PAPERS

Minima Moralia in Project Management: There Is No Right Life in the Wrong One

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ABSTRACT

"There is no right life in the wrong one," Theodor W. Adorno (1951/2006) concluded in the *Minima Moralia*. In project management, this idea calls for rethinking the contributions and implications of the discipline for the greater context of society and the life of the individual project manager. What does it mean to be a good project manager and to pursue the right life? And what are we doing to the world? In the end, we will have learned that there is no way to be a good project manager without a systemic perspective on the real world.

KEYWORDS: critique; systemicity; individuation; systemic change; systems thinking

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INTRODUCTION

Living by the book does not make us good project managers. There is more to it than knowledge, skills, and certifications. We know this, and senior project managers never cease to stress the importance of experience, but how good are we, really? What are the references for good and right? It may not be enough to refer to project management only, even though project management as a discipline constantly wants to improve. Yet, the primary frame of reference of project management remains management, efficiency, and excellence. The claim of this article, following Theodor W. Adorno, is that this focus is not enough. We need to put project management into a broader context, and a philosophical approach may be the best way to do so. We may ask: What do I bring to the world as a project manager besides simply the project? To what greater context are my deeds contributing? Do I create good or do I contribute to the plundering of the planet and the destruction of humankind's future on earth? What kind of person do I become if I dutifully pursue project management? What do I do to myself if I manage projects? What kinds of behavior do my deeds promote? And is this—whatever it is that we as project managers are contributing to—what we want to see in the world? Project management as a discipline should be constantly under this kind of critical surveillance.

There is no right life in the wrong one. Adorno's (1951/2006) insight from the *Minima Moralia* provides a good starting point for our quest. Adorno puts personal action into a greater context: a context that may violate individually good intentions and that violates any attempt to compensate on the micro scale for what is wrong on the macro scale. There is no right in the wrong. Adorno stands for critical thought; however, we shall go further than critique. We want to explore opportunities to overcome discomfort and the major challenges of industrialized Western society. Yet, addressing those challenges—namely, systemicity and individuation—as shortcomings of the Enlightenment is a philosophical endeavor. Building on this, in the pursuit of solutions and the integration of project management into broader contexts, systems thinking, cybernetics, and sociology can all play major roles. The power of context, generic emergence, and operational closure are three major systems concepts that allow us to look for systemic change and balance. For the individual project manager, however, there is always the chance to be en garde—to keep a watchful eye and take good care of oneself. Reflecting—realizing your position in the world, observing your observations, and critically realizing yourself—seems to be good, ancient advice for successfully pursuing not primarily a better, but rather a right life.

Discomfort

"There is no right life in the wrong one." (1951/2006, aphorism number 18, p.39) This is probably Theodor W. Adorno's most prominent quote, and for many people, it represents the essence of the *Minima Moralia* (1951/2006). It is more a statement, however, than an answer to the question of how we

should lead our lives, and over the years it has become a mantra for addressing discomfort and a warning form luring complacency. In the *Minima Moralia*, Adorno brings forward a collection of reflections on the dark days of Nazi Germany and World War II, as well as on the life of a German exiled in the United States. How shall I lead my life, so he asks, in disruptive times and discomfort?

Adorno's observations on how cunning and effective the (project) management of war and genocide had been are discomforting. His work was indeed an accusation against some of his countrymen: those who tried to hide in their own niche; those who were just doing their jobs, being tiny cogs in the horrifying, big machine; those who tried to do the right thing within their private niches, doing good only for friends and family, but not caring for their neighbors. What we see when we broaden our view and look beyond the boundaries of project management may indeed be discomforting. How can we make sure that we get it right this time? Do we know, or do we only believe that engaging in project management is harmless and providing the right context for the right life?

In hindsight, the *Minima Moralia* marks a middle position between Adorno's two major works—the *Dialectics of Enlightenment* and the *Negative Dialectics*. In 1947, he published the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, along with Max Horkheimer (1947/1977), bringing forward a thesis on the dead end of positivism. In the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, they review the course of reason from the Enlightenment into the Industrial Revolution and the machine age toward the totalitarian structures of capitalism, socialism, and fascism. Left alone, the course of reason does not necessarily lead to a desirable end. On the contrary, it seems necessary to re-induce the idea of responsibility and accountability of the individual based on ethical values. This idea carried forward the Frankfurt School of the 1930s and the critical theory of which Adorno and Horkheimer were major protagonists.

In 1966, Adorno published his second major work, the *Negative Dialectics* (1966/1973). It reads like a reflection on reflection. It is the critique of critique. In this, it follows the path from ontological observation to epistemology; only on the surface is it less empirical. It leads the way from looking at the world in general and at practices to maneuver within it toward observing the practices of observation, sensemaking, and the creation of meaning. In all this, Theodor W. Adorno, as a major antagonist of the critical school, explores the conditions for the possibility of leading one's life well.

You might ask: Why is this relevant in the context of a philosophy of project management? The answer is twofold: First, it addresses a certain discomfort with project management, as a discipline rooted deeply in the rationality of the industrial age and what this brings to the world; second, it addresses equally discomfort with the demands of project management for the project manager and the impact of those demands on the individual. We know there much criticism of project management; it is challenged from the inside as well as the outside. Projects fail, and the life of a project manager is certainly no picnic in the park. We have a certain idea that there must be more to project management than a body of knowledge or various competence baselines. We know that we can rightfully assume that there is a shadow of project management, and that all the effort to create a shining project management practice creates an equally rich shadow (Bértholo, forthcoming). We know that in project management we focus great attention on things we would like to see in the world and we turn a blind eye to those things we would prefer to avoid dealing with. There is no place for lust, love, anger, rage, and wrath in project management. We strive to be rational and we want to deliver superior results. However, the large equation of project management, its disciplinary matrix of models, methods, and instruments does not work out well. And we know this. For the individual project manager, uncertainty prevails. We ask ourselves: How can I manage my project well? What can I do? What am I responsible for? Rather than reinforcing the known and investing in more of the same, we may want to join the critical school and Theodor W. Adorno in exploring the conditions necessary for the possibility of living the right life.

Unlike *Dialectics of Enlightenment* and *Negative Dialectics*, *Minima Moralia* is not a coherent philosophical work. It is a collection of aphorisms, a collection of the most diverse reflections. Adorno varies his perspectives; he ventures various points of view, leading to different observations and insights. The *Minima Moralia* talks in aphorisms and does not lead to any final word; rather, it is food for thought and an invitation for further reflection. Implicitly, it leads from ontology, engaging in the factual world, to epistemology, reflecting on our ability to observe and understand. It is an invitation to engage in sensemaking and the creation of meaning.

On this account, applying the *Minima Moralia* to project management is an invitation for project managers to combine two pursuits into one: to be a good project manager and to pursue the right life. To attempt this requires a certain awareness of the contexts beyond project management as a discipline. What is the broader context we are working in and what does our work do to the individual as a whole person? This question has an ethical dimension as well as a systemic one. Awareness may begin with discomfort, but to be turned into constructive solutions, it needs to be articulated well and is best done in the form of critique.

Critique

Critique operates from a distance. Any critique needs a well-elaborated frame of reference to gain a firm position. This differentiates it from negative criticism and moaning. Discomfort does not carry

us far. Only if critique overcomes negative criticism and operates on the basis of a positive alternative can it result in change. This idea points to Thomas Kuhn's (1962) scientific revolution and his works on paradigm shifts. Discomfort is necessary, but is not sufficient for change. Only if we see an attractive alternative that overcomes, adds to, and incorporates the existing paradigm are we willing to change.

So any discomfort we address with our existing understanding of the paradigms of project management can be fruitful only if we engage in critique based on the exploration and elaboration of attractive alternatives. We should never forget that those attractive alternatives must embrace and build on the benefits that come with the existing paradigm. Change represents an evolution, rather than a revolution.

Any critical position, hence, needs to explore alternative perspectives to gain additional insight, adding to our understanding and leading us toward the path for change. Bernard Scott (2009), in his principles of observation, submits that to any given observation there is always more detail, there is always a bigger picture, and there is always an alternative perspective. This notion may lead the exploration; however, every new position of critique needs to be reasoned, named, and become visible for the discourse to gain a right to play.

What reads as an in-depth examination of the theory of science has very practical implications for a discourse on project management. What is project management? How can we improve it? What is there beyond the body of knowledge and competence baselines? A good example for pushing the boundaries of project management as a discipline is the Cross-Cultural Complex Project Management research project (CCCPM). Over the past seven years, an array of 12 PhD projects addressing the challenges of social complexity in project management has engaged in this kind of critique. Scientifically embedded in cultural studies, 12 distinct perspectives beyond the known project management discourse have been ventured. Critique operates from a distance; hence, all of those research projects had to find and work out their own specific positions of critique within the frame of reference. Joana Bértholo's (forthcoming) work on the shadow of project management, to give just one example, engaged in Jungian psychology. This allowed for the elaboration of a contrasting perspective on the body of knowledge and the various competence baselines; it brought forward profound insights, learned about new limitations, and opened doors for further engagement.

Critique often runs into judgment. Once a new perspective enters the discourse through critique, we need to be careful about debates on judgment. Project managers seem to be safe when it comes down to this challenge, however. In accordance with evaluation theory in project management, the dominant belief and insight is that for proper assessment, we need smart goal setting and to elaborate objectives precisely. We have seen a lot of progress in this field, with active debates on topics such as shareholders versus stakeholders, people versus profit, and humankind versus nature. The discourse on sustainability has especially enriched good project management practices and found its way into the International Project Management Association (IPMA) project management excellence model.

The consideration of judgment, however, goes deeper. Only on the surface are we concerned with goal attainment and the achievement of objectives. When confronted with critique, we need to be careful about categories of judgment. They may be scientific and we may distinguish between right and wrong. They may be moral and we may distinguish between good and bad or evil. It makes a difference which category is applied—even if we choose pragmatism as a category and distinguish between functional and not functional. We may easily run into a dead end, where judgments collide irreversibly because we are not only confronting different opinions within a given category but are clashing on the category level as well. Something may be scientifically right but morally evil and not functional; in such a case, it is necessary to go back and gain a distance and allow for the perspective to see the different categories. If we do not do this, we will fight and argue on the wrong grounds. The evaluation of different categories of judgment is an unsolved philosophical question in itself; knowing about this, however, at least allows us to agree to disagree.

The most pragmatic solution that philosophy itself has brought forward to solve the judgment and values issue is a systemic one. Discourse ethics, by Jürgen Habermas (1983, 1991), allow for self-referential derivation, variation, selection, and retention to the answers to the questions of ethics, judgment, and values. This reflects the approach of Heinz von Foerster in his Cybern-Ethics, which strongly argues that ethics need to be implicit if you do not want to get lost in the debate on morals (Foerster 1985, 1993, 2002; Foerster & Poerksen, 2002). In consequence, discourse ethics demand a continued conversation on judgment and values, allowing for judgment at a given time and demanding the continuous development of values.

Coming back to project management, we may want to suggest one general leading question—namely, how much is enough? The question is not so much an ultimate question as it is a carrier—a guide that allows us to address both sides of the equation and may lead to the idea of sufficiency (Klein & Wong, 2012). It counterbalances the tendency to do more of the same on the side of the existing, dominant paradigm as well as on the side of the critique. How much is enough?

Systemicity

You cannot beat the house. The logic of the context is always stronger than the logic of the intentions, says Josef Stalin. It seems cynical to quote such a man on systemic insights, but his bon mot

reflects very well the insights of the early 20th century. Industrialization and capitalism had created production systems without human dignity. Charlie Chaplin's films *Modern Times* and *The Great Dictator* very cunningly demonstrate the atmosphere that these systems created for the majority of people. There is no right life in the wrong one.

What Theodor W. Adorno (1951/2006) addresses in *Minima Moralia* and the critical school is the positivism of the factual. Rationalism went over the top in pursuing the reduction of complexity. For example, in what we call scientific management, this created the dehumanization of production systems. The scientific perspective went hand in hand with capitalism and was propelled forward by a technocratic education. The early 20th century saw an excess of technological possibilities with little ethical reflection, driving the success story of industrialization further and further into human areas. Agriculture was industrialized, along with housing, education, and healthcare. Even mass murder was industrialized in the killing factories of the Holocaust (Neitzel & Welzer, 2011). Rationalism went over the top, and the critical school addressed the course of a development that started with the Enlightenment and that could neither be trusted nor left alone. The invisible hand is not our friend.

Systems are dreadful; they can kill people. And what is even more disturbing is that we do not address this and do not hold systems accountable. There has been a remarkable debate in the theory of law over the past 60 years on crimes against humanity and genocide (Lattimer & Sands, 2004; Sands, 2003). Approaching the Nuremberg Trials after World War II, there had been competing positions on whether the prosecution should be based on the concept of crimes against humanity or genocide. The notion of crimes against humanity addresses mass murder and accounts for a large group of individuals being victims of the atrocities. In contrast, genocide does not look at the individual but rather at the specific traits of a group, which leads to a more abstract legal concept. This makes it possible to address the crime at an early stage, when the frame of reference for the crime is used as a rationale, with a specific group, people, or religion being targeted. People are victimized simply because they belong to that specific group. The Nuremberg Trials, however, were argued on the basis of crimes against humanity. The systemic category of genocide was avoided because it may have drawn the attention to the history of the World War II allies as well. Yet, what is more appalling is that both concepts only argue on the side of the victims—neither concept overcomes the idea that individuals should be prosecuted and punished. Even today, we do not engage in a concept that allows us to address a specific configuration of a political or a legal system for expectable implications at a very early stage, prior to the unfolding of the events. If we had had the concept of a system as an actor as early as 1935 and with the *Nürnberger Reichsgesetze* that constituted the necessary legislation for victims of the Holocaust, action could have been taken. Nobody has the right to obey, concluded Hannah Arendt (1966), in reporting on the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem. Otto Adolf Eichmann was charged, in the rank of a lieutenant colonel, with the management of the logistics of mass deportation of Jews to the concentration and extermination camps. He defended his own actions, which contributed substantially to the Holocaust as obedience. "I just followed orders," he said. This is, however, all after the fact. What if we had the means to investigate and intervene into the course of events at an early stage?

Systems are wonderful; they allow us to excel. The Porsche 918 Spyder is a lighthouse project of German manufacturing: a total of 918 units were manufactured and sold at an average of close to a million Euros per car. The Porsche 918 Spyder is a carrier of the best of what Porsche engineering, design, and manufacturing are capable of delivering. The car sold out long before the last unit left production. The Porsche site in Stuttgart-Zuffenhausen prides itself as an example of Manufacture 2.0. In an almost business-romantic way, Porsche refers to individual craftsmanship. The entire manufacturing facility for the Porsche 918 Spyder displaced the idea of the good old workshop. Being clean and silent, however, the car neither resembles mass production nor the workshop. Manufacture 2.0 plays with a romantic image just to highlight the idea that this kind of manufacturing and this kind of excellence requires a wide-ranging systemic embedment. Manufacture 2.0 is embedded within the Porsche production system, its logistics, and its production principles. It is embedded within the industrial environment of southern Germany and the technical know-how and skills of generations; it is embedded within the German education system, work legislation, and legal structures. Manufacture 2.0 taps into profound German work ethics and a cultural dedication to excellence. We know this, and Porsche could have brought this forward, but instead the company remarkably displayed the romantic notion of individual craftsmanship. Do systems want to hide, or are we shying away, avoiding acknowledging them?

For the *Minima Moralia* in project management, these examples raise the question of the systemic context. In what kind of context are specific projects embedded? In what kind of rationale is project management as a discipline, embedded? And in what kind of context does the individual project manager do his or her job? Mind the context, choose wisely, and mind your own contribution. You are either part of the problem or part of the solution.

Individuation

The individual carries the burden of Western society. This characterizes what Ulrich Beck (1986) calls the 'risk society'; when they are not addressed as

systemic actors or accountable entities, economic as well as political systems seem to have the inherent tendency to cascade risks to the lowest possible level, which is to shift societal risk onto the individual.

Individualization went over the top. All the responsibilities for individual life and the systemicity of Western societies seem to end up on the level of the individual, and the individual is overburdened (Beck, 1986; Ehrenberg, 1998; Sennett, 1998; Sloterdijk, 2009; Trojanow, 2013). The excess of individualism is running in two ways: resulting in what we may want to call heroic management on the one side and the exhausted self on the other side.

We love heroic managers. Hollywood movies teach us that we can save the world almost single-handedly. The dominant narratives of the West nurture what Johann Wolfgang von Goethe called 'fantasies of what is possible and a frenzy of creativity,' resulting in classical hubris. Ancient Greek drama is full of tragedy when it comes to processing human hubris. Many men in those ancient days set out to venture heroic tasks; none managed without trouble and only a few survived. The Enlightenment promoted the individual and the enlightened culture chose to over identify with successful heroes. A single person can save the world; hence, we expect individuals to do so as a moral obligation. Heroic management is the consequent adaptation of this belief. As long as we turn a blind eye to systemicity, the individual has to save the day. We expect managers to be heroes, to take on leadership, and ultimately to be successful entrepreneurs wherever they go, both inside and outside the project. The focus is on individual skills. The growth of management literature nurtures this perspective and offers more and more ways of pretending to enable individuals to live up to this impossible challenge. Of course, there *are* successful managers. We used to call them A-players. We distinguish them from B-players and we try to get the C-players out of the way. Yet, we learn from systemic practitioners that wherever these ABC-player policies are at work, it is appropriate to suspect that organizations are not adequately caring for the state of the organization and the systemic implications. Good business processes and management systems allow average people to do a proper job, if not to excel. Our Western culture and value system, however, make it all too easy to place blame on the individual and to dispose of the burden. The pitcher goes often to the well, but is broken at last.

The exhausted self cracks. We may call it depression or burnout, but the symptoms remain the same. The individual commits and tries to carry out more than is actually possible. The actual tragedy we find is when individuals do not blame the system and the systemicity of the environment but rather believe the inability to cope exists within us ourselves, naming it an individual deficiency. 'Slow down,' the bystander wants to tell the exhausted individual. However, the more committed and established someone is the farther up the ladder, the further advanced in the career, and the more successful, the more the person tends to carry on, to march on. We can call people lucky if they are not suffering from their next heart attack. In any case, however, they have sacrificed at least and long ago what is worth calling "a good life." And this is certainly another good reason to reconsider Theodor W. Adorno's (1951/2006) *Minima Moralia*. There is no right life in the wrong one. We do not need heroic management. We are all in this together. We are not alone. However, it is about time to address the challenges of systemicity and individuation and look out for systemic solutions that redistribute risk, responsibility, and accountability to the right levels.

To what extent, we may ask, does project management account for the individual? Is project management just another performance-oriented discipline that pushes the negative externalities of its practice over to the other side, which we like to call privacy? Does project management as a discipline facilitate the right life? Does it encourage and promote a good life? Do we ask too much? Is the well-being of the project manager and the people working in the field not the business of the discipline? And if not, then what kind of person do I become if I go along with the field as it stands? What do I do to myself and others if I accept this notion of impersonal business practices? And, last but not least, do I want to be that kind of person?

Integration

The extreme is the absurd. Project management is embedded in the two major challenges of modern society: systemicity and individuation. In a certain way, this challenge reflects the antagonism between the individual and the collective. We may as well call it the antagonism between the self and society or social systems in general. The challenge, however, goes far beyond. It is not so much a question of myself and others. With the terms *systemicity* and *individuation*, we acknowledge, following Adorno, that the specific rational of the Enlightenment went over the top and created realities far from the intended. Hence, we are not only looking at the challenge that comes with the very nature of any antagonism, but we are looking at a violated antagonism at its extreme, entirely out of balance. We also need to acknowledge that nobody seems to be in charge of either systemicity or individuation. Who takes care of the systems of society and their emergent interplay? And who takes care of the individual whose hubris is driving him or her into exhaustion?

In any case, we could know a lot about systems, but we hesitate to further research and shy away from the implications. Systems thinking and cybernetics provide models, methodologies, and tools allowing for deeper insight into systemicity, complexity, and their implications, both in general as well as for management (Jackson, 2000; 2002).

Out of the variety of systemic models and concepts, three are highlighted to illustrate these possible approaches: the power of context, generic emergence, and operational closure.

The power of context guides our view toward the systemic embedding of any observable entity. The context facilitates specific activities and developments and hinders others. By examining the context of a system, we can learn much about the conditions for any possibility for the system in focus. Within a given frame, specific developments are possible and others are not. Peter Senge (1990) cunningly brought this notion forward in his book, *The Fifth Discipline*, in which he draws a cascade of structure, behavior, and results. The structure of an organization or of a professional discipline determines the behavior of the actors. Determination in this context does not mean predictability of the single action; however, it determines the overall course of action and the behavioral attractor for each individual contribution. Behavior, in consequence, determines results. If, for instance, an educational system only rewards individual performance, then individuals will behave accordingly and try to display individual performance. Good teamwork will not be a likely result; in contrast, individualism will be enforced and, with it, pseudo-heroic behavior.

Generic emergence seems to be the most underestimated systems concept. The interplay of the individuals will inevitably result in the emergence of social systems, being distinct entities in their own right. Regulations, institutions, and norms will form. More than acknowledging that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, we have to recognize that the whole determines the additional behavior of its parts. A social system emerges from individual behavior and from the interplay of the actors; yet, once emerged and established, the social system will, in an autopoetic way, as Niklas Luhmann (1984) puts it, regulate and determine the behavior of individuals in such a way that the system will be reproduced over and over again. It does not allow for variation and produces more of the same. As long as we neglect the generic emergence of social systems, we will be blind to systems as actors. We will not be able to see, as in the case of the Holocaust, that just by following orders individuals can create evil in the most banal way. Looking at social systems, we know that organizations and corporations can be addressed systematically as actors, but to what extent does that account for projects as well? Is a project an emergent social system in its own right?

Operational closure sits at the very heart of systems concepts (Beer, 1979, 1982; Luhmann, 1984) and it creates the boundary between the system and its environment. However, there is a generic perspective carried with the notion of operational closure. The boundary of a system is not made from stone. It is volatile. It is malleable. Many activities are necessary to maintain the system and the boundary between the system and its environment. So it is the selected interaction between the parts that create the system and its boundary by only interplaying with the very elements of the system. Beyond that, there is no link to the environment. The only link to the environment can be described as structural coupling (Luhmann, 2000), but now we are back to the power of context. Two systems are environment and context for each other. One system limits the other. One system determines and facilitates the further development of a specific system. Project management is embedded in modern society and is an element of it; it is determined by modern society and also contributes to it. So the question is: How does it change, or is change possible at all?

Systemic change is possible, although the overall nature of systems of any kind—and consequently, social systems as well—are conservative by nature. In an autopoetic way, systems safeguard their further existence and are averse to change but this is only one part of the story. Systems tend to be conservative and ultra-stable. On the other hand, they are sensitive to the change of initial conditions. This is what we know from chaos theory and the famous butterfly effect (Lorenz, 1963). Systems theory comes with the threefold concept of evolution, which includes variation, selection, and retention. To a larger extent, evolution makes sure that variations, and especially deviations, are discharged and only the favorable elements are selected—only favorable behavior will be rewarded, promoted, and kept. To a large extent, this idea stresses that change can only come from within. Variations of activities and the behavior of the elements produce the opportunity for change. In a very surprising way, minimal variations cause large-scale change. If we want change, we certainly want to keep an eye on those minimal variations and their implications; however, as long as we turn a blind eye on systemicity, then guided change is beyond reach. What is worse—change happens incidentally and is neither controlled nor contained.

What we can hope for is balance. Before we engage in the heroic idea of change, which again tends to be just a reaffirmation of the hubris of modern society, we may want to have a look at balance. Rationality and individualism are neither good nor bad, neither right nor wrong by nature. Only if we get too much or too little of something, are we exposed to challenging problems. Containing excess and deficiency points toward balance and asks for ways to realize it. Cybernetics, especially in the works of Stafford Beer, brought forward the idea of homeostasis, which addresses active balance on the basis of negative feedback (Beer, 1979, 1982; Espejo & Harnden, 1989). Beer argues that any system fit for viability, as he calls it, needs to be in touch with itself and must evaluate the implications of the results it produces for itself. If systems are not capable of self-reflection, then they are not viable. We have examples from biology.

Yeast, for example, in the fermentation process of turning sugar into alcohol, cannot control its excess and will eventually die of the alcohol it produced itself. The system that is out of balance will die; however, we do not necessarily need to consult cybernetics to access knowledge about balance. The wisdom of tai chi philosophy and the balance between yin and yang bring forward similar notions. An excess of yin or an excess of yang will be fatal for any living body. If the two conflicting energies are in balance, that is what we call health (Klein & Wong, 2012). Balance, however, is only the first insight of tai chi; the second is sufficiency. There should be sufficient and not excessive yin or yang. Enough is enough. So, how much rationality and how much individualism are sufficient? We immediately see that this brings us back to questions of evaluation and values. We are back with Theodor W. Adorno and the *Minima Moralia*. What is a good life? What is the right life?

Adorno's point, however, is critique. Systems approaches and cybernetics facilitate an understanding that goes beyond discomfort and critique. They facilitate an understanding of modern society, social systems, and culture that enables a thorough exploration of the possibilities for change. In this context, we meet project management as a paradigmatic reference for a community of practice. Project management is a manmade, scientific, and professional discipline; hence, it can be changed accordingly; it can be reviewed in the light of performance and unintended implications; and it can be changed and improved by taking into account the bigger picture of society and individual well-being.

Reflection

Gnóthi seautón—know thyself—read the inscription on the entrance of the oracle temple in Delphi. This recommendation greeted those who came to the oracle seeking advice when challenged by the problems in their lives. Be in touch with yourself and you will know the answer. Self-recognition, self-awareness, and self-assurance may not be sufficient to find a solution, but they are necessary. This brings us back to Stafford Beer's homeostasis and cybernetics. The prefix—*self*—in *self-recognition*, *self-awareness*, and *self-assurance* indicates one of the essential feedback loops we find in cybernetics. The self is relating to itself. This is a feedback loop; this lies at the heart of any reflection. We can go even further by not restricting the self to the conscious mind, but acknowledging that any emerging entity, any living system, any conscious mind, any social system needs a notion of self to exist, and hence has the possibility to relate to its own self (Klein, 2012). This holds for the individual as well as for the collective, for the social system as well as for the project.

Observe your observation! This is what cybernetics brings forward in its second order, observing observations (Foerster, 1985, 1993, 2002; Watzlawick, 1984). Self-observation is the most critical activity any emergent entity can conduct. It allows us to evaluate whether anything is out of balance or if things are still just fine. Second-order cybernetics now invites evaluation and variation. A system can evaluate what it can observe and vary its observations. This brings us back to Scott's (2009) principles of observation. There is always a bigger picture, there is always more detail, and there is always an alternative perspective. If I observe differently, I will see different things and I can evaluate differently. I can act accordingly, and I can change. This is what people mean when they ask you to think outside the box. It is an invitation to choose a different perspective, to see things differently, and to arrive at different judgments and conclusions (Beyes, 2003). It is an invitation to multidisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity—an invitation to not do more of the same. We can push it even further and suggest not just thinking outside the box, but thinking without a box at all. We may follow the invitation of transdisciplinary approaches to leave behind the idea of a discipline and allow, for example, for emotions and intuition. We probably do not need to go as far as thinking without a box, however, acknowledging that the possibility to choose different perspectives comes with an obligation: the obligation to take on the responsibility for the perspectives we choose to make sense and create meaning of and within the world (Bredillet, 2010; Klein, Biesenthal, & Dehlin, 2015). The extreme is the absurd and sticking to only one perspective is certainly extreme. In the pursuit of the right life, we should look at least twice and from different angles.

All problems result from things that are not thought through. This statement, attributed to Albert Einstein, carries a lot of systemic wisdom. Changing perspectives allows for a richer picture of the world. Impact evaluation allows for responsible action. It would be irresponsible to reduce project management to the iron triangle of cost, time, and quality. We know there is more to project management than that but, even in its current state, operational closure tends to promote more of the same. Challenged by complexity, project management teaches us that we find the major sources for complexity beyond the technical realm in the political and cultural domain. Noel Tichy's (1983) TPC balance combines a technological (T), a political (P), and a cultural (C) perspective and suggests that by focusing on the technological aspects of organizations or, in our case of projects, we only see one-third of the world and remain blind to the other two-thirds of social complexity. By not watching, by not observing, and by not evaluating the impacts of political and cultural micro and macro structures, we allow project management to walk almost blindly. Even the CCCPM research project—bold as it may be—is just a humble beginning that is trying to change project management by engaging in alternative perspectives to create a richer picture. It is a beginning, which allows us to

address systemicity and individuation as challenges to modern society as well as to recognize their impact on project management and the work and lives of project managers. Finally, there is one question whose enlightening power we cannot overestimate—it is an evaluation question that, despite its simple character, allows us to evaluate the right life in its context. We all will benefit from asking it and answering it sincerely. It is a humble question we should all take very seriously: How are you?

Here, we may want to start all over again, beginning with discomfort and critique and allowing for reflection rather than being subjected to a discipline, a system, or project management, for that matter. In reference to Adorno, project management should contribute to improving the world and elevating the well-being of those involved, and should not only be addressed as an end but also all along the way. If project management does not live up to this ethical imperative, it will be shattered and will need to be rebuilt from scratch.

Conclusion

A philosophical perspective on project management is long overdue. Philosophy provides a platform for reflection and it immediately shows, challenges, and critiques the dominant points of references of project management: engineering, economics, and management sciences. Turning to Adorno and the Frankfurt School allows us to embark on the critique of an unfinished Enlightenment that never learned to reflect upon its own reflections and instead pushed rationalism and the glorification of the individual well over the top into malign extremes.

Adorno addresses our responsibility for what is, what has become, and what we contribute to with our deeds. This is not reduced to the obvious contribution to the bad things we see in the world; rather it also addresses our unintended and implicit contributions to the banality of evil. Adorno introduces a much broader perspective of accountability, which may be called individual, and eventually collective, responsibility for systemic emergence. It is an ethical obligation for systemic integrity.

Individuation and systemicity reveal the blind spots of our time giving the context for project management as we know it. The heroic manager in his hubris is exposed as a self-exploiting individual driven into exhaustion, and the invisible hand fails to be trustworthy. Through systems thinking and cybernetics, we learn to see the implications of our thinking and doing. We see the threats and opportunities of project management as a discipline.

Following Adorno, we may say that there is no right project management in the wrong project management. Philosophy enables us to reflect, whereas systems thinking and cybernetics allow us to act, to explore the conditions for the possibility of a desirable future, and to change.

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