

# **A POSTMODERN ACCOUNTING THEORY**

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# A POSTMODERN ACCOUNTING THEORY: AN INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH

BY

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## **About the Author**

Gaétan Breton is author or co-author of over a dozen books, mostly essays, and over 30 academic articles. He graduated from the City University of London and is currently a Professor of Accounting at Université du Québec à Montréal. In the last 15 years he has concentrated his teaching at the graduate level and supervised many Masters and PhD students. He is also deeply invested in the life of his community, having served as treasurer and councilor for many not-for-profit organizations.

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# Foreword

This book aims to break with tradition in many ways. Firstly, we want to submit the accounting activity to the standards established in the human sciences. Consequently, the standardization process will not be presented as a form of theorization and the books of standards will not be presented as accounting theories. Our attitude constitutes a major rupture with the traditional vision.

This traditional vision based on an intense confusion leads to strange ways of presenting the research done since the 1960s. We want to discuss these research as products of the institution of accounting and as representing different aspects of the accounting theory. The body of research has some specific tendencies; for instance, the massive use of mathematics for two reasons: firstly, to establish a rupture with the traditional “research,” which was more practitioners’ discussions than “scientific” investigation, and secondly, to topple accounting research on the side of the “pure” sciences following the research in finance and economics. Economics occupies a particular place in the general picture of the academic disciplines. It is not really included among the human sciences and surely not among the natural sciences. Some people consider that it can be no science at all. Considering the crucial influence of economics on the development of accounting, we argue that the students in accounting have the right to be exposed to the discussion in its most actual state.

To do so we adopt a postmodern position, which is in fact an attitude. The most important leitmotif we keep from this position is to doubt every dogma included in the traditional accounting theory handbooks. This doubt will lead to discussing the situations and the concepts leaving the students with the possibility of making their own choices. We want to enlighten their choices instead of indoctrinating it.

Here comes the second position from our postmodern approach, which is to consider that there is no unique good answer to one question but many possible answers that are socially discriminated by whoever holds the power in the institutions.

This book is addressed to accounting students at undergraduate and graduate levels. We refuse to imprison undergraduate students in a compulsive vision of learning, transforming them into machines only able to repeat infinite lists of details. Graham Stacey, head of research at Price Waterhouse London, told us once about the graduates in accounting: *they are not educated, they are trained*. At the end of their program they will be specialists of a profession in society but, in the actual state of the academic system, they may have never thought about their

role in this society except for claiming their protected field of intervention; although for others they are furiously advocating the “free market.”

In this spirit, the questions at the end of the chapters may be viewed more as discussion topics than questions with a specific answer. Obviously, they are related to the content of the chapters, but they may sometimes necessitate other readings to be answered properly, which means with an open state of mind. Although everyone studying accounting may be confronted with such questions or topics, graduate students may be more prone or able to provide more complete answers.

Finally, as the students-readers will understand later, we take a constructivist point of view contrary to the implicit positivist one behind the classical accounting theory handbooks. We also start with the concept that any institution is a discursive object. Being discursive doesn't imply that it does not exist for real, it is only another form of existence. These are the bases on which we build our accounting theory which is not made of standards and any pretensions about some supposed “laws” driving the markets.

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