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Corporate Strategy, Organizations, and Subjectivity: A Critique

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Abstract

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This paper attempts to develop a new approach to the study of corporate strategy. It draws on the methodology of Michel Foucault to suggest that corporate strategy can be seen as a discourse which has its own specific conditions of possibility. These are traced historically to various exercises of power within the conduct of war and the development of business organizations. Strategy is located as an emergent set of practices which has distinctive power effects on organizations and subjectivity. Analyses of strategy cannot be reduced either to rationalist accounts of markets and environments nor interpretive understandings of actors' frames of reference. The emergence and reproduction of 'strategy' as an essential element in managerial discourse needs to be located in specific changes in organizations and managerial subjectivity, because it is a mechanism of power that transforms individuals into particular kinds of subjects who secure a sense of well-being through participation in strategic practices. Conflict over 'strategy' is therefore more than just a question of career politics and market competition. It touches on the very sense of what it is to be human as well as having effects that readily legitimize prevailing relations of inequality and privilege in contemporary organizations and institutions.

Introduction

The concept of corporate strategy has a central place today in the way in which managers think about themselves and their organizations. According to the orthodoxy propounded in business schools and embraced by consultants, stock market analysts, financial institutions and the media, every organization must have a strategy, because otherwise it is without direction in an increasingly turbulent economic, and politically charged, environment. To date, much of the academic literature (e.g. Ansoff 1965; Hofer and Schendel 1978; Porter 1980, 1985) has tended to generate and/or support this orthodoxy in which strategy is perceived as a set of 'rational' techniques for managing complex businesses in a changing environment. There are others (e.g. Pettigrew 1985, 1985a, 1985b, 1986, 1987, 1988; Mintzberg 1978; Mintzberg and Waters 1982, 1985; Mintzberg and McHugh 1985), however, who have begun to challenge this orthodoxy by questioning the extent to which strategy actually embodies rational processes. They give attention to the socially constructed and thereby political character of strategic processes and the inability

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of rational models to account for the uncertain speed and direction of organizational change.

In this paper, we develop a framework for the critical analysis of corporate strategy which is distinctive from both of these approaches. This involves focusing upon corporate strategy as a set of discourses and practices which transform managers and employees alike into subjects who secure their sense of purpose and reality by formulating, evaluating and conducting strategy. Thus our central concern is the emergence, development and reproduction of the discourse of strategy *per se*. This requires an investigation of the conditions under which strategic discourse becomes both 'thinkable' and 'practical'. In terms of distinct organizations and their interrelations, it entails an examination of the conditions under which the 'practicality' of the discourse becomes transformed into a disciplinary force. In turn, this involves an analysis of subjectivity — an attempt to understand how the discourse of strategy becomes part of the identity of managers and workers.

The paper is divided into three parts. In the first part, we elaborate the concept of discourse and the implications this has for the study of strategy. In particular we draw attention to those discursive practices which historically can be seen as conditions for the possible formation of discourses on strategy. In our view, there is a tendency in business schools and amongst practitioners to treat the discourse of corporate strategy as a 'natural' rather than problematic feature of organization life. Our way of exploring the problematic character of strategy is to examine the not necessarily continuous history of its discursive formation. In the second part of the paper, we examine strategic discourse as a technology or mechanism of power that has certain truth effects. Here our concern is not to investigate the 'truth' of strategy so much as the consequences of its being defined as true. In particular, we focus on the way in which individuals are transformed into subjects whose sense of meaning and reality becomes tied to their participation in the discourse and practice of strategy. In this sense, strategy may be understood as a discourse that produces subjective self-discipline. In the third and final section, we attempt to show how this approach is distinctive from the critical accounts developed by processual theorists such as Pettigrew and Mintzberg. Throughout the paper we also draw attention to a number of empirical issues that discourse analysis would seek to investigate further.

Discourse, Genealogy and Strategy

In this first section of the paper we concentrate on historicizing the discourse and practice of strategy. In this regard, we follow Giddens (1979) in seeking to avoid treating the present as if it were the natural order of things or an inevitable consequence of what went before. This involves 'breaking free from the straightjacket of thinking only in terms of the type of society we know in the here and now' (Giddens 1984: 26). It

also demands that we examine history not as a sequence in a chain of causes and effects but as more or less discrete events which, in aggregation, create a new discursive formation. The analysis is not then concerned to reproduce the *past*; rather, it is focused on rendering the *present* more intelligible.

In the first part of this section, we discuss the concept of discourse and seek to clarify its contribution to the understanding of social relations. In the second part, we introduce the concept of 'genealogy' as a way of understanding discourses as historically constituted phenomena. In the third part, we sketch out a preliminary 'genealogy' of the discourse of strategy.

The Concept of Discourse

The concept of discourse is most closely associated with the writings of Foucault. In Foucault's work, it takes on a variety of meanings and it is not our intention to discuss this in detail or legislate for a 'correct' account of discourse. In general terms, we conceive of a discourse as a set of ideas and practices which condition our ways of relating to, and acting upon, particular phenomena. Because a discourse is always embedded in social practice, it cannot be *reduced* to its ideational content any more than be seen as devoid of theory. For example, in Foucault's analysis of madness or illness or criminality, he emphasizes that these categories are constructed in particular social contexts. Once they are recognizable as such, i.e. when subjects come to understand the world in these terms, then social practices develop which reproduce this perception as 'truth'. This occurs not least as a result of a combination of the power-knowledge relations represented by political activists and 'experts' generating a convincing discourse that entails physically segregating the mad and the insane from 'normal' society through a system of institutional incarceration. Such an exercise of power clearly institutionalizes the knowledge that sustains and reproduces these dividing practices and the 'truth' of the distinction between the subjectivity of normality and insanity. The discourse, in this sense, produces its own truth effects through elaborating a view of the world in which problems are defined that the discourse can 'solve'. A discourse is not then simply a 'way of seeing'; it is always embedded in social practices which reproduce that way of seeing as the 'truth' of the discourse. It is for this reason that Foucault emphasizes the inseparability of power and knowledge. Knowledge is always intricately bound up with technologies of power which reproduce particular discursive practices.

It is important to note here that we are not reproducing a functionalist argument in which norms and values cohere to create a functionally reproducing system. In modern societies there are a plurality of discourses which actors can draw upon. Foucault emphasizes that the power effects of discourses are always subject to resistance — a further factor

which generates the dynamism of a discourse. In general terms, social order is contingently accomplished through the skilled actions of subjects who coordinate their relationships with others through various tactics which establish or confirm the grounds of the communicative exchange (the subject of ethnomethodology; see Heritage 1987). Thus, the power effects of discourses have to be reproduced. As Giddens emphasizes, it is axiomatic that the actor can 'do otherwise'; thus discourse cannot be understood as oppressive or as omnipotent. Discourses change as actors adapt and change the conditions of the process of reproduction. If this were not the case, we could not talk about the emergence of new discourses, by which we mean the emergence of qualitatively new ways of 'accomplishing' social relations. On the other hand, discourses are at one level 'internal' to the subject, providing the basis on which subjectivity itself is constructed. Thus if we want to understand subjects and social relations we need to understand the discourses within which they routinely embed their own self-understandings.

In summary, we use the term discourse as shorthand for a whole set of power/knowledge relations which are written, spoken, communicated and embedded in social practices. These relations have power and truth effects and it is the consequences that follow which are a major concern of a discourse analysis. However, these effects are not to be understood as the inevitable result of the dominance of a particular set of values and norms but as the contingently produced outcome of the actions of subjects who could 'do otherwise'.

The Concept of Genealogy

It follows from the previous argument that when using this approach, a key task is to analyze the diverse set of conditions that make it possible, though not inevitable, that a particular discourse is constituted and developed. This is what we mean by 'genealogy'. This is not a matter of looking for an origin since no single source can be traced from which the progress of a particular discourse can be plotted. Rather the analysis involves a search for discrete discourses and practices that can be seen as having been moulded and reconstituted into a new discursive formation. Genealogical analysis, in this sense, is an attempt to show that particular discourses are historically constituted by specific processes in which existing discourses are changed and adapted into a qualitatively different set of practices. Genealogical analysis is neither a 'history of ideas' nor a 'history' per se. Instead, it seeks to show how social relations of power and knowledge are reconstituted to create new ways of seeing and acting. It is also concerned to 'record the singularity of surface events' (Burrell 1988: 229).

Corporate Strategy

In our view, it is possible to identify a discourse of strategy that has a specific relation to corporate business. This discourse has its own historical conditions of possibility; it embodies particular ways of seeing organizations, subjects and societies. It is embedded in particular sets of social relations. It has particular truth effects which are disciplinary on subjects and organizations. It is reproduced in specific sets of power-knowledge relations and it meets resistances at particular points. In the remainder of this paper we seek to elaborate these aspects, beginning firstly with an attempt to examine the historically specific conditions of the emergence of the discourse of strategy.

The fascination of the business community with the concept of strategy is comparatively new. Bracker states that:

‘The first modern writers to relate the concept of strategy to business were von Neumann and Morgenstern (1947) with their theory of games.’ (Bracker 1980: 219)

This highlights an interesting paradox. If strategy is so important, how did business manage to survive so long without ‘consciously’ having a concept of strategy? The answer to this question is particularly important for us, for although strategy entered business organizations partly in response to certain conditions, as will be demonstrated below, it is the case that the discourse also *constitutes the problems for which it claims to be a solution*.

Failing to acknowledge the mutually constitutive character of strategy and the problems it is deemed to resolve, several authors (e.g. Chandler 1962, 1977; Williamson 1975) simply impute strategic intent to the business world as if it existed prior to practitioners having subscribed explicitly to the discipline of strategy. This is to take on the intellectual role of the ‘legislator’ as Bauman (1988) describes it, i.e. to assume that the intellectual can tell people what they ‘really’ meant or what they were ‘really’ doing, distinct from actors’ own discursive understanding of their actions. Within such a paradigm, practitioners’ discourse is often treated as a set of false representations of an underlying reality which conceal from actors their ‘true’ interests or intentions. This is mistaken because, as Hindess (1986) has argued, ‘interests’ and ‘intentions’ cannot be identified separately from the discourses in which they are expressed (see also Hindess 1987 for an elaboration of this argument). Subjects do not exist ‘prior’ to their implication in discourse. It is for this reason that the notion of the subject and subjectivity must not be conflated with, or seen as a substitute for, the concept of the individual. Rather, subjects are constituted as certain categories of actors/individuals through discursive practices. For these reasons, we cannot accept the legitimacy of imputing strategic intent to business practitioners where the concept of strategy has not yet secured a discursive foothold. This is not, of course, to deny practitioners intentions which are then readily rationalized as strategies.

Nevertheless, such rationalizations and the accounts of academics that legitimize them can be seen as an important element of the discourse itself and part of how it is made to seem natural and inevitable. By contrast with these legitimating accounts which tend to rewrite history in terms of the present, discourse analysis seeks to rewrite the present in terms of history.

It is concerned, then, with the conditions that rendered it possible for this historically specific discourse of corporate strategy to emerge and transform current practices in organizations. This necessitates looking particularly at the institutional setting in which the discourse first became identifiable. Once we do this, it is immediately apparent that until very recently the drive towards the articulation, expansion and utilization of corporate strategy came from the U.S.A. Two aspects of this can be separated for heuristic purposes — first that of the emergence of managerial discourse in general in the U.S.A. and second, the changing nature of corporations in the U.S.A. in the post-1945 period.

With regard to the former, the U.S.A. had been the source of most of the innovative thinking on the nature of the role of management and organizations since Weber. From the late 19th century, there was a particular symbiosis of theoretical and experiential learning about management and organizations which had been embodied in the emerging business school culture of U.S. universities. Unlike in Europe, where the ethos of universities was distinctly separated from that of industry and the world of work (see, for example, Wiener's 1985 discussion of English Culture), in the U.S.A., major industrialists such as Carnegie, Mellon, Sloan and others endowed and supported institutions at the highest status level in the U.S. university system with the express purpose of encouraging research and training in the field of business. Whilst it is the case that various managerial techniques and ideas (such as the Bedaux system and Fayol's prescriptions for management) were developed in Europe, these were only gradually and intermittently taken up in practice by European managements and lacked any institutional base in universities to compare with the U.S.A. (see Littler 1982). Around the time of the First World War, Taylorism was branching out into the whole sphere of production management and workforce planning and establishing a following amongst policy-makers, managers and academics in the U.S. Partly as a critical response to the economism of Taylorism, industrial psychology was developing at Harvard under the leadership of Mayo and gaining widespread adherents. Thus by the late 1930s, there already existed in the U.S.A. a powerful managerial discourse embodied in a great many material practices and professional groups, which was largely absent from the European context.

However, it is important to note that these discourses were predominantly *intra*-organizational. They were concerned with control of production within the organization. The market location of the organization, its external environment, and various technologies of intervention (e.g. marketing, mass consumer advertising) which are the key interrelated

features of corporate strategy were not yet constituted sufficiently clearly to become objects of theoretical or managerial discourse.

The reasons for this are complex. One feature relates to the economic discourses through which markets were understood at this time. The dominance of the free market philosophy meant that management treated the central issue as getting the factors of production right within the organization. Since the market operated by a hidden hand, there was little point in trying to anticipate it, though the growth of advertising was indicating an interest in at least 'bending' the hidden hand slightly. Furthermore, the ideology of entrepreneurialism with its emphasis on inspirational and charismatic qualities tended to see the role of the leader in almost mystical terms as penetrative of this essentially opaque set of processes. On the other hand, the split in the market at this time between the huge conglomerates of Rockefeller, Morgan, Carnegie, etc. and the many small businesses which existed, complicated the picture. The largest companies appeared capable of controlling the market forces whereas the smaller companies were in no position to do more than respond to its forces. The notion of planning to segment the market and to differentiate products for specific 'types' of consumers had not yet developed. Mass production was the order of the day for the largest companies, whilst, in order to survive, small companies had to develop very specialist niches.

From these brief considerations, then, it can be seen that managerial discourse as developed in the U.S.A. in the pre-1945 period had not yet generated a clear space in which the ideas which were to form the central elements of the discourse of corporate strategy (i.e. the planned relationship between the market and the internal characteristics of the organization) could be developed. Although there were discourses around notions of internal control and monitoring, these were only tangentially related to the analysis of the external environment.

Nevertheless, there were changes occurring which in conjunction with concepts of internal order and control began to give rise to this distinctive emphasis on the planned relationship between markets and organizations that characterizes the discourse of strategy. We would wish to draw attention to three features of this process: the restructuring of ownership relations, the changing conditions of markets and new developments in the structure and management of organizations.

First, there was the gradual restructuring of ownership relations and the institutional separation of ownership from direct managerial control that began to occur in the inter-war period in the U.S.A. This created a distance between the owners of the corporation and its managers. How were owners to receive information about the performance of the corporation? On what basis were owners to make decisions about their investments in the corporation? This distance has been mediated in many ways e.g. the establishment of auditing and accounting regulations, the development of investment advisory services, etc. In our view, what is also crucial here is that the corporation has to articulate its objectives in a

systematic way to this external audience, in a way which did not occur when the company was owned and managed by the same small group of people. In this sense, then, a discursive space has opened up — the corporation has to explain what it is doing, and why it is doing it. It is this discursive space that is 'colonized' by corporate strategy.

Second, there were changes in international market conditions after World War II which elevated the U.S.A. to a stewardship role in overseeing the world economy. American multi-national corporations increasingly faced control problems as a result of their mass production systems being scattered worldwide. Such expansion involved U.S. corporations not only with problems in controlling divisions and relations at the point of production, but also in managing culturally diverse markets. In terms of market sizes and competition, there was a more complex situation for the U.S.A. than there had been internally. As European and Japanese companies, with the help of their respective governments, began to develop in this new environment, competition became more intense and was increasingly fuelled by technological innovation, price and quality competition. At the same time as managers were faced with bridging the distance between themselves and the owners, they were also faced with explaining how the company was going to succeed in these more complex competitive conditions.

Finally, these processes of change were making it more difficult to operate with old models of organization structure in which simple hierarchies ran from the top to the bottom of the organization. Multi-plant corporations, the geographical dispersion of multinationals, product differentiation, and the transformation of production and communications through dramatic technological innovations made a functional form of organization structure both more difficult and less necessary to sustain. In particular, multi-divisional forms of organization where each plant became a profit centre with its own financial budget and subject to competitive market forces as if independent of its parent was a method of enforcing control over the separate parts of an oligopoly or monopoly.

Why was this new discursive space filled to a significant degree by the discourse of strategy? Here, we have to be careful to avoid assuming that this was an inevitable outcome of the period. Instead, we have to examine its gradual development, reproduction and then self-propelling domination of the wider field of management discourse.

It is relevant at this point to highlight the much earlier articulation and intervention of strategic discourse in the military arena. Although notions of strategy had been central to military discourse from the late 18th century (see Knights and Morgan 1990 for a more extended discussion of this issue), it was only during the inter-war years that advances in communications technology facilitated the use of military information and surveillance techniques as strategic devices which could break down temporal and spatial distances (see Dandeker 1989). This development of strategy within the military and in particular its facilitating a temporal-spatial linkage between internal organizational features and the potential

of the external environment provided an appropriate model for a private industry facing the pressures of international as well as local competition. The prestige of the military deriving from victory over Germany and Japan also added weight to the view that strategy was a central feature of this success. This prestige was further reflected and reproduced in the role of military leaders in public affairs in the post-war period — MacArthur in Japan and Korea, De Gaulle in France, Eisenhower in the U.S.A.

Crucial to the development of the discourse, however, has been the role of academics, such as Ansoff (1965) who began to articulate the need for corporate strategy. The idea that market forces could be controlled through planning mechanisms was in many ways a logical development of the idea that people can be controlled and monitored. In the same way that the 19th century witnessed the gradual installation of systems of control *inside* organizations, so the post-1945 era saw the emergence of discourse concerned with controlling what was *outside* the organization.

This discourse developed in a variety of sites which we are only briefly able to touch on in the confines of this paper. In the academic sphere, this process generates a set of experts — people who research strategy, who elaborate its ‘inner meaning’, who wrestle with its problematics, who expand its horizons beyond market-based organizations to state and non-profit organizations.

It is crucial that the discourse becomes part of the everyday reality of organizations. At one level, the academics directly influence those who seek credentials either at undergraduate or at post-experience level. They set the agenda in which the tools and techniques of strategic management are of central importance. Students requiring credentials incorporate this as the way of looking at organizations and their relationship to the environment, so that when they go into organizations they seek to ‘apply’ these techniques.

Specialist practitioners in the field of strategy also emerge. Outside specific organizations, there are the management consultants and advisors whose job it is to provide ‘strategic analyses’ for the myriad of companies and other organizations lacking ‘strategic skills’. Their audience consists not just of the people within the organization where they operate as consultants but also the wider business community, in particular those who own, or through the management of institutional investment funds, control the ownership of private companies. Within organizations, there are those managers or administrators who, learning from training or educational courses, business literature or from their experience of working with the consultants in-house, take on the mantle of strategists and work from the inside to implement the discourse; their audience is also partly inside the organization, those who are subjected to the power effects of strategy, and partly outside the organization — existing and potential owners of the company, financial commentators and competitors.

Since the 1950s, then, more and more people have become involved in constituting the discourse of strategy. It is important to note that there is no one *single* source of this discourse, nor does its unity imply agreement over particular issues. What the discourse of corporate strategy does is to constitute a field of knowledge and power which defines what the 'real problems' are within organizations and what are the parameters of the 'real solutions' to them. Clearly within this framework, there is room for plenty of disagreement. Different experts are keen to present their own version of what are to be defined as problems and this will often bear a close relationship to the kinds of strategic solutions they offer for any particular organization. What is not questioned within the discourse is the relevance and necessity of perceiving strategy as the most appropriate means of resolving problems.

There is no suggestion that this is a mode of reasoning about organizations unique to a historically specific period. It is simply the application of new techniques to prevailing discursive reasoning within and around organizations. Strategy is also a technology of power that creates as much as it responds to the problems it professes to resolve. Furthermore, strategists do not usually reflect upon the 'truth' and disciplinary effects of their own discourse. Nevertheless, strategic discourse engages individuals in practices through which they discover the very 'truth' of what they are — viz. a 'strategic actor'. In short, the truth effect of the mechanisms of power of the discourse is to define for the individual what it is to be human — to constitute or re-constitute their subjectivity.

So powerful are these truth effects that it is exceedingly difficult for us to disengage ourselves from such a view. Can there be any other way of looking at organizations than one which derives from the discourse of corporate strategy? The transmutation of personnel management into human resources strategy or the increased interest of accounting in strategy (see the recent special issue of *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 1990) are merely two of the more recent explicit manifestations of the intrusion of this discourse into other areas of management, whilst current reforms in the National Health Service in the U.K. and the privatization of nationalized corporations have all drawn on the discourse of strategy to legitimize themselves.

However, if we take a rather more long-term view, we can see that there are alternatives to strategic discourse. For example, it is clear that there are groups both within management and in the wider population of the organization who will reject the discourse of strategy *per se*. Certain managers may cling to some sort of entrepreneurial ideology in which conformity to the 'top down' demands of a strategic plan are anathema. Others may reject the credentialist ideology of strategy in favour of the emphasis on experience or instinct. Still other managers may cling to a notion of the traditional way of doing things which does not need to be sanctified by 'strategy'. Within the lower ranks of an organization, we are likely to encounter mass indifference or even cynicism about the way in which the discourse of strategy is used by management.

From another perspective, it is clear that there have been significant cultural differences in the rate of take-up of strategic discourse. Clearly its spread across the world in the 1960s and 1970s is related to the dominant position of America as a market for business literature and as the home base of the largest multinationals which have been strongly influenced by the pro-active managerialism of the new breed of MBA's. The trend is reinforced by the tendency, particularly of Europeans, to associate American dominance with economic efficiency and rational scientific models of management. Nevertheless, there has been a considerable time-lag between the U.S.A. and the European and Asian countries.

It is important that we examine these alternatives because, in effect, they constitute processes of resistance. Within the discourse of strategy, they are seen as 'irrational' responses to an overwhelming logic. However, if our theory similarly devalues these alternatives, then we are doing nothing more than accepting the labels that the discourse provides for us. Since these labels are historically constituted, we are justified in comparing them to other labels that come from different perspectives. From other points of view, why should we accept the technologies of power embodied in strategic discourse as the only legitimate means of understanding organizations?

Conventional analyses of corporate strategy seek to account for these alternatives within the parameters of the discourse. Thus they become 'cultural lags', 'irrational hangovers' which will gradually, but inexorably, be undermined by the spread of rational management techniques. Opposition or alternative perspectives are either negated by denying them legitimacy or incorporated by considering deviance as remediable. Genealogical analysis points to the need to examine these developments not as the logical outcome of an inevitable and rationalizing process but as the concrete accomplishment of actors in specific contexts which have as their consequence the negation of other perspectives. The triumph of corporate strategy cannot be assumed to be a natural outcome of an obviously superior set of techniques. Rather we need to examine in specific organizational contexts how it becomes dominant. How is it, for example, that banks have moved from a traditional view of management and markets towards a strategic approach to their future? How is it that corporate strategy is now seen as relevant to the health service and other public services? This is not the outcome of some neutral unfolding of the 'logic of history' but the 'skilled accomplishment' of discursive practices by particular subjects. If theorists of corporate strategy reproduce the 'naturalness' of their object of study, they fail to see real struggles that are continuing to take place over the basis on which organizations should develop. Genealogical analysis tries to break that 'naturalness' and open up again the subterranean 'irrationalities' which the discourse has tried to overcome.

In summary, then, we would argue that the genealogical analysis of corporate strategy generates the following issues for empirical research:

- The analysis of the conditions through which the discourse of strategy became possible, focusing particularly on changes in ownership and markets in the post-war years.
- The analysis of its reproduction within academic, organizational and interorganizational settings by the application of knowledge and technologies of power to social relations. In particular, the focus here is on the development of expert knowledges which are drawn upon in the exercise of power by particular groups who seek to define the problems and solutions for organizations.
- The analysis of the bases of resistance to the reproduction of the discourse, its knowledges and its technologies of power. How is it that alternative ways of seeing organizations are negated, undermined and destroyed by corporate strategy discourse?

While making no claim to provide a comprehensive analysis of corporate strategy, we have problematized the concept in a way which has not yet occurred in traditional business school approaches to this field of study. In the next section, we take this further by spelling out some of the ways in which strategic discourse ‘works’ now that it is increasingly dominant in the current social context.

The Power Effects of Strategic Discourse

In the previous section, we considered how strategic discourse has become dominant over the last thirty years in business schools and organizations. We emphasized that this was not inevitable, but the result of the accomplishment of actors committed to expanding and reproducing their own sphere of power and knowledge. In our view, this process has a number of power effects. On the one hand, it negates and devalues alternative approaches to organizations. In this sense, it is a constraint that ‘disables’ particular actors. On the other hand, it ‘empowers’ other actors. For those who accept the logic of the discourse, it provides them with a subjective identity that is expanded, through participation in its reproduction. In combination, we can talk of the discourse of corporate strategy as constitutive of new social relations. We can therefore point towards a social theory of corporate strategy which is concerned with analyzing these power effects and in so doing opening up again alternatives which are currently being shut down.

In the rest of this section, we wish to consider the following power effects of corporate strategy discourse, in particular;

- (a) It provides managers with a rationalization of their successes and failures;
- (b) It sustains and enhances the prerogatives of management and negates alternative perspectives on organizations;
- (c) It generates a sense of personal and organizational security for managers;

- (d) It reflects and sustains a strong sense of gendered masculinity for male management;
- (e) It demonstrates managerial rationality to colleagues, customers, competitors, government and significant others in the environment;
- (f) It facilitates and legitimizes the exercise of power.
- (g) It constitutes the subjectivity of organizational members as particular categories of persons who secure their sense of reality through engaging in strategic discourse and practice.

Strategy as Rationalization of Success and Failure

Learning and subscribing to discourses on corporate strategy provides managers with a vocabulary of success and failure and a means of celebrating the former and rationalizing or re-defining the latter in terms of relative success (Knights and Murray 1990). Thus the vagaries of the market or of employees or customers become 'understandable' by reference to particular theories of corporate strategy. Failure can be explained away because some factor was insufficiently appreciated, but now it has become incorporated in the next round of business planning and so we can look forward to the future with confidence. It is characteristic of the discourse that everything is explicable in the end. There is nothing that is in principle unknowable — just bits of the jigsaw that were not known at the right time, thus undermining the particular strategy adopted.

Strategy and Management Prerogatives

Managers utilize these explanatory schema together with the techniques and disciplinary methods to which they are linked, in order to construct accounts of the organization that enhance their own contribution and importance. In so doing, the symbolic and material privileges of management are readily enhanced and rendered legitimate. If we take the situation where the absence of property rights may generate crises of legitimacy for managers, the development of strategy within the corporation can have the effect of sustaining a new basis of managerial prerogative. Managers are credentialled experts with the ability to both define the problems the organization faces and the solutions it needs to adopt. They are essential to the functioning of the organization and it therefore follows that their prerogatives are secure and legitimate. Managerial hierarchies, together with inequalities of income and work conditions can be justified by reference to the expertise that managers bring to their task through their knowledge of strategic discourse.

Strategy and Personal Security

What we are suggesting is that strategic discourse becomes a means through which managers and staff come to 'know' themselves and their

organizations. Much of its utility is the extent to which it generates a kind of one-dimensional organizational self-knowledge. So, for example, managers can present themselves to each other and to the organization as a whole as the *subjective* component of the discourse of strategy, i.e. the element in the model of success that 'can make a difference'. Practitioners are embedded in the discourse and reproduce it as one of the conditions of their own subjectivity. They are now constituted as 'strategic' actors both insofar as they act on behalf of the organization and, perhaps, in their own personal life outside work (see Knights and Morgan 1990 for a brief discussion of this). In this context, developing a strategy and a plan of action provides existential comfort for managers subjected to the precarious contingencies of market relations. This comfort comes from the sense that strategic intervention can give managers a feeling that their destiny is at least partly in their own hands. It rests on the creation of projects to which managers, like everyone else, can commit themselves in ways that relieve or obscure the 'meaningless void' (Sartre 1966) or relativity of the amorphous world in which they reside.

Strategy and Gendered Identity

Associated with this sense of being in control of a precarious world is the link, for men at least, between strategy and an assertive, perhaps even aggressive macho, masculinity. So it is no accident that the conventional discourse on strategy is ahistorical, unreflective and dominated by conceptions of rationality and the control of externalities. Both strategy and masculine identity in contemporary society are informed by an instrumental-purposive model of action that denies its historical self-formation equally as much as it dismisses elements of experience which cannot 'readily be assimilated into rational categories' (Seidler 1989: 7). While there are other masculine managerial identities (see Morgan and Knights 1990 for an empirical examination of the contrasts between 'patriarchal paternal' and 'aggressive sales' masculine discourses), they tend to share this instrumental pursuit of control over that which is outside the self, or external to the boundaries that are seen as the locus of power. Very often in strategic discourse, for example, markets are conceptualized in terms of the degree of penetration an organization might be expected to secure and so the whole language can be seen as masculine in orientation. It could be argued, then, that strategic discourse and practice both reflects and reproduces what may be termed a 'masculinist conception of power' (Brittan 1989).

Strategy and the External World

Strategic discourse provides a demonstration to outsiders of how the organization is apparently rational and in control of its destiny. In an era when ownership and control have become institutionally distinct, shareholders and the participants in the capital markets look to publicly avail-

able information from companies in order to construct their own investment decisions. Whilst there are some sources such as Annual Reports which are quantified, these are supplemented in the case of the large publicly quoted companies by the provision of a continual flow of information from specialist press officers and public relations experts. Because share prices are a complex product of investor demand, supply of stock, financial data and future expectations, the confidence in corporate management is an extremely important dimension. It is one that is contingent on demonstrating a control not just over product, labour and capital markets but also of managing information and, in particular, its interpretation. The latter has the potential to benefit or undermine the company's image and future prosperity in the same way as actual success in the various markets. The construction of managers as competent 'strategists' is increasingly crucial (see Slater 1989 for an analysis along these lines). This is not simply a case of 'impression management' (Goffman 1971) for public consumption, though that is one aspect and is why companies are increasingly bringing in specialist public relations agencies to help them. It is also an image that has to be managed within specific sets of institutional relationships with financial institutions, the state and other organizations.

Strategy and Intra-Organizational Power

Since strategy is deemed so important by outsiders, it follows that those professional groups within the organization which can claim a central role and expertise in strategy will begin to exercise power over others through the development and transformation of rules and practices. Thus Armstrong (1984, 1987a, 1987b) argues that a central reason for the low status of engineers within management in Britain is that they have failed to capture any strategic functions — in other words, failed successfully to sustain the claim that their expertise is peculiarly essential to organizational success. By contrast, accountants, partly through their already existing linkages to outside bodies, institutions and the state, have secured a strategic advantage in terms of the design and development of corporate strategy.

This whole area, however, remains very under-explored. A number of occupational or functional groupings are competing to establish supremacy over the area of strategic discourse. In addition to accountants, there are marketing people who claim expertise over assessing products and market potential. There are also information technology experts who propound the centrality of IT to organizational problem-solving as well as arguing that technological requirements are significant determinants of organizations' structures and market opportunities. There are also increasingly 'human resource' professionals stepping into the breach vacated by industrial relations and, to a lesser extent, personnel management, with a view to linking these issues more directly with 'business strategy'. Increasingly, competition is also emanating from

those general managers specifically trained in strategic management discourse and equipped with the latest analytical techniques for business decision-making as a result of university MBA courses. Within any particular organization, these various groupings and professions combined with a proliferation of external consultants creates a veritable plethora of experts on strategy. Each group in turn seeks to draw a lesson to aid its own particular role from outside pressures to strategy formation. Thus the accountants will emphasize the importance of bottom line figures for reassuring shareholders; their particular expertise in measuring costs and creatively producing accounts that appeal to outsiders is emphasized. Marketeers on the other hand will emphasize the priority the city analysts put upon market position and potential. Engineers and IT specialists may seek to draw comfort from outsiders who propound the central role of innovation and/or communication. This does not occur simply in debate within management; it has an impact on the construction of boards of directors — on what sorts of non-executive directors are brought in — and on what position they can be expected to support. Similarly, the introduction of management consultants can frequently be a device to legitimate a particular position taken within the company, either by selecting consultants with an established reputation for taking a particular line or by heavily influencing their proposals, by the selection of the right ‘project director’ from within the company.

Strategy and Managerial Subjectivity

So far our approach may be seen as fairly distinct from the orthodoxy where, we have argued, strategy is taken for granted as an unexamined resource in prescriptions for, or descriptions of, organizational life. We have also intimated that a discourse analysis builds on, but is distinctive from, the processual approach of Mintzberg and Pettigrew which would presently claim to be the critical alternative to the rationalist school on strategy. Although there are significant differences between these two authors, they both share a view of strategy as emerging not out of rational planning but largely from political processes of negotiation within the organization and between the organization and different elements in its environment. So, for example, acknowledging that strategies are not exclusively the outcome of plans and intentions, Mintzberg and Waters (1985) shift the focus of their previous analyses (1982, 1984) to encompass *emergent* strategies which are ‘patterns or consistencies realized despite, or in the absence of, intentions’ (1985: 257). By contrast, the argument of Pettigrew (1984: 15) is that the content of strategy can only be understood and managed in terms of the process (e.g. internal politics) and the context (e.g. internal ideology and external environment) in which it is located.

Both these statements indicate considerable compatibility between the processual and our own approach, but we believe that discourse analysis

effects a more radical break with the orthodox rationalist view of strategy. Although processual theorists see strategy as an outcome of negotiated and political relations and as often emergent rather than deliberate, they do not seem to question the rationalist view that it exists to resolve problems *vis-à-vis* the organization and its environment. (see, for example, Pettigrew 1984: 25; Mintzberg and Waters 1985) By contrast, we conceptualize strategy as a discourse that also constitutes the problems which it then claims to have an exclusive expertise in solving. Problems and solutions are then mutually constituted through the discourse of strategy, but they are also always in a state of flux or in a continuous process of reconstitution.

It could easily be thought that our approach to strategy was not so very dissimilar from the processual perspective and, more particularly, the social constructionist theory subscribed to by Pettigrew. Clearly we have much in common in recognizing the political machinations surrounding strategy, but where we differ is in holding distinct epistemological perspectives and a different analytic view with regard to the conception of power. In the first case, processual theory has a leaning toward causal analysis that despite criticisms of linear explanations of social and organizational practices, prevents it from following the full logic of an hermeneutic epistemology. In the second is a conception of power that is restricted to that which is negative, constraining or coercive and involving a competitive struggle between individuals or groups. This is so, we would argue, by virtue of power being seen to reside as a *property* of persons or, at best, specific groups rather than as a characteristic of social relations in general. We treat each of these in turn.

Unfortunately there is not enough space here to develop in detail the epistemological differences between our analysis and the processual approach. They hinge on the degree to which the processual theorists, although placing their analyses within the contingencies of specific social contexts, still cling to certain positivist attempts to identify and perhaps measure causal processes, as if action can be fully explained through references to interests and the opportunities or constraints surrounding their pursuit. Our view acknowledges that managerial action is influenced by the structure of extrinsic rewards and sanctions, but that individual's preoccupation with identity frequently generates a subjectivity of internal self-discipline. From this analytical position, the distinction between subjects and the practices in which they are engaged can no longer be seen as *sharp* enough to warrant a division between context and process, environment and strategy or more abstractly between independent and dependent variables. We are not suggesting that this is the explicit model adopted by processual theorists, only that it is one into which they are inclined to slip. What we would wish to emphasize is that our approach treats the discourse of corporate strategy as the 'topic' of analysis, rather than a 'resource'. By this, we mean that the very category of strategy has to be subjected to critical examination instead of presumed to be known, as is the case both in the rational and processual approaches. This is a

problem because, as we have indicated elsewhere (Knights and Morgan 1990), strategy is a term that, within the commonsense use of language, is adopted indiscriminately to describe the intentions or plans behind any action from warfare to waltzing. Breaking from this commonsense, we think it is important to indicate how far from being merely a descriptive label, strategy as a discourse is intimately involved in constituting the intentions and actions from which it is thought to be derived. Strategy, then, is an integral part, and not independent, of the actions or practices that it is frequently drawn upon to explain or justify.

There is some connection between this epistemological legacy and the conception of power, since even with Lukes' (1974) third dimension to which Pettigrew (1985a) subscribes, there is presumed to be a causal-like chain running from those who possess power to determine the actions of those who are powerless. Despite the power being concealed behind constructions of reality that are seen to structure subordinates' wants, the conception being drawn upon is still the Weberian/Dahl one of getting people to do what they would not otherwise do in the absence of such power. It is still then a deterministic theory. (For a more substantial critique of Lukes see Knights and Willmott 1983, 1989; Clegg 1989.)

We support processual theory in its rejection of the view that corporate strategy constitutes simply a rational response to the environment and its concern to understand strategies as the outcome of power relations conditioned by external and internal environmental possibilities (Pettigrew 1985a: 41–46), but, as has already been intimated, we do not share the same conceptions of power. Let us examine this in more detail. Acknowledging his debt to Lukes (1974), Pettigrew (1985a: 45) argues that:

'A concern with both power and control as explanations of, in this case, choice and change processes, would in effect correspond to two uses of power: power used to defeat competition in a choice or change process and power used to prevent competition in a choice or change process. In both of these processes there would be an explanatory role for unobtrusive systems of power derived from the generation and manipulation of symbols, language, belief and ideology — from culture creation; and from the more public use of power expressed through the possession, control and tactical use of overt sources of power such as position, force or expertise.'

What is evident from this quotation is a belief that power determines choice and change as if the intentions of the 'powerful' were directly coincident and continuous with their effects. One need only stay with Weber to recognize that much of what occurs in social life is a consequence of actions that had entirely other intentions. However, our concern goes beyond this to question the wholly negative way in which power is conceived. This is reflected by the very use of terms like defeat, prevent and manipulation suggesting that power is always about getting others to do what you want them to do, either through direct force, or by the stealth of manipulating the social conditions such that they will think they want to do it anyway. What lies at the back of such conceptions is a view

of some people possessing power and being preoccupied with ensuring that others comply or conform to their demands.

This is to follow what Foucault would describe as a juridical view of power where it is seen to be associated with laws, rules, prohibitions, or coercion. Here 'power is taken to be a right, which one is able to possess like a commodity, and something which one can in consequence transfer or alienate' ... since it involves ... 'a contractual type of exchange' (Foucault 1980: 88). By contrast, Foucault (*ibid*: 89) suggests, 'power is neither given, nor exchanged, nor recovered, but rather exercised, and that it only exists in action'. Accordingly, power is not a property of individuals or groups but of all relations and, moreover, it is not principally about repression and constraint. On the contrary, it is more often positive and productive of subjective well being. Power is positive in the sense that it can transform individuals into subjects who secure their sense of what it is to be 'worthy' and 'competent' human beings through the social practices that it creates or sustains (Knights and Willmott 1989). As Miller (1987: 2) puts it, power

'operates through the promotion of subjectivity and is more resourceful. It is not limited to seeking to deny and to challenge, but attempts to invest the individual with a series of personal objectives and ambitions. Power in this respect is a more intimate phenomenon. It knows the individual better, it does not act on individuals at a distance and from the outside. It acts on the interior of the person, through their self.'

This leads us to what we consider to be the most important difference between our approach and processual theorists. It concerns the way in which we see power to be productive of subjectivity. Managers and staff are not just passive victims of the power of strategic discourse; through it they are constituted as subjects either in support of, or in resistance to, its plausibility. Insofar as strategic discourse would seem to facilitate general concerns with personal as well as organizational well-being and control, individuals readily participate in its practices and internalize its discipline. In this respect they are transformed into subjects who secure their sense of meaning, identity and reality (Knights 1990) through participation in the discourses and practices of strategy. Again, this participation is not passive; individuals and groups exercise power to elaborate some and resist other elements of the discourse. They may indeed seek to resist the strategy altogether, but in order to do so, they have to invariably engage with, and be at least partially constituted by, its content. To resist by means of distancing behaviour, wherein there is a pretence that power has no personal affect, is possible, but its weakness is an indifference to mobilizing the resistance collectively, and this leaves power relations unaffected. Moreover, since no relations exist outside power, the illusion of autonomous space created by such resistance cannot be sustained. Consequently, both those who embrace and those who resist strategy find themselves caught up in its reproduction and this can give to individuals a sense that the organization is pursuing a stable and orderly path through an otherwise uncertain and chaotic environment. Strategic discourses

could then be seen by practitioners as the means of transforming uncertainties in the environment into calculable risks.

We are not seeking to deny or contradict what practitioners do and say when they exercise power through strategic discourse. Rather, we are suggesting that it is worth examining a little more closely how the discourse is formulated, how resources and cultural meanings are drawn into its service and what are its effects. Most important of all, our analysis suggests that strategy does not simply respond to pre-existing problems. In the process of its formulation, strategy is actively involved in the constitution, or re-definition, of problems in advance of offering itself as a solution to them. The research message of such analysis is that wherever in organizational practice a solution is being offered, it is important to investigate the problems to which it relates for evidence of its power to create or reconstitute them. The concern of our own current research is precisely to examine the various sites of power relations where strategic discourse becomes articulated and embodied through constituting or re-defining the problems for which it claims to offer a solution.

Summary and Conclusion

In the first part of the paper, we sought to understand the development of the strategy discourse not as a continuous and inevitable outcome of some historical progress, but rather to problematize its contemporary pervasiveness by reference to the, by no means continuous or inevitable, conditions of its possible development. Important elements of this were discourses and practices within the military, and changing perceptions both in theory and practice about the 'hidden hand' in free market economies. We indicated also how the discourse has met with resistance which it generally seeks to negate or incorporate, but we argued that it was important for theorists of strategy to examine the conditions under which this occurred.

In the second part of the paper we pointed to a number of features within organizations upon which a discourse perspective would focus and perhaps provide insights. Primary among these were the unintended effects of strategy wherein it helps to secure the exercise of power and the management of identity for managerial (and other) subjects and facilitates the development of a corporate image and rationalizations of success and failure for organizations.

Finally, in the third section, we briefly contrasted genealogical and discourse analysis with the processual approach suggesting that its distinctiveness lay primarily in a different conception of power and a focus upon managerial subjectivity and identity. In particular, the discourses and practices surrounding strategy have to be seen as social constructs which have the effect of constituting managerial and labour subjectivities that enhance the productive power of organizations through subjectively 'locking' individuals and groups into their tasks and commitments. At the

same time, strategic discourses secure and embellish the material and symbolic privileges of particular individuals and groups, thus helping to legitimize stratification inequalities.

It is our view that, by treating strategy as a topic of investigation rather than a resource, a genealogical and discourse analysis can stimulate a more critical study of organizations. More specifically, it may redirect attention away from the preoccupations of the rationalists who prescribe strategies or their improvement and the processual theorists who, in reporting the political machinations surrounding strategy, may merely encourage a more reflective and efficient approach to its implementation. In this sense, in their distinctive ways, both approaches contribute to, rather than scrutinize and criticize, the discourse of corporate strategy. This is partly because neither rationalists nor processualists seem to problematize strategy sufficiently to escape its grip on the subjectivity of themselves as theorists and, by implication, their prescriptions for and accounts of practitioners. In conclusion, we believe that our approach departs from this prevailing literature and offers the possibility for it to move in a more self-consciously critical direction.

Note

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