, does it draw upon common figures such as the « manager » or the « engineer »? How do consultants set, as by authority, their own definition of their profession, resisting any outside attempt to describe their expertise and the multiplicity of its segments? How do practices and ideas move around from one segment to another? Does the study of the national histories of consulting (Ainamo, Tienari, 2002; Faust, 2002; Faust, Kordon, 2014; Karsten, van Veen, 2002; Mastripiéri, 2013; Wallerstedt, 2001) also lead to question the idea of a unified sector? What leads to, what encourages the emergence of demarcation lines, of cooperation, of struggles to protect inner partitions? How do they adapt from one country to another? Does this status provide, across the globe, the same type and the same amount of economic and symbolic profit?

In this research axis, one can introduce the social history of one specialization or segment of consulting, a key historical moment or the mechanisms of the division of labour, what can be observed in a specific national or regional context, the analysis of a « borderline » area where professionals signal their practice as different from « ordinary » or « secular » work, the ethnography or statistical study of the structuring elements of some fraction of the field of research. This research axis also calls for the questioning of the effects induced by social and economic changes, recent or not-so-recent, at a national or an international level, on the development or recompositions of consulting, and for the objectivizing of the assumed relationship between some circumstances or predominant practices and those labelled as « consulting ».

2. What do consultants do? For an ethnography of consulting work

The contents of consulting work are renowned for their difficulty at being described and defined, and are probably the least researched area amongst studies on consulting. Some have indeed taken a closer look (Boni-Le Goff, 2015; Kipping, 2000; Lippitt, 1959; Moeneclae, 2015; Sturdy *et al.*, 1999; Villette, 1988) but there remains much work to be done on the detail and the variety of consultants' daily business, and about the nature of their « interventions ». Thorough examination, notably in the form of ethnography, can shed a precious light upon their practices, the content they produce, their work routines and the parts that remains unthought, the way they build « new offerings », the interactions which act as a structure and as a major element of their activity, the way they specialize their activity according to different fields of practice, how

they get organized, etc. This on-site examination can help understand the less visible aspects of their work: time, pace, the practical and cognitive aids it relies on and how they apprehend and categorize these « tools » and « methods », what kind of notion of the world their work encourages or, is the fruit of, the social interactions that develop or is reproduced within their work.

On this subject, and to keep in line with the issues dealt with by this conference, it appears extremely interesting to pay attention to the forms and the content of the relationships between consultants and the protagonists who make up their social environment, as Strauss (1978) explains, amongst others. About clients: some sociological research has gone into the paradox of the consultancy relationship, or has explored the role held by the notion of trust (Henry, 2013). In the same line of thought, the existence of some kind of « coproduction » through a « maieutics » of the « intervention » can appear more as a postulate rather than as a true research finding (Gadrey, De Bandt, 1994). In the same way, the exploration of interactions with other types of protagonists – upstream-downstream workers along a line of divided work, competitors, professional organizations, institutions responsible for giving a legal frame – is even more scarce. It is often assumed that consulting operates within a triangular relationship with the client and the recipients of the consultant's action, such as the client's employees (Villette, 2003): is that really always true? Furthermore, one should explore in which ways the most common social stances held by consultants are considered, sought after and encouraged. Finally, this detailed apprehension of their practices, of the history of their « methods » and of their management devices can help envision the underlying yet major tension in consultants' work, between « old » methods and the invention of « new » procedures.

3. Between mythical figures and realities: social properties and careers of consultants

Whereas the careers and qualities of some types of consultants have indeed been researched – mostly the ones acting in the long standing and more prestigious fields – it is not the case with more recent types, or the ones who differ from the prevailing figures. Yet the contrast between the ideal, typical, not to say mythical figure of the young, male, white, highly qualified consultant, eager to learn or be endorsed with coveted social codes (Alvesson, Robertson, 2006; Fondeur, Sauviat, 2004) and the actual, multiple realities of the field, can be striking. This contrast, precisely, is to be explored, along with the many different ways of being a consultant, through the study of the heterogeneity of careers and trajectories: social background, education, ways of entering a specialized area, progress within the field of consulting, ways of exiting it or of coming and going in and out of it, ways of finally retiring.

Many questions arise: they allow to go beyond the classic representations of the consultant, who aim at showing the « profession » as attractive, as a « major protagonist » in society and the economy. For example: whereas in the highest

circles of consulting work, some professionals may be seeking to make up for their « educational record » (Henry, 1993), is this also true in lower levels? In the same way, while many consultant careers are an answer to high social expectations, what kind of path can lead to the same professional area but with different ambitions – for instance, to make up for a fall in social status? In each segment, how can their manner, their ways of interacting, their language skills, their pastimes, their behaviour as consumers, their political opinions or religious practices be described, how are they distributed between the different segments? How exactly do consultants commit to an agency or a brand (Kärreman, Rylander, 2008), in the case of more or less non-prevailing specialized segments? Along the same line of thought, how do the present transformations in employment impact the different figures of the « consultant »? Within organizations, or within the larger scope of the professional field, how do the self-employed – whether « sublime » or precarious (Fondeur, Sauviat, 2003; Maestriperi, 2014) – and the permanent employees (Berrebi-Hoffmann, 2002; Cucca, Maestriperi, 2014) coexist? Within such a pattern, how does the often observed injunction to self-monitoring occur (Alvesson, Kärreman, 2004)? Finally, how do the newer specializations, as they appear and progress, deal with the predominance of a certain kind of education in consulting, such as engineering degrees or business schools (Engwall, 2012; Rassam, Oates, 1991)?

Careful attention should be paid to the mechanisms along which gender relations are (re)produced and (re)negotiated, here very specific to a field characterized by an « unisex » meritocratic model (to speak in the words of Löwy, 2006) and equipped with a particularly strong glass ceiling (Boni-Le Goff, 2012, 2013; Kelan, 2012). Beyond the differences in the way careers are led, it is important to figure out how the positions held by women and their progress in the different areas of consulting impact the figure of the « professional », of the « consultant », of the expert in a field or another, such as « management ». Besides, it might be interesting to question the ways social sciences are used in certain areas of consulting practices, and their impacts on consultants' careers.

4. Businessmen, or manufacturers of economic and political doctrines?

Consulting, according to many, spreads or even « creates » practices and doctrines, and whose political significance is often denied. Constantly posing as a vector of change (Dujarier, 2006; Henry, 1993), it claims to play a major role in society (Kipping, Clark, 2012). But if that really is true, what kind of change does it contribute to? More widely, by which processes does it partake in the production or reinforcement of social reality – here understood as a result of the institutional production of categories on people, objects, ways of being and of thinking (Boltanski, 2009; Bourdieu, Boltanski, 1976)?

Whereas consultants are willing to present themselves as iconoclasts, aren't they in fact partaking in the reproduction of social structures, or even, of a certain social order? Aren't they in fact simply collecting the elements for a criticism of

capitalism (Boltanski, Chiapello, 1999) in order to develop their business? Or, on the contrary, does the enchantment they often advertise (through assignments dedicated to « personal growth », « collective and individual achievements », « progress », etc.) actually generate the suggested or promised effects? As for the more recent or dominated specializations in consulting – such as counselling for elected staff representatives (Cristofalo, 2009) or equality and diversity consulting (Blanchard, 2013) – are they committed to setting a better balance of power and position, or are they more concerned with playing the role of a moderate opposition? Are the doings of a consultant simply a means to promote a way of being that is « up-to-date », that is « modern » (Chauvin, 2010; Moeneclae, 2009, 2015) or do they actually adapt to the various groups of people involved in the various specialized segments? In the first case, how do they contribute to the invisibilization and relative normalization of certain groups of people (workers, the unemployed, immigrants, rural populations, etc.), social classes or fractions of a social class?

What could be understood from a typology of all the functions the consultants give to themselves or are given? Does the fact that their clients sometimes make a use of these functions in a different way than explicitly stated (Villette, 1988) give ground to reconsider the extent of their alleged power? How and to what extent have the growing number and types of expertise nurtured the development of consulting techniques over the last decades (Berrebi-Hoffman, Lallement, 2009)? How do these techniques circulate in other fields such as the academic world or the medias (David, Strang, 2006; Faust, 2012)? Furthermore, what do they have in common with national and international public institutions that take part in saying, and incorporating, what reality is (Moeneclae, 2012; Ramirez, 2003, 2013)? Inspired by several works (Boussard, Maugeri, 2003; Ghaffari et al., 2013), the idea is to study practices and tools particularly involved in constructing this « reality »: sophistication in social classifications, increase in different types of people and skills assessment practices, development and implementation of « accounting standards » or « quality standards », quantified measures, constant control, « benchmarking » and « best practices », « participatory surveys », « information » and « knowledge management », « innovation » in « production methods », « customer relationship » « charter », etc. Which are the exact effects of those social technologies and how are they sometimes rejected, diverted or adapted? Also, as certain consultants establish themselves as oracles or « visionaries », repeatedly heralding « ruptures » in the rules of the economic game, one can question their independence and the interests underlying their predictions. In particular, what is the exact part played by the closeness or the homologies, from the point of view of social characteristics and status, between high-level consultants and leading protagonists of the economic and political field (Laurens, 2015; Thine et al., 2013)?

Finally, guided by these questionings, the conference should help decompartmentalize studies about this prominently international object. Do consultants share the same doctrines and the same practices in different countries and geographic areas (Cailluet, 2000; Djelic, 2004; Kipping et al., 2003; Saint-Martin, 2001a), and in the various professional or social worlds in which

they now intervene (Belorgey, 2011, 2014; Berrebi-Hoffmann, Grémion, 2009; Chauvin, 2010; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1990; Martin, 1998; Saint-Martin, 2001b; Serrano-Velarde, 2010; Sorignet, 2012)? How do local branches of international firms (the famous « Big 4 », amongst others) and their smaller outgrowth, in the form of smaller companies, manage to operate according to national or regional public policies and in specific historical, economic and social contexts?

The conference aims to bring together and organize a conversation between studies in sociology, history, political science, anthropology or management sciences. Will be favoured, papers which rely, to a certain extent, on empirical data, such as ethnography, the construction or analysis of statistical data, interviews or the studying of historical archive.

Place, date and organization of the conference

The conference will be held over two days, the 20th and 21st of June 2016, at the **École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS)**, 105, Boulevard Raspail, 75006 PARIS, France.

It will switch back and forth between plenary conferences and topical workshops. Each paper will be discussed by an experienced researcher.

The conference will be held in French and English.

A fraction of papers will afterwards be selected for publishing, within a collective publication or within a journal.

Abstract Submission

Abstracts of 3500 to 5000 characters in French or English, are invited **by 15th January 2016** at the following e-mail addresses: isabel.boni-legoff@unil.ch, vincent.moeneclaey@ens.uvsq.fr, sophie.pochic@ens.fr

They should mention:

- the name, institutional address, e-mail address of the author(s)
- the preferred topical axis
- the frame and context in which the study is being or has been carried out, the empirical data which has been collected
- the main outcome of the study, which will be presented during the conference

Authors should provide, if necessary, information about particular geographical or national conditions for their work.

- **15th January 2016:** deadline for submission of proposals for papers, in French or English
- **10th February 2016:** notification of acceptance or refusal of papers
- **15th May 2016:** closing date for sending an original text comprising between 30,000 and 45,000 characters, in French or English
- **20th and 21 June 2016:** Conference
- **September 2016:** selection of papers for publishing and request of modification

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