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Strategy after modernism: recovering practice

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Abstract
This article identifies an opportunity for European researchers to develop a more practice-sensitive research programme for strategy 'after modernism'. Strategy's intellectual lock-in on modernist detachment and economic theory can now be relaxed. Strategy can draw also on the rich resources of sociology to engage more directly with strategy as a social practice. This article outlines elements of a double agenda for strategy research after modernism: first, a sociological agenda concerned with understanding strategy's elites, its skills and its technologies, and their implications for society as a whole; second, a managerial agenda, turning this sociological understanding to practical advantage in terms of how managers become strategists, how strategy skills are acquired and how strategy technologies can be better designed and used. The article considers implications for research methods and the Mintzbergian tradition in strategy.
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Introduction

Strategy research is at an exciting juncture, one that European scholars are particularly well placed to exploit.[1] For a long time, strategy research has been trapped by the modernist assumptions of its birthplace, the United States of the 1960s. Modernism captured strategy within an epistemological straight jacket that valued scientific detachment over practical engagement, the general over the contextual, the quantitative over the qualitative. Today, though, post-modern scepticism has broken these epistemological constraints and modernism's monopoly is crumbling away. Thanks to post-modernism – but not bound to it – we stand now '*after* modernism'. The detached, quantitative generalisations of modernism are revealed as just one of the pathways forward for strategic management research.

The pathway that I shall urge here is one that engages directly with the practice of strategy. After modernism, we need no longer detach ourselves through quantitative analysis of large data sets; we can look for a much more intimate relationship with our subjects. As we get closer to practice, we shall find that 'strategy' is not only an attribute of firms but also an *activity undertaken by people* (Johnson *et al.*, 2003). Strategy is something people do. From this perspective, strategy can be seen as a social practice like any other practice, whether domestic, political or educational. And the people engaged in this activity, just like in any other domain, can be helped to understand and improve their practice.

This article, then, is concerned with recovering strategy practice from the margins of the modernist research programme. After modernism, the opportunity for strategy research is to be more direct in improving practice and more plural in the methods by which we do it. In so doing, strategy research will simply be joining in a recovery of practice common throughout the social sciences and increasingly in management research as well (Tsoukas and Cummings, 1997; Toulmin, 2001). The response here to recent calls for researchers to work on managers' real problems (Tranfield and Starkey, 1998) is to start by making managerial practice the actual object of study. Studying practice can be practical.

Engagement with practice therefore sets a double agenda. First, there is a simple sociological interest in what is an important social activity, involving substantial resources and with significant effects. Second, there is a more directly managerial agenda, drawing out from a sociological understanding of this activity practical implications for improving it. In a sense, the potential of sociology today is

similar to that of economics in the 1970s. As industrial economics arose first to understand and regulate the oligopolistic industries of the mid-20th century, and only later was translated by Porter (1981) and others into managerial frameworks, so too with sociology: broad sociological insights can now be put to practical use. In other words, recognising strategy as a practice enables both illumination of a significant phenomenon that has been hitherto obscure and improvement of something in which people personally, and society in general, have a great deal at stake.

This article continues as follows. The next section locates the management disciplines' growing attentiveness to practice within a general repudiation of modernist constraints within the social sciences as a whole. In the following section, I explain how strategy research came to be peculiarly locked in to a modernist trajectory that it is only now beginning to escape. The third section outlines some elements of a double agenda for strategy research after modernism – both a sociological one concerned with understanding an important practice in our society and a managerial one concerned with turning this sociological understanding to practical advantage. The final section offers some concluding comments on strategy after modernism, particularly regarding an end to strategy's sociological exceptionalism and the beginning of a post-Mintzbergian research programme.

Modernism and after

Philosopher Stephen Toulmin (1990; 2001) identifies two crucial shifts in the evolution of Western thought over the last few hundred years, each concerned with the relative status of practical reason and theoretical rationality. The social sciences in general, and management in particular, are engaged today in the second shift, a return to practical reason.

Toulmin's first shift was the modernist turn brought about by the Enlightenment, 300 years ago. In philosophy, the hard rationalism of Descartes replaced the humanist wisdom of Montaigne; the formal theory of logic supplanted the practical skills of rhetoric (Toulmin, 2001). Theoretical rationality and general laws prevailed over earlier concerns for the timely, the local and the practical. It was such Enlightenment ideals that gave the social sciences their original modernist form, with rationality secured through detachment, quantification and scientific elitism. In this general characterisation of the early social sciences, we can recognise traditional strategy research too.

Our moment now, however, is in Toulmin's second shift, a repudiation of modernism and the recovery of practical reason. Since the 1980s, post-modern scepticism has increasingly undermined confidence in general scientific laws and reasserted the value of craft, context and (modest) narrative (Lyotard, 1984). In the practical domain, the abstract rationality of the traditional 'hard' sciences is no longer assured its old respect. Scientific knowledge has too often let practitioners down and, besides, is far less exclusive. For Toulmin (2001), the way forward is to broaden the scientific concern for theoretical rationality to embrace practical reason as well. In real life, general scientific laws are just another set of tools for people to apply and adapt to particular practical problems. Modernism's disdain for the applied is no longer defensible. Scientists and practitioners can now be partners in putting 'Reason to work in the realm of Practice' (Toulmin, 2001).

Toulmin's second shift, therefore, places us 'after modernism' (Smith, 1992; Whittington and Mayer, 2000; Pettigrew, 2001). Here it is not a matter of simple post-modern rejection of the rational sciences; rather, it is about incorporating them within a broader enterprise of reasonable practice. In this sense, 'after modernism' is an altogether more inclusive and pragmatic formulation than its modern and post-modern rivals. Although we no longer accept modernist science as supreme, we can still make use of it as part of our general repertoire of practical knowledge. 'After modernism' does not entail the disabling scepticism of the post-modern extreme, but permits the pluralism of the practical.

The management disciplines have not stood apart from these currents in the social sciences, and appear increasingly eager to participate in this general recovery of practical reason (Tsoukas and Cummings, 1997). Post-modernists increasingly challenge the hard rationality of traditional management theory (Cooper and Burrell, 1988; Chia, 1995; Clegg and Kornberger, 2003). More generally, there are now frequent calls for a closer reconciliation of academic theory with managerial reality, often characterised as a shift from the detached Mode 1 style of management research towards a more engaged Mode 2 (Pettigrew, 1997; Tranfield and Starkey, 1998; Huff, 2000). The management disciplines, in general, are losing their exclusive faith in modernist detachment and moving closer to the kind of engagement with practice that is characteristically 'after modern'.

This move towards practice on the part of management research is an international one, but particularly marked on the European side of the Atlantic. Europe's attentiveness to practice is not accidental. Within the social sciences generally, it was Europe that launched the original post-modern challenge (Rosenau, 1992). The United States, meanwhile, remains 'the last great Enlightenment regime', imprinted with an enduring respect for modernist values by its 18th century foundation (Gray, 1998). Within the management sciences specifically, there is something of the same differential. European management research has always guarded a broader intellectual legacy than that of strictly modernist social science and it has also favoured qualitative, contextual research in the field (Koza and Thoenig, 1995). European societies have a tradition of intimate relationships between practice and academe, in part perhaps because their relative smallness brings business and academic elites closer together (Berry, 1995; Adler *et al.*, 2003). Thanks both to intellectual tradition and to relationships in the field, European researchers are therefore particularly well placed to shift strategy research closer to practice.

I shall argue that there are substantial opportunities to be had from the practical turn after modernism. At the same time, however, there are strong grounds for thinking that strategy will be a particularly hard nut to crack. As I shall demonstrate in the following section, strategy research is still marked by the accident of its birth in mid-20th century America.

Modernism in strategy

The 1960s saw the emergence of two rival streams in strategy research. On the one hand, there was a lively interest in the tools of practical strategic planning (Bowman *et al.*, 2002). Pioneers such as Ackoff, Ansoff, Drucker and Steiner developed new ways of doing strategy, based on deep experience with American corporations such as Lockheed, General Electric and General Motors. On the other hand, there was the work of business historian Chandler (1962), whose *Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the History of American Enterprise* traced the emergence of the diversified, multidivisional corporation back to the early years of the 20th century. Chandler's research inspired the first generation of doctoral students in strategy at Harvard Business School, concerned with the progress and performance of diversified, multidivisional corporations across the United States, Europe and the rest of the world (Whittington and Mayer, 2000).

The two research streams took very different trajectories. Ansoff and his peers pursued technique; the Harvard students built large databases. Planning sought validation in use; diversification and divisionalisation found their rationale in the economic theory of Williamson (1975). It is of course the Harvard students who Rumelt *et al.* (1994) finally credit with establishing the framework for strategy as a 'positive science'. Their methods reassured an American scientific community that was still serenely modern; the turn to economic theory opened a path that others could easily follow. For an emerging field, economics offered both ready-made frameworks and rapid legitimacy. Committed to positivism, confident of rationality and uncomfortable with primary data, economics fitted the modernist spirit of the times (McCloskey, 1983). Economics soon became the intellectual well-spring for the strategy discipline as a whole (Barney, 2002). Modernist scientism smothered modest utilitarianism. The planning experts' simple practicalmindedness became mocked and marginalised (Mintzberg, 1994). The academic Chandler rather than the applied Ansoff is now declared the true founder of strategy research (Rumelt *et al.*, 1994).

Harvard's 'positive science' became the model for strategy research because it matched the founding conditions of the discipline. But then strategy got locked in. The modernist scientific method is vigorously defended to this day (Hubbard *et al.*, 1998; Schendel, 2000; Arend, 2003). Qualitative research is so marginalised that the *Strategic Management Journal* published just 14 case-based articles in its first 20 years (Phelan *et al.*, 2002). Empirical work in this key journal relies increasingly on secondary sources and larger sample sizes, while authorship is dominated by North Americans, at a steady 80% (Phelan *et al.*, 2002). A measure of the detachment of this work from the concerns of practice is a survey of more than 100 American chief executives: only 6% claimed to read the *Strategic Management Journal* at least occasionally, and 66% admitted to not being familiar with it at all (Gopinath and Hoffman, 1995).

However, there are growing challenges to modernism's grip on the strategy discipline. Even within the *Strategic Management Journal*, Lowendahl and Revang (1998), Powell (2002) and Mir and Watson (2000) have argued forcefully for different conceptions of knowledge, each in their own way allowing for a more flexible accommodation with practice. The research agenda that I propose in the next section is sympathetic to these, but differs in emphasising the nature of strategy as a social practice in itself.

A double agenda for strategy after modernism

Taking strategy as a social practice, as something people do, has a radically decentring effect on traditional conceptions of the discipline's purpose. Typically, strategy is defined as concerned for the competitive advantage and performance of the firm (Barney, 2002). Sensitivity to practice, on the other hand, takes the level of analysis both above and below the firm. From a sociological perspective, the concern moves up a level, to consider strategy as a broad field of social activity, whose practices are important to society as a whole. Here, it is not so much firm performance that matters as strategy's performance as an entire field. From a managerial perspective, the concern shifts down a level, to get inside firms' overall strategy processes to the actual activities of strategy's practitioners. Here, it is the performance of the strategists that matters, in the sense of how they perform their roles. In short, accepting strategy as a social practice involves a refusal to privilege firm performance over that of either the field as a whole or its practitioners individually.

This section outlines some key elements of a double agenda for strategy research after modernism. Each part of this agenda is firmly fixed on practice, but in different ways: first, strategy is considered as a practice in itself; second, understanding of this practice is turned to managerial advantage. What follows is not intended to be exhaustive, only illustrative of the potential for a more practice-sensitive approach to strategy research.

The sociological agenda

The sociological agenda approaches strategy as a social practice just like any other. After all, strategy has a strong claim on sociological attention. Strategy is concerned with the direction of powerful institutions within both the public and the private sphere; the effects of strategy's investments and innovations are felt throughout society; strategy activity involves skilled and costly actors, such as senior managers, strategy consultants and investment bankers; strategy discourse has penetrated deep and wide in contemporary society (Knights and Morgan, 1991).

In approaching strategy as a social practice, the initial research questions are similar to those that sociology would ask about any other practice. And, of course, sociology already has good tools to address such questions. Just for example, we can draw on the sociology of elites to understand who gets the power to do strategy (Mills, 1956); we have a long tradition from the sociology of work to help explain the division of strategy labour and the place of skills within it (Braverman, 1974); and the sociology of science and technology can help us analyse the creation, use and effects of strategy's tools (Latour and Woolgar, 1979). We can certainly imagine more lines of sociological inquiry, but for the moment these three can serve at least to illustrate some of what sociology can bring.

The sociology of elites is traditionally concerned with such issues as what types of people have power, how these powerful people connect and influence across society and the extent to which the powerful vary over time and place (Pettigrew, 1992; Scott, 1997). Applying this lens specifically to strategy entails focussing on strategy's elites both within and beyond the firm – in other words, not just senior managers and professional planners but also the strategy consultants, the gurus and leading academics who influence practice from outside (Whittington *et al.*, 2003). The classic sociological starting point is to investigate the typical educations and career tracks of each elite group and the extent to which these groups are relatively open or closed: for instance, strategy consulting firm McKinsey & Co. traditionally recruits from national social elites (Kipping, 1999). Next would be to explore the different roles that these elite groups play and the networks through which they interact and channel their influence, for better or for worse: as exemplified by the dotcom and Enron failures, the growing influence of strategy consultants may have been for the worse, with wide effects (Ghemawat, 2002; Whittington *et al.*, 2003). Finally, sociology would consider the implications of differences in strategy elites over time and place: for example, the late arrival of McKinsey in Spain delayed divisionalisation and management professionalisation in Spanish business (Guillén, 1994); in American big business, the post-war rise of finance professionals and associated modes of calculation promoted an economy-wide shift towards conglomerates (Fligstein, 1990). Whether for Spanish retardation or US conglomeratisation, the sociological concern here is less for the direct performance of firms, more for the performance of strategy as a field with impact upon whole societies.

Work, its skills and the shifting division of labour are also strong traditional concerns of sociology. Seeing strategy as something people do reveal it as a kind of work much like any other. Just as we might ask of automobile production or fast food restaurants (Beynon, 1973; Ritzer, 2000), we can ask: what is the work involved in making a strategy, what skills are required, how is this work organised and with what implications (Whittington, 2003)? It is a good time to ask these questions. After all, we are participating in a major transformation of strategy work, from the centralised, professionalised planning mode of the 1960s and 1970s to its contemporary dispersal to middle managers and the organisational periphery (Mintzberg, 1994; Floyd and Wooldridge, 2000; Regnér, 2003). The rise and fall of professionalised strategic planning is not dissimilar to the rise and fall of skilled organised labour in Western economies (Licthenstein, 2003), and likely involves equivalent forces, processes and exceptions. However, we know little beyond the main contours of this transformation, particularly regarding its implications for strategy skills and work organisation. Sociology has given us a deep insight into the work of making cars and flipping hamburgers; there is an equivalent agenda regarding the work of strategy-making.

Finally, sociology has challenged deterministic accounts of science and technology, re-conceiving them as socially constructed and interpreted in use. The conceptual, organisational and material technologies of strategy-making are hardly different. We are beginning to assemble some knowledge of the tools of strategy (Rigby, 2001); but why should we not explore the design and use of key strategy technologies – from strategy retreats to the five forces – just as we do the design and use of computers, for instance (Kidder, 1981; Orlikowski, 2000)? The agenda here, therefore, is at least two-fold. First, we need a better understanding of how new strategy tools and concepts are developed, tested and marketed: Porter is revealing about the intellectual leap-in-the-dark involved in developing the generic strategy concept (Argyres and McGahan, 2002; Lampel *et al.*, 2004). In a world subject to management fads and fashions, understanding these development processes might enhance our quality control (Abrahamson, 1996; Whittington *et al.*, 2003). Second, we should understand how these tools are used in practice (Jarzabkowski, 2004). Hodgkinson and Wright's (2002) study of the ultimate failure of scenario and cognitive mapping exercises in the strategy-making process of a publishing company demonstrates that in practice such techniques can become tools for organisational politics as much as rational analysis. Such strategy techniques are not organisationally neutral and mastery over them has political implications.

The managerial agenda

My claim in the Introduction was that sociology stands to strategy today as industrial economics stood in the 1970s. After modernism, practical engagement becomes part of the scientific purpose. Unlike economics, with its strong theoretical assumptions and its empirical stand-offishness, sociology is particularly ready to engage directly with people and what they do (Bauman, 1990). While there is no obligation to move from sociological understanding to practical implications, the step is a short one. Again the potential is certainly wider, but here I shall illustrate by outlining some practical managerial research agendas that we can draw from the three traditions introduced above: the sociologies of elites, work and science and technology.

First, a sociological understanding of strategy elites would reflect on a question of direct importance to the students who sit in our strategy classes: how does one become a strategist? Here the sociological outlining of typical educational and career tracks provides a start, but a managerial agenda would seek to translate this into more practical guidelines. For middle managers particularly, the 'dynamics of inclusion' in strategic decision-making are complex and problematic (Westley, 1990). Samra-Fredericks (2003) documents a particularly vivid moment in which one manager becomes effectively excluded from strategic influence. However, strategic inclusion requires organisational legitimacy and a command of discourse that do not come readily. One part of the managerial research agenda, therefore, lies in developing a framework that can assist managers in terms of their personal development as strategists. Managers and students are likely to be at least as interested in the 'five forces' (or whatever) that make a strategist as the five forces that determine industry attractiveness.

A sociology of strategy work could equally inform another set of related managerial research questions, again touching our students directly: what are the skills strategists need and how can they be acquired? Mintzberg's (1994)

claim is that strategy-making requires both the skills of strategic planning – analytical, predominantly – and the skills of strategic thinking – much more synthetic in character. Beyond Mintzberg's observations, however, we have very little systematic knowledge of what these skills practically consist of, when and where they should predominate and how they should be organised. Worse, for all the investments in business education over the last few decades, we still know very little about how managers acquire such skills (Whittington, 2001). Practitioner-turned-teacher Jeanne Liedtka (Liedtka, 1998; Liedtka and Rosenbloom, 1998) reflects on many of the practical challenges involved in teaching both strategic planning and strategic thinking, inside and outside the business school environment. However, there remains a large managerial research agenda in elaborating the skills of strategy and the formal and informal means by which they are best acquired.

Finally, a sociological appreciation of strategy's technologies would open up at least two further intriguing research opportunities. One clear opportunity lies in understanding how strategy tools can be used more effectively in managerial practice (Jarzabkowksi, 2004). Usage is not likely to be simply analytical but also rhetorical, political and legitimatory. The definition of strategy technology need not be confined simply to the familiar analytical apparatus, but could also include the organisational technologies of strategy – such as task forces and retreats – and even the physical technologies involved in strategy – such as flip charts, brown paper and computer graphics. The effective strategist needs a command of all these technologies and more. Blackler *et al.*'s (2000) comparative study of three strategy development teams point to the decisive impact of an inappropriate investment in computer presentation, while Eden and Ackerman (1998) demonstrate the non-trivial effects of the shape and arrangement of the Post-it notes used in discussions at strategy workshops. The second opportunity lies in understanding better how to design and disseminate new strategy technologies, particularly important for strategy practitioners in consulting (Ghemawat, 2002). Michael Porter has assembled a personal intellectual tool-kit, an academic position at Harvard Business School, and a direct outlet to practise through his consulting firm that together constitute a formidable machine for the creation and dissemination of innovative strategy technologies (Argyres and McGahan, 2002). Understanding the 'laboratory lives' (Latour and Woolgar, 1979) involved in such successful strategy R&D practice can contribute managerially to the success of business schools and consultancies much more widely.

This double agenda will require a broadening of research methods beyond those of traditional strategy research. To be sure, there will be a role for quantitative research, even that relying on secondary sources: 'after modernism' is above all inclusive and, besides, quantitative methods have delivered powerful insights into the sociology of elites at least (Scott, 1997). Yet even such quantitative research would involve a crucial difference, widening the dependent variable to include the patterning of society and the effectiveness of the practitioner. Quantitative research methods still have their place, therefore, but after modernism they will find different kinds of use. It is in pursuing the managerial agenda, however, that the sharpest breaks with the detached methods of modernism will likely be required. Understanding and shaping strategy practice demands intimate engagement. It is such methods as ethnography, action research and practitioners' self-investigation that are most likely to yield the deepest insights into the nature of practice and the possibility of its improvement (Toulmin and Gustavsen, 1997; Balogun *et al.*, 2003). If the *Strategic Management Journal* were to take on the implications of 'after modernism', the profile of its articles would look radically different from that of its first 20 years.

Conclusions

My central proposition is that strategy research is finally escaping the modernist assumptions with which, by an accident of birth, it was firmly imprinted at its founding four decades ago. Emerging in the United States in the 1960s, the new strategy discipline was caught in a time and place when modernism's confidence in numbers and detachment still had dominion over the social sciences. Fighting for its place in the academy, strategy then could take few risks and the discipline was set on an epistemological straight-and-narrow. However, as modernism has succumbed to the assaults of post-modernism throughout the social sciences, and the strategy discipline itself has grown in strength and maturity, strategy researchers now can be more bold and more plural. After modernism, we are ready to recover the kinds of practical concerns that preoccupied the planning tradition of Ansoff and his colleagues. This time, however, our engagement with practice can be informed by a much more sophisticated theoretical and methodological apparatus. This time, too, European researchers are poised to take a far larger role.

Strategy research after modernism will increasingly look for its models beyond economics towards sociology. Sociology is less constrained by modernism, and more open to practice. Besides, it has rich intellectual resources. We have seen how the sociologies of elites, of work and of technology can not only illuminate strategy as a practice with important societal effects but also open up insights into practical managerial issues such as strategists' careers, their skills and learning, and the effective design and use of strategy tools. Sociology has plenty more to offer. Some are already applying a sociological appreciation of discourse to strategy (Barry and Elmes, 1997; Hendry, 2000). The potential contribution of other branches of sociological inquiry, such as the sociology of the professions and comparative institutional sociology, can easily be imagined. What this amounts to is an end to strategy's sociological exceptionalism – its domination by economics and its wariness of reflexivity. Practically, strategy as a discipline has much to gain from sociology. Socially, strategy is too important for continued exemption from sociological analysis as a practice in itself. It is time for strategy to turn the sociological gaze upon itself.

I close by anticipating an objection. The attention here to the practice of strategy, to its tools and to its practitioners, may seem unduly to privilege the formal. After all, Mintzberg (1994) has taught us that in reality strategies often simply emerge. The mistake, however, is to conclude from this that formal strategy does not really matter. This is

to be trapped by strategy's traditional criterion, simple firm performance. From the sociological viewpoint, strategy remains an activity that involves substantial resources and has significant consequences for society at large, however unintended. The performance of the strategy field as a whole is socially too important to ignore. From a managerial viewpoint, formal strategy activities are something that many actors participate in. Regardless of the connection between activities and firm outcomes, managers still need the right tools and skills to perform their strategy jobs. We must take formal strategy more seriously than Mintzberg because it has wider ramifications than he recognises, for people and societies. Emergence has for too long been an excuse for retreat from the study of formal strategy-making; it is time now for the recovery of strategy practice. The research agenda after modernism is, therefore, also a post-Mintzbergian one.

Notes

1 This paper has benefited greatly from many conversations within the www.strategy-as-practice.org community.

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