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# There will be no revolution Managers in modern societies

**Abstract:** The paper discusses the place and role of managers in modern societies. The starting point is James Burnham's concept of the managerial revolution from eight decades ago. However, the author refers to classic concepts in the social sciences and the latest approaches in this field. He tries to prove that there will be no revolution in the management of modern economic organisations. However, he points to several evolutionary changes that have taken place and are still taking place — both in the social and economic structures. Analysing managers in a multidimensional way is possible by combining two perspectives of social reality: micro-sociological and macro-sociological.

**Keywords:** managers, managerialism, social differentiation, social structure, managing organisations.

## Introduction

Undoubtedly, managers constitute an important and, at the same time, specific social category. They are important because they perform managerial functions, manage people, assets and various processes, and are specific because they are a minority, and not everyone can perform managerial functions. However, above all, managers are important because their decisions are significant not only for the very organizations, but also for the society.

It could even be said that managers indirectly determine the predestination of local communities, as well as the level and quality of their life. In Poland, the significance of managerial decisions for local and regional communities became known very well especially in the early years after the so-called systemic trans-

formation, i.e., after 1989. Nowadays, they may not be as spectacular, but certainly they are still really significant.

Today, it is also worth considering whether and how managerial roles are undergoing transformations, especially in their social context, and whether these transformations are revolutionary in nature, as the American sociologist James Burnham indicated over eight decades ago, or whether they are rather evolutionary, even imperceptible. Finally, it seems crucial to check whether they are noticeable, and constitute a factor distinguishing this social category in some way, or if they are standard in nature. These questions are important, especially in the period after the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, at the time of geopolitical anxiety and uncertainty, and in the conditions of the economic slowdown affecting many countries after the (post)pandemic boom.

There is no revolution in Burnham's sense, and we do not expect it. Managers do not directly take control of the industry and economy. How it works in an indirect sense, i.e., in the influence on the directions of development, decision-making, and finally access to information and its distribution, is a completely different issue that requires a separate, in-depth study. This paper discusses only the place and role of managers in modern societies taking managerial roles played in organizations into account, especially in economic organizations as a point of reference. Thus, the macro-sociological perspective is intertwined with the micro-sociological view of the phenomena and processes discussed.

Certainly, when analysing the place and role of managers in contemporary societies and economic systems, the significance of specific environmental conditions should be emphasized. What is meant here is the dominant type of capitalism, together with its origins and specific determinants. This specific structure forces, on the one hand, the recruitment and selection of specific types of personalities and identities, and on the other hand, shape a strictly defined managerial identity. To some extent it becomes a required attribute of the manager.

Therefore, within economic organizations understood as systems of social positions and roles, the identity of employees, including managers, is systematically shaped within the processes of secondary socialization. This happens under the influence of mutual relations with other people, in contact with the structure of the organization, its procedures, the system of norms and values, as well as the organizational culture and climate. In these conditions, it is an individual matter to maintain a minimum of one's own distinctiveness and uniqueness or freedom, if it is considered in slightly broader terms. However, the intended effect of each organization as a social system is to adapt individuals to its goals and current requirements. The discussion, and even a fierce dispute, about how much freedom there is in this normative enslavement could be held for a very long time, referring first to philosophical arguments, and finally to economic and practical ones [cf. Bockman, 2011].

Here, the problem is only signalled, and, additionally, the external system of conditions towards the organization is indicated. In particular, the patterns of social and professional advancement that are present in every society and temporarily

dominant, the norms and values attributed to the economy and its components, primarily to enterprises, as well as the level of satisfaction and trust with the surrounding conditions declared both in research and in everyday social situations are referred to. This system of conditions is of key importance not only for defining the ways in which managerial roles are performed, but also for the perception of their performance. Moreover, it always expresses the socially shaped and perceived distance between managerial and executive work. In Poland, in conditions marked by the transformation from the old to the new socio-economic order, the factors mentioned above take on additional significance and a specific colour.

It is worth considering where we are as Polish society and we as participants in market games that undoubtedly permeate our everyday life and our out-of-work life. When analysing not only the traps of thinking, but also economic models, Daniel Kahneman introduces a division into *Humans* and *Econs* [Kahneman, 2012: 357; see also Smith, 2000]. He states unequivocally that the world of completely rational “econs” is rather a mirage because markets are composed of “humans” who do not always make fully rational decisions, entangling a number of non-economic elements in their decision-making processes. Incidentally, many decades before Kahneman, Vilfredo Pareto [1994] had developed the concept of logical, extra-logical and illogical actions. And he probably linked it more fully with the social determinants of human actions rather than the aforementioned psychologist, a Nobel Prize winner in economics.

Globalization has certainly become a feature of modernity, which in the simplest sense, can be presented as a network of economic, social, and cultural correlations [cf. Sassen, 1998; Rapley, 2004; Stiglitz, 2003; Nester, 2010; Alvesson, 2013], but economic above all [cf. Stiglitz, 2003]. It is the economy that has a considerable influence on other structures of modern societies. And this is not about simple determinism, but a certain system of conditions that causes a specific type of management to trigger specific attitudes and consolidates the existing axionormative system. Naturally, this relationship is mutual in nature. In other words, recognized values and norms shape a specific type of management. A significant role in these processes falls to managers.

## Towards a socioeconomic definition of a manager

In the attempt to define the term “manager”, I will begin by referring to the various spellings of this word in Polish. It occurs that there are three of its form — “manager”, which is a literal transfer from English, and the Polonized ones — “menadżer” and “menedżer”. *Wielki Słownik Języka Polskiego* offers this latter Polonized spelling as the basic form of the analysed word [Dubisz, 2018]. Therefore, following a certain tradition in this respect and the current dictionary interpretation, I have been using this spelling for years.

In English, “manager” refers either to a person managing all or part of an enterprise, or to a person managing the activities of an athlete or team, or — more broadly — to a person managing a career. An additional meaning already involves specific tasks, as it refers to supervising expenses. Therefore, a fundamental conclusion that can be drawn from these initial considerations is the connection of managers with enterprises, and thus with the economic structures of modern societies. This is an important observation because this is the understanding that occurs in this article. It could be said directly that the managers are part of the economy.

However, other terms are also used to refer to managerial work. These are primarily a “supervisor” and “director”. Although to some extent it can be assumed that they overlap and that they are used synonymously, it is worth paying attention to the hierarchy accompanying the inclusion of these words in spoken and written statements. It seems that a director, followed by a manager and supervisor are the highest in this hierarchy. Nevertheless, this outlined convention is not unambiguous and permanent. Additionally, a “supervisor” and “director” are more universal terms due to the fact that they are used both to refer to managerial work and specific positions in the economy, as well as outside it. As mentioned before, the term manager is “reserved” rather for the economy, although it is also associated with such institutions as schools, offices, universities, etc. Today, the statements that, for example, a school principal should also be a manager or that a rector of an academic institution should be a manager are gaining popularity. These formulations therefore contain both a certain opposition between a director and a manager, as well as a postulate to expand managerial functions in non-economic structures with elements of managerial management.

Nevertheless, the aforementioned intuitive hierarchy functioning in social communication corresponds to the dictionary definitions of the terms discussed. *Wielki Słownik Języka Polskiego* places supervisors within specific sections as managing teams of people, and directors as managing enterprises or institutions [Dubisz, 2018]. This is an important distinction, because it fits into the earlier thesis about the universality of these terms. After all, a director is placed within both economic and non-economic organizations, in contrast to a manager, who is unequivocally assigned to enterprises. For a researcher of the social, educational, cultural and economic determinants of the functioning of managers, such a linguistic usage is extremely interesting. This is because it reveals, at least partially, everyday phenomena and processes that shape, modify and consolidate a linguistic meaning. In other words, the language reflects well and sometimes unambiguously what takes place within social structures, mutual relations, social relations and interactions. Also, in the processual sense.

In turn, the definitions of “manager” found in scientific studies, mainly within the framework of management sciences, although in line with the typical use of this term in language, emphasize certain specific features and processes associated with managerial work. First of all, these are managing teams of people, supervising, deciding and controlling [Drucker 1992, 1994; Listwan, 1993a, 1993b]. Certainly,

apart from relating the components of these definitions to managers, it is worth remembering about the *implicit* relations with other structures and the individual specificity of modern economic organizations contained in them. Here, both the social environment and employees are primarily meant. It can therefore be stated that defining a specific concept, in this case “manager”, also includes abbreviated references to other categories of people and the relations connecting them with managers. That is why “supervision”, as a relationship occurring on the manager-employee line, which at the same time expresses a clear and unbridgeable division between them, has been emphasised earlier.

Researchers of management, social elites and power relations in society and organizations emphasized already in the 1960s that managers are a category of people who control the functioning of enterprises [see Wright Mills, 2002]. In addition to the obvious economic “marking” of managers [see also Galbraith, 1973, 1979], there is their location within the highest levels of management and the explicit and specific assignment of specific functions in society, and not only in the organization. This is a key issue, because managers, also as the object of research in these considerations, are not reduced only to the enterprise or institution. Like Burnham [1943], Schumpeter [2021], Wright Mills [2002], Galbraith [1973, 1979], or Drucker [1992, 1994, 2010] have it, an attempt is made to analyse the place and role of managers in modern societies in macro categories, considering microstructural categories. This means, on the one hand, a constant change of perspective, and on the other, the interpenetration of these perspectives and their mutual complementation. This procedure seems methodologically obvious but is nevertheless absent in many scientific discourses and practical analyses of complex phenomena and processes.

In this context, it is worth considering the position of the last of the mentioned researchers, Peter F. Drucker. The aforementioned interpenetration of perspectives is perhaps most clearly visible in his works. This is because on the one hand, he notices such elements of the organizational functioning of managers as decision-making [cf. Drucker, 1992, 1994, 2010], and on the other hand, he places them in broader social structures as the main actors of change [cf. Drucker, 1994]. Moreover, Drucker, as one of the most famous management theorists, addresses the problem of decision-making very broadly. Decision-making actually applies to all employees because all of them make specific decisions while performing professional tasks [cf. also Kotarbiński’s distinction between physical and mental work — 1965], but in the case of managers, these decisions are strategic in nature. This means that they have an impact on the entire organization “here and now”, as well as on its shape and fate in the future. This is a certain distinguishing feature of the work of managers, especially top-level managers, in relation to lower-ranking supervisors and executive employees.

Therefore, referring to both definitions above, it is worth trying to combine the aforementioned perspectives in a synthetic definition of a manager. Therefore, such representatives of formally hired and indirectly productive work who direct the work of teams of people within economic organizations, fulfilling the functions

of planning, organizing, motivating and controlling, and whose decisions influence not only these organizations, but also society as a whole will be called managers.

This definition proposal deliberately refers to the greatest extent to the so-called *top management*, i.e., to people holding the highest positions in the management structure of enterprises, but it also considers the middle level of management, directors managing divisions or departments of enterprises, especially in the case of large international corporations. Such an understanding is therefore consistent with both the linguistic usage of the word “manager” and the practice occurring in this area in modern economic organizations. It is also similar to the English *executive*, which could be translated as a director or manager, but emphasizing the higher level of management. When enumerating the components of the proposed definition, it is therefore necessary to emphasize in particular the location within economic structures (enterprises), making decisions of a strategic nature and performing hired work (at least in the formal sense).

## Managers from a micro and macro sociological perspective

Are managers a specific category? Yes, they are. Mainly because of the supervisory relationship and managing other people. It could be stated that management is a “natural” process – there have never been organizations or entire societies without managers. Nevertheless, what is natural for the process itself and presumably for managers, does not have to be so for subordinates for several reasons. However, psychological dilemmas, for example, whether someone can cope mentally with subordination, whether they would like to be a manager themselves, etc., are the least interesting. The author of the article is rather interested in certain phenomena and processes that take place in communities, forms of resistance to imposed goals, avoiding responsibility, contesting, etc.

On the other hand, when analysing the place and role of managers in modern societies, their growing importance and social impact (this is an evolution, not a revolution) is worth emphasizing. And it does not mean becoming celebrities, as is the case with some managers, especially in economically developed countries (incidentally, they are often capital owners performing managerial functions, and not managers understood as hired workers). It rather represents the creation of social networks, connections, and real influences which managers implement through organizations and associations of a diverse (industry, local, business) nature [cf. Jasiński, 2002, 2013]. This tendency to associate and influence the course of events is rooted both in managers’ individual beliefs about their own competences, including a sense of agency, and the desire to manage matters “their way”. Sometimes this is even accompanied by a genuine sense of responsibility.

Finally, it is worth noting how the organizational roles of managers, i.e., those performed in their natural environment in the enterprise, have changed in recent decades. The changes concern both basic issues, primarily planning, organizing, motivating and controlling, as well as the image, relations with the social environment of the organization and personal development. This is not surprising because organizations have also changed. Although they retain their national features, managers, due to the globalization of modern markets (product and capital), have become more modern as well as focused on change, and thanks to the unrestricted transfer of information, they use good practices and models from other countries. However, this is again an evolutionary change, not a revolutionary one, especially because its effects seem permanent and profound. It seems that there is no return to the previous situation. Modernization processes are too advanced, employees' awareness of the law has increased, aspirations and ambitions have been fuelled. National cultures and organizational cultures are continuously changing while maintaining their mutual relations (Hofstede, 2008).

Furthermore, to limit the issue to everyday activities, managerial work, especially the model one, performed reliably, with concern not only for the success of the undertakings, but also for people, is very difficult, requiring the combination of several factors, from personality, through organizational, economic, cultural, etc. This work also has a certain "unfavourable" feature, namely, its effects are deferred in time. This means that what managers do today will be reflected in specific results in a few or a dozen months. Not all owners of capital and not all supervisory boards (or other bodies supervising the work of management boards) demonstrate proper understanding of this fact. This sometimes leads to excessive pressure for results exerted on management boards, which in turn may induce illegal actions, e.g. creative accounting.

In addition, there are other factors that shape managerial work, such as risk and uncertainty about whether the undertaking will succeed at all, and whether the goals will be achieved. This of course affects both the perception of managers themselves and the assessment of their work. It becomes more complicated than executive work and, out of necessity, involves trust as an immanent element.

Managerial work, generally speaking, is not a job available to everyone. For now, social barriers are left aside, and professional competences and a certain type of predisposition that could be simply called a vocation are rather referred to. Therefore, the joy of the job performed as a universal factor that applies to any type of work in the case of managers takes on an additional meaning. This is because vocation is an element of assessment by members of the subordinate team. The image of these opinions, their content, form and individual interpretation create a specific reflected self.

It is worth using the previously developed model which assumes combining the macrosocial and microsocial perspectives while analysing the place and role of managers in society [cf. Banaszak 2023a, 2023b]. It means not only a comparison of both points of view, but above all their mutual interpenetration and complementation. In social reality, in turn, it means the occurrence of various structures that

enter into mutual relations, which together build a relatively complete picture of the analysed phenomena and social processes.

In the case of managers, adopting these assumptions requires analyses related to the natural environment, i.e., the organization, as well as an analysis of the social position of managers. In this approach, organizations are treated not only as a place of work and spending a certain *quantum* of time, but as complex systems of positions and social roles performed by managers and other participants of the “game”. The issues of interest for the research problems include recruitment and selection of contemporary staff (not only managers), education (understood as education, including academic education, as well as training, courses, etc.), education (understood as an intra-organizational system of improving qualifications and as mutual learning from each other, and finally as secondary socialization related to performing managerial roles), intra-organizational communication, management styles, organizational culture, conflict and ways of dealing with conflict, mutual attitudes of managers and subordinates, or forms of dismissing employees (not only in the formal and legal sense, but from the point of view of long-term relationships).

Obviously, both economic and non-economic organizations can be analysed as part of broader structures and as subject to their influence. Thus, the second part of the approach, the macrostructural approach, represents analyses of mutual relations between individual organizations, institutions and entire structures. For example, the relations between the education system and the economy, between education and the social structure, between the national and global economy, between the structures of the modern rule of law state and the economy are important and significant in their consequences. The positioning of managers in the social structure (in this case, in the class-estate structure) and showing mutual relations with other categories of people, in particular with owners of capital, specialists, workers, etc., is another key issue. This perspective also includes the cultural point of view, encompassing not only the traditionally understood participation in culture, but also the lifestyle of managers, which is specific, and may constitute a fundamental factor distinguishing them from other social categories [cf. Kozyr-Kowalski, 1979, 1993, 2004; Weber, 2013; Banaszak, 2023a, 2023b].

In the macro-social view, various inter- and transdisciplinary approaches to the latest phenomena and processes of the modern, globalized world also play an important role. All of them are inspired by the crisis of the capitalist way of management that hit the system in 2008. However, some of these approaches, such as those by Thomas Piketty [2015], Tadeusz Klementewicz [2015] or Guy Standing [2011], go far beyond the exegesis of what has been said and written about the crisis. They are independent proposals that could be considered successful attempts at an explanatory approach to the latest social phenomena and processes. The presence of managerial issues and their location in the centre of considerations is a characteristic feature of the aforementioned approaches, which are predominantly theoretical and empirical.

In an attempt to outline the general framework for the functioning of contemporary social systems, economies and organisations, the managerial context analysed in this text should be remembered. It means showing the mutual relations between social, economic and organisational structures, and the issue of the place and role of managers in modern societies. The analytical construct outlined in this way refers to the famous work by James Burnham [1943], *The Managerial Revolution*. Additionally, if the issues of management were to be universalised, we would probably go back not only to Simmel [1975], but also to Aristotle's *Politics* or *Plato's Republic*. The macrosocial context, including the economic and cultural context, seem to me to be particularly interesting in the study of contemporary managers, and more broadly, modernity.

Managerial issues also assume considering the interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary context. Regardless of the nuances of meaning and interpretation and whether some phenomena and processes can be captured as borderline for individual scientific disciplines or whether they necessarily engage several of them to clarify and explain these matters, an approach that absorbs several sciences at the same time is becoming more and more a requirement of modern social sciences. The eminent French economist, Thomas Piketty [2015: 727—728], aptly states that: “On the other hand, representatives of other social sciences cannot leave the study of economic facts to economists and escape immediately when a number appears on the horizon or be satisfied with the statement that every number is just a social construction, which is indeed true, but not sufficient. Ultimately, both forms of resignation are the same, because they lead to leaving the field for someone else.”

His words could therefore be perceived as a kind of encouragement to address the issues of this world as disciplinarily neutral. Their intellectual appropriation, on the other hand, would consist in introducing some kind of specificity of a specific view, consisting in the fact that one of the social sciences directs the focus on the object being studied from one side, and another from the other; that one shows its front, and another presents it in side lighting (illumination). Managers approached in the aforementioned micro- and macro-social perspectives are such an issue, or, more precisely, a group of issues.

Therefore, there is nothing left but to agree with the French researcher who postulates both a common view of issues, and an attempt to develop practical recommendations, solutions that would satisfy not only researchers but, above all, other citizens. Piketty [2015: 726] states that: “This involvement should not be reduced to acting in the name of great abstract principles (justice, democracy, world peace), but should instead find expression in specific decisions, institutions and political choices, whether it is about the welfare state, taxes or debt. Everyone engages in politics from their perspectives. There is no narrow elite of political leaders on one side and an army of spectators and commentators on the other, who can only cast their votes in the ballot box once every five years. The idea according to which the ethics of the researcher and the ethics of the citizen are incompatible, and that the debate on means should be separated

from the debate on goals, however understandable, seems to me illusory and ultimately dangerous.” It is noticed that, although in an elegant form, the French economist firmly expresses his view on the social involvement of social sciences and also researchers. In this respect, he comes close to both the classical proposal of Max Weber [2012] and the later proposal of Gunnar Myrdal [cf. Kozyr-Kowalski, 2003].

Therefore, Piketty’s initial assumptions, the analyses and conclusions, apart from their unquestionable theoretical and methodological coherence, lead to the conclusion that the main factor destabilising the capitalist order is the inequality between the private rate of return on capital and the growth of income and production. In the first case, managers are the beneficiaries of this inequality, while in the second case they are indirectly, and sometimes directly, responsible for the described situation. “The past devours the future” – as Piketty [2015: 723] states because capital reproduces itself at a faster rate than output increases. And despite the convergence of structures such as education, there is constant stratification, including income, which threatens the democratic foundations and values of social justice.

Piketty’s very important thesis is that the education vs. technology opposition does not explain the entire complex phenomenon of social inequality. Why? Because, in addition to this, there are also inequalities produced in the workplace and through work, among others. Various concepts focusing on the opposition of education vs. society, education vs. labour market, or education vs. social stratification do not take this fact into account at all. This is educational reductionism, i.e., reducing the entire universe of social phenomena and processes to education [cf. Banaszak, 2023b]. The task of reductionism understood in this way is to create the impression that everything is education. Consequently, educational sciences can deal with these phenomena and processes without any special concern for the theoretical and methodological level of considerations. Max Weber [2012] warned against such procedures.

In turn, the aforementioned Thomas Piketty [2015: 374] addresses this problem in the following way: “The theory of the race between education and technology is based on two hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that the wage of a given employee is equal to his marginal productivity, that is, their individual share in the production of the enterprise or administration for which they work. The second hypothesis is that this productivity depends primarily on their qualifications and the state of demand for, and supply of qualifications in a given society.”

Therefore, the second hypothesis, which could be called educational-market, refers to the assumption that if there is a technologically increased demand for a specific type of qualification, for example IT, in a given society, and — at the same time — the supply of people with such qualifications is relatively small, then the salaries of IT specialists will probably grow. Additionally, the differences in salaries between them and other categories of employees will increase. As a result of these unbalanced forces of supply and demand, there will be a growing pay inequality in a given society. Therefore, assuming that regulating

the supply of qualifications is mediated by the education system and only by it, we can draw the conclusion that demand, in turn, depends on the technological advancement that is involved in the process of production of goods and provision of services.

Such a model of mutual relations has a considerable appeal in attracting attention, as well as a certain explanatory power. However, it is incomplete on both sides. The education system shows a number of correlations with other factors, while the level of technology is dependent on additional variables. Here, it is worth using the distinction once made by Max Weber, which is not only a useful analytical tool, but also a condition of objectivity in social sciences. The German scholar proposed a division into economic phenomena, economically significant and economically determined phenomena. Combining these three types of phenomena or “shuffling” them does not change their nature. The point is that in many analyses [cf. Potulicka, Rutkowiak, 2010], the education system and education processes are treated as economic phenomena *per se*. And education is a structure of economically significant phenomena and processes, i.e., those that affect the economy, but do not constitute the only group of factors. Increasingly, education is also becoming an economically determined structure, which means that the economy has an impact on it. This faces resistance especially from academics because it means — indirectly — a loss of autonomy to which academic education in particular has become accustomed over the centuries.

Thomas Piketty [2015: 374—375] claims that both complex structures, i.e., education and technology, are strongly dependent on various non-educational and non-technological factors: “However, these two elements are dependent on different forces. The education system depends in particular on public policy in this area, the selection criteria in different branches of education, the way in which the system is financed and the cost of education for students and their families, as well as the possibility of training during professional work. Technological progress depends on the pace of innovation and its application, generally leading to an ever-stronger demand for qualifications, a constant modification of their content and the professions corresponding to them. Hence the concept of a race between education and technology and between social groups.”

In the case of analysing the place and role of managers in modern societies, the described race model could be supplemented with one essential element, i.e., the needs for efficient and above all effective management. This is where managers are located. Additionally, within this category, there is a constant tendency to monopolize managerial positions. Therefore, since the circle of managers, especially top managers, the highest-ranking managers of corporations, is rather closed and relatively elite, we deal with an increase in managerial salaries, which is the result of low supply and constant demand.

# Conclusions

Managers in organizations perform a number of important and significant functions; they direct the work of other people and finally decide on the directions of development of the organization. There is no doubt about it. Nevertheless, thanks to this organizational activity, managers contribute to social changes and indirectly they decide on the directions of development of entire countries. What is more, they want to do this, being aware of their own strength in this area. That is why they so often associate and why they are so deeply involved.

This article attempts to present managers as important organizational actors, as well as a crucial element of the social structure of modern societies. Managers, analysed from both microsociological and macrosociological perspective can be presented in many aspects. Their professional work is significant for the organizations they manage. The decisions they make are, in turn, economically significant and therefore shape the entire complex of issues that form the economic system. Additionally, as citizens, they engage in social matters, either within local communities or within national and international associations. This activity of managers requires separate analysis and probably deserves an extensive monographic study. Nevertheless, an attempt has been made to present other aspects of their social and professional functioning in mutual relations, while clearly emphasizing the rank and significance of managerial positions in modern societies and economies.

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