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All On a Promise: Critical Studies of Projects and Project Management

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The project holds a particularly significant position in the contemporary organizational landscape, Projects, we are told, are the loci where creativity and innovation take place, where change is enacted, where the new and the novel materialise, where 'business as usual' is disrupted and transformed, and where the routine can be replaced by exploration, excitement and even emancipation for those lucky enough to work in projects. The project, often the megaproject, also takes prime position in the materialisation of grand modernist dreams; the Burj Khalifa/Burj Dubai, the Channel Tunnel, Heathrow's Terminal 5, UK's NHS Patient Records System, China's Three Gorges Dam, the Human Genome Project, the CERN Hadron Collider and each Olympics embodying the same faith in progress and human ambition as the Hoover Dam, Concorde and the Apollo 11 moon landing (Hughes, 1998; Parker, 2009).

Following this logic it is little surprise that projects have increasingly been promoted as "universally-applicable templates for the deliberate integration of diverse specialisms, enabling the organisation of flexible, autonomous, and knowledgeable individuals into temporary teams for the timely, efficient and effective accomplishment of defined goals" (Hodgson and Cicmil, 2007: 222). The process of projectification typically relies on the depiction of the project as an organisational form and management technique supremely suited to the new knowledge-based capitalist economy (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005); hence 'projectification' is accelerated by the restructuring of contemporary capitalism, as an increasing number of organizations across a range of sectors, from IS/IT to creative industries, are identified as "project-based", where almost all operations are organized as projects and where permanent structures are confined to the basic functions of administrative support (cf. Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006; Whitley, 2006). At the same time, this extension of project organising is often undermined by the limitations of hyper-rational project management methodologies, by the rather less emancipatory long-term consequences for project managers and

workers charged with delivering on this heroic mission, and often by a dismal record of delivery according to the self-defined goals of the project.

Understanding this tension requires a grasp of project rationality. In the archetypal project, a specific goal is formulated, a concrete time frame allotted and a dedicated team assigned. Project managers are conceived of as rational decision makers who pay attention to the issue of control in terms of time, costs and quality. In this sense project management stands as a rationalist and universal scheme to be implemented in the same way in all organizations following a sort of neo-Fordist perspective. As the field of project management has belatedly come to terms with recent moves in managerialist discourse, there have been some attempts by proponents of project management to renew the field by adopting modish managerial fashions (drawing on ideas of knowledge management or organisational learning, exploring cultures within project teams, addressing project leadership over project management, or promoting micro-political analyses of stakeholder interests). Typically, however, this new language is used to supplement rather than challenge the hyper-rational focus on planning and control, underpinned by a masculine toughness and heroism.

The intention of this stream is to focus upon the theoretical and methodological limitations of the instrumental rationality implicit in traditional conceptions of projects and project management. In particular, the intention is to draw upon wider intellectual resources than the managerialist, quantitative and positivist methodologies offering the technicist solutions which have traditionally been brought to bear on attempts to understand and control the project form of organising. More recently, critical scholars have begun to problematize projects, their organisation and their societal impact (see Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006; Cicmil et al, 2009), resulting in work which offers new theoretical and empirical insights into this activity and form. Themes explored in critical work include the conflict between flexibility and standardization (Nocker, 2006); issues of power and domination in project settings (Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Marshall, 2006); gender, ethics and moral responsibility within projects (Crevani and Lennerfors, 2009; Nocker, 2009); issues of language and politics (Linehan and Kavanagh, 2006; Räisänen and Linde, 2004; Cicmil et al, 2009b); projects and work intensification (Garrick and Clegg, 2001; Koch, 2004; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006); tensions between creativity and control in project organisations (Styhre, 2006); the nature of and limits to projectification (Andersson and Wickelgren, 2009) and the dysfunctions of project rationality (Thomas and Buckle-Henning, 2007; Whitty and Schulz, 2007). Other work has focused on critical analyses of issues of leadership in projects (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2009), critical examinations of the lived reality of project work (Green, 2006; Cicmil and Gaggiotti, 2009); and the ongoing professionalisation of project management as a career (Hodgson, 2005; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007). In addition to research of this kind, contributions which adopt critical perspectives on the themes of temporality, complexity, phronesis, sustainability, the knowledge economy, professionalisation, pedagogy and education as related to the field of project studies would be of particular interest in this conference stream. Other relevant topics include (but are not restricted to) the following;

- The hegemony of project discourse across industries and societies
- Excess in projects and projectification
- Projects as modernist or post-modernist phenomena
- Projects versus other forms of organizing
- Project-based organizations and the obsolescence of the project ideal
- Projects as a managerial fad or fashion
- The use and abuse of the project form
- Critical project research and the practitioner
- Inequality and power in project organization
- Shame, blame and regret in project environments
- Project management: losing, regaining or strengthening its legitimacy?
- Success, failure and ambivalence in projects
- The gendering of projects
- Projects and the failings of Knowledge Management
- Management accounting regimes and project management
- Projects and the entrepreneurialisation of society
- Critical understandings of the project-based economy
- Critical methodologies for researching projects

In addition to critical work drawing on research in traditional project-dominated fields, we would like to encourage papers which empirically address the widening range of sectors in which organisations and organising are increasingly structured around the project form. Such work might encompass the following fields:

- New Product Development
- Entrepreneurial and Intrapreneurial projects
- International Development projects
- Consultancy and Consulting projects
- Organisational Change projects
- Urban Regeneration and Community Development projects
- New Media and IT related projects
- Art and Exhibition projects
- Innovation projects
- Event Management projects
- Research projects in both industry and academia

Keywords: project, temporality, disruption, change

Those interested are asked to submit abstracts (maximum 1000 words, A4 paper, single spaced, 12 point font) to damian.hodgson@mbs.ac.uk by 1st November 2010. Inquiries about the stream may be addressed to any member of the convening team

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