The Other Side of Projects: The Case for Critical Project Studies

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Introduction

The achievements of project management and project managers have been broadly extolled by those within the field for many years, and the sentiment that these achievements were not sufficiently recognised or understood in wider society has long persisted. There are signs in recent years that this inattention is at last being reversed, and that both looking back and looking forward, there is evidence that corporations, sponsors, governments, international bodies and indeed fellow employees and managers are now paying serious attention to what project management as a discipline has achieved, and what it can contribute in the future.

This 'coming of age' of the discipline is welcome, and represents a huge opportunity for the field of project management to establish itself across public and private sectors, and to make a greater contribution to organisations, economies and societies. It is precisely at this moment, facing this opportunity, that we wish to raise a cautionary note. To take its place as a mature and self-confident discipline, as has been noted by several authors, project management requires a broadening and deepening of the theoretical base of project management, as befits a mature and confident discipline (Winch, 1996; Morris, Patel, and Wearne, 2000; Maylor, 2001; Koskela and Howell, 2002; Morris, 2004). Clearly, project management has developed continually since the early work on scheduling in the first half of the 20th century, and important contributions and advances have been made year upon year. What we are arguing for in this research note is specifically a broadening of the agenda, and more importantly a recognition of the social and ethical territory that project management already occupies, but frequently fails to reflect upon (Cicmil, 2006; Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006; Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006). We might refer to this occluded face of project management as 'the other side' (or the 'dark side') of the discipline, in terms of both what is overlooked and in terms of what is often ignored, as regards the more dysfunctional aspects and consequences of project management practice. This we argue would involve identifying and encouraging research which explores new perspectives and new themes which lie

outside the tightly-defined and densely populated conceptual landscape of mainstream project management.

Our argument in this research note will centre on three main themes. First of all, we must articulate the limitations that project management currently faces, many of which are widely recognised within the field, and the ongoing efforts to 'rethink' the basis of the discipline to overcome these limitations. We then will outline one important dimension which is by and large neglected by the majority of work on project management; the political, social and ethical dimension to project management in both theory and practice. Drawing on the tradition referred to as 'Critical Management Studies', we will outline what a 'Critical Project Studies' might embrace and aim to achieve. Finally, drawing on an incipient critical literature, both within and outside the project management field, we would like to raise a number of important themes and make a case for a greater recognition and integration of these concerns into mainstream project management.

Challenging Project Management

In recent years, project management has attracted increasing attention from researchers, organisations, and local and national governments, which in one sense reflects the increased adoption of project-based work across industrial sectors[1]. Both practitioner and academic discourses have hailed the project form as a vital economic and social process on which the emerging 'knowledge economy' heavily relies (Frame 1994; Briner and Hastings, 1994; Cleland and Ireland, 2002; Meredith and Mantel, 2003). Three key characteristics of modern organisations and society are typically cited in the rise of the project form; rapidly changing environments and markets, the increasing complexity of products and services and the corresponding knowledge intensity in production processes. Not only are projects considered suitable ways to control endeavours in a turbulent environment (Ekstedt et al, 1999), but more importantly, they are regarded as the appropriate way to stimulate a learning environment and enhance creativity so as to deliver complex products (Hobday, 2000). Recent literature has highlighted the importance of project-based organizing in the processes of information sharing and knowledge management in organizations (Silver, 2000; De Fillippi, 2001). In this context, project management has been promoted as a powerful and widely-applicable vehicle for integrating diverse functions of an organization, enabling the efficient, timely, and effective accomplishment of goals through the concentration of flexible, autonomous, and knowledgeable individuals in temporary teams. Project management and

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[1] A process described by some as 'projectification' (Midler, 1995; Lundin and Söderholm, 1998; Jessen, 2002; Sydow and Staber, 2002), implying in the extreme the colonisation of all aspects of life by project-related principles, rules, techniques, and procedures.

projects have seemingly been accepted by many both within and outside the field as natural, self-evident, and indispensable.

It is at this point, however, that the paradox of project management as universal solution to the acknowledged challenges of the new economic and social era becomes apparent. A growing body of literature, as well as a growing body of empirical evidence and the voices of numerous practitioners indicate that accepting and applying this widely promoted project management 'good practice' standards does not eliminate project failures, nor does it guarantee project success (Williams, 2004). We paradoxical aspects can be isolated. Firstly, a number of empirical studies support the view that the very reason for using projects and project management as a methodology for organisational innovation and change is at the heart of project failures (Thomas, 2000; Maylor, 2001). Thus Clarke (1999) queries the application of project management as a vehicle of change in light of the rigid 'standardisation' of project management, often leading to cultural clashes; project management being regarded a essentially a 'corporate reporting' tool; project overload syndrome; individual resistance to imposed procedures and practice, and a lack of confidence and motivation in project management. In such (not untypical) circumstances, the selfsame principles of structured project management methodology are simultaneously the major causes of failure.

Secondly, and equally worryingly, contemporary studies of project performance continue to indicate the disparity between the maturing body of project management know-how and the effectiveness of its application (Williams, 1999; Atkinson, 1999; Morris et al*., *2000). Recent public reports provide an insight into frequent cost overruns, delays, and under-performance in terms of quality and user satisfaction, which seem to have become the rule and the reality of contemporary projects (e.g., Morris and Hough, 1987; Flyvbjerg et al., 2002, 2003). The litany of high-profile project debacles has provided a recurrent theme over the last two decades, encompassing Denver Airport, the Jubilee Line extension to the London Underground, the Scottish Parliament and already many predict a similar story for the 2012 London Olympics. Evidence of poor project performance can be found across various industries and types of project (e.g. Standish Group, 1994; Bowen et al, 1994; Winch, 1996).

Project failure rates tend to be fiercely contested, and we would also be sceptical of easy attributions of 'success' and 'failure'; as Fincham suggests, these accounts can seen as *narratives* whereby 'through a kind of social labelling events are formulated into evolving 'stories' that evoke either status or stigma' (Fincham, 2002: 1). More widely, however, the wider consequences of project failures tend to go unnoticed, and often suppressed. This is the issue of general neglect of the social complexity in project environments in conceptualising key performance indicators against which projects are evaluated and

approved. As numerous reports in the public domain about the implications and consequences for multiple communities affected by important major projects (The Three Gorges Dam, the Shell's Sakhalin 2 oil-and gas project, the Olympics 2012) indicate, economic measures tend to dominate decision making processes and to marginalise values, interests and risks related to health, safety, well-being, environment and long-term possibilities for collaboration and sustainable development.

Ironically, however, part of the current high profile of project management stems from the widely publicised instances of project management failure, particularly in public sector-related projects and in IS/IT. A long-standing international debate about the formulation of the various bodies of knowledge, regarding the boundaries of the subject area, its purpose, practical application, and relationship with other aspects of organisational and managerial reality (Wideman, 1995; Morris et al., 2000; Koskela and Howell, 2002; Meredith and Mantel, 2003, among others) has been driven by the aim of radically examining the intellectual foundation of project management, thus tackling the perceived root of the problems. Overall, there remains a tendency in the field to assume that the basic framework of project management is compelling and essentially sound, and to see any failings in project management as normal in a maturing field, and soon to be ironed out through more complex and elaborate modelling of project planning and monitoring problems and solutions, including an increased reliance on IS /IT and software based tools (see, for example, Young, 2003; Maylor, 2003; Meredith and Mantel, 2003). Despite the increased sophistication of these models and proliferation of project management text-books, consultancy support and governmental policies, it is still unclear to what extent these complex tools are being actually used by practitioners.

One approach which broadens the agenda in a productive manner is the more political analysis of projects as organisational and social arrangements which gained some prominence from the 1990s onwards. An early forerunner of this approach is Taggert and Silbey's (1986) world-weary 'political' development cycle of projects, which replaces the smoothly rational PLC with an alternative whose stages include wild enthusiasm, disillusionment, total confusion, search for the guilty, punishment of the innocent, and promotion of non-participants. Other authors suggest the need for a wider picture of what goes on in social construction of projects and project management by focusing on who and which agendas are included in/excluded from decision-making processes (Flyvbjerg et al., 2003). Particularly influential is the Scandinavian School of Project Studies (Sahlin-Anderson and Söderholm, 2002) which raises a number of vital themes which move beyond traditional understandings of projects and their management, positing among other things the conceptualisation of projects as temporary organisations (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995) and

the recognition of the historically-embedded nature of projects (Kreiner, 1995; Engwall, 2003).

Towards a Constructive Critique

While recognising the advances made in these various directions, we would suggest that the problem is far more deeply rooted in the fundamental principles upon which the field of project management has been established. More widely, however, we need to address the wider consequences of the contemporary project management discourse which tend to go unnoticed, and often suppressed.

Our concern is that research into projects and project management remains heavily reliant on a functionalist, instrumental view of projects and organisations, where the function of project management is taken to be the accomplishment of some finite piece of work in a specified period of time, within a certain budget, and to agreed specifications. Most textbooks and professional associations for project management enthusiastically promote this normative view of the field, involving the application of knowledge, skills, tools and techniques to project activities to meet project requirements. This position typically assumes rationality, universality, objectivity, and value-free decision-making, and the possibility of generating law-like predictions in knowledge. Carrying the legacy of the tradition of 'natural sciences' (e.g. systems theory), the project management body of knowledge continues to emphasise the role of project managers as 'implementers', whose role and responsibility is merely to address issues of control (time and cost) and content (planned scope of work). This position explicitly and deliberately marginalises and suppresses their wider potential role as competent social and political actors in complex project-labelled arrangements. Efforts to dissemination and institutionalise 'best practice' across and between industries and sectors reflects and pursues the progressive rationalisation of action in project contexts. The consequences of this situation are both ethical and deeply practical – as Balck argues;

> Practitioners, in particular we as project managers, are well advised to rid ourselves of the constricting historical background of a mechanistic world image and rationalism. (Balck, 1994, pp. 2)

Our proposal is to draw on the insights offered by the broad grouping of Critical Management Studies to widen and deepen the theoretical foundations of project management and to provide novel approaches to the entrenched challenges facing project management. Critical work on management and organisations has an eclectic base, and draws upon a wide range of social theories, philosophies and ethical/moral positions, including Marxism, feminism, environmentalism, labour process theory, post-structuralism, post-colonialism and critical realism (for a summary, see Alvesson and Willmott, 1996; Grey and Willmott, 2005). Given

this diversity, Fournier and Grey (2000) set out three key tenets which critical work largely shares. They argue that critical research on management and organisations:

1. Has a 'Non-Performative Intent' – starts out from the position that issues of morality, equality and ethics are as important as – or more important than - traditional functionalist concerns of organisational effectiveness and efficiency,

2. 'Aims to Denaturalise Organisations and Management'– challenges work which asserts that the current way in which organisations, economies and societies are organised is somehow natural, normal or inevitable, drawing attention instead to political and power relations underpinning any 'status quo'.

3. 'Aims to Prevent Oppression/Exploitation'– the overarching concern for such work is to oppose oppression and exploitation in organisations and societies, whether this be the exploitation of employees, of women, of ethnic minorities, or of the environment.

Much of this work has since the mid-1990s been collectively referred to as 'Critical Management Studies', and 'CMS' has also lent its name to a major international conference as well as to a major Interest Group at the Academy of Management. Such work takes specific issue with moves to reduce management to value-neutral competence, and rejects what is core to project management's instrumentalist ethos; "the means-end calculus with economic efficiency as guiding theme, ethics and values ignored, truncated or subsumed within efficiency" (Grey, 2005: 8). CMS-inspired work therefore resists the suppression of the political, ethical and moral aspect of organisations and management, arguing that this is far removed from the reality of management which is "often messy, ambiguous, fragmented and political in character" (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000: 60).

Over the last decade, work has emerged which applies this critical position to project management, its nostrums and methods – this work, although drawn from many disciplinary backgrounds and theoretical positions, share a focus on critical issues and might be seen as the emergence of a school of Critical Project Studies. Some of this work is brought together in an edited collection by the authors (Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006); others can be found across the range of management, business and engineering journals. In the following section, we will attempt to give a brief overview of the existing literature which pursues critical themes and develops insights based on empirical work in a variety of project organisations and sectors.

One key critical research theme (Hodgson, 2002; Thomas, 2003) is a focus on the consequences of those techniques of observation, measurement and performance control central to project management methodologies for both the management and the self-management of workers within project settings. Work on project management in this tradition tends to criticise project management methodology, as, first and foremost, the attempt to impose control upon employees (Metcalfe, 1997), using similar principles of work fragmentation and the maximisation of visibility and accountability to those underpinning

Scientific Management (Whitty and Schulz, 2007). Some of this work points to the self-defeating nature of the control imperative central to project management (Drummond and Hodgson, 2007); other work points to the deleterious effects of control and work intensification on learning and knowledge transfer in such environments (Koch, 2004). A strong current of research in this vein focuses upon the intensified nature of work in project environments (Garrick and Clegg, 2001; Zika-Victorsson et al, 2006) and the impact of precarious working in many project industries (Eskinsmyth, 2002; Green, 2006). This insight is extended beyond the workplace in research on the impact of projects working on work-life balance (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2003), drawing attention to the discriminatory aspect while other work takes a slightly different approach, analysing instead the gendered nature of project management models and procedures (Buckle and Thomas, 2003; Thomas and Buckle-Henning, 2007).

At the same time, the ongoing professionalisation of project management has been interpreted in line with other professionalisation projects, as a mode of control over expert labour, implementing and enforcing a form of self-disciplinary control over project managers (Hodgson, 2002). A key challenge for critical work from this perspective is thus to draw attention to the subtle power relations established and maintained by project management technologies through the monopoly of language and discourse (Raisanen and Linde, 2004; Hodgson and Cicmil, 2007) and the consequences of these power relations for practice in project settings. A parallel but equally vital line of examination looks at the role of project management in perpetuating oligarchic elites in modern corporations (Clegg and Courpasson, 2004), and analyses of project management as a form of bureaucratic control, imposing administrative constraints at the expense of creativity and autonomy (Hodgson, 2004; Styhre, 2006).

Towards Critical Project Studies

Our immediate objective is to signpost possible research trajectories towards a critical evaluation of the intellectual foundations of project management as a field of study and a practising discipline and to broaden the research agenda by encouraging a more critical approach in this increasingly prominent area of organisational life. In doing so, we are taking up the challenge offered by Flyvbjerg (2001: 166) to conduct research that 'contributes to society's capacity for value-rational deliberation and action'. Our hope is that this paper may encourage movement towards the creation of a vocabulary and a resource for a critical engagement between practitioners and academics beyond the confines of the existing language, concepts and assumptions of project management.

The first and most important consequence of an engagement with critical work would be an increased sensitivity to the possibility of oppression and exploitation in project settings, an outcome which is especially likely given the pressurised environment of most projects, regardless of sector and scale. A second important aspect of critical approaches to project management is to rethink definitions of project success beyond time, cost and quality performance to encompass work-life balance, societal impacts, health and safety, and ethical concerns more widely. And, thirdly, critical project management research would engage with (and serve) not merely project managers but practitioners at all levels of the project hierarchy, often with the aim of initiating some transformation in how actors perceive themselves, their voice, their broad responsibility and their influence in shaping their own social place.

Our intention in presenting these views is primarily to start a dialogue, to raise the importance of such issues and concerns within the field of project management and to draw attention to broader theoretical resources available to conceptualise projects and their management. To this end, we have in the past organised workshops to act as a forum for debates around these themes, of which the best papers have been published as a collection (Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006). We continue to run these workshops, in the hope of extending the debate and learning from the views, experiences and insights of as broad a range as possible, and we would welcome interventions, participation and even counter-critique from all quarters. We hope that, at the least, this research note has succeeded in raising new concerns and has sharpened interest among project management academics and practitioners to engage with these concerns, which are central to the future of an ethical, politically self-aware and in the broadest sense 'effective' project management.

In the process of establishing a field, it is entirely understandable that the focus is upon extolling the virtues, values and achievements of project management in the face of indifference, rivalry and scepticism, and suppressing or ignoring both the failings of project management and also the negative consequences of project management at its most successful. One of the prices of maturity is the requirement to critique oneself in a far more rigorous and extensive manner. This undertaking is already underway, and we would hope that this journal would be an important forum for the debates in this area. We recognise that this requires a fundamental reappraisal of many core tenets of project management theory and technique, an undertaking which poses a challenge for many whose careers and indeed livelihoods are intimately connected to project management as it stands. Nonetheless, without such a radical reappraisal, project management as a discipline will not overcome the practical and philosophical challenges which it currently faces, and will struggle to cope with and influence the broadening field of project organising in the next century.

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