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## **Making Strategy Critical? Part II: Strategy Redux - Macro Perspectives**

**Andrea Whittle & Chris Carter**

In 2018, we presented Part I of the special issue of *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* that set out collection of critical perspectives on strategy grounded in micro-sociological and philosophical perspectives on the role of strategy in contemporary organizations and society (Volume 53<sup>1</sup>). In the earlier Part I special issue, we saw how sociological and philosophical thinking can enrich, enlighten or even emancipate us from the 'age of strategy' through the eyes of sociologist Erving Goffman (Mueller, 2018), sociologist Harold Garfinkel (Neyland & Whittle, 2018), social psychologist Karl Weick (Brown, 2018), philosopher and historian Michel Foucault (McKinlay & Pezet, 2018), philosopher Gilles Deleuze (Munro & Thanem, 2018) and philosopher Slavoj Žižek (Butler, 2018). In this special issue Part II, we extend this earlier work by considering the macro-sociological and philosophical thinkers that we also believe can enrich, enlighten or even emancipate us from the 'age of strategy'.

Strategizing is a crucial organizational practice. Organizations of all shapes and sizes, of different political stripes, operating in vastly different environments, strategize. Whether it is multinational corporations engaging in strategy 'from above', political parties strategizing their next move in their quest for power, or insurrectionist social movements pursuing 'strategies from below', what is clear is that strategy that matters. Elsewhere (Carter, 2013), it has been argued that we live in the 'Age of Strategy', a reference to the ubiquity of strategy discourse. The aim of this Part II of the special issue on strategy is to expose the reader to a range of more 'macro' sociological and related philosophical approaches that can help understand the complexity of strategy.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/journal/critical-perspectives-on-accounting/vol/53/suppl/C>

This Introduction to the Part II special issue is structured as follows. First, we take the reader through a series of core concepts needed, in our view, to appreciate strategy with a critical lens. We discuss the approach to viewing strategy as a fundamentally political process: the winner and losers of strategic contests and the master strategists carefully calculating the social, economic, political, institutional and symbolic costs and gains of each strategic move, spinning their Machiavellian webs to further their goals (or the goals of their masters). Next, we tackle the issue of bringing power into the analysis of strategy, in all its guises. The section that follows on strategy process picks up the theme of the 'death of planning' and discusses the ongoing process through which strategies are crafted, full of twists, turns, unintended consequences and paradoxes. Strategies can emerge from oblique and indirect action guided by a more or less coherent and more or less shared sense of 'who we are' and 'what we are good at', rather than the clarity and certainty of the strategic goals, targets or KPIs. We then broaden the strategy agenda to the wider social landscape upon which strategies are formed. We consider the significance of social capital for 'pulling off' a strategy, revealing the importance of social networks and diplomacy for garnering support - or perhaps just acquiescence - for strategic change. We also consider the role of dominant strategic blueprints in shaping strategic action and the role of hubris and the (absence of) reflexivity in explaining why so many strategies fail and why so many strategists cling on to failing strategies. In the final section, a summary of the papers in this Part II special issue is provided.

### *Politics*

Strategy is an important activity but not a neutral one. Shiny strategy texts and hagiographic accounts of successful strategists conceal the deeply politicized nature of strategy: it creates winners and losers and it enacts some views of the world while effacing others (Carter et al., 2010). Writers on strategy often miss this point (Carter & Whittle, 2018). Power and politics are as fundamental to strategy as energy is to the study of physics (Clegg et al., 2004). The skilful practice of strategy therefore requires

a deep understanding of power (Flyvbjerg, 1998). Freedman, in his *magnum opus* 'Strategy: A History' asserts:

“So the realm of strategy is one of bargaining and persuasion as well as threats and pressure, psychological as well as physical effects, and words as well as deeds. This is why strategy is the central political art. It is about getting more out of a situation than the starting balance of power would suggest. It is the art of creating power.” (Freedman, 2012: xii)

Therefore, strategies are not created by the economic calculation machines depicted in rational models of strategic positions and options. They are created by people acting within webs of social relations and all they entail: social rules and norms, unwritten expectations and understandings, structures of dependence and interdependence, and systems of domination, exploitation and oppression. Consider a firm such as Uber, which has undoubtedly led a fundamental strategic shift in the personal transportation hire industry but has done so only through the appropriation and exploitation of a raft of social, political and legal relations: the subsidisation of fares to lower-than-cost prices to undercut local taxi firms and drive them out of business (something considered an anti-competitive tactic by some commentators)<sup>2</sup>, the exploitation of the employment status of workers they deemed 'self-employed' to avoid responsibilities for sick pay and holiday pay<sup>3</sup>, and their appeal to civic duty in their relationship with the police and crime agencies designed to legitimate their activities in the eyes of the regulators and general public<sup>4</sup>. Uber's radically innovative business model requires not only a superior level of efficiency or superior value proposition for its customers. It also requires the navigation and negotiation of the social, political and legal systems through which its legitimacy depends. Strategy is deeply cultural and always political.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-04-23/uber-shares-ride-data-to-get-law-enforcement-on-its-side>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-53478402>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-04-23/uber-shares-ride-data-to-get-law-enforcement-on-its-side>

## *Master Strategists*

This understanding of strategy as the “art of creating power” (Freedman, 2012: xii) invokes images of skilled operators who apply strategy to the art of manipulating situations. The modern cultural figuration of the Master Strategist has been born (Clegg et al., 2004). A Master Strategist weaves together insight, data and instinct to achieve great victories against all odds. Powell (2010), for instance, wrote of the *New Machiavellians*, strategists adept in the use and consolidation of power. In the public eye, the media often consecrates political advisors and spin doctors as ‘Master Strategists’. This mantle ascribes exceptional vision and impeccable foresight to them that in all probability exaggerates the abilities of ‘Master Strategists’ to envision the future and make others dance to their tune to turn their vision into reality. We live in the UK and, over the last decade, various political advisors have been hailed as strategic geniuses. They have also received critique and opprobrium in equal measure: for instance, Alastair Campbell and Peter Mandelson in the Blair Government through to Dominic Cummings in the current Johnson administration<sup>5</sup>.

In the UK, many observers point out that Brexit was accomplished through a carefully orchestrated strategy of political cunning, legal manoeuvring, theatrical performance, media manipulation and social media (dis)information. Looking back, it is easy to rewrite history and imagine that the strategists at the heart of the Brexit campaign knew the outcomes of their every move, but the risks and uncertainties they faced were still present. Think, for example, of the strategy used by Johnson to prorogue Parliament in August 2019, a move widely viewed as a strategic tactic designed to force through the Withdrawal Agreement without parliamentary scrutiny. Brexiteers viewed it as a symbol of his heroic efforts to ‘get Brexit done’ – thus solidifying their view that ‘Remoaners’<sup>6</sup> were an enemy of the will of the people; however, it could have gone the other way and led to a loss of trust in his

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<sup>5</sup> This is not restricted to the UK, and similar figures will be found across the political world, such as James Carville, Mary Matalin, or, more recently, Steve Bannon in the United States. Some, such as Sir Lynton Crosby, have played major strategic roles across different countries.

<sup>6</sup> The term ‘Remoaners’ playfully combines the term ‘Remainer’ and ‘Moaner’ to describe those who voted Remain in the 2016 UK Referendum on EU membership and continued to bemoan the consequences of the Leave outcome and continued to campaign for another referendum.

leadership and administration. It is as if each strategic move of both Brexiteers and Remainers had to be carefully calculated in terms of the mix of social, economic, political, institutional and symbolic costs and gains they could potentially generate in service of their ultimate cause.

One also finds such endorsements of strategic cunning in the world of professional sport. Politicians, sportsmen and women are some of the best-known people in society. As a result, they invite media analysis and intrigue concerning the strategies they adopted to achieve their success. This mediatization of strategy reveals much about modern-day 'Master Strategists' that we suspect applies to comparatively unknown people in more mundane organizations across the world. There is considerable identity work in being a 'Master Strategist', which blends an ability to concentrate and exercise huge agency together with a strong personal narrative as to why a strategist should be trusted with such power (Brown, 2018; Mueller, 2018).

### *Power*

Power comes in many forms (Clegg, 1989), and any understanding of strategy requires a broad knowledge of the structures of power. Lukes' (1974; 2005) exposition of power highlights how power operates across different levels. The first dimension of power examines how an individual or group gets their way in a formal setting in a situation of overt conflict. The second dimension examines how some issues or topics never get onto the agenda because those in positions of institutional power seek to control the agenda in public fora. Here, we see not only how power operates in situations of overt conflict but also how it operates unobtrusively by ensuring certain sources of conflict never get articulated in the first place. The third dimension is broader again and concerns how a group fixes situations in their interests through the development of dominant ideas that serve the interests of some groups at the expense of others. The relational turn saw criticism of Lukes' structuralist approach and questioned the idea that 'real interests' can be identified in the third dimension of power (something that Lukes (2004) himself acknowledged and rectified in his second edition of *Power: A*

*Radical View*), but his framework did provide further understanding of how dominant ideas are produced. Flyvbjerg (1998), for instance, in a wonderfully conceived study of power and politics in the Danish City of Aalborg, highlighted how power works best through rationality, but that in a clash naked power will almost always defeat rationality. The Brexiteers used the third face of power skilfully to their advantage, convincing millions of Britons that the European Union was their enemy and their interests would best be served by ‘taking back control’ and restricting immigration. Enemies and bogeymen were created and an alluring sense of proud sovereign identity was constructed that appealed to those who felt disenfranchised and left behind in the wake of regional economic degeneration and the effects of globalization.

### *Process*

Strategy is a processual and iterative activity (Kornberger & Clegg, 2011; MacKay & Chia, 2013; MacKay et al., 2020) rather than something that has a distinct beginning, middle and end. Freedman (2012) points out that it is wrong to think of strategy as ending in a definitive victory or defeat. Instead, a strategy that seemingly resolves one issue often creates a whole set of new problems. In this regard, strategy is less a three-act play and more of a soap-opera: an on-going drama that is never fully resolved. David Cameron’s decision to hold a referendum into Britain’s membership of the European Union is a case in point. The strategy was ostensibly to address Britain’s supposedly problematic relationship with the European Union and, arguably, more importantly, to shore up David Cameron’s position within the Conservative Party and to neutralize the potential effect of the UKIP, a right-wing leave the EU party, on the Conservative’s electoral base<sup>7</sup>. Cameron announced his commitment to a referendum in 2013, to take place in the next Parliament, should he win the General Election. *Bien pensant* opinion held that Cameron’s Conservative Party was unlikely to win an outright majority at

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<sup>7</sup> Britain’s membership of the European Union has been controversial within the Conservative Party for four decades. From the 1990s, a well organised group of ‘Euro Sceptics’ agitated for leaving the European Union. During the 1990s, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) was formed. UKIP exercised electoral pressure on the Conservative Party and often threatened to reduce its vote, as Conservative supporters voted for UKIP.

the election. The most likely outcome was a continuance of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. David Cameron won an outright victory at the 2015 General Election, and in 2016 the European Referendum followed. Cameron narrowly lost the referendum and resigned on the day of the result. Theresa May replaced him, promising that 'Brexit means Brexit'. May fought a General Election on Brexit in June 2017, losing her majority. Numerous defeats followed, and May's Brexit legislation failed to pass. In 2019, May resigned and was replaced by Boris Johnson, as Prime Minister. Numerous legislative defeats followed and in 2019 a General Election was called to resolve the Parliamentary impasse. Johnson promised to 'Get Brexit Done' and framed the election as being solely about Brexit. Labour tried to sidestep Brexit concentrating instead on domestic issues. Johnson won a famous victory in December 2019, securing a landslide win. In January 2020, Britain left the European Union but with a deal between the country and the EU yet to be negotiated. One of the strategic lessons to take from Brexit is that strategy rarely has neat beginnings and ends. Instead it is a process characterized by unpredictability, paradoxes and unintended consequences. Certainly, over four years after the referendum, David Cameron's original strategy of resolving the European issue within his own party has backfired spectacularly.

### *Plans, Mediocrity and Drift*

That strategies rarely unfold as anticipated is widely accepted (Chia & MacKay, 2012; Freedman, 2012; Mintzberg & Walters, 1985; Rumelt, 2012). Strategy comprises of twists, unintended consequences and paradoxes. Of course, organizations develop detailed strategies but as Von Clausewitz famously noted, such strategic plans rarely survive their first contact with the enemy (Kornberger, 2013). Similarly, beyond the military context, a strategy is not implemented in a vacuum. This can be seen clearly during political campaigns, where competing political parties seek to impose their narrative on a campaign, framing the campaign that promotes their preferred vision and diminishes that of their opponents. Alexander (2010) examines Obama's election to the US Presidency in 2008 and re-election in 2012 as a battle of symbolic representation (Alexander, 2016). In the case of Brexit, the Remain

campaign framed their arguments front and centre on the economic implications of the UK leaving the European Union. It was a re-run of Project Fear that had prevailed in the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum. In contrast, the Leave campaign framed their strategy around 'Taking Back Control' (Hobolt, 2016). The two narratives were competitions to fix meaning.

Strategic plans, of course, can be little more than aspirational wish lists, which have little chance of ever being fully achieved. They contain stock phrases and ambitious goals that often bear no relationship to the difficult and sometimes painful and unpopular choices that have to be faced. Rumelt (2012) characterises this as bad strategy. The charge sheet for bad strategy includes: organizations failing to face up to central problems; organizations confusing goals for strategy; the pursuit of busyness or the hallucinogenic allure of blue sky thinking; or merely trotting out the latest list of managerial buzzwords.

### *Obliquity / Peripheral Vision*

Strategy is often very purposeful and utilitarian: go from A to B in a linear fashion. Such strategies rarely work and can often do considerable damage to organizations. Kay (2011) discusses how the ICI, the British industrial giant, went from focusing on the development and application of chemistry to concentrating on delivering Shareholder Value. In the process of trying to accomplish this strategic change, the company reduced its spending on research and development. Over time, ICI undermined itself and destroyed its Shareholder Value. Kay (2011) advances the concept of obliquity whereby goals are often best pursued by indirect means. The assumption is that organizations focusing on what they are good at will lead to better outcomes, rather than some grandiloquent performance goals. Chia and Holt (2009) make a very similar point about the efficacy of indirect action and how strategy and identity are co-productions:

"So, rather than being a transcendent blueprint of a sovereign individual or organization, strategy and identity are co-productive of one another. Both strategy and identity develop

through everyday practical coping and through the cultivation of a style of engagement, and this style or *modus operandi* is what gives consistency, stability and, ultimately, identity to the agent, be it an individual or organization, as a locus of action.” (Chia & Holt, 2009: 650).

### *Social Capital*

Strategy is a social process, meaning social capital (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Starkey & Tempest, 2004) is never far from its development. For instance, a study of John Birt (Carter et al., 2020), Director-General of BBC between 1992 and 1999 demonstrated the importance of social capital in developing the ideas for a strategy. Subsequently, Birt’s social capital was important for promoting the strategy, simultaneously the strategy affirmed Birt’s social capital. Social capital can ascribe legitimacy to a strategy and make it central within a given sector or field (Child & Smith, 1987). In this regard, strategy is very similar to diplomacy: building relationships and persuading key stakeholders about a strategy’s efficacy.

### *Dominant Ideas*

While strategy is a practical activity, it rests on theoretical assumptions about how the world works and how one should behave. These sets of assumptions and ways of thinking and acting shape strategic action regardless of whether the strategist is aware of them. Dominant strategic ideas can hold sway in a given field or sector, making it difficult to deviate from a dominant strategic blueprint. Much ink has been spilled on the governance failures of banks in the run up to the global financial crisis. State intervention prevented the collapse of many of the best known banks within the international financial system. Many of the Chief Executives and Chairpersons of the large banks have justifiably been pilloried for their failings. Yet, it is important to remember that they were all more or less following a strategic recipe that had become *de rigueur* among banks. It became axiomatic that ‘new laws of finance’ existed that permitted greater risk taking on account of the high level mathematics that purported to minimize risk (Fraser, 2014; Tett, 2009). Small-scale banks with strong

geographic footprints disembedded themselves from the local context in the pursuit of being global players in the financial world (Kerr & Robinson 2012; Perman, 2019). It was difficult for banks *not* extending their leverage and not trading in mortgage-backed securities and collateralized debt obligations and to justify this decision, especially when every other bank seemed to be profiting from these activities. Extended leverage and mortgage-based trading was just ‘business as usual’ and everyone, including apparently regulators, assumed at the time that risk was factored into the market based on assessments by credit rating agencies, or would be picked up by auditors.

It is worth asking what might have unfolded had a bank diverged sharply from this strategic epistemic cloud? In all likelihood, the executives of the banks would have been removed for being insufficiently ambitious. There are dominant ideas that are difficult to avoid – as suggested by Lukes’ (1974) third level of power. This is reminiscent of Keynes’ (1936) vivid assertions relating the role of academic ideas on the world of business and government: “Practical men who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back” (Keynes, 1936: 383). Strategic blueprints filter the thinking of all strategists in all organizational fields. Only those that are conscious of them can be reflexively aware of their downsides or dangers. Which brings us to our final section on hubris and reflexivity.

### *Hubris and Reflexivity*

Nutt (2002) estimates that 50 % of major strategic decisions end in failure. If many strategies fail, why do so many strategists believe so firmly in the success of their strategies? More generally, many senior executives succumb to hubris, where intoxicated by their own brilliance they are prone to the myth of their own infallibility (Vaughan, 1997). Reflexivity is core to the strategy process. As Mulgan (2009: 255) points out, ‘strategy fills the space between the wide, almost limitless avenues of what’s possible in the far future, and the modest steps which appear to be on offer in the near future. At its best

organizations face up to their true potential and their weaknesses, but for that very reason it's bound to be uncomfortable.' Strategy is an activity that requires foresight but it remains a gamble.

### **The Papers**

Each of the papers in Part II of our special issue on Making Strategy Critical engages with the work of a key social science thinker and outlines the implications of their insights for the study of strategy. In Part I, we introduced social theorists whose respective perspective is relatively "micro", along with philosophers that we proposed had significant potential in developing meaningful critical knowledge on strategy: Foucault (McKinlay & Pezet, 2018), Garfinkel (Neyland & Whittle, 2018), Deleuze & Guattari (Munro, 2018), Goffman (Mueller, 2018), Weick (Brown, 2018), and Zizek (Butler, 2018). In Part II, we focus on social theorists whose work can be viewed as having a more "macro" scope than those we covered in Part I: Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu, Margaret Archer, Karl Polanyi, and Niklas Luhmann.

### **Anthony Giddens**

Englund, Gerdin and Burns (2020) use the structuration theory of sociologist Anthony Giddens to show how strategizing and accounting intertwine as part of the social practices of everyday organizational life. As a social theorist, Giddens represents arguably one of the most influential scholars of modern times. Certainly, he is the most important British social scientist since John Maynard Keynes. His work illuminated British sociology from the 1970s through to the late 1990s. At the risk of over-generalizing, we view Giddens' career as falling into four periods: (i) Sociological Greats, (ii) Structuration Theory, (iii) Reflexive Modernity, and, (iv) the Third Way. In the first period, Giddens re-interpreted classical sociological theory for a new generation of sociology researchers and students alike (Giddens, 1971). His structuration theory combined insights from structural functionalism, phenomenology and ethnomethodology to answer one of the most complex and intriguing questions faced by any social theorist: how is it that people are on the one hand constrained by social structure and at the same time capable of agentic action that 'breaks free' of these social structures? The answer, for Giddens,

was the 'duality of structure' in which there exists a dynamic interaction and mutual dependence between structural forces and agentic action. Structuration theory has been particularly influential in the Strategy-as-Practice literature as a way of conceptualizing the social practices involved in strategizing (Whittington, 1992).

Giddens' work on reflexive modernity (Giddens, 1990, 1991) engaged with the shifting contours of modernity, not least through globalization and processes of disembedding, surveillance, and identity. The final period of Giddens' career was his most controversial: his role in developing the Third Way (Giddens, 1998). The Third Way's central premise is that traditional class based politics was no longer relevant to politics and the challenge for social democrat governments is to follow a new approach that eschews 'Classical Social Democracy' and 'Neo-liberalism'. Nested in a context characterized by globalization and technological change, the Third Way argued for a synthesis of market economics and social justice. It caught the imagination of Centre-Left political leaders, most notably Tony Blair and Bill Clinton. This period in Giddens career confirmed him as a public intellectual, actively engaged in political debate, while leading the prestigious *London School of Economics and Political Science*. Giddens was later appointed to the House of Lords in the British Parliament. The Third Way elicited heavy criticisms from within academia and its effects were ultimately shortlived (Driver & Martell, 2000; Legget, 2004).

Englund, Gerdin and Burns conceptualize strategizing and accounting not as separate social practices but rather as recursively interlinked, where both form and feed into one another. The authors draw on findings from a case study (including observation of project meetings, interviews with managers and analysis of company documents) in a Swedish subsidiary of a multinational manufacturing company. The study followed the implementation of a capital reduction project designed to address problems with cash flow that were affecting the rapid expansion of the company at the time. As the project progressed, organizational members began to conceptualize the strategy through the accounting measurements used, leading them to question and eventually change the strategic

direction of the firm. The very thing that members believed to be the source of their company's rapid growth and success to date – their ability to be responsive to customers and flexible in making changes to meet their needs – was then reconceptualized as a 'problem' to be addressed by restricting the number of late changes made to orders and standardizing their products and processes.

The authors show how the accounting system served as the practice through which the company's strategy was enacted by furnishing organizational members with a meaning system ('signification structure' in Giddensian terms), a way of sanctioning appropriate and inappropriate behaviour according to a moral order ('legitimation structure' in Giddensian terms) and a way of exercising power over individuals, groups and departments ('domination structure' in Giddensian terms). By following the situated activities of organizational members as they worked on an accounting project, the paper shows how intentional action can lead to unintended changes to the broader structures that make up the organizational strategy. Only by incorporating an understanding of accounting systems as a form of social practice – not only cash flow forecasts and balance sheets but the ways they are used in practice – can we fully conceptualize how organizations develop their strategies in the intended and unintended ways that they do. In this regard, using Structuration Theory alerted Englund et al. to strategy's broader ramifications.

### **Pierre Bourdieu**

Harvey, Yang, Mueller and Maclean use Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the 'field of power' to conceptualize how a major shift in the organizational model of philanthropic fundraising took place in the North East of England. That Pierre Bourdieu was one of the leading sociologists of the twentieth century is well established. In 2012, The Guardian newspaper reported that, after Foucault, Bourdieu is the 2nd most cited philosopher, according to the Thomson Reuters citation index<sup>8</sup>. Enjoying a far-reaching influence across the social sciences, ranging from the sociology of education through to

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/feb/21/pierre-bourdieu-philosophy-most-quoted>  
Accessed: 10<sup>th</sup> June, 2020.

socio-legal studies, the continuing importance of Bourdieu's work is evident: providing the intellectual underpinnings for the recent 'Great British Class Survey', a collaboration between the BBC and British sociologists (Savage et. al, 2012). Bourdieu's influence on strategy has been comparatively underdeveloped.

The social theory of Bourdieu is best known for its way of conceptualizing how power operates in society. Bourdieu is renowned for his theory of the reproduction of social class through the circulation of different forms of capital: social, cultural, economic and symbolic capital. He is also renowned for his theory of the reproduction of elites through the maintenance of positions of power across interconnected social institutions (politics, education, business, the media, the arts, and so on). Bourdieu was a vocal critic of social injustice and champion of the rights of various oppressed groups, viewing his theories of power as playing a vital role in understanding and overcoming forms of inequality, domination and oppression in society.

Harvey, Yang, Mueller and Maclean (2020) propose that strategy theory can be enriched by understanding how strategizing takes place through the struggle for power between less powerful actors and those elites who have command over various types of resources. Adopting a Bourdieusian perspective means rethinking traditional economic theories of strategy with their assumptions about economic competition (e.g., *homo economicus* thinking) and seeing the complex social relations that shape who has power and how they gain it and maintain it. Strategy is, after all, fundamentally about the accumulation and use (or abuse) of sources of power through the control over resources. However, these resources can take many forms and are not only the kind of economic resources used by firms to swallow up rivals or out-compete rivals in a price war. They also include networks of social relations, systems of symbolic association and spheres of influence which are disproportionately available to and advantageous to the established elite.

Importantly, elites can influence not only individual strategic decisions within organizations but also at a broader level, the availability and desirability of particular 'models' or 'templates' for doing

business. Harvey, Yang, Mueller and Maclean show how the elites within the Community Foundation for Tyne & Wear and Northumberland (CFTWN), the largest philanthropic foundation in the UK, set about transforming the foundation with the adoption of a new US-style community foundation model of fundraising. Importantly, this transformation was enacted not only by influential individuals within the foundation but also through a coalition of elites from different institutions with different sources of economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital. The interests of elites who might otherwise oppose the model were accommodated in the process, especially through the reciprocal expectations of social capital. As such, the model was not merely transposed but rather was adapted to fit the local context, with symbolic appeals to the local needs of the region playing a crucial role in mobilizing support. Local elites editing and adaptation of the model highlighted their *habitus* – understanding the game – and their ability to manipulate social and cultural capital to achieve their own ends. By introducing this new business model, the network of elites had succeeded in transforming the foundation's strategic decision-making about the types of charitable projects it entered into and the manner in which it sought to raise funds, while also bolstering their status and legitimacy. Thus, it was through the circulation of capital in networks of power cutting across institutions that this new business model from the US was diffused in the North East of England, shaping the fundraising strategy for years to come. By putting power in all its guises, not just its economic form, at the centre stage, Harvey et al. show how Bourdieusian theory enables us to capture the mechanisms through which elites gain and maintain their position of domination within and across institutions.

### **Margaret Archer**

Margaret Archer is the doyenne of Critical Realism, an approach that has had particular appeal within British social science (cf. Reed, 2011; Thompson, 2013). Sayer, a critical realist fellow traveller, articulates the bedrock assumption of critical realism as 'the belief that there is a world existing independently of our knowledge of it' (Sayer, 2000: p2). This is strikingly different from a constructionist / interpretative view of the world. Margaret Archer spent most of her career at

Warwick University developing work on critical realism. She was 11th president of the International Sociological Association (1986–1990) and in 2014, Pope Francis appointed her as the President of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences (2014-2018).

Archer's work is a seminal expression of the critical realist position. In this volume, Mutch (2020), a well-known Business School critical realist, uses the morphogenetic theory of Margaret Archer to illuminate how moments where strategizing is practiced connect to wider social contexts, as people operate in and find themselves conditioned by social structures not of their making and not of their choosing. According to Mutch, the power of an Archerian perspective lies in the deeply contextual and non-deterministic view of strategy that it can provide. While strategic agents occupy positions not of their own making, they, nonetheless, possess some agency. It is perhaps a mystery for Mutch that Critical Realism has not gained more traction within the field of strategy. Undeterred, like an intellectual traveller boulevarding around the central plazas of strategic thought, Mutch offers possibilities for strategy. Strategy-as-Practice can be strengthened, or perhaps dispensed with altogether; Institutional Logics offer some potential for bridging Critical Realism to the more popular if cheerfully arid world of Institutional Theory (Mutch, 2018); while Socio-Materialism needs rescuing from a Baradian analytical *cul de sac*. Mutch complains that previous strategic forays into Critical Realism, save for Herepath (2014), have not stayed true to the Critical Realist flame. Across two decades, Mutch has been a tireless proselytiser for Archer and Critical Realism. What precisely is the appeal of this perspective?

Mutch views Critical Realism as *the* theory par excellence: 'The claim for Archer's approach is that it can be applied to any situation in social life, whether that be a detailed examination of local strategic practice or the unfolding of relationships between organizations at a societal level' (Mutch, 2020, this volume). This general applicability is a considerable strength. Mutch highlights that Archer's work is complex and distinctive and requires further explanation. Archer defined morphogenesis as follows, 'The 'morpho' element is an acknowledgement that society has no pre-set form or preferred state:

the 'genetic' part is a recognition that it takes its shape from, and is formed by, agents, originating from the intended and unintended consequences of their activities' (Archer, 1995:5). Her approach to research is to start with a contemporary problem and then work backwards. Archer analyses morphogenetic cycles, which at the risk of simplification, go from T4 to T1 in the following process:

T4: Do different social structures have different outcomes?

T2-T3: How can we explain why structures are different in the first place? Structures are dependent on continuous activity, what connections are made between different parts of the structure? What are agents doing? What do agents want? What resistance do agents encounter? Do agents aim to change or maintain the existing social structure? Where do their interests (ideational, material and cultural) lie?

T1: Archer emphasises that all social actors have an inheritance and this is the result of social actor's past thinking and doing. This is what shapes the parts and the relationship between the parts.

Archer's model is a complex one. Much of her empirical work provides historically nuanced explanations of the differences between different education systems. The processes of change are studied in complex and temporally sophisticated ways. Archer's work differs from Bourdieu and Giddens particularly through her assertion that structure and agency are analytically separate and operate on different temporal horizons. Mutch identifies that Archer has radical implications for Strategy-as-Practice, which is implicitly grounded in a structuration perspective, however imperfectly executed.

Archer's work engages directly with the central problematic of social theory: the relationship between structure and agency (Archer, 1995; Mutch, 2017), where, 'we are simultaneously free and constrained and we also have some awareness of it' (Archer, 1995, p. 2). This is highly relevant for strategy, given its tendency to privilege managerial agency. Archer's distinct contribution to the structure / agency debate is her morphogenesis framework outlined above. In doing so, Archer takes

few prisoners in assessing the efforts of others in handling structure and agency. They stand accused of the charge of conflation, which for Archer there is no greater sociological crime! Conflation takes three forms: (i) Upward conflation occurs when agency is accorded primacy over structure, this can be seen in rational choice theory and methodological individualism; (ii) Downward conflation comprises of methodological 'holism' usurping the possibilities of agency (Marxism, functionalism, institutional theory); (iii) Central conflation collapses structure and agency together in a co-constitutive fashion, such as Bourdieu and Giddens. Archer (1995) pours scorn on Giddens as a 'central conflationist', arguing strongly against what she views as his excessive view of the interaction between structure and agency. In British sociology, Archer versus Giddens was one of the more entertaining talking points of the 1990s: Archer persistently skewered Giddens for his 'central conflationism' at the very point Giddens assumed the role of public intellectual, political pundit and advisor to Tony Blair. Despite the differences between the two, Kay (2010: 255) suggests the 'underlying connection between Archer and Giddens became increasingly clear in the 1990s as Archer came under the influence of Roy Bhaskar'.

The critical realist lens emphasises reflexivity in the morphogenetic process. Caetano (2017:67) asserts that, 'one of the greatest merits of Archer's research is the problematisation of reflexivity based on the notion of internal conversations'. The term 'conditioned by' social structure is important here because it captures the way in which social structures (such as social norms, rules, sanctions and so on) shape or guide, but do not fully determine, the courses of action that people choose. For Archer, it is the agency made possible by reflexivity that enables social change. Reflexivity here refers to the human capacity to monitor and reflect on our actions and their role in satisfying our value-laden goals, including reflection on the forms of reflexivity used to do this monitoring and evaluation. Of course, structure also acts here: not everyone is equally able, or permitted, to engage in the kinds of reflexivity that enable social change.

Given the fact that Archer's theory of morphogenesis and reflexivity was developed to explain a range of social questions in several different domains, including the sociology of education where Archer started her early work, it is no surprise that these theories also have analytic purchase on questions of organizational strategy. As social systems, organizations also exhibit these same patterns of social stability and change over time, driven by the dynamics of social interactions working within, and sometimes ultimately transforming, pre-existing social structures. Mutch (2020) gives several examples of how Archer's morphogenetic theory enables us to explain strategic action (and inaction) in organizations. He cites the different paths taken by some breweries expanding into retailing linked to the historical experiences of managing public houses, while their rivals were unencumbered by such historical legacies. He also describes the implementation of Enterprise Resource Planning systems that generate new 'thought styles' that promote certain types of reflexivity and undermine others. Mutch (2020) suggests that Archer's stance on reflexivity has much to offer strategy. This is an area underexplored by strategy research in general.

Archer has also analyzed the role of the Multinational Corporation and contemporary Information Systems in promoting particular formalized and codified forms of autonomous reflexivity, where reflection and evaluation of alternative courses of action are completed autonomously without the contribution of others (including the nation-state) into the reflection process. To understand strategy, we not only need to understand how strategic choices are made, but crucially also how prevailing conditions and logics condition these choices not of the making and not of the choosing of those concerned. Importantly, a methodological implication also follows, namely the need to pay more attention to history than is typically the case in the field of strategic management, to understand how, when and where these conditions of constraint emerged.

### **Karl Polanyi**

Faulconbridge and Muzio (2020) draw on insights from Karl Polanyi's economic sociology to develop novel insights into the embedded nature of strategizing. Karl Polanyi was not a typical economist as

he spent his career seeking to understand the relationship between economic systems and social systems. Through detailed historical and anthropological studies, he tried to understand the social conditions and contexts in which particular market and non-market economic systems functioned, promulgated and declined. Polanyi rejected the starting point of classical economics with the atomistic and rational economic individual. Instead, he focused on the role of social systems and especially institutions in the formation and regulation of economic exchange systems.

The term 'embeddedness' seeks to capture this relationship by emphasizing how economic systems are always embedded in social relations and social institutions (such as the state, regulatory policies, religious institutions, and so on). Polanyi showed that laissez-faire markets, which were assumed to operate independently from the state, actually relied on the state for their inception and continuation. However, the state also plays a dual role in not only enabling free-market exchange but also 'taming' the market when their effects are judged to be destructive. Crucially, sensitivity to embeddedness also means sensitivity to geographical and historical differences, as the role of the state differs over history and across countries according to the values of the society represented by the state. The markets and organizations involved in economic exchange, from a Polanyian perspective, can look very different as a result of the heterogeneous institutional systems in which they operate. The varieties of capitalism literature has since advanced these ideas by mapping the heterogeneous roles played by the nation-states around the world in balancing these dual enabling and taming roles.

Faulconbridge and Muzio assert that Polanyi's ideas about embeddedness have rich potential for enlightening strategy scholarship. It allows research strategists to move the level of analysis away from the individual organization towards a broader level of analysis that captures how organizational strategies are shaped by relationships between markets, the state and society. Firms do not have free choice about the strategies they adopt, as models of strategic choice often assume. Instead, they are always shaped by the social relations and institutional structures that bear down on what is viable and what is considered legitimate. The trading of commodities – such as land, labour and knowledge – can

only be possible when the state has transformed them into legal entities that can be traded. Thus, the state plays a role both in making certain strategies viable by creating legal structures, it also plays a role in making certain strategies more legitimate than others through its involvement in reinforcing the underlying beliefs, value systems and customs that underpin them.

Faulconbridge and Muzio show how this institutional embeddedness operated during a period of contestation in the strategies of English law firms operating in Italy. Using archival data and interview data, they show how the incoming English firms sought but failed to enact a transformation in the business models used in the Italian legal sector, displacing the smaller regionally based Italian law firms with their more Taylorised, standardized and globally integrated full-service model. Factors such as the strong personal bonds and long-term relationships between lawyers and clients, in addition to the small fiefdom-like paternalistic organization of the small Italian firms and the influential role of universities in governing entry into and policing the profession, meant the formalized and arms-length style transactions favoured by the English global firms failed to take hold. These traits of Italian firms, which remained intact and were even reinforced by the arrival of the English rivals, had their basis not only in legal structures (such as regulations which in effect barred formal employment in law firms) but also in the wider societal understandings of what was a morally and culturally legitimate way of doing business. The strategy of the English legal firms failed because the practices they imported were viewed as morally and culturally alien and illegitimate. By extending the analysis to state and society in this way following Polanyi, we are able to understand not only why particular strategies emerge but crucially also why they succeed or fail. For the strategy field, then, Faulconbridge and Muzio propose that taking Polanyi seriously means starting to ask broader questions about how organizational strategies are affected by and affect, state-market-society relationships.

### **Niklas Luhmann**

Rasche and Seidl (2020) examine the implications of Luhmann's work for the study of strategy. Luhmann was a prolific sociologist, publishing 75 books and 200 articles. His work spanned a number

of topics but he is best known for his systems theory. Communication is at the core of Luhmann's system theory. It comprises of, (i) information to be communicated, (ii) utterances, or the way in which content is communicated, and, critically, (iii) how are information and utterances actually understood. Luhmann's conceptualization of communication is emergent, hinging on the interactions between social actors. This occurs within a broader communication process where meaning is established.

Rasche and Seidl explore how Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems enables us to rethink how we approach the questions of strategy content (i.e. what strategies are chosen), process (i.e. how strategies are selected and implemented) and context (i.e. the environment of strategies). Luhmann was a controversial but equally influential thinker who took his inspiration not only from the systems theory of structural functionalist sociologist Talcott Parsons but also from advanced systems thinking in biology, philosophy and cybernetics. Luhmann made two radical propositions: that the social world consists of nothing but systems of communication and that communications are not generated by people but by communication networks with a life of their own. As Borch (2005) notes, this has implications for Luhmann's conceptualisation of power:

'It combines a sophisticated, flexible and non-causal perspective on power with a general theory of society and its evolution. Here, power is viewed as a byproduct of societal evolution or, more accurately, as an effective means of dealing with increasing complexity.' (Borch, 2005, p. 155).

Luhmann viewed communication as the very essence of the social world because communication is the only genuinely social operation, since communication presupposes another person being interacted with. He saw communication systems as self-referential because the understanding of a communication can only be established on the basis of further communications (for example, think of how the understanding of a question is only known from hearing how the recipient answered it). Communication is therefore not conceptualized as a process of exchanging information but rather as a never-ending process of determining the understanding of previous communications. Since social

systems can only be formed through communications that occur within them, communication systems exhibit a self-referential reproduction that Luhmann terms (from systems theory) as 'autopoietic' (meaning a system that can reproduce and sustain itself).

Organizations, like any social system, are comprised of these self-referential and self-reproducing systems of communication. The strategies of organizations, by definition, are therefore understood as the outcomes of the decisions made within these communication systems. As these self-referential systems evolve over time, idiosyncratic ways of observing the world and distinguishing things within it emerge – for example, when one firm understands a strategic issue as provoking intensified competition with rivals whereas another firm views the same strategic issue in terms of opportunities for cooperation or collaboration. It is in this sense that Luhmann's theory proposes that communications 'construct' the world, insofar as what we observe is a result of our own distinctions.

What does Luhmann's theory of social systems mean for how we study strategizing? Rasche and Seidl outline three areas in which Luhmannian theorizing can enrich the study of strategizing. In terms of strategy context, the environment of strategizing is conventionally understood as a pre-existing context for strategic decisions and actions to take place in. For example, markets and competitive forces are presumed to be pre-existing environments in theories such as 'five forces' analysis or transaction cost economics, with firms advised to adapt to or exploit to these environments to their competitive advantage. For Luhmann, however, the 'environment' does not exist independently of the organization and its communication system, it exists only through the continued use of systems of distinction used in its communications (for example, distinguishing 'customers', 'competitors', 'partners' and so on). It is here that Rasche and Seidl forge important conceptual bridges to Weick's concept of 'enactment' (see also Brown, 2018). In terms of strategy content, conventional approaches such as the Boston Consulting Group matrix, five forces analysis, the balanced scorecard and blue ocean strategy provide supposedly universally applicable frameworks for selecting superior strategies. For Luhmann, however, these concepts and tools are 'empty' and meaningless until they are applied

in an organizational communication system, generating an inherent degree of modification and adaptation as they are integrated into the distinction systems and 'internal logic' being used to generate understanding. Rather than viewing the ambiguity and interpretive flexibility of strategy concepts as a problem, then, we can view it as a necessary condition of its spread and adoption.

Finally, Rasche and Seidl propose that the study of the strategy process can be enriched by understanding the 'double contingency' of strategic decision-making, namely, situations where one party's actions depend on the action of another, and vice versa, while both parties do not have complete knowledge of what the other will do (think of two firms both contemplating competing through a price cut but unable to fully know whether the other will follow suit and spark a price war to the disadvantage of both parties). While game theory has of course shown how these situations play out, Luhmann's thinking emphasizes the underlying paradox on which they are based, namely the need to justify a selection amongst alternative courses of action while at the same time being unable to justify the selection prior to the decision being made. Rather than view this paradox as a problem to be addressed, Luhmann views it as constitutive of the organizing process. Strategic plans, forecasts and vision statements provide excuses and justifications for action that conceal the paradox and make organized action possible, thereby avoiding paralysis by the paradox. The important thing, then, is not whether every aspect of the plan, forecast or vision is implemented or how accurate it was, but whether it is plausible enough to generate shared understanding and meaningful action in the communication system that makes up the organization.

Taken together, Rasche and Seidl's proposition for a Luhmannian approach to studying strategy means viewing strategizing as a system of meta-communication, that is, a second-order form of communication about the communication system. Strategic communications, such as strategy workshops, away-days, plans, budgets and vision and mission statements, are communications about the way the organization observes itself and its environment (for example, viewing a group of people as potential customers or by viewing a current competitor as a potential partner). By making its own

observational distinctions explicit and reflecting on them, possibilities for strategic change are generated (for example, a new strategy tool could lead to a new distinction of the organization's core competence being introduced). This means viewing supposedly 'external' sources of strategic change, such as a new strategy tool or concept, as actually internal to the organizational communication system, since it is this system of distinctions that creates the meaning of the tool or concept and hence its effects. Any strategic change an organization makes, then, is ultimately an adaptation to the organization's own image of the environment. This Luhmannian perspective is nothing short of a radical new proposition that turns on its head conventional strategic management thinking about organizations as surviving or succeeding through adaptation to their environment.

## **Conclusions**

Strategy research must do better. It needs to speak to the great challenges of our times and provide more profound understandings of the challenges ahead. By linking the critical study of strategy with the critical study of accounting, we can open up avenues through which the practices of strategizing can be understood as a social, cultural, power-laden and political process. Accounting research matters to strategy research, and vice versa. The field of accounting led the way in introducing critical theories into the study of organizational practices, through the study of accounting and accountability (e.g. Hoskin & Macve, 1986, 1988; Miller, 1990; Miller & O'Leary, 1987; Power, 1997, 2011). It is therefore not surprising that we believe that the study of strategizing needs a deep engagement with how critical social theory and philosophical thinking recasts the theory and practice of strategy as a contested social, cultural and political phenomenon, in keeping with this earlier ground-breaking work.

Our project is an ecumenical one, arguing that a progressive, critical approach to strategy has much to gain from studying insights from some of the great thinkers of sociological theory. As a field, strategic management research is grounded in the orthodoxy of economics. We want to create a field

that is genuinely interdisciplinary, in the same way as accounting research has developed, embracing theories from sociology, political science and social psychology as well as economics. Without wanting to create a straw man, and recognizing the great advances made in economics that reject the assumptions about rationality and choice of neoclassic economics and embrace social science, the field of strategy can only progress if it starts to ask the kinds of questions that can only be answered by social theory. In Part II of our special issue on Making Strategy Critical, we see the richness offered by the works of Archer, Bourdieu, Giddens, Luhmann, and Polanyi. In each case, their work speaks directly to strategy. But what are these new questions? And what kinds of answers do these social theorists propose?

Englund, Gerdin and Burns (2020) enable us to ask: how do organizations come to enact a shift in their strategy? The answer provided by the social theory of Giddens suggests that the change in strategy arose not through a process of rational choice but through the meanings, norms and power relations surrounding the organization's accounting system.

Harvey, Yang, Mueller and Maclean (2020) enable us to ask: how do business models come to dominate entire institutional fields? The answer provided by the social theory of Bourdieu is that the rise and fall of business models has less to do with rational assessments of their strategic value and more to do with the power struggles between less powerful actors and elites through the flow and exchange of social, cultural and economic capital. It is not only the business models at stake in these struggles, it is structures of power, prestige and privilege being shaped: who gets to claim superiority and who gets to call the shots.

Mutch (2020) enables us to ask: how do strategists 'break free' from the social structures conditioning their actions and exercise agency to enact strategic change? The answer provided by the social theory of Archer lies in understanding the reflexivity through which people can both reflect on their goals, as well as reflecting on the methods they use to evaluate their goals. History also now matters, as we

seek to understand how the weight of history bears down upon agents and constrains their ability to manoeuvre through the conditions and logics that were not of their choosing and not of their making.

Falconbridge and Muzio (2020) enable us to ask: how are strategic choices shaped by the relationship between markets, the state and society? The answer provided by the social theory of Polanyi is through the embeddedness of economic activity in the social relations and institutional structures that shape what is considered viable and legitimate. The state becomes the key strategic player, not just the firm, as it creates legal systems and reinforces societal beliefs, value systems and customs that underpin particular strategies. Geography, as well as history, now matters. Strategies that work in one country then fail when they are transported elsewhere, when they meet a new nexus of state-market-society relationships.

Rasche and Seidl (2020) enable us to ask: how can we conceptualize strategy context, content and process as communication systems? The answer provided by the social theory of Luhmann is to view organizations as self-referential and self-reproducing 'autopoietic' systems of communication. Strategizing is no longer conceptualized as the rational selection of superior courses of action from among a range of alternatives following the prescriptions of generic tools and models (5 forces, Boston matrix, blue ocean, and so on). Rather, strategizing is undertaken within communication systems with a 'life of their own', in an ongoing system of producing communications and interpreting the organization's reactions. Strategies – the kinds of written documents, spreadsheets and presentations outlining the future plans, budgets, visions and mission statements that we are all familiar with – are merely a form of meta-communication: a communication about the organization's communication system.

Our argument is that the theory and practice of strategy can be greatly enriched by engaging with major theoretical achievements of the past. Strategic practice requires asking difficult questions of an organisation and its context. It also means moving beyond *bien pensant* opinion and asking different questions. This is where social theory helps. Our view of strategy is a progressive one. Our question is

how can organisations achieve progressive outcomes? Our answer is that engaging with sociological and philosophical thinkers is a good place to start.

Overall, Parts I and II of our special issue on 'Making Strategy Critical' offer an overview of different theoretical perspectives that can be productively mobilized by management and accounting researchers in understanding not only strategy and how it intermingles with power, but also a wide range of organizational and accounting phenomena that impact the lives of many people both within and beyond the frontiers of organizations. We hope the articles in this special issue precipitate further critical research into strategy and explorations of its relationship with accounting.

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