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The Inception of Making Projects Critical

The emergence of the Making Projects Critical workshops and publications can be traced back to a chance meeting between the authors of this reflective paper, Svetlana Cicmil and Damian Hodgson, at the Critical Management Studies Conference held in Hulme Hall, Manchester, in the summer of 2001, and the discovery of shared interests in a critical examination of projects and their management. Of course, this was not the source of the ideas behind Making Projects Critical (MPC) – our conversation revolved around our interest in several papers already published in the late 1990s and early 2000s by writers such as Mike Bresnen, Bent Flyvbjerg, Gernot Grabher, Frederic Tell, Christine Raisanen, Jonas Soderlund, David Buchanan, Robyn Fincham, Stuart Green, Nick Marshall, Janice Thomas, Richard Badham, Mats Engwall, Johann Packendorff and Monica Lindgren – Johann and Monica shortly to become co-organisers of the MPC workshops and publications alongside Damian and Svetlana. What struck us as a missed opportunity was the separation between many of these research outputs – to our mind, there was an implicit conversation to be held between these ideas, but often these were publications in very different fields, some far removed from standard project management research – from construction management to geography, from linguistics to (team and occupational) psychology, from ICT studies to knowledge management and organisational behaviour. The connections which could be identified included the strong Nordic influence, reflecting what has been described as the Scandinavian School of Project Studies (Sahlin-Anderson and Söderholm, 2002) which had elevated interest in project management since the publication of Lundin and Söderholm (1995), on projects as temporary organisations Kristian Kreiner (1995) and Packendorf (1995) on contingent and complex nature of project organising, and Midler (1995) on projectification - although without necessarily containing a critical edge, we felt.

In the summer of 2002, following an extended conversation in the intervening months, we contacted a number of academics whose work on projects had interested us. As we described it in our emailed invitations at the time, "At a number of conferences this year and last year, we met with individuals working in this area using ideas from what might broadly be described as 'critical management studies', along with others with a less technicist/managerialist position and a more sociologically-informed interest in the implications of projects for contemporary society. The time seems right to bring together a number of these writers in disparate fields to facilitate productive discussions between researchers working in a variety of sectors and from a range of critical theoretical positions". Receiving several enthusiastic replies and suggestions of colleagues who might also be interested, we felt sufficiently reassured that there was enough material interest to organise an

event. With the support of Bristol Business School (BBS) and the encouragement of the then BBS Dean, Charles Harvey, the first Making Projects Critical was held in Bristol in April 2003.

From the outset, the intention of the workshop was twofold. Firstly, to bridge the gap between project management research, grounded at the time in a very functionalist tradition and worldview inherited from engineering and the more positivist variants of management research, *and* wider social science, with a less pragmatic orientation and an interest in the implications of projects and project-based work beyond the project itself. And secondly, the intention was always to prioritise critical perspectives on projects -those which did not focus exclusively on 'how can we manage projects so that they are more successful' but, instead, considered all of the implications, positive and negative, of project organising and project management.

It was of our particular interest to;

- give voice to issues of morality, equality and ethics in project based work, organising and management and create a dialogue with those more traditional functionalist concerns of project's effectiveness and efficiency,
- challenge the apparent inevitability of projects by drawing attention instead to political and power relations underpinning any 'status quo'.
- to open up possibilities for a fairer, more affirmative and caring forms of organising and management (cf .Fournier and Grey, 2000; Alvesson and Deetz, 2000).

There was, therefore, an intention from the start to create a space where heterodox understandings of projects and project management could be put forward, discussed and developed. These commitments resulted in tensions, which were often found to be productive, but at the same time, produced particular challenges for us as organisers. More on this below.

The Evolution of MPC

Between 2003 and 2006, more workshops were held (in Bristol and then in Manchester), with some outstanding and innovative work presented by participants which either reframed projects and project management using novel theories or ideas, or challenged established totems of faith in the project management field. It is invidious to single out contributors, but papers which we recall as having a particular impact on us in these early workshops include Alf Rehn's work on projects as excess drawing on Georges Bataille, David Courpasson's discussion of the use of project management to (re)produce corporate elites, Donncha Kavanagh's paper on understanding PM as language and practice from a 'becoming' ontology, and Manuela Nocker's use of Henri Lefebvre to consider projects as social space. Other early themes included improvisation, routines, Actor

Network Theory, project ecologies, rhetorics, project ontologies, professionalisation, project management education, heroism, morality and ethics - and a provocative paper on 'Making Sense of Project Management' by Mark Winter which would go on to form the kernel of the 'Rethinking Project Management' movement. No doubt other attendees at those early events will have different papers lodged in their mind, but the quality of conversation and range of themes covered in the workshop itself (and in the restaurant and bar afterwards) were as inspirational as the papers themselves.

Much of this work went on to be published in important project management and social science journals. However, it was not until the publication of the edited collection 'Making Projects Critical' in 2006 (Palgrave) that the workshop series really delivered on its original aim to not only bring together "these writers in disparate fields" but to extend the conversation to a wider readership than those who had been able to attend the workshops. The book seemed to be well-received, sold well in the UK, Europe, Australia and the US and received a broadly positive review in this journal (Dainty, 2008). Most importantly, the book helped to raise the profile of several of the concerns of the book's contributors in the public domain, supported by other activities such as Svetlana Cicmil's interview in the Sunday Times (March 4 2007). While special issues (ephemera, New Technology, Work and Employment) and offshoot events (a related workshop hosted by the UTS in Sydney in 2007 and a stream at the Critical Management Studies Conference in Naples, 2011) took place in subsequent years, the core of MPC has remained the ongoing conversation facilitated by the workshops, held in Stockholm in 2008, Bristol in 2010, Manchester in 2012, Stockholm again in 2014, and next in Newcastle in the north of England in early 2016. Connections with wider debates and fields of work have been forged by the participation of outstanding and often provocative keynote speakers such as Peter Case. Dan Kärreman, David Knights, Martin Parker, Andy Sturdy, Damian O'Doherty, and Davide Nicolini. Equally important have been those researchers who have been almost ever-present in these workshops, again lending a continuity to an interrupted but connected conversation with new participants and new topics at every event – Manuela Nocker, Neil Alderman, Chris Ivory, and Janice Thomas.

The MPC community has grown over the years to embrace colleagues from North America, Australia and across Europe. Also, new threads of our original work have developed in previously unexpected directions, attracting new participants and forging cross-fertilisation across research communities. The research agenda of the MPC coordinators have also developed in different directions while still being nourished by the conversations at MPC events; for Damian Hodgson, pressing concerns include identity politics within the field, the professionalisation of PM and the implications of projectification in the public sector, particularly healthcare, while Johann and Monica have linked

their MPC work to critical studies of leadership and entrepreneurship, while also addressing emotional labour, sustainability and resilience in project-based work. Svetlana's focus has been on critical process-phenomenological theorising and complexity thinking in her studies of PM practice, skills and knowledge.

Tensions and Impact

A core tension evident throughout the MPC series has been between focus (on critical concerns) and inclusivity. Throughout the workshops, and indeed in the 2006 text, we were keen to support a dialogue between writers with 'critical' concerns and those who were sceptical of the concerns of MPC. Thus, in the book, Peter Morris was invited to 'speak back' to the contents in a summative chapter, offering a thoughtful response calling for constructive rather than subversive critique. In the workshops also, several contributions came from eminent authors in the field of project management such as Harvey Maylor and Rodney Turner, challenging the tone or the mission of MPC. We were very grateful to all for 'entering the lion's den', so to speak, to ensure debates were broad and never complacently critical. We also acknowledge Terry Williams's support in welcoming a more social-constructionist approach to project studies and for encouraging a productive dialogue between MPC and PMI (Project Management Institute). Looking back, many very good papers were submitted to the workshops but not accepted simply on the grounds that they were not, in any sense we could see, 'critical', or else they did not have the potential to engage with critical concerns. At times authors may have been unhappy with this response, but our feeling throughout is that there were many other excellent conferences where such work would fit, including the PMI Research Conference, IRNOP or the European Academy of Management.

The second tension is one which has preoccupied the field of Critical Management Studies in recent years (see also debates on critical performativity, e.g. Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman 2009; King and Learmonth, 2015) – what has been the impact of MPC? As academics, we are well equipped and disciplined in the art of tracing the history of ideas; identifying what has been picked up, reused or recycled by other academics is the normal practice of understanding the intellectual legacy of thought and of thinkers. The workshops have benefitted throughout from the energy and ideas of committed doctoral students and other (at the time) early-career researchers including Viviane Sergi, Marcus Lindahl, Erik Pineiro, Katie Collins, Bradley Rolfe, Karen Smits, Beata Segercrantz, Thomas Lennerfors, Lucia Crevani, Annette Hallin, Markus Hallgren, Niki Vermeulen, Michael Cowen, Ewan Mackenzie, Claire Heron, Mats Fred, and Eamonn O'Laocha – apologies to any we may have omitted here. Traces of any legacy would be found in the work and writings of these and, indeed, already-established researchers who partook in the conversation.

However, to quote one of Marx's famous aphorisms for a moment; "philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it." By challenging functionalist and narrowly pragmatist approaches to projects and project management, was there a risk of failing to influence or inform the thought and practice of those managing projects, training those managing projects, or managing those managing projects? For this reason, recent workshops have focused explicitly on practice or praxis – to quote the most recent call for papers, for the forthcoming MPC8 "In an era of increasing emphasis on relevance and impact, what is the real contribution provided by the adoption of critical perspectives to the practice and lived experience of project managers and others engaged in project-based activities? Can project studies adopt a critical performativity to facilitate pragmatic interventions and provide alternative ways of organising in projects? In short, what do we *do* with critical project studies?" In this regard, we must also acknowledge the vital contributions of practitioners, typically practicing project managers, to our MPC events. The reflexive analyses by Charles Smith (a long-standing MPC participant) and Brad Rolfe whose recent PhD both draws on, and extends the MPC intellectual foundation and, equally importantly, its 'vision into practice'.

We have always recognised that our MPC project 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' (Hodgson and Cicmil, 2008, p.148). In that sense, PM education as a field of practice lends itself to possibilities of enacting the vision of MPC and developing a critical pedagogic approaches reflecting the key tenets discussed in the introduction above. As such, it has a potential to articulate and reaffirm pragmatic aspects of critical thought in recognising and encouraging the need for social action, political competence and the development of critical, managerially relevant knowledge and practical understanding that enable change and provide skills for new ways of operating (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). Linking PM education at business schools with phronetic approach to learning and acting (Flyvbjerg, 2001) is a powerful pedagogic tool in management education alongside other approaches to praxis and lived experience such as those based on existential hermeneutic, phenomenology and participatory pedagogy. The work of Cicmil and Hodgson, 2007, outlining their experiment with such curriculum innovation is one example. Mark Winter's success with programmes at Manchester Business School and elsewhere based on the principles of reflective practice is another (Winter and Szczepanek, 2009).

Looking ahead, new ideas and new challenges continue to emerge. The forthcoming MPC workshop (MPC8) will continue to explore these themes; the question of how MPC might further impact practice will persist, drawing on examples of critical performativity from Katie Collins, Steven Segal,

Bradley Rolfe and Riku Oksman, and reflections from practitioners such as Charles Smith. The workshop will, we hope, continue to maintain an openness to discussions with other PM academics and practitioners, and to provide a forum for debates with other fields in social science. One such debate relates to the place of projects in the public sector, particularly in times of austerity in many developed economies, and this debate connects with research in the field of government and public policy. In this vein, a separate event has been organised in Malmo, Sweden for April 2016 by Mats Fred and Dalia Mukhtar-Landgren, entitled 'The Projectification of Public Administration'.

As to future directions, given the diversity of thought in MPC so far there is little point in speculating too far on what MPC will do next or will become. The movement was formed from and through dialogue, and throughout the last 15 years, new directions and ideas have continually emerged in unpredictable ways from this ongoing critical conversation between workshop participants. We look forward with anticipation to what this conversation will produce in the future.

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