

Peter F. Drucker:
Man of the Past, Man of the Future¹

A Personal Hommage

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“What this book actually dealt with is: THE FUTURE OF SOCIETY.” This is the closing sentence in Peter Drucker’s book, *Management Challenges for the 21st Century*,² which appeared in 1999. The future has always been of particular interest to Peter Drucker. Many people contemplate and write about the future, but no other management author has had such an impact on our thinking as Drucker. What makes him so exceptional? What distinguishes him from the others? My hypothesis: Drucker interprets the future in a unique way because he is a man of the past.

I once asked Professor Drucker whether he considers himself more as a historical writer or a management thinker. Without much hesitation he answered, “more as a historical writer.” Shortly before this I had read his memoirs, *Adventures of a Bystander*.³ In this book he sweeps us away into a world that has since disappeared, to the source of my argumentation. Another famous Viennese, the writer Stefan Zweig (1881-1942), calls this “yesterday’s world.”⁴ The environment into which Peter F. Drucker was born and raised was unique in many ways. In the upper middle classes of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, great emphasis was placed on education, culture, art, music, historical consciousness, urbanity and international openness. However, these catchphrases only partially describe this time period in Vienna. Whoever wants to really understand what it was like to live during this time should read Drucker’s *Adventures of a Bystander* and

¹ The Peter-Drucker-Archive at Claremont University invited various authors to pay their tribute to Peter Drucker on the occasion of his 90th birthday in November 1999.

² Peter F. Drucker, *Management Challenges for the 21st Century*, New York: Harper Business 1999.

³ Peter F. Drucker, *Adventures of a Bystander*, New York: Harper & Row 1978.

Zweig's *Yesterday's World*. It was common during this time, for example, for children of the educated classes to be raised speaking several languages, as they were often brought up by English and French governesses.

This world is reflected most convincingly in the minds that it produced, whose curriculum vitae closely resembles that of Peter Drucker. The fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918, Bolshevism in Russia, the Nazi period in Germany, this “volcanic tremor across our European earth,” as Stefan Zweig calls it, uprooted an entire generation while simultaneously releasing tremendous creativity. Stefan Zweig first emigrated to England and later journeyed to Brazil. The philosopher Karl Popper, born in Vienna in 1902, wrote his main work, “The Open Society and Its Enemies” during the Second World War while in exile in New Zealand and returned later to England.⁵ The path of the mathematician John von Neumann (1903-1957), to whom we owe the development of game theory and the computer, led him from Budapest via Germany to Princeton, U.S.A. The writer-philosopher Elias Canetti (1905-1997) made his way to England and later to Switzerland.⁶ The science journalist, Artur Koestler (1905-1983), born in Budapest, lived a restless life in Israel, Germany, Russia, France, Spain, and finally England. Ernst Gombrich (1909-2001), world famous art historian, was born in Vienna in the same year as Drucker. Written in England, his voluminous work “The Story of Art”⁷ (688 pages!) sold more than six million copies. This group could also be extended to include the sociologist Norbert Elias (1897-1990),⁸ who was born in Breslau and whose path led him to Paris, England, Amsterdam, and Bielefeld, where I met him at the age of 90. Karol Wojtyla from Krakau, Poland, better known as Pope John Paul II, is also a child of this unusually fertile cultural ground: he speaks ten languages. Peter Drucker's life fits well into this exceptional group: Vienna, Hamburg, Frankfurt, England, and America.

⁴ Stefan Zweig, *Die Welt von gestern – Erinnerungen eines Europäers*, Stockholm: Bermann-Fischer 1944.

⁵ Karl Popper, *Die offene Gesellschaft und ihre Feinde*, Stuttgart: UTB 1992.

⁶ Elias Canetti, *Die gerettete Zunge*, Munich: Carl Hanser 1977.

⁷ Ernst Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, 16th edition, London: Phaidon Press 1995. First edition published in 1950.

With its own decline, the Danube monarchy set its children free. Far from their homelands, these people accomplished great achievements and left permanent marks on the cultural inheritance of humankind. The children of the royal and imperial monarchy were able to achieve such success because they had become exemplary world citizens – educated, culturally flexible, multilingual, historically conscious – long before the era of globalization. “Yesterday’s World” had clearly prepared them for the world of the future. Their works are an echo of a unique culture.

This, however, was merely the broad general setting. The specifics are even more notable. Because Peter Drucker understands history as few others do, he can elucidate the future in a way that is characteristic only to him. He has repeatedly impressed me with his detailed and extensive knowledge, and with the way he cleverly makes such unusual associations. Several experiences and analogies bear witness to this. When I read many years ago that the famous philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer learned Spanish just to enable him to read *The Oracle Manual and the Art of Worldly Wisdom*⁹ by the Spanish Jesuit Balthasar Gracian (1601-1658) in its original language, I was truly impressed. I later corresponded with Drucker about this and discovered that he was well acquainted with Gracian. Drucker wrote, “My father gave it to me as a present 72 years ago when I left Vienna to become a business apprentice in Hamburg.... A few months later I discovered Kierkegaard [a Danish philosopher]. And these two have become the poles of my life. Because of Gracian, I taught myself enough Spanish to read his work in its original language – and along with that I learned enough Danish to also read Kierkegaard’s work in its original language.”¹⁰ Learning Spanish like Schopenhauer in order to read Gracian and also learning Danish like the famous Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936) in order to read Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) in his

⁸ Norbert Elias, *Der Prozess der Zivilisation*, Bern: Francke 1969.

⁹ Balthasar Gracian, *The Oracle Manual and the Art of Worldly Wisdom* (Spanish original title: *Oraculo manual, y arte de prudencia*), translated into German by Arthur Schopenhauer, 11th edition, Frankfurt am Main: Insel 1998.

¹⁰ Personal letter from Peter F. Drucker, July 26, 1999.

original language are parallels that put Drucker's extraordinary talent and depth into their proper light.

Let us explore a specific case. Drucker frequently names the Deutsche Bank in his articles and books as the first business to be organized according to modern principles. Because I knew of his interest in this topic, I once sent him an article about one of the founders of this bank, Ludwig Bamberger (1826-1899).¹¹ Now I did not expect that Drucker would be familiar with this name, of which I myself had never heard. Wrong again. He was well acquainted with Bamberger's life and deeds through the diaries of his own grandfather, Ferdinand von Bond. Drucker wrote back to me, "His stories of Ludwig Bamberger and Georg Siemens [another founder of the Deutsche Bank] fascinated me and I still remember some of them,"¹² – further proof of Peter Drucker's unbelievably detailed knowledge.

Drucker's close proximity to and personal contact with great personalities – from all imaginable categories of people – are also remarkable. In *Adventures of a Bystander*, Drucker recalls of his acquaintances with Buckminster Fuller, the physicist, and Marshall McLuhan, the communication scientist. I quickly noticed that whenever I mentioned a famous name to Drucker, he knew that person. Three examples: he knew Ernst Juenger (1895-1998), the controversial German writer, from the 1930s and met Reinhard Mohn, the man who turned Bertelsmann into a truly global publishing company in the 1950s. When I asked him if he knew art historian Ernst Gombrich, he responded: "I did not know Gombrich from Vienna. But, about ten or twelve years ago, I spent a very happy and long evening with him in London.... After that we regularly exchanged books and letters and articles."¹³ This is indeed a small world. From across great distances, great

¹¹ *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, "Ein bärtiger Revolutionär und erfolgreicher Bankier" (English: "A bearded revolutionary and a successful banker"), February 1999; see also Benedikt Koehler, Ludwig Bamberger, *Revolutionär und Bankier*, Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlag-Anstalt 1999.

¹² Personal letter from Peter F. Drucker, March 4, 1999.

¹³ Personal letter from Peter F. Drucker, November 28, 2001.

personalities attract one another and their paths intersect. Drucker often found himself in the right place at the right time for such encounters.

Drucker possesses yet another skill, which I have observed to such a great extent only in the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges: the skill of association.¹⁴ Borges seems not only to have read everything, but he also has the skill of making the most improbable connections and associations. In doing this, he surpasses time and space and recognizes relationships and analogies that escape the average person. The same is true for Peter Drucker. He draws parallels and recognizes commonalities between current, future and historical developments, stretching broad intellectual arches between them. Personalities such as Drucker und Borges seem to have encyclopedic memories. Yet this alone is not enough; the real skill is the ability to make connections. Arthur Koestler, whom I mentioned before, considers this competence the true source of creativity.¹⁵

Drucker's new book, *Management Challenges for the 21st Century*, bears witness to this skill. His consideration of information technology in light of the history of the printing trade leads to surprising conclusions. As he sees it, the winners of the IT revolution are not the hardware or software developers of today, but rather the publishing houses which have access to knowledge and content. In his book he lists Bertelsmann with Reinhard Mohn as an example. Bertelsmann is currently the largest publisher of English-language books in the world. Drucker's choice pleased me personally, because I had just a few months before chosen Reinhard Mohn as the "Entrepreneur of the Century" for the largest German weekly newspaper, *Die Zeit*.¹⁶ But in this context, Drucker's choice has a far greater weight.

Drucker's historical competence cannot, of course, be interpreted "mechanically". History does not repeat itself, nor does it follow given laws, as Karl Marx or Oswald

¹⁴ See for example, Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, New York: Viking 1999.

¹⁵ Arthur Koestler, *Der göttliche Funke*, Munich: Scherz 1968.

¹⁶ Hermann Simon, "Fit für die Zukunft", *Die Zeit*, 30 December 1998.

Spengler have suggested.¹⁷ Nevertheless, it can be said that the human being has changed very little during the known course of history. The statements by Plato, Aristotle, or Seneca about the human being, his/her behavior and conduct, are as accurate today as they were in ancient times. We gain, therefore, valuable insight when we interpret current developments and the future in light of historical analogies. This perfectly describes Peter Drucker's great strength – as well as the most notable weakness of nearly all management authors. Their knowledge of history is typically sporadic and superficial or totally nonexistent. As opposed to those who have dubbed themselves specialists of entrepreneurial history but have only covered a small portion of this field, Drucker possesses a much broader foundation of historical knowledge. Without this type of historical understanding and consciousness, it becomes easy in management to fall victim to the current buzzwords or trends of the day. The comments of the philosopher George Santayana that history will repeat itself for those who do not want to learn from it is perhaps especially applicable to management, which often purports to create something new, although it is really only serving old wine in new wineskins.

Peter Drucker teaches us with history as his tool. He holds a mirror in front of us that opens new perspectives and helps us to better understand the future. And this brings us back to Soren Kierkegaard who said, "Life can only be understood by looking back, but can only be lived by looking forward." Precisely because he is a man of the past, Peter Drucker shines as a thinker of the future.

¹⁷ Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, Munich: Beck 1923.