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From project ontologies to communities of virtue

Carol Linehan and Donncha Kavanagh

Department of Management & Marketing

University College Cork

National University of Ireland, Cork.

Cork

Ireland

Email: d.kavanagh@ucc.ie

Phone: +353-21-4902242

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Abstract

Projects, as an organizing principle, can provide exciting contexts for innovative work. Thus far, project management discourse has tended to privilege the vital need to deliver projects 'on time, on budget, and to specification'. In common with the call for papers for this workshop we suggest that perhaps the "instrumental rationality" underpinning this language of characterising project activity may create more problems than it solves. In this paper we suggest that such questions (and language) frame project contexts in a partial way. We argue that such concerns stem from a particular worldview or ontology, which we identify as a 'being' ontology. Here we contrast being and becoming project ontologies, to explore the questions, methods and interventions that each foregrounds. In an attempt to move this dialogue further than simply another contrast of modern and postmodernist accounts of project organising, we go on to consider some possible ethical concomitants of valuing being and becoming ontologies in project contexts.

Key Words

Project organisation, ontology, community of practice, virtue, ethics.

From project ontologies to communities of virtue

Introduction

Story 1: The King and the Cartographer

The story goes that a king employed a cartographer to produce a map of his territory. The king found the map most useful and was so captivated by the power of representation that he asked the cartographer to producer a better map, to a larger scale. The cartographer complied, but after some time the king asked for an even better map. And so on, until eventually the cartographer produced a one-to-one map, which of course was the *territory* and was therefore a useless *map*.

Story 2: The paper mountain

The PCS project was a 2-year, $16m project to replace a process control system in a pharmaceutical plant. The main players in this complex project were the pharmaceutical firm, the software development company, and a project management company. In one month, the project management organisation produced 40,000 sheets of A4 paper as part of their work on the project.

An important first step in considering the future of projects and of project management is to consider our understanding of what a 'project' is. What do we assume about the nature of projects? Addressing such a question is to reflect on our understanding of ontology, that is our understanding of the nature of the world, and of existence. This is important because ontological assumptions underpin the set of practices that go under the umbrella term, 'project management'. Put differently, what is the 'it' that project managers presume to manage?

In this paper we introduce the term 'project ontologies' as a way of distinguishing different ways of thinking about what projects are. These project ontologies might also be described as world-views, paradigms, or cognitive codes. We draw on Robert Chia's (1995) distinction between what he refers to as 'being' and 'becoming' ontologies (and elsewhere, but less usefully, modern and postmodern styles of organisational analysis). For us, a becoming ontology seems to better describe the empirical reality of projects, though we recognise that each ontology is necessarily partial. More important, perhaps, an excessive attachment to one or the other leads to a privileging of some questions, methods and interventions, and a marginalisation of others. What one person sees as a 'problem' others may see as a 'nuisance', an 'opportunity', a 'disaster', a 'storm in a teacup', or a 'joke'. In other words, problems and issues are *interpretations*, and interpretations are always based and consequential on our worldview or ontology.

Not only are 'problems' outcomes of retrospective interpretative processes, but they may also be *generated* by dysfunctional interventions. By this we mean interventions that, while they seek to deal with a potential problem, are actually the *source* of the problem in so far as both the 'problem' and 'intervention' are both consequences of a dominant ontology. The old story of the king and the cartographer (story 1 above) helps illustrate this point. Similarly, story 2 illustrates how a belief in representationalism – representing the world as it is perceived to be, and then working with those representations – allows us to (project) manage, but that paradoxically an excessive belief in this paradigm leads to over-management and ultimately poor management. The general point of the

stories is that *excessive* attachment to one worldview may actually *create* problems that the worldview purports to eliminate. In short, worldviews are important.

We begin this paper by exploring what is meant by a being and a becoming ontology of projects, and what kinds of questions and interventions these ontologies prompt. This is developed by reflecting on the implications a shift in language from 'project teams' to 'communities of practice' brings to our questions about project management. We go on to consider how a shift in language should also be considered in the light of its ethical concomitants and potential consequences for participants in project contexts.

Being and Becoming Ontologies

Following Chia, we present a being ontology as the dominant ontology of organisational analysis. In this worldview, primacy is given to objects, things, states, events, and nouns. In the context of projects, a being ontology leads us to talk and think about organisation structure in an objectified manner. In other words, our descriptions privilege static accounts of group structuring – for instance the common discussion in project management texts and practice about the taxonomic distinctions between functional, weak matrix, balanced matrix, strong matrix, and projectised structures. Moreover, these are seen as planned elements of the project organisation, pre-existing the actual activities of the project group. This style of thinking leads us to consider project organisations as things, as entities, akin to elephants and other organisms, with functions, parts, structure, and relationships with similar entities in the 'environment' be they parent organisations, client organisations, subcontractors or state institutions. And of course this is all good, not least because it provides stability and structure in a complex, ambiguous and indeed chaotic world. Moreover, it is a worldview that infuses the discourse of project management, and its hegemony in that domain speaks eloquently of its practical value.

Story 3: The Fortress of Files

At the weekly project management meeting of the PCS project (story 2 above), the software company was represented by its project manager and senior project engineer. They brought about a dozen box and lever-arch files to each meeting, and they formed these into a three-sided fortress of files on the table before the meeting commenced.

But a being ontology is not without problems. Story 3 reminds us that while the representationalist technologies of management might be good, necessary, and helpful, their limitations must also be recognised. Whitehead's fallacy of misplaced concreteness – wherein "we have mistaken our abstractions for concrete realities"(Whitehead, 1925: 69) – reminds us of the ever-present tendency towards reification that comes with a being ontology. In many cases the language of 'being' is applied, not only to projects, but also on a macro scale to organisations, which, when viewed in an entitative fashion, treat the organisation as a rational, performance driven agent (Cooper & Burrell, 1988). Thus the organisation is spoken about as having goals, knowledge, plans etc. This is not necessarily a problem since one must for pragmatic reasons often assume that entities are real, stable and static. But in at least some instances – and we argue that project organising is one such instance – a being ontology fits very uneasily with the phenomenon or issue of concern. In particular, focusing on the formal representations of structure and relationships risks missing out on the dynamic, fluid relationships in project groups which are at the heart of their creative potential (Brown & Duguid, 2000/2002). Akin to trying to eat soup with a fork, the gaps and inadequacies mean that it can often fail to adequately capture or engage with the phenomenon.

An interesting dimension to this point is that the discipline of project management has traditionally set itself up as an alternative paradigm to *production* management, arguing that while the latter provides a satisfactory worldview and set of techniques in the relatively stable world of production, it is inadequate in a project environment where the focus is on change. The mantra, in short, has been to use production management in stable contexts (e.g. running a cheese factory) while use project management to manage change (e.g. building a new cheese factory). The irony is that the effort to professionalize and institutionalise the discipline of project management over the last two decades has been founded on an ontological paradigm that is already populated by production management. This has had important consequences. First, the distinction between production and project management has been blurred, partly because the former has found it quite easy to expand into what is now constituted as a closely related territory. Second, the standardization and codification of knowledge, which are bedfellows of professionalization and institutionalization, threaten to sap a deeper understanding of working, managing and knowing that is especially pertinent to the projectised domain (Tsoukas, 1998).

This pragmatic and epistemological issue is perhaps of less import than the ethical problems that are potential consequences of the tendency towards reification that occurs within a being ontology. In a project context, this reification operates at the level of a project goal and at the level of the specific techniques of project management – e.g. earned value analysis, the critical path method, risk assessment, etc. Both the goal and the techniques are depicted as inviolable, 'natural', and beyond deconstruction or critique. Thus, project management technologies can be applied to the building of a new school, the development of a new software system, the launching of a new product – but also to setting up a slave trafficking network or a human cloning project – with little or no engagement with the ethical value of the specific projects. In other words, project management technologies embody what Weber ([1921] 1968) called 'instrumental rationality' – the continual calculation of means in relation to ends – with little reflection on the ends themselves. In short, a being ontology tends to evacuate values and ethical considerations out of the situation.

Another ethical criticism is that a being ontology is excessively instrumental, tending to see humans as simply a means to an end (the project goal). This is consequential on the tendency towards reification that is inherent within a being ontology. Following Kant, the issue is not that humans cannot be used as a means to achieving an end, but that it is morally wrong to treat them *only* as a means. Here, Habermas's (1971) distinction between 'work' (instrumental action 'governed by technical rules based on empirical fact') and 'interaction' (communicative action that generates and enforces reciprocal norms) is compelling and speaks to the empirical reality that project management has tended to privilege the former over the latter. This is an important point but one that tends to be glossed over in, for instance, the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK), which purports to offer a doctrinal understanding of the discipline.

Our point is not that a being ontology is wrong or unhelpful; rather that it is partial and that it may blind us to other, perhaps more useful and more human, ways of thinking about and seeing the world.

In contrast to a being ontology, a becoming ontology emphasises process, verbs, activity, and the construction of entities. With respect to structure and organisation, a becoming ontology calls attention to the dynamics of how such structural and procedural issues are made relevant and played out within specific project contexts. It focuses our attention on situations in which members negotiate their use of governing principles and structural arrangements in actual practice. Thus, rather than speaking about structure and roles, we instead speak about structuring and sense-

making (Giddens, 1984; Weick, 1995). Instead of seeing structure as something that exists prior to the project, we see structure (that is order) as an emergent outcome of structuring and sense-making processes (which is not to belittle or ignore the path-dependency power of existing technologies and structures embedded within them).

In the world of projects, this is altogether compelling. Projects are centrally about change and movement, and a philosophical basis that is founded on these concepts seems to make most sense. It also clarifies the practical difficulties that confound practitioners as they seek to implement the representationalist technologies that are consequential on a being ontology. How, for instance, can one draw an organisation chart when the 'organisation' is continually changing in terms of membership, roles and responsibilities?

A becoming ontology demands that we continually question categories and divisions that are routinely seen as fixed. Paradoxically, a becoming ontology is more secure intellectually since it provides a kind of 'concreteness check' on the tendency towards reification that Whitehead warns us of. It is an antidote to what one might term, the 'hardening of the categories'. Setting an agenda around ontology means that we must think about and question our understanding of the nature of the world, and the nature of the entities that make up the world. To hold a becoming ontology is to demand that we question boundaries on the basis that these are always human constructions and mere 'empirical' manifestations of conceptual categories. In this sense, a becoming ontology is fundamentally critical, continually driving us to ask basic questions, to question received wisdoms, and to be impatient with ready answers. However, this is not to say that it celebrates cynicism or nihilism. Rather, it demands that we not only question what is, but also that we construct imaginative answers to the questions that we pose.

What is a project? Project as Language and Practice

In the context of projects, the most immediate question centres on the nature of projects. In short, what is a project? Usually, we tend to think of a project as a temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product or service and we recognise its existence in the spoors of managerial technologies, viz. budgets, organisation charts, barcharts, etc. A becoming ontology compels us to think differently, to consider a project as an emergent outcome of disparate, ambiguous, political practices. Specifically, it moves us away from the metaphor of the project as an organism, with a defined goal or function, embedded in an environment populated by other organisms. Instead, we find it much better to think of a project firstly as a language, and secondly as a practice. In this section we will explain why we find this valuable.

Firstly, we assert that a project is a language, competing in a set of language games. The project comes to be, as it were, as the language of the project is created; it continues to exist and 'expand' as more and more individuals participate, use and invent the project's language. And it ceases to be – it 'unbecomes' – as the language of the project and the particular community (as an idiosyncratic network of relations) in which it is embedded dies and is forgotten. Here, we draw on Wittgenstein's (1953) notion that language is always situated and can only be understood in terms of specific 'forms of life'. Associated with each form of life is a 'language-game', consisting of a vocabulary and a set of language rules that are developed and modified in the course of ongoing social practice.

Thinking of a project as a language provides an interesting and ironic perspective on the discourse of project management. One of the reasons why this discourse has flourished is because of the

'silo mentality' in organisations wherein there are perceived communication barriers between departments or functional units. In language terms, the departments are isomorphic with distinct languages – hence we have a sales language, a production language, an accounting language, etc. Project management has been proffered as a potent integrating mechanism to counter the (linguistic) fragmentation that is rampant in the contemporary organisational setting. Ironically, however, the solution has been to impose yet another language into the mix – namely the language of project management, with its vocabulary of barcharts, resource histograms, work breakdown structure, project life cycle, balanced matrix, project risk analysis, critical path method, etc. Underpinning the promulgation of project management is an ideology that project management does provide a unifying language, a kind of organisational Esperanto, that desperately needs to learned and used across the organisation. While there may be some merit in this argument, it is essentially no different from the arguments previously used by languages that are now indigenous to the organisational context, such as the language of accounting, marketing, quality, etc.

A becoming ontology also reminds us of language's undecidability and inherent ambiguity – *différence* in Derrida's lexicon. The very success of project approaches is that they expect and enable ambiguity, uncertainty, and risk, conditions that perhaps underpin their success in creating contexts for innovation and learning. In contrast, the potential difficulty with a being ontology is its intolerance for ambiguity – akin to the king's intolerance for inaccuracy in maps – that ultimately may cause as many problems as it solves.

This celebration of ambiguity and of difference leads us to change the vocabulary and images we use when speaking about projects. In particular, the concept of a project team seems excessively rigid from this perspective, since teams, axiomatically, have a well-defined, singular goal.

Story 4: It's all Greek to me

One of us spent over a year observing a project team at work, sitting in on project meetings in a quasi-ethnographic manner. Despite having experience in software development, project management, and the pharmaceutical industry (the domains of the team's activities) the researcher understood very little of what was said at the meetings. In conversation with members of the project team afterwards, it became clear that many team members shared this feeling, although nobody was willing to admit this publicly.

As story 4 indicates, projects are complex, ambiguous, confusing phenomena wherein the idea of a single, clear goal is at odds with the reality, most especially in the earlier stages of a project. Hence we need a metaphor that recognises that goals (plural) are emergent, provisional outcomes rather than pre-existing, fully-formed and singular. For us, the metaphor of 'community' is appropriate because communities are necessarily heterogeneous, containing many different points of view and different values. Also communities are emergent. They are extremely difficult to 'engineer' to fit a given task, since their membership and values emerge in the flow of work activity. Furthermore, thinking about the project as a community rather than as a team is important because it reminds us that political skills are the crucial skills in the realm of community organisation (note that we tend not to speak about communities being 'managed'). In centring on the political domain, the key role of the manager shifts to one of identifying and reconciling difference in a context where difference, and changing difference, is axiomatic. These changes are significant, because if the world is an effect produced by language, then changing our language does, in fact, change our world. Community also offers the potential to develop a more

sophisticated understanding of the nature of (project) work, learning and identity, especially when it is articulated with the concept of practice, to which we now turn.

In this section, we draw on recent work by Andreas Reckwitz (2002), who outlines the characteristics of a 'practice theory', building on and connecting the works of diverse authors including Bourdieu, Garfinkel, Giddens, Latour, late Foucault, and Weber. The vocabulary and perspective of these practice theorists – and Reckwitz is quick to acknowledge the dangers of merging such a diverse group into one category – is that they are opposed to purpose orientated (homo economicus) and norm orientated (homo sociologicus) models for explaining action. Instead, they highlight the importance of shared or collective symbolic structures of knowledge in understanding both action and social order. For instance, Giddens (1984) stresses that an agent's ability to act is best understood by recognising the agent's skill in drawing on a shared cultural stock of knowledge which both constitute and give accounts of an agent's action. For Giddens, the agent's knowledge is more practical than theoretical (or to use Polyani's terms, it is tacit rather than explicit knowledge). In this sense, the social is thoroughly located in 'practices' which Giddens defines as "a routinised form of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, knowhow, states of emotion and motivational knowledge" (p. 249).

An especially influential strand within practice theory has been Lave and Wenger's work on 'communities of practice' (Lave, 1993; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). They take a unified approach to work practices (which are routinely portrayed as stable, routine and regulated by procedures) and learning (which is usually seen as a creative activity, inimical to work practices). In their view knowing is not about abstract, objective information; rather it is about engaging with, and learning to function in a community. This functioning is not restricted to explicit, formal, expert skills but also encompasses learning about the community's viewpoints, the language it uses, the relations of importance, and so on. "If context is viewed as a social world constituted in relation with persons acting, both context and activity seem inescapably flexible and changing" (Lave, 1993: 5). In a similar vein, Brown and Duguid (1991) argue that many ethnographic studies of work have shown that actual work practices often diverge from the ways organizations 'describe that work in manuals, training programs, organizational charts and job descriptions.' Their work is rich in evidence that routinely highlights the situated nature of work, and knowing in practice. From their perspective, structural and procedural arrangements may facilitate or constrain work, but not determine it. Similarly 'learning' and 'generating knowledge' are thought to be separate from work practice, perhaps even requiring special arrangements – such as project groups – or protected areas (like an off site training workshop) to occur. However both of these assumptions rest on a being ontology of work and knowledge coupled with a desire to represent both in terms of formal abstractions from practice. The result being that the fluidity and detail of working and knowing get lost in the abstraction.

Lave treats 'community' as a network of relations from which forms of participation emerge. Her use of this metaphor is rich in messy stuff, in conflict and contradiction and dilemmas of participation that can only be resolved in situated local practice. Her view of learning attempts a synthesis of the individual and the structural, which recognises each element's co-constructive role.

> Activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are part of broader systems of relations in which they have meaning . . . Learning thus implies becoming a different

> person with respect to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relations . . . learning involves the construction of identities (Lave et al., 1991: 53)

Her relational account of interaction expands the view of learning as 'cognitive change' to include a sense of the person 'becoming' as they engage with community activities. The 'community of practice' metaphor can be drawn on to develop an account of what it is project members are participating in. The aim is to use the metaphor in a generative manner to explore the ways of being/possible selves that are constrained or facilitated through peoples' participation in work practice. Rather than seeing 'individual' or 'community' as the primary focus for analysis, the assumption here is that both are mutually constituted through language in action.

This is a social constructionist view of participation in project contexts in which, as Bateson (1972) suggested, "the map is not the territory". This shifting view of language from representation to construction, from a container of knowledge to a constructer of realities, moves us from asking 'what do we know about the world?' to 'what language games do we participate in and what are the consequence and prizes attached to such games?' Language is seen as action, not as a precursor to it.

> As Wittgenstein (1963) proposed, language gains its meaning not from its mental or subjective underpinnings, but from its uses in action (language games). Or again emphasizing the significant place of human relatedness in postmodern writings, language gains its meaning within organized forms of interaction. (Gergen & Joseph, 1996)

The community of practice metaphor serves as an exemplar of a language of 'becoming' (and indeed a 'becoming of language') to understanding project activities. It moves away from a purely instrumental (modernist?) understanding of projects to highlight the constructed, and often contested, nature of participating in projects. While we believe that such a perspective on projects is generative, it would be folly to suggest that our goal should be to strive for, for example, the 'creation' or 'engineering' of communities of practice in actual project networks. Though the language of 'community' and 'learning' often connotes positive environments it could equally be likely that through participation in particular project contexts members learn to withdraw from risk, resist change and become positioned as marginalised from further project activities. To return for a moment to themes addressed in the call for papers:

> there are strong arguments that project working typically leads to the removal of discretion and autonomy from skilled and committed employees and a tendency to deskill project workers of all levels.

Through involvement in project contexts participants may experience negative impacts. The value of a community of practice lens is not that, if used 'properly' in empirical contexts it somehow avoids such outcomes, but rather that through its emphasis on how project activities and members identities are co-constructed it allows us to consider the many possible emergent features and consequences in project contexts.

So far, so critical (echoing the 'making projects critical' theme), we have identified some of the limits of a 'being' perspective on project activity, highlighted an alternative 'becoming' ontology of projects, and elaborated on how this may help us to view projects differently – through the exemplar of the community of practice metaphor. Yet if we are sincere about our claim that activities, identities, and consequences are emergent from particular language games then is it not incumbent on us to reflect also on the possible consequences of our 'becoming' language game? In

the remainder of the paper we attempt to move beyond the dichotomy of being and becoming to consider the epistemological and ethical concomitants of a becoming ontology.

Epistemologizing

Our first point relates to an ever-present danger in all dichotomies, namely that each pole is in one sense constituted and defined by its opposite. For example, the concept of 'black' only has meaning because we understand its opposite, 'white'; 'black' is in 'white' and vice versa. While we may seek to privilege one end of a dichotomy, the mutual indwelling of the two poles means that we necessarily highlight the other end as well. Something akin to a dog chasing its tail, the net effect of any attempt to privilege one pole of a dichotomy is that the *dichotomy* (or perhaps dualism is a better term) is privileged over other potential interpretative frames. Similarly, Law's (1994: 15) point that we should have a "sociology of verbs rather than a sociology of nouns" – a classic statement of a becoming ontology – may be alluring but it is also unrealistic and naïve, since one could hardly dispense with nouns *tout court.* (It might be churlish to add that, since every transitive verb requires a noun, Law should really have been arguing for a sociology of *intransitive* verbs.)

Another issue is that the desire to celebrate a becoming ontology – which may partly be inspired by professional and career aspirations – may lead us to an unwarranted demonization of a being ontology. Things really do come to be; artefacts are made; things are constructed; sometimes a concrete floor is just a concrete floor. The twist to Whitehead's fallacy of misplaced concreteness is that it is just as much a fallacy to misplace the *absence* of concreteness. A related point is that the valorisation of a becoming ontology may only superficially mask a deeper epistemological two-timing. A particular instance of this is when a becoming ontology is touted as a better, more improved form of representationalism (see Woolgar (1986) for development). Moreover, in staying at the level of debating ontological positions in a dichotomous fashion we run the risk of forgetting that even 'co-constructed communities' create consequences for those involved in practice. There is a danger that we simply embrace a 'becoming' ontology as a cleverer and better representation of organising and project work without fully reflecting on some possible consequences of our shift in language either for the study of project contexts or for those who work in such contexts.

A related criticism of the postmodernist/constructionist position is that it ultimately is based on some form of relativism. The common argument is that social constructionists tend to be interested in construction processes and are more or less mute on questions such as whether 'true' or 'false' knowledge is manufactured or who loses and who wins in the construction processes (Star, 1991). These are important criticisms.

The Ethics of Becoming

The path of postmodern criticism of the modernist, instrumental, objectification of organisations, projects, knowledge, etc has been well trodden. We have argued here that a 'becoming' ontology avoids this instrumental objectification with its language of process, fluidity and co-construction. But while this language is beloved of critical academics (ourselves included) are there any ethical considerations around its use? It seems to us that the language of projectification underpinned by a *being* ontology can clearly exhibit the kind of instrumental rationality that legitimises the entitative and objectified treatment of projects, project goals, outcomes and participants (both in academic and practitioners language games). But so too can a *becoming* ontology, with its emphasis on

language of emergent properties, ambiguity, fluidity in relations etc. At this point we can focus the issues around a number of questions that, for us, seem pertinent and important.

The first issue relates to identity. From a becoming/practice perspective, work, learning and *identity* are co-produced through language in action. Hence, perceived changes in work and organisational environments will lead to changing accounts of 'possible selves'. For instance, the pervasiveness of information and communication technologies in the contemporary organisation has given much credence to Foucault's ideas of the 'disciplined individual', wherein one governs oneself by performing actions in which one is oneself the object of those actions (Foucault, 1977, 1979, 1988). Recently, Gabriel (2002) has spoken about the 'glass cage' – reworking Weber's famous metaphor of the iron cage – within which people now work, under continual (self-)surveillance and discipline, through "total exposure to the eye of the customer, the fellow-employee, the manager". An important consequence of this, for Gabriel, is that the self becomes 'fragile'. This echoes Richard Sennett's (1998) examination of the personal consequences on contemporary work forms (where projects hold almost iconic status). An important consequence is the creation of a "pliant self, a collage of fragments unceasing it its becoming, ever open to new experience – these are just the psychological conditions suited to short-term work experience, flexible institutions, and constant risk-taking" (p. 133). Also in 1998, Wallulis (1998) wrote about the demise of the 'secure individual' contrasting the current uncertainty about work and family life with a previous generation where there were career ladders, long-term marriages, and incessant and transparent progress in the standard of living. Drawing on earlier work by Kotter (1995) and Capelli (1999), Cadin (2004) has recently contrasted the 'classical' and 'boundaryless' career to exemplify the shifts in work practices, contexts, language games and identity:

	Classical career	Boundaryless career
Environment	Stable	Turbulent
Organizational structure	Bureaucratic	Project-based
Career progression benchmark	Objective	Subjective
Favoured career path	Standard and scaled	Idiosyncratic

What interests us, and what we think is apposite to this conference, is the conjunction and mirroring of the language games between critical academics of a constructionist/postmodern persuasion and that of project practitioners. For instance, Sennett reports that an IBM executive once told the sociologist Walter Powell that the flexible corporation "must become an archipelago of related activities". Powell, in turn, speaks of how "networklike arrangements are lighter on their feet…than pyramidal hierarchies; … they are more readily decomposable or redefinable than the fixed assets of hierarchies" (Sennett, 1998: 23). This language of becoming echoes a similar lexicon propounded by other academics, gurus and intellectuals in the late 1980s and early1990s. Kanter – who sought to teach giants how to dance – and Peters – who helped us live with chaos – are exemplars of the period:

> It is better to view economic activity in terms of clusters of activity sets whose membership composition, 'ownership', and goals are constantly changing. Projects rather than positions are central. (Kanter, 1991: 85).
>
> The new 'bestest' will probably be alternative outfits that consist of *networks* of small, medium, and large firms gathered to do today's (and not necessarily tomorrow's) task as best they can. . . . the surviving organisation will resemble a floating crap game of projects embedded amid networks of multiple organisations (Peters, 1990: 75).

This projectised approach to work was taken up with gusto during the 1990s, reflected most noticeably in the growth in membership of the professional bodies. The Project Management Institute (PMI), founded in 1969, now has 121,000 members worldwide, while the International Project Management Association (IPMA) has 30,000 members. Most of this growth occurred during the 1990s (in 1990, PMI had only 8,500 members).

If the language games of critical academics and practitioners converge more around the temporary and uncertain, do we (as critical academics) simply further legitimate the proliferation of ambiguous, risky, short term alliances in project contexts with the possibly negative and fragmentary consequences for those working in such contexts? At heart, the issue is whether critical management academics are unwitting participants, providing much of the vocabulary for a new language game, a new point of view that is appropriated by some for particular political interests. This language provides a justification for an abandonment of stability and provides a rhetoric that people will buy into, even though these may be the very people who would might most benefit from and need stability.

The ideas of Antonio Gramsci, while formulated in a different time and context, go some way towards explaining and understanding this connection between academics and practitioners. The question that Gramsci (Gramsci & Forgacs, 1988; Gramsci, Hoare, & Nowell-Smith, 1971) addressed was simple: 'Why/how do the exploited willingly consent to and accept a conception of the world that belongs to the rulers?' For us the question relates to how and why those working in a project environment – which is characterised by insecurity, anxiety, unstable careers, fragile and corroded identities – accept the world view of the elite, in this case the (project) managerial elite and the owners of capital. In answering this question, Gramsci identified three central processes. First, *universalism* describes the way in which the dominant group manages to portray its parochial interests and obsessions as the common interests of all people. Second, *naturalism* describes how a given way of life is reified to the point where it is equated to nature. In turn, this leads to quietism on the basis that it is pointless to seek to counter that which is natural. Third, *rationalism* describes how the ruling group gives rise to a class of intellectuals who theorize and thus justify/perpetuate the existing way of life. While Gramsci was seeking to understand events in Italy in the 1930s, at least for us his ideas resonate with contemporary phenomena. In particular, his articulation of the relationship between intellectuals – including academics – and an elite group is especially apposite.

Building communities of virtue

Practice theory and particularly the literature on communities of practice provide a valuable and insightful way of thinking about organizational life and identity. Our objective in this final section of the paper is to retain much of this theoretical scaffolding of practice theory but to reorient it towards issues of value, virtue and ethics. We flag this shift by speaking about communities of virtue rather than communities of practice. (Our understanding of virtue draws especially on the writings of Alasdair MacIntyre (1984)).

Our first point is perhaps aimed at ourselves. We have presented a becoming ontology as a more authentic and more human paradigm, which does not suffer from the instrumentalism and inhumanity of a being ontology. But, and we alluded to this at the outset of the paper, a being ontology only becomes problematic *in excess*; a map that is the territory is useless, but that does not mean that all maps are useless. One can and indeed must implement and operate the

representationalist technologies of management but one must always be alive to the danger that this may lead one to seeing humans as simply and *only* a means to an end. Here, Martin Buber's (1970) distinction between I-it (instrumental) relationships and I-thou (human) relationships provides a useful and clear way of remembering and repeating this important point.

Our second point seeks to address the 'spiritual' crisis in project work head on. Virtue, ethics and morality have a place in projects and this must be reflected in the discourse of project management. Perhaps the best-known distillation of this discourse is the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK), published by the Project Management Institute (Project Management Institute, 2004). It is telling that this document is silent on these topics.

We are not necessarily calling for a new entry to be added to the PMBOK list of its current knowledge areas: integration, time, quality, human resource, communications, risk, and procurement. Neither would we like to see ethics in a project domain reduced to instruction in the application of philosophical approaches – e.g. utilitarianism v Kantian ethics – to ethical dilemmas confronting the project manager. Rather, we would advocate an approach founded on the concept of virtue, which was perhaps best described by Aristotle as a character trait that manifests itself in habitual action. Consistent with our earlier discussion on practice theory, both Aristotle and MacIntyre see virtues as being fundamentally grounded in *practice*, which the latter defines as

> any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended (MacIntyre, 1984: 185).

Central to this definition is MacIntyre's distinction between 'internal' and 'external' goods. The former relates to the type of reward that is *exclusively* obtained through the activity itself while external goods relate to rewards, e.g. money, that may be obtained through a variety of means. This leads him to define a virtue as "*an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods*" (MacIntyre, 1984: 191, original emphasis). Obedience to rules, standards of excellence, tradition, and community play an important role in MacIntyre's theoretical architecture: "To enter into a practice is to enter into a relationship not only with its contemporary practitioners, but also with those who have preceded us in the practice, particularly those whose achievements extended the reach of the practice to its present point" (p. 194). At the same time, a practice is not an institution (the latter being primarily concerned with external goods).

MacIntyre's ideas are important, even if the implications are not always clear and when they are clear they tend to be uncomfortable. Related to the project domain, one would suspect that he would *not* see project management as a practice, on the basis that "Tic-tac-toe is not an example of a practice in this sense, nor is throwing a football with skill; but the game of football is, and so is chess. Bricklaying is not a practice; architecture is" (MacIntyre, 1984: 187). He would likely bemoan the spread of decontextualized educational programmes such as the MBA and, in the domain of project management, PMI certification. These programmes create a managerial class whose members stand outside practice, since they are concentrated on external goods (which can be pursued and obtained in a variety of domains). He might also assert that the fact that (project) management is not a practice is consistent with the spiritual emptiness of the domain.

What then should one do? In these last few paragraphs we will merely outline an agenda for practitioners and, in particular, academics. First, we believe that the concept of virtue needs to be brought back into the discussion and, in particular, into the questions we ask. What do we mean by virtue and why is it important? Which particular virtues should we celebrate and why? Are there universal virtues (history would shed some doubt on this)? What is the relationship between virtue and practice, between virtue and community, and between virtue and tradition? Are there specific virtues associated with the projects domain? Does the notion of the 'project domain' run counter to a theory of virtue? How might an orientation towards virtue change academic research and teaching?

The second theme relates to how MacIntyre's notion of practice – one that is grounded in a community and tradition – might change our understanding of education, and management education in particular. For MacIntyre, education does not stand outside of practice and it is certainly not a practice on its own. Instead, it is a derivative aspect of particular practices. For MacIntyre, "teaching is involved in a variety of practices and … teaching is an ingredient in every practice…[but] teaching is never more than a means, … it has no point and purpose except for the point and purpose of the activities to which it introduces students" (MacIntyre & Dunne, 2002: 9). Again, this does not sit easily with our current understanding of education. It does, however, provide an intriguing basis for re-imagining pedagogy. One educationalist who has engaged with MacIntyre's ideas is John Roberts, whose experiences with alternative modes of teaching in Cambridge provide a very useful pedagogical prototype (Roberts, 1996).

Finally, the ideas worked through in this paper provide a basis for a new form of engagement by academics with the institutions of project management, such as the IPMA and PMI. Contrary to MacIntyre's position, these institutions are equally concerned with internal as well as external goods, in so far as they are very much involved in regulating and defining practice. Bearing in mind Gramsci's warning that academics may (unwittingly) provide a legitimating language for new elites, we have a role to play through directly engaging with such institutions. Akin to Socrates who plied his trade in the middle of the marketplace, we need to be *in media res*, in the middle of things, not just sitting idly by concocting better representations of the world 'out there'. Our language moves from capturing knowledge to techniques for engaging participation in project groups. Participation aimed at generating unforeseen relationships, encouraging dialogue, and stimulating multiple inputs. It is important to point out that our aim is not to supplant practitioners' voices with new trendy postmodern terms. But rather to listen carefully to what practitioners have to say – to draw on vivid stories to highlight challenges, useful techniques, crises that practitioners have experienced.

> An account of a company's venture into overseas markets, how the basic structure of the organization was changed, how people lost and gained jobs, and the attendant excitements and frustrations, may be vivid and empathically absorbing. The specific details cannot be generalized across time and organizations. However, in these concrete detailings, others can more easily locate relevant analogies. In this sense, the language of the circumscribed theory can have greater use-value than the highly general and abstract offering. (Gergen et al., 1996)

What is the role of researchers and commentators on project management in this becoming ontology? To draw on Gergen's (Gergen et al., 1996) image – under the modernist assumptions we were polishing mirrors to better reflect the world to those who didn't have our educated eyes to see reality as it was. Now perhaps we are better cast as crystal ball gazers – we present a view of the world in the hope that it may be…. "to tell it as it might become". The point of our story is not to

abandon other ontologies or forms of knowing (e.g. techniques for project groups) but to recontextualise them (and their questions) in a manner that creates more generative possibilities for theory and practice.

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