This is a more developed version (with some notes) of my abstract in English of my French text “Etude d’un milieu d’Organisateurs-rationalisateurs”.

I apologize for not having written a longer text in English. As I haven’t had the time to write a proper version in English, I would prefer to submit a more precise abstract than a vague and misleading paper. I just hope that this small text will provoke debate and stimulate comment.

I am currently writing a thesis on the « Scientific Management » international movement during the Twenties and the Thirties. This concept originates from the Taylorist movement that emerged at the turn of the century in the United States1.

Most of the studies concerning “Scientific Management” and “Rationalization” policies have been focused on local reorganizations of particular firms. Some authors have tried to give overviews of practices at a national level2. But these books lack any clear vision of the evolution of these Taylorist ideas during the inter-war period.

Researchers influenced by the History of Science and Technology3, using the concept of Agency4, have recently tried to have a better understanding of these questions by stressing the simultaneous transformation of discourses and practices5. Specialists of Management History have also demonstrated wide changes in the firm structure triggered by the application of Taylorist ideas6 (notably the new importance of Bureaucracy).

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5 They have been notably influenced by the seminal book of J.L Austin, «How to do things with words», Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1962


Even if these new researches are very stimulating, I think it is legitimate to consider these concepts of “Taylorism” and “Scientific Management” in the Twenties and in the Thirties as having much broader implications and applications than the technical reorganization of a single firm. Engineers, managers, but also civil servants and specialists of social sciences assembled as part of the “Scientific Management” movement in the United States and in Europe in the inter-war period to propagate the “mental revolution” advocated by Taylor, that is to say, the systematic and so-called scientific study of all elements influencing the production process in order to determine objective rules permitting its improvement.

Thus defined, this idea could be applied to many objects of studies and at different levels:

- to an individual firm as a production unit
- to the relations between a firm and the market, linking production and distribution.
- to groups of firms trying to “rationalize the market”.
- to a firm considered as a part of a social system regulated by the State.

It corresponds to a general body of research that redefines the links between the Firm and the Society. Yet, between the two wars, this international movement of “Scientific Management”, “Organisation scientifique du travail” (French), or “Rationalisierung” (German) had never constituted in any countries and at any moment a clear and stabilized theory of work organization. However, this vague concept, blurred by divergent interpretations of Taylorism, and altered by different translations, had nevertheless been appropriated all over the world by many people as a sort of by-word for modernization.

7 On this broad vision of “Taylorism”, see the two first chapters of Merkle, Judith A. « Management And Ideology. The legacy of the international Scientific Management Movement », Berkeley, University of California press, 1980
8 “Scientific Management is not an efficiency device, nor is it any bunch or group of efficiency devices. It is not a new scheme of paying men; it is not holding a stop watch on a man and writing things about him, it is not time study; it is not motion study nor an analysis of the movement of men; it is not the printing and ruling and unloading of a ton or two of blanks on a set of men and saying «there’s a system, go to it». It is not divided foremanship or functional foremanship; it is not any of the devices which the average man calls to mind when Scientific Management is spoken of...

Now, in its essence, Scientific Management involves a complete mental revolution on the part of the workingman engaged in any particular establishment or industry - a complete mental revolution on the part of these men as to their duties toward their work, toward their fellow man, and toward their employers. and it involves the equally complete mental revolution on the part of those of the Management’s side - the foreman, the superintendent, the owner of the business, the board of directors - a complete mental revolution on their part of their duties toward their fellow workers in the management, toward their workmen, and toward all of their daily problems. And without this complete mental revolution on both sides, Scientific Management does not exist.

The great revolution that takes place in the mental attitude of the two parties under Scientific Management is that both sides take their eyes off of the division of the surplus as the important matter and together turn their attention towards increasing the size of the surplus...» in Copley, Frank B. « Frederick W. Taylor : Father of Scientific Management », 2 volumes, New York, 1923. In the twenties and the thirties, this text had been considered by many authors as defining the ideological basis of “Scientific Management”.

The content of the discussions in these international congresses was deeply influenced by the national and institutional backgrounds of the speakers. Congressists often did not understand each other. Using the same words, they were not talking about the same subject. During the whole inter-war period, they had been trying, but finally failed, to define a common terminology. But this vagueness in the use of terms allowed a wide variety of actors to participate in these international congresses. It kept open a kind of contact space for interactions between very different voices. Therefore, I think the study of theses congresses and of their context of organization is a good means of investigating the idea of an “International milieu” of promoters of Scientific Management during the inter-war period.

By reconstituting the “space of maneuvering” of individuals in this specific milieu by meticulous biographical and bibliographical studies, I hope to be able to analyse and to understand at an international level the link between the dynamics of transformation of networks of actors and the evolution of discourses on work organization in various countries and circumstances.

9 See about this theme, the whole literature concerning the link between the “five-dollar day” advocated by Henry Ford and the Mass Production System.
10 For example, after the International Management Congress in London, a congressist called Dent declared: “it was not feasible to lay down ideal forms of operation and collaboration in inculcating management principles, owing to the wide differences of ideas and of approach to the subject in different countries. The racial factor was too big; some went for regimentation as a cure, others preferred voluntary methods.”
11 See, for example, comments of the Secretary of the International Committee of Scientific Management on the text published in 1938 as the result of the international inquiry on Management Terminology by Hugo Von Haan: “Present Developments in International Management Terminology”:
“The Secretariat still consider, however, that they are still too vague to produce the result which it originally had in view, namely to help to ensure unity of action among the National Committees by specifying in precise terms what the common aim is”.
12 For this study, I will be influenced by seminal articles concerning “network analysis” such as Granovetter Mark S. «The strength of weak ties» American Journal of Sociology n°78, pp1360-80, 1973 or Padgett J.f et