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Thinking of strategy in a postmodern way

Part 2

- *This is the concluding part of an article which proposes that the adoption of a postmodern way of thinking should help the development of a new strategy paradigm.*
- *The article begins with a thorough but simplified expression of postmodernism written to make this area of philosophy more accessible and understandable to those who have not confronted it before.*
- *The article concludes with the view that by taking a postmodern orientation, both strategy thinking and strategy practice will benefit.*
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VI. Assertion 3: postmodernism

Postmodernism ... shows [the human agent] to be essentially an observer-community which constructs *interpretations* of the world, these interpretations having no absolute or universal status. (Cooper and Burrell, 1988, p. 94.)

Reprise

In Part 1, I sought to develop an argument which demonstrated that the idea and practice of strategy are muddled and incomplete, and that strategy is in urgent need of an agreed paradigm.

As part of the discussion I drew attention to different interpretations of the term 'strategy', and went on to assert that these different interpretations were consistent with Kuhn's (1970) idea of a pre-paradigm where, using Kuhn's diagnosis (1970, p. 178, 47–48), 'a number of schools compete for the domination of a given field', and 'frequent and deep debates over legitimate methods, problems and standards of solution ... define [the different] schools [rather than] produce agreement.'

As part of my overall argument I also made a third assertion; namely that the adoption of a postmodern style of thinking provides two main benefits to strategic thinking and practice. First it encourages new insights about the strategic process, and helps to reveal the unconscious ontological assumptions that we make about the world that we 'see', analyse, and make decisions about. Second, the adoption of a postmodern way of thinking helps clarify the focus and scope of an agreed paradigm, and gives impetus to the agendas and actions which we as managers, strategic theorists and management developers need to pursue and complete.

The assertion that adoption of a postmodern 'orientation' (Alvesson, 1995) can provide a basis for the development of strategic thinking and practice, and the becoming of an agreed paradigm, is the focus of Part 2.

Outline

Part 2 is developed over two sections.

Section VII begins with a definition of the scope of 'postmodernism'. The section goes on to explore four definitions or themes. The first is concerned with postmodernism as a debate about reality.[1] The second is concerned with postmodernism, semiotics and the 'crisis of representation'. And the third explores the implications of postmodernism to the authority of science, noticing in particular the questionable dependence of science on past outcomes as a basis for further experimentation and progress, and as part of the same problem, the self referential nature of science where the basis of proof is obtained by reference to other proofs, where these in turn have no absolute standard or base. Fourth, Section VII considers the consequences of an emphasis on 'process' rather than structure.

Finally, taking account of the overall argument developed in Parts 1 and 2 of this paper, Section VIII brings the paper to a conclusion by considering the implications of a postmodern

style of thinking for the development of strategic thinking, theory and practice.

Helping to make sense of postmodernism
While acknowledging that much of the literature on postmodernism is inaccessible, often contradictory and irritating to many, the paper attempts to simplify some of the ideas and language adopted by postmodern writers without diluting the meanings and underlying epistemology. The glossary appended at the end of this paper also provides definitions and explanations to facilitate understanding.

VII. So what is postmodernism?

Postmodernism as a debate about reality

The term 'postmodern' refers both to a period of time and an epistemological stance[2] which has its origins back in the 1950s when many began to see the 'grandiose dreams of Westernization [becoming] tarnished' (Lyon, 1994, p. 6).

In epistemological terms, postmodernism involves a critical questioning of the assumptions and outcomes of modernism, where the latter term is used to capture the ideals of the Enlightenment, when scientific reasoning displaced the ungrounded theories, speculations, superstitions and sorceries of the Middle Ages.

In social science, postmodernism first queries, then denies, the objectifications of positivism borrowed from physics and other sciences. For example, modern (i.e. modernist) organizational analysis treats the idea of organization as an abstraction as if it were 'out there', distant from the very community which comprises the entity itself. In this modernist ontology, it is therefore possible to speak of '*the* organization', as a unique holistic entity, or 'thing', which can be managed and changed as if it were a mere artefact or fabrication; even possibly some 'thing' to be re-engineered.[3] It follows that in this ontology the management and change of an organization can therefore be

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[1]This has resonance with Section IV (in Part 1) where we considered some of the ontological issues confronting strategic management.

[2]Legge (1995, p. 286) and Hassard (1996, p. 53).
[3]Morgan (1986) offers other telling metaphors of organization.

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assumed to be accomplished by 'tools and techniques' available to 'the management'—all of these being simplified objectifications which in turn divert attention from the complex interrelated political and social processes associated with change.

> 'Modernism is that moment when man invented himself; when he no longer saw himself as a reflection of God or Nature.'

By contrast, postmodernism adopts a different ontology and challenges us to explain the world from our own experiences—from our own standpoint as stakeholders and activists, rather than as passive distant observers. This is a world where the idea of 'organization' is replaced with the idea of 'organizing'; where the process of human *relating* takes priority; where the modernist idea of 'organization' is discarded in favour of attention to the primary organizing processes which, over time and space, bring about continuous emergence, growth, decay and change where nothing remains constant other than possibly the name of the organization itself.[4]

This shift in ontology is important to strategic thinking in three ways. First, thinking in a postmodern way encourages us to observe and investigate 'the world' (another objectification) in a different way. It encourages us to be careful about our assumptions and perceptions, and to be curious about, and anticipate our individual impacts and effects on the whole. In observing the world in a postmodern way we are forced to associate with it; we are forced to return to being a part of the world; we become the world. Hence the postmodern world is a different world from that objectified by the modernist project.

Second, by adopting a postmodern ontology, a modernist idea—like competition—

suddenly needs to be explained in a different way than by relying unduly (and unthinkingly) on the notions of rivalry and equilibrium found in economics and carried forward to strategy. The objectification 'competition' has therefore to be explained from different angles which explore empirically the complex processes underlying changes in behaviours, symbols and language in competing. Postmodernism therefore teases us to think behind the icon; to pierce the superficiality and laziness of our language where unthinkingly we use nouns (like 'competition') which have the effect of concealing the complex time- and space-related processes of changing (like 'competing').

Third, postmodernism brings to our attention the idea that language has an effect on what we observe and what we say we observe. When we look at a tree, for example, we call it a tree because, based on our past experience and prior knowledge, we are able to place it into a category of entities which we've been schooled to call 'trees'. However, if we are able to see the detail of its leaves, or touch the texture of its bark, then we tend to use a subclassification which aims to be more 'accurate', and hence call it a particular species of tree. On the basis of our revised taxonomy our tree then takes on a different meaning: it acquires a different label and, possibly due to our past experiences, a different emotional connection when we choose to speak about 'English oaks' rather than 'trees'.

Postmodernism brings to our attention the thought that language is not neutral: that

Language is not neutral

words, indeed even the physical representations of letters and words which are printed on this page, have unique meanings imputed to them by those who read them. Thus the word 'tree' is likely to have a different meaning for me than for you. As you read the word 'tree', the way you 'see' or picture a tree in your mind's eye will be different from the way I

[4]Commenting on Weber's contribution, Smart (1993, p. 88), notes the essential paradox of modernity.

Modernity simultaneously creates the promise and the possibility, perhaps the fleeting experience of satisfaction, but it is driven by an endless pursuit of innovation or change which creates restlessness, discontent, and dissatisfaction, and in consequence diminishes the experience and meaning of existence.

picture the idea of a tree in mine. Possibly more profoundly, the way that you picture the tree I'm writing about, may well be different from the way I hope or intention you to imagine the tree. Thus, while in both our minds we picture trees, neither of our trees is the *same* tree. We therefore have a basis for potential conflict should I go on to assert a strategic requirement; namely, that the way I picture my tree is the *only* way for you to picture your trees in future.

When we move this sort of thinking into the domain of management, the potential for disagreement and conflict becomes ever more self evident. For example, when we use the term 'customers', not only do we bring into existence a taxonomy which seeks to separate the species 'customer' from any other species (such as 'consumer'), worse it conceals the possibility that the 'customer' is simultaneously also an employee and/or shareholder. It fails to capture the holistic nature of our existence.

The shorthand expression 'customers' may also be misleading, for by attending to the class as a whole (i.e. 'customers') unknowingly we may well be tempted to imagine all customers to be the same, and hence fail to recognize the individual requirements of an individual customer. Adopting a postmodern way of thinking encourages us not to confuse the index or the class of entities called 'customers' from the actual customer who routinely comes to us to negotiate or buy from us.

Having explained some of the consequences of postmodernism to ontology—to the way we seek to derive meaningful patterns from random phenomena derived from empirical observations, and then construct labels which enable collections of phenomena (like stars) to be grouped together in labels (such as constellations[5])—we now turn to semiotics, to the

study of signs and symbols, and the issue of representation.

Semiotics and the crisis of representation

As a key element in its epistemology, postmodernism is particularly associated with semiotics (Gottdeiner, 1994)—the study of signs and symbols—and by association, is concerned with the 'crises of representation' (Gephart *et al.*, 1996, p. 7) and the problem of 'reality'. In this regard postmodernism shares the concerns of poststructuralism. As Bertens (1995, p. 6) puts it:

> … postmodernism rejects the empirical idea that language can represent reality … [but rather adopts] the idea that language constitutes, rather than reflects, the world, and that knowledge is therefore always distorted by language, that is, by the historical circumstances and the specific environment in which it arises.

One outcome of this crisis of representation is that we are forced to challenge our understandings of the ways that we see, hear, think about, analyse, communicate and make sense of the relationships between ourselves and the rest of the world. As Legge writes (1995, pp. 306–307), in postmodernism the profound difference is that world is no longer '"out there" waiting to be discovered, but is created through discourses emergent from power/ knowledge relations.'

It follows that in postmodernism there cannot be *one* unique representation of reality, *one* universally agreed truth about what constitutes reality. On the contrary, postmodern epistemology leads us to the view that there are multiple representations of reality (Lyon, 1994, p. 7), each being equally valid; each being created by their own discourse or 'languaging' (von Krogh *et al.*, 1994).

A related proposition is developed by Derrida's work on poststructuralism, where he demonstrates that words in themselves have no meaning; rather the meaning of words is achieved by comparing one word to another— for example, hard/soft, tall/short, large/small,

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[5]Of course, from their point of view stars don't know they're stars. Nor do they know they're members of a constellation to which we've attributed an existence and label. And even if the stars know that we have attributed to them membership of a constellation, do they want to be *treated* as if they are members of the constellation?

man/woman. A word's meaning is thus described by its difference with any other; and as this difference is never stable or constant, but altered according to the successive momentary circumstances of its use—for example, woman/man, woman/girl, woman/manager—language is therefore indeterminate (Lyon, 1994, p. 13).

Chia (1995, p. 590) makes a similar point; he writes:

> The apparent concreteness of the qualities we perceive in the social world are in reality [sic] attributes which we impute, through language, to that which we apprehend as a way of ordering our experiences and organizing our understanding.

As signs, words themselves therefore merely 're-present' that which they're signifying. But in representing entities (or more precisely *signifieds*), words are used apart from the phenomena which they're representing. Hassard captures this space-time problem. He writes (1996, p. 52):

> The sign represents the present in its absence—it is a 'deferred presence'. Derrida argues against the notion of a fully present reality that is directly available to our understanding. Instead he posits a world that is continually deferred both in time and space.

In Derrida's thinking, the consequence of this is there is no unique meaning, only differences.

The implications of this style of thinking to social and organizational analysis are explained by Denzin (1994, p. 191). He writes:

> A sign is only made up of differences and has no stable center. Since structures can only be represented by signs, for example, 'society', then they too have neither fixed presences nor center points.

On this basis, words in themselves therefore have no meaning: 'meaning and understanding are not naturally intrinsic to the world . . . they

have to be constructed' (Cooper and Burrell, 1988, p. 99). And as meaning is imposed momentarily through discourse, meaning is essentially ambiguous, and ultimately undecidable (cf. Legge, 1995, p. 302).[6]

Postmodernism as a debate about science[7]

> Science has created this cosmos of natural causality and has seemed unable to answer with certainty the question of its own ultimate presuppositions. (Weber, 1970, p. 355.)

This finding of postmodernism, that there are multiple representations of reality created through discourse, stands in stark contrast with the protocols of Western science where experiments are undertaken on the implicit assumption that prior findings are sufficiently dependable for subsequent work to proceed.

When taking a postmodern stance, however, this implicit assumption (that prior findings are sufficiently dependable for subsequent work to proceed) is judged to conceal flaws in the scientific process. As one of the flaws, postmodernists have revealed the self-referential nature of modern science: the notion that in validating (scientific) results, scientists appeal either (a) to the internal consistency of the underlying axioms, or (b) to the explanatory or predictive power (or accuracy of outcomes against predictions irrespective of the eloquence or internal consistency of the model), or (c) to comparison with others' findings. As Ashley astutely notes (1994, pp. 64–65), in science:

> [e]ither a discourse refers us to another discourse, or it dogmatically insists that its

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[6]In contrast to modernism. As Lyotard (1984) writes: 'All modern forms of knowledge . . . whether positivist, hermeneutic, [interpretative] or Marxist guise, legitimate themselves by making explicit appeals to some type of universal standard.'

[7]Here we have to be particularly careful that we do not attribute to science claims it does not make and conventions it does not adopt. On the other hand it is necessary to lay out some of the ideas of postmodernism which—by referring to Weber's, Derrida's and Lyotard's work—question the validity of science.

internal and idiomatic rules of validity are absolute and complete in themselves. But in either case, the referent of a discourse is a discourse.

As a second flaw, postmodernists also note the increasing fragmentation and specialization of research where scientists engage in discrete but related areas of enquiry formulating and testing hypotheses using models and language specially crafted for their particular field of enquiry and discipline. Taking a postmodern stance, this development not only reinforces the self-referential nature of science, but worse, deters one from being able to take an holistic perspective.[8] Citing Lyotard (1984, p. 17), Lyon (1994, p. 12) pointedly remarks:

> As science spawns disciplines and subdisciplines ... [e]ach form of discourse is forced to generate what home-made authority it can ... All that remains is 'flexible networks of language games'.

It is clear that postmodernism therefore raises serious concerns about scientific method and the reliability of results.

Postmodernism also rejects logical positivism as a dependable methodology, arguing that the cause-effect relationships modelled in the hypothetico-deductive approach, overlooks, ignores or conceals the interests and prejudices of individual researchers.

Far better, they argue, to be honest about the research method and the role of scientists in the development of science. Postmodernists are therefore critical of social scientists who have adopted positivism unthinkingly in preference to a narrow inductive approach which investigates directly individuals' sense making, their behaviours and experiences (Gill and Johnson, 1991, p. 126).

Based on this analysis, science is derided by postmodernists; what remains is then labelled as 'postmodern science'. Citing Lyotard (1984, pp. 40–41), Ashley (1994, p. 65) proposes the

[8]Franklin *et al*. (1998) note the impact of fragmentation of language and disciplines on the possibility of universities to become learning organizations.

characteristics of postmodern science will be different from normal science (Kuhn, 1970). For Ashley, postmodern science will emerge with

> practices that are heterogeneous and varied. Postmodern science 'plays its own game', and 'is incapable of legitimating [grounding] itself, as speculation assumed it could'. 'Speculative' philosophy can now 'relinquish its [failed] legitimation duties' with a sigh of relief. We do not have to be nostalgic for lost certainties.

For readers (managers and theorists) who have been brought up in the rational managerial model where, as Handy (1994, p. 17) so eloquently muses, the 'myth of science' gives managers a mistaken confidence that 'everything, in theory, could be understood, predicted and, therefore, managed', the idea that there's nothing to hold on to—nothing to rely on—is undoubtedly an empty prospect. But to insist otherwise, to imagine that there is something to hold on to, something which provides a unique and dependable standard for comparison and action, is 'pure fiction'; an 'illusion' (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 122) which beguiles people into working with the images of reality rather than with the phenomena or entities themselves.

> It is precisely this [modernist] linear, static and fragmenting style of thinking that the process-sensitive style of postmodernism is concerned to destructure. (Chia, 1995.)

Postmodernism as a concern for 'process' rather than just structure

> ... we need to see organization as a *process* ... [where we explore] the production of organization rather than the organization of production. (Cooper and Burrell, 1988, p. 106.)

As a final theme, postmodernism invites us to focus on 'process' rather than 'structure'. This has the effect that our attention is shifted from

Postmodernism invites us to focus on 'process' rather than 'structure'

the 'big' picture to the 'small' one; from meta-narratives to the micro-organizing processes which constitute ourselves as individuals, and the interdepending communities of which we are a part.

In this style of thinking, entities become secondary, and what becomes important instead is a concern for developing an understanding of the tiny details of the processes which enable the creation and continued existence of entities. In this style of thinking, assumptions and concerns for coherence, stability and structure give way to the study of relationships, chaos and uncertainty and the endemic nature of change (cf. Featherstone, 1991, p. 33). Instead of a hypothesized world of 'common sense structures' found in modernism, postmodernism is concerned with exploring the processes of joining, remaining and separating: processes which continuously shape today's and tomorrow's memberships and communities.

As Chia (1995, p. 9) writes:

> The human world ... is ... invariably constituted in predominantly static terms through an organizing logic based on the principles of division, distinction and difference. However, the alternative belief [is] that 'all things flow' ... and is in a continuous process of becoming, transforming and perishing ...

An emphasis on 'becoming' (Chia, 1995) shifts our attention away from outputs and performance. Taking another metaphor, in postmodernism the idea of 'destination' is substituted by the idea of 'journey' where close attention is given to all aspects of the process in real and elapsed time.

> Thus, each moment of duration absorbs the preceding one, transforming it and with it

the whole, constituting at each stage of the process a novel and never-to-be-repeated event. (Chia, 1995, p. 10.)

This emphasis on process coincides, in part at least, with the recent contentions of Hamel (1997a) who claims that '*the strategy industry doesn't have a theory of strategy creation*. It doesn't know where bold, new value-creating strategies come from.'

His concern with strategizing, and ours with the modernist and postmodernist orientations of strategic thinking, serve to highlight the need to reconsider the epistemological foundations of the strategy discipline.

Indeed, analogous to the work of Chia (1995 and 1997), Cooper and Burrell (1988), Legge (1995) and other organization theorists, who propose a shift of perspective from the analysis of organizations to the analysis of organizing, strategic management can also be reconceived using this perspective. Thus, by being concerned with the analysis of strategizing—rather than the analysis of strategy (or strategic analysis)—we heighten the importance of the intellectual processes which foreground visioning, speculating and scenario planning which enable the development of a shared process which engages human talent in the development of a communal strategic journey.

In summary then, in this theme postmodernism is therefore concerned with the 'hows' rather than the 'whats' of strategy. It is con-

The 'hows' rather than the 'whats' of strategy

cerned about the continuous process of strategy formation where the web of intricate changing relationships pattern and re-pattern, shaping the creation of shared mental models, and the development of communities which value shared learning—i.e. organizational learning. In postmodernism strategic objectives and strategic outcomes therefore become secondary: what matters is *how* we get from 'here' to 'there'. Thus as we journey along our

strategic route we remain ever alert to the need to change our pace and our 'final' direction as new events and unexpected futures cause us to reconsider, re-evaluate and re-strategize our future destination and take a new route on our eternal journey.

VIII. Conclusion. Thinking of strategy in a postmodern way: provisional implications for strategic theory and practice of postmodernism

> ... the world is not already there, waiting for us to reflect it. It is the result of a complex process of a *will to know* which orders and organizes the world ... (Cooper and Burrell, 1988, p. 100).

Methodological and ontological issues

In this paper we have sought to expose some of the difficulties and contradictions which can be found amidst the profusion of writing on strategy and strategic management.

In part, as we have sought to demonstrate in Section V, the causes for these difficulties and contradictions lie in unthinking and sometimes faulty application of the rules and methodologies used by scientists. In particular, as Prahalad and Hamel (1994, p. 10) and Franklin (1997) note, early work on strategic management and planning was influenced strongly by the hypothetico-deductive approach adopted in economics, where causal relationships are hypothesized, and scant attention is given to the difficulties of operationalizing abstract ideas and variables like 'inflation' or 'demand' or, in strategy work, 'competition'.

One might argue that the consequences of undue dependence on the methodology of economics (cf. Blaug, 1980) were worsened by unthinking attachment to the rational managerial model developed earlier in the century; the notion that men can be treated as machines, that 'well trained managers can manage anything' (Peters and Waterman, 1989, p. 29) and that the world is inherently predictable.

In the light of history, and work in other social sciences, including semiotics and the philosophy of science, we might recognize today that the rational managerial model was little more than a rhetoric[9] (Eccles *et al.*, 1992, p. 29) of its time; a common language of commonly shared assumptions about how the world behaves and how it can be controlled.

Attention to postmodernism pierces the rhetoric requiring us, as strategic theorists and doers, to regard the world as essentially undecidable such that well intended outcomes from the traditional tools of strategic analysis—like portfolio analysis, SWOTS and BCG matrices—are not dependable because they are 'created through discourses emergent from power/knowledge relations' (Legge, 1995, pp. 306–307), and reflect 'the ideological frameworks in which they arise' (Bertens, 1995, p. 7).

We are, as theorists and practitioners, knowingly or not, involved in an unceasing ontological endeavour where 'the will to know' (Cooper and Burrell, 1988, p. 100) shapes what we are interested in and, hence, influences what we see. In turn this goes on to direct our judgement as to whether what we see is sufficiently equivalent to the abstract variables, relationships, and modelling(s) (possibly created *a priori*) which are held in our minds[10] (Friedman, 1953, p. 26; Franklin and Woodhead, 1980, p. 367) and, assuming an acceptable 'fit', prompts actions based on our will to know.

The postmodern project therefore differs markedly from modernism which 'posits ... an already made up mind' (Cooper and Burrell, 1988, p. 94) where phenomena are waiting to be found, analysed and classified unproblematically. This is, of course, the positivist approach to the natural sciences where

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[9]To view management from a rhetorical perspective is to recognize that *the way people talk about the world has everything to do with the way the world is ultimately understood and acted in, and that the concept of revolutionary change depends to a great extent on how the world is framed by our language.* (Eccles *et al.*, 1992, p. 29.)

[10]As Stephen Hawking notes (1988, p. 155) 'a scientific theory ... exists only in our minds.'

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statements made about the world 'are directly verifiable as true or false simply by looking at the "facts" of the world' (Hughes, 1990, p. 36).

But the work of Kuhn (1970) in particular, suggests this approach to science, epistemology and ontology is naive and flawed. The political, social and human context of science cannot be assumed to have a neutral impact. Kuhn's (1970) essay is clear on this point: scientific revolutions are shaped by the contexts of the period in which the scientific endeavours take place. What is acceptable science, in terms of agendas and procedures, is not merely self-referential (i.e. based on the acceptability of the logic of the axioms or the consistency of empirical results with the underlying theory), but affected by the social, political and economic contexts in which scientists are brought up and operate (Hughes, 1990).

The consequences for theory building and the practice of strategic management

The consequences for theory building and the practice of strategic management of this way of thinking involve short- and long-run agendas.

First, we need to (re-) state how little we know. What we believe we know is in part an

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We need to state how little we know

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ontological illusion conjured up through a research methodology which has depended on procedures adopted in the natural sciences where, in particular, the general has been improperly derived from the particular (cf. Popper's criticism, 1957).

Second, any prospect of the development of a unifying paradigm needs to begin from the admission that a theory of strategy (or for that matter, a theory of strategy creation) may take a generation or more to develop. An agreed research programme needs to begin with the

expectation that any dependable improvements in our knowledge are likely initially to be small and incremental. In the development of strategy theory, like strategy practice, we cannot and should not seek or expect quick wins.

Third, within the field of management education and development, where strategy and management appear, there's a strong case that the ideas and techniques of strategy should be located within a critical social scientific framework. Admittedly philosophy and social science are also open to critical review; but unless managers are given insights into the research and theory building process, where researchers' 'angles' have impacts on the process and outcomes of research, managers will be forever ignorant—possibly skilled in management but certainly incompetent in judging the contexts and conditions where, using logic as a process, ideas and solutions might be considered to be most appropriate and helpful.

Fourth, a recurrent theme throughout the paper, is the need for research and writing in strategy to take on the implications of postmodernism. Thinking of strategy in a postmodern way means recognizing that 'views of the social world are never free of the effects of values, interests and other presuppositional factors' (Antonio and Kellner, 1994, p. 145), including 'power/knowledge relationships'. Thinking of strategy in a postmodern way requires researchers and writers to acknowledge their facts are value-laden, and that their view of the world is only one of many possible ontologies. Such an admission may well lead to a fifth implication, also found in Alvesson and Willmott (1996), namely the development of theory which better accounts for the role and importance of power (and gender) within strategic management.

But most importantly, thinking of strategy in a postmodern way relieves us from the tedious recipes of the modernists; it frees us to think of organizations as collectives of people rather than 'it beings' who exist apart from us. It is potentially emancipating: it allows us to become free of the 'iron cage' expressed by Weber. Thinking of strategy in a postmodern

way gives added impetus to work of the culture-excellence school of management; those who see purpose, values, people and process being centred in the development of theory and practice; those who have a mission to liberate managers from their right to command, and install, instead, obligations to a wider stakeholder community where systemic and ecological considerations become as important as the narrow interests of capital.

Thinking of strategy in a postmodern way is therefore revolutionary: a prospect for scientific revolution and a prospective feature of strategic change itself.

Postscript. Charity, hope, pessimism and irony: strategy and postmodernism

Before we close this paper it is appropriate to bring to the discussion some of the more recent developments in strategic theory which, interpreted charitably, can be thought to have resonance with one or other of themes we have been exploring.

In particular I want to cite the recent work of Bartlett and Ghoshal who, in a series of articles in the *Harvard Business Review* (1994), and in their recent book (1997), have brought into managers' consciousness a concern for people, purpose and *process* as essential features of good strategic management.

The work of Peter Senge (1990), Collins and Porras (1996), and Hamel and Prahalad (1994) all, in their own way, also represent a concern for the strategic process. Although their contributions are concerned mostly with organization-wide developments—what modernists judge to be true corporate strategy—we might take heart and hope that their subsequent work will acquire some of the characteristics associated with a postmodern style of thinking which looks at the 'micro-logics of organizing' (Chia, 1995, p. 579).

But it's equally possible to be pessimistic. Not only is the rational managerial model terminally embedded in our language, practice and theory, worse still the idea of strategy has been so abused that one might argue that it's

lost any sensible meaning. And as strategy is devoid of meaning then possibly we should discard it, asserting loudly that its use is potentially hazardous, and entailing health warnings throughout.

Taking a postmodern style of thinking, however, I am forced to conclude that 'strategy' is a good case for postmodern analysis, and that we should hold on to it. It is a term with multiple meanings; a term which is ultimately undecidable. And in so far as 'strategy' is no different from any other concept, then why should strategy be canonized by martyring it into extinction?

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Glossary

The aim of the glossary is to provide summary definitions/explanations of terms used in the paper. Reference to more extensive definitions/explanations can be found in (for example) Gill and Johnson (1991) and Hughes (1990).

Term	Definition/explanation
a priori model	an abstract model where variables and relationships have few or no empirical counterparts.
axioms/axiomatic	a series of linked assumptions which provide the basis of any *a priori* theory. An initial test of any *a priori* theory is NOT whether the axioms are 'real' or 'unreal'; rather that the axioms are logically consistent with one another. Hence the notion of 'internal consistency' of a model or theory.
discourse	the formal treatment of a subject in speech or writing involving information, knowledge, argument and communication.
epistemology	a branch of philosophy which is concerned with validating knowledge; i.e. determining how we know what we know.
foundationalism	the belief that science can be built on observable facts (Lyon, 1994, p. 7).
hermeneutics	a study of the past gained through texts and artefacts.
hypothesis/hypothetico deductive reasoning	a research method which involves (1) the formulation of cause-effect hypotheses which are then (2) subjected to rigorous testing through empirical observation.
inductive empiricism	research which is based on observation without obvious regard to or foundation in an underlying theory. Induction is a research method where general results are inferred (i.e. induced) and adopted from singular instances of an observation or experiment. Hence the notion of the inductive fallacy; e.g. 'I have seen a large number of white swans; I have never seen a black one; therefore all swans are white.' (Blaug, 1980, p. 15.)
interpretavism/ interpretative research	usually associated with Weber, interpretavism is where the researcher interprets and gives meaning to others' action without prior or subsequent recourse to theory or hypothesis. It is therefore at odds with positivism.
metanarrative	an explanation or forecast of a movement having potentially (world)-wide implications. Marxism is generally regarded as a metanarrative.
methodology	governs the 'rules' of research; governs how we collect information and in particular whether we adopt a logical deductive process (where empirical observation is initially unimportant or ignored), or an inductive process which relies on observation to derive theory, understanding, explanation and prediction.
modernism/modernist	a period of time and an epistemology associated with the Enlightenment, the development of (Western) scientific thought and the repudiation of non-scientific explanations of natural phenomena.
ontology	ontology is concerned with the nature of reality, and in particular, aims to define rules or circumstances when we can concede or attribute existence to some entity or group of entities.
paradigm	following Loasby (1971, p. 866), a paradigm 'defines the types of relationships to be investigated and the methods and abstractions to be regarded as legitimate within a particular problem area.'
positivistic/positivism	a research method based in the natural sciences where empirical observation of phenomena (i.e. 'things' removed from abstract thinking) provide scientists/researchers with a basis for the development of theory.
postmodernism	an epoch and an epistemology which follows modernism and queries the basis of progress arguing to alternative ways of observing the world and shaping the future other than positivism. In this paper, postmodernism is particularly concerned with the concept of 'reality'.
problematic	some phenomenon or behaviour where there is a philosophical problem which is endemic to the class of phenomena being studied.
rhetoric	the use of language to encourage or reflect (i.e. explain and understand) others' action.
rational managerial model	associated with Fordism; where human beings are treated as if they were machines.
semiotics	the study of signs and symbols.
theory	a formalized system of assumptions, variables and cause-effect relationships which provide simplifications of the world, aid understanding, and offer the prospect of prediction.

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