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# Expanding the Horizon without Prejudice

by Fabrizio Perretti\*

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*The future of a magazine like Economia&Management cannot but draw inspiration and strength from its past and its roots. As Winston Churchill used to recall, the more you are able to look at the past, the more you will be able to push into the future.*

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**E**conomia&Management was born as the magazine of the SDA, the School of Business Management of the Bocconi University. That is, it was born inside a business school whose official purpose is to train the so-called professional elites (who manage companies) and must face the problem of integrating two social systems, with their respective cultural and organizational models: those who practice management as a profession, and those who study the disciplines on which it is based.

This is not a simple problem. (1) It regards the equilibrium between practical application and university research, in which businesses are essentially the recipients of the training, but at the same time, also the sources from which the knowledge transmitted to them is derived. That is, we see a circular relationship, in which the business school has the role not only of producing new knowledge, but also of rationalizing the knowledge and experiences already present in some organizations and disseminating it among a broader public of both enterprises and other subjects that interact with them. The magazine of a business school is part of this logic and is an expression of those aims. It is even more so if, as in the case of the SDA and Economia&Management, both of them have the same founder.

Claudio Dematté was very aware of the difficult relationship between practice and science, and always sought a balance between them. If, as recalled in the editorial we republished in this special, (2) management is closer to art than science, this does not mean that business must be studied only as an infinite variety of specific cases. Yet it is always necessary to place it in a social and institutional context. For Dematté, business does not exist as an abstract, universal, ahistorical, and atemporal concept as represented by microeconomics manuals, but it can also not be governed based on management manuals (often published in the United States) and fixed rules. The title of one of his editorials from 1992 – “When in Rome, Do Business as the Romans do” – shows that approach, in which the subject of business evokes different concepts in different contexts. That diversity cannot but be reflected in managerial practices which are also distinct, that must “be able to interpret the structure and logic underlying the various economic systems: what is the concept of going concern, what type of links connect businesses, banks, financial markets, and entrepreneurs; what business connections there are between them; the role that is assigned to institutions that defend competition; what system of relations ties workers to companies; how businesses and public powers relate to each other; and lastly, how balance is formed and maintained between the different interlocutors that converge in each business.” (3)

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Consistent with this approach, the magazine has traditionally concentrated on the analysis of the Italian situation. Yet this has never meant closing itself within national borders and ignoring international experiences. Such an approach would in fact have been very distant from the experience of Dematté, the founder of the SDA, who drew inspiration from the educational model of Harvard Business School which he had experienced directly, and who always dealt with internationalization – of financial markets and business strategies – in his activity as a professor and researcher. So the focus was on the Italian context, as regarded the choice of audience and interlocutors, but with an international (not global) perspective to understand different contexts from which to draw positive or negative lessons. Since the magazine was aimed at Italian enterprises, or those that operate in Italy, he always had to take into account their specific features both in terms of size (prevalence of small and medium enterprises) and in terms of type and ownership structure (presence of family businesses and public companies). Among his initial duties was that of spreading a managerial culture within many businesses that lacked one because they didn't feel the need for it, because they thought it was the result only of direct experience and the subject of hereditary transmission, or because they were subject only to public logics. As an expression of a university institution, the magazine assumed and then immediately played a public role of disseminating knowledge and increasing the level of managerial education in business entities that had even only weak exposure.

As an expression of a business school in a prestigious university such as the Bocconi – the top institution in Italy for higher education in economics (4) – *Economia&Management* also addressed the most advanced expressions of entrepreneurship and the Italian governing class, but has always sought to do so while maintaining its independence and freedom of judgment. While businesses represent the subject of study and the magazine's audience, the aim was not to be the representative of business or the managerial class in public debate. In Dematté's editorials careful attention was always paid to Italian businesses and the Italian economic system, but as stressed by Fer-

ruccio De Bortoli, “never uncritical allegiance, fideistic abandon, or intellectual surrender.” (5) To the contrary, businesses were always subject to criticism, they were pushed to set more ambitious, long-term goals. Precisely due to the respect and importance of the role they have in the economy and society, they were often called on to take on the position and the social and political responsibilities that a governing class must have, understood not as an elite that simply occupies a top position in society, but that in making those decisions under its responsibility is fully aware of the concept of *res publica*, of that social contract that acts to orient and limit individual behavior. Businesses and entrepreneurs should thus assume the role of a governing class, and as such, believe in their mission and the acceptance of responsibility to contribute

to creating a political space for society as a whole.

In Italy, unfortunately, those who have leadership roles in economic organizations have often occupied elite positions without having the proper responsibility for their role. As Guido Carli, former governor of the Bank of Italy and president of Confindustria, observed, Italian industrialists, and the entrepreneurial class more in general, never considered themselves as fully part of the establishment, members of the governing class. That is, Italian

entrepreneurs never considered the state as their own, as a social organization for which they were directly responsible – even together with the other social groups that make up the community – but as an outside subject, that provides services, favors, or imposes heavy costs. (6) As Dematté stressed, “when this overarching principle is lacking, the functioning of society is delegated only to the laws and the repression of illegal behavior. But since laws are not rooted in shared social values, the success of coercive control and its cost become modest, and intolerable, respectively.” (7) With respect to businesses, *Economia&Management* thus proposed a function that we could define as “maieutic,” helping them to find within themselves the role and responsibilities deriving from their position and economic importance, and at the same time, point out some errors to them, and the risk of taking easy shortcuts.

Three functions: pedagogic, maieutic, and critical.



These are some of the original basic features of the magazine with regard to its audience and readers. The other fundamental characteristic is undoubtedly pluralism and the open attitude regarding contributions and the articles published. The challenges, whether they are technological, social, or political, in which we all participate, including businesses, are such that “nobody with any sense can presume to have exhaustive answers when faced with such radical changes.” (8) Thus it is necessary to be open to contributions from various subjects, with different perspectives, because “the more we think of them, the more we speak of them,” the more we can nourish the hope of understanding those changes, addressing them, and resolving them positively. Despite being the magazine of a specific school and university, *Economia&Management* not only involves various internal components, but also encourages and welcomes outside contributions from other institutions and universities. The focus is not the SDA and not the Bocconi, but “the problems of our country,” and *Economia&Management*, precisely because it is from the SDA and the Bocconi, because of the values on which it is based and their position and prestige in the Italian and international context, has felt the need to adopt a role of encouragement and aggregation that goes beyond the confines of its own educational institution.

What I have described are the roots of *Economia&Management*, or better – using the verses of the famous poem by Ungaretti – “these are my rivers,” the urns of water which inspired me in leading this magazine. And it is difficult, at least for me, to understand if “this is my nostalgia” or a source on which to draw for the future of the magazine as well. This past is certainly part of the present, but can it also

be part of the future? Dealing with internationalization, Dematté often spoke of the spatial dimension of events, the enlargement of the area of reference and the dilemma that this phenomenon entails: withdrawing or integrating into broader areas. If we address this question to a magazine like *Economia&Management*, we need to ask if it still makes sense to focus on Italy and speak, first of all, to the businesses that operate in our country, or if we need to expand our horizons to a wider public – in both Europe and globally – especially when, in addition to businesses, business schools themselves increasingly act and perhaps even compete in that larger space, and when academic research is understood as science, as universal. On the one hand, there are those who intend spatial enlargement as globalization, a single, borderless space, in which businesses face the same challenges, the same problems, and to which management offers a common model. On the other hand, there are those who intend spatial enlargement as a combination of distinct spaces, in which borders are transformed but do not disappear, in which variety exists (and this is positive), and not recognizing it implies finding oneself, like Hagel, in the “night in which all cows are black.” In this case as well, Dematté exhorted readers to “avoid prepackaged conclusions – such as that which assumes a priori the existence of a generalized and irreversible trend towards globalization – and instead to determine objectively and without prejudice the true geographic dynamic under examination... [in which] the local dimension of activity can certainly co-exist, and even be intensified, despite the presence of a generalized globalization in the rest of the system.” (9) Looking back, this seems to still be valid advice for the future, and not only of this magazine.

(1) See H.A. Simon, “The business school a problem in organizational design”, *Journal of Management Studies*, 4(1), 1967, pp. 1-16.

(2) C. Dematté, “Governo d’impresa: fra arte e professione”, *Economia&Management*, 1 (febbraio), 1994, pp. 5-8. Article published on pages 8-11 of this special issue dedicated to 30 years of the magazine.

(3) C. Dematté, “Paese che vai, impresa che trovi”, *Economia&Management*, 4 (October), 1992, pp. 5-8.

(4) See E. Resti, *L’Università Bocconi: dalla fondazione a oggi*, Milan, Egea, 2000.

(5) F. De Bortoli, *Preface to the book by C. Dematté, Il mestiere di dirigere*. Milan, Etas, 2004.

(6) G. Carli, *Intervista sul capitalismo italiano*, Bari, Laterza, 1977.

(7) C. Dematté, “La responsabilità politica della classe dirigente italiana”, *Economia&Management*, 2 (May), 1992, pp. 5-7.

(8) C. Dematté, *Preface to the book Una cultura per l’impresa*, Milan, Etas, 1996.

(9) C. Dematté, “Le strategie di internazionalizzazione”, 2003, in E. Marafioti and F. Perretti, *Strategie di internazionalizzazione*, Milan, Egea, 2020.