



A critical argument in favor of theoretical pluralism: Project failure and the many and varied limitations of project management

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Received 15 February 2013; received in revised form 23 May 2013; accepted 15 August 2013

Available online 4 September 2013

Abstract

In project management, failure is often assumed to be evidence of deficient management: a problem that can be overcome by better management. Drawing on qualitative research within UK construction projects we examine how four different theoretical approaches (positivism, structural Marxism, interpretivism and actor–network theory) all challenge this managerial assumption. Each theoretical perspective enables a specific analysis of empirical data that critiques the notion that project failures are easily, simply, or largely, associated with the failure of project management. In so doing, our pluralist analysis reveals the social and political contextualization of performance in project management. We thus conclude by proposing that practitioner and scholarly concerns with project failure (and success), can actively contribute to attempts to reflect upon various matters of political concern as developed within the Making Projects Critical community, and by extension Critical Management Studies. Thus, we propose greater interaction between critical and mainstream project research communities.

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Keywords: Project failure; Critical project studies; Performativity; Theoretical pluralism

1. Introduction

Failure is a persistent trauma within organizations, perhaps especially within project-based organizations (Lindahl and Rehn, 2007). Stories of “failed”, or “failing” projects, abound in the media, from construction (London’s Wembley Stadium), to aerospace (F-35 fighter,) and IT (UK NHS patient record system). While project failures can and do result in lost share prices, or football matches, their effects can also include lost public funds, safety, homes, communities, health, and even life itself. While the “projectification of society” (Lundin and Söderholm, 1998), and the proliferation of project management

(PM), have been subject to mounting critical interrogation (Bresnen, 2007; Cicmil et al., 2009; Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Hodgson, 2002, 2004, 2005; Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006, 2007a,b; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006, 2007; Sage et al., 2010a; Styhre, 2006), as reviews by both Söderlund (2011) and Turner et al. (2013) indicate, the phenomena of “project failure” (and “success”) continue to be understood largely from within a narrowly functionalist-positive/managerial perspective (for some exceptions see Fincham, 2002; Lindahl and Rehn, 2007; Sage et al., 2013).

Taking this tendency as our cue for critical analysis, in this paper we evaluate different theoretical approaches as means of contributing to the “Making Projects Critical” agenda of addressing managerial concerns with performativity without instrumentalizing knowledge to that intent (Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006). Our use of “performativity” here mirrors that of Fournier and Grey (2000)

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who explain how within management and organization disciplines knowledge and truth are mostly wedded to the pursuit of managerial efficiency and control. Our purpose here is to explain how the study of project failures can be a much more richly variegated enterprise. Specifically, we seek to engage readers interested in reflecting upon how the relationship between project failure and project management might be understood across different theoretical approaches. In so doing, we reverse the prevailing analysis of project failure found within the so-called Factors/Success School where analysis is orientated around “descriptive statistics on the criteria and factors of project success and failure” (Söderlund, 2011: 158); instead of asking how empirical analysis of project failure can provide us with “better” theories of project management (e.g. Cooke-Davies, 2002; Jha and Iya, 2007; Morris and Hough, 1987), we ask how might alternative empirical analysis of project failures, framed by different theoretical positions, help us conceptualize the limits of project management.

Our concern with the limits of project management is not intended as a critical trick or as conceptual legitimization of defective management; rather, we want to shed light on how a myriad of interwoven social, political, symbolic, economic and material, forces, enable, constrain and define project outcomes in ways that cannot be apprehended within existing research on project failure, and in particular that of the Factors School. In other words, we will examine the social contextualization of project management (Cicmil et al., 2009), and specifically project failure. This research will aid scholars and practitioners seeking to become more reflexive about the myriad influences not only on project outcomes (e.g. Cooke-Davies, 2002), but also on the more substantive question of how and why those outcomes are being defined and legitimated as failures or successes.

While the field of PM research is theoretically pluralist (Gauthier and Ika, 2012; Pellegrinelli, 2011), it is apparent that research into project failure/success is usually regarded as belonging to a narrowly managerialist, functionalist–positivist mode of enquiry, principally research within the Factors School. Söderlund (2011: 160) explains how Factors School analysis centers on the use of empirical data (usually cross-sectional surveys and more infrequently in-depth case studies) to produce descriptive statistics on the criteria and factors of project success and failure (see also the “Success School” of project management in Turner et al., 2013). It is not our goal to dismiss this body of research – indeed, as we set out below it can inform our analysis of the limits of project management to apprehend and achieve project outcomes – yet we do believe that this research cannot, due in no small part to its location within a functionalist–positivist paradigm of knowledge, offer answers to the significance of such limitations.

We develop our pluralist, “more-than-managerial”, appreciation of project failure here through qualitative research in the UK construction industry. Construction is in an established project-based industry that is suffused with discussions of performance failure, from the extraordinary: cost and time overruns in megaprojects such as the Channel Tunnel (Flyvbjerg et al., 2003); to the quotidian: the newly instigated “Dodgy Builder of the Year”, award offered by the UK’ *Contract Journal*

(Contact, 2010). Since the 1980s, construction has witnessed the spread of standardized PM knowledge, methods and tools (e.g. Critical Path Analysis, PERT, TQM, BPR and lean) to enable better control and efficiency in the invariably unpredictable act of building (Applebaum, 1982; Green, 2003, 2006; Green et al., 2008; Styhre, 2006). The penetration of distinct PM knowledge beyond middle management at site-level remains debatable (Green, 2006). However, among most construction management (CM) researchers and senior managers, the development of generic PM tools grounded on a positivist–functionalist epistemology to understand and control the complex causes of unpredictability in building has become the mantra by which the future of the industry can be secured (Green, 2003, 2006; Green et al., 2008). Partly due to the spread of PM as the performance solution, from mega projects (Flyvbjerg et al., 2003) to home kitchen installation (Moben, 2010), failure increasingly becomes viewed in construction in terms of the failure of management to achieve expected outcomes. It frequently appears that project failures are project *management* failures: reproducing the managerialization of organization (Parker, 2002).

This mutually reinforcing image of the construction industry as a low performing, yet highly performative, sector, is shared by both mainstream (Harris et al., 2006) and the far smaller number of critically-orientated studies of construction (Clarke, 2006; Clegg, 1975; Fletcher and Watson, 2007; Green, 2003, 2006; Green et al., 2008; Styhre, 2006). Conceivably, this highly performative image of construction contributes to the rather modest number of critical studies of construction work despite its sizeable socio-economic influence: perhaps this sector is simply too managerially performative for interesting critical study? By focussing on construction, we also follow Spicer et al. (2009) in challenging the notion that engagement with performativities is antithetical to the CMS agenda. In pursuing this “more than managerial” approach we also adopt a pluralist perspective, so as to generate new critical concepts by refusing to orientate studies of project failure around a managerial–positivist paradigm. However, in adopting this pluralist approach, we inevitably risk the charges of paradigm warriors defending the incommensurability thesis (Jackson and Carter, 1991); given this, before proceeding further, we will briefly revisit these heated debates to clarify *why* and *how* we are pursuing theoretical pluralism here.

2. Theoretical pluralism revisited

Since Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) *Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis*, theoretical pluralism as a research methodology has been criticized for inhibiting the potential for reflexive, non-performative, non-essentialist studies of management and organization (Alvesson et al., 2008; Deetz, 1996; Jackson and Carter, 1991; Parker and McHugh, 1991; Tadajewski, 2009). As a result, despite the general acceptance of the plurality of managerial rationalities (Hotho and Pollard, 2007), the plurality of modes of organization (Morgan, 1997), and the plurality of global politics (Dussell and Labarra-Collado, 2006), critical, but theoretically pluralistic work have been rare, either as an empirical (Hassard, 1991) or review-based (Davila and Oyon, 2007)

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