

Strategy, Strategizing and Making Things Strategic: Analytical Frames for Studying Power and Strategy

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“[Strategy] is the art of creating power.”

Lawrence Freedman, 2013: xii

ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates how power theories can inform the study of strategy as practice, and vice versa. Understanding strategy with Freedman as the “art of creating power”, the study of the ways in which power and strategy interact, and how one leads to the other should be a central concern for scholars of strategy. Whilst providing an overview over the key writings that have emerged at the interface between power and strategy, this chapter also attempts to point towards several possible future lines of inquiry. It is organized following a rather simple heuristic device (strategy as noun, strategizing as verb, strategic as adjective) which will emphasise the different agents, mechanisms and effects that can guide the analysis of power and strategy.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a systematic reflection on how power can be used as analytical framework to study strategy. Such an endeavour faces the difficulty of having to deal with two rather large bookshelves: one collects those authors that share a concern with power, albeit that they might not use the term strategy; on the other shelves the writers on strategy often tend to have a more implicit than explicit interest in theories of power. To make things even more difficult, the two bookshelves are usually placed in different part of libraries. Philosophers, sociologists, political scientists, organization theorists and others may well be interested in power but business school professors study strategy in overwhelmingly economic terms with competition conceived as warfare by other means. It is ironical that, for all the forceful imagery of strategy writing, often drawing on military metaphors, there is a dearth of explicit account of power relations and strategy. The irony attaches to the fact that strategy is so consciously aimed at changing power relations – in the market, in the organization, or vis-à-vis government regulators; it speaks of “forces” and (value) “chains”, of competition and advantages but strangely it neglects issues of power. We find Freedman’s introductory quote one of the most apt definitions of strategy as it alludes to the important fact that power is dynamically created in specific contexts, and that it is power that makes it possible to accomplish an objective. For Freedman (2013) strategy is the “central political art” as it is concerned with getting more out of a situation than the balance of power would initially suggest. It is in this sense that strategy is concerned with the creation of power. Perhaps it is telling that Freedman is a Professor of War Studies (and thus his books are located on yet other shelves in the libraries).

In this chapter we will roam and range in the library, moving from one shelf to another, following ideas and mobilizing authors to achieve the following structure: first we will review some of the key texts of the strategy-as-practice literature that deals with power. We will frame analysis by discussing

the relation between power and 1) strategy as noun, 2) strategizing as verb 3) making things strategic (strategic as adjective). Such a simple heuristic device will enable us to emphasise the different agents, mechanisms and effects that can guide the study of power and strategy. We conclude our chapter with a brief reflection on further research opportunities that follow from our analysis.

REVIEWING STRATEGY-AS-PRACTICE AND POWER

It is strategy-as-practice's big accomplishment to have scholars that have connected the two bookshelves and established first a trickle, then a flow of communication across disciplinary boundaries (see for an overview Vaara and Whittington, 2012). As result, there are a number of contributions to the strategy-as-practice literature that make the point that strategy and power relations are necessarily coterminous. We will briefly review some of the most significant of recent empirical accounts, all of which find some direction from Knights and Morgan's (1991) embryonic paper, developing the critical strand of strategy-as-practice research with an interest in power relations (for early accounts see, Ezzamel and Willmott, 2004; 2008; Hendry, 2000; Lilley, 2001).

Drawing on Foucault, the novel idea put forward by Knights and Morgan was to suggest that strategy discourses exercises power: it is various strategy discourses that constitute subject positions and delineate the space in which the manager emerges as a strategic actor. Strategy was defined as a set of (discursive) practices that had to be analysed with regard to their power effects on the organization, the environment and those doing the strategizing. Knights and Morgan put special emphasis on the strategist's identity who, in their view, represented a new form of subjectivity that stands in contrast to that of the bureaucrat, the planner and other much criticized embodiments of the "organization man" (Whyte 2013).

The focus on discourse has provided fertile soil for the study of strategy. For instance, Phillips et al. (2008: 772) argued that discourse, including that of strategy, is "continually and recursively acting on

individual meaning making through the operation of text.” When strategists engage in discursive practices – when they write or speak as strategists – they engage simultaneously in a political activity in which they are involved in “a struggle for power in and around organizations that seeks to determine the nature of concepts and subject positions and to control how the resulting objects are understood and treated” (Phillips et al., 2008: 773; see also Hardy and Thomas, 2013). In the same vein, Fenton and Langley (2011: 3) argue that “[s]trategy narratives select and prioritize – indeed, this is their ostensible managerial purpose. However, as they achieve this, they also implicitly express, construct and reproduce legitimate power structures, organizational roles, and ideologies (Mumby, 1987).” In an empirical application, Vaara and his colleagues (2010) analysed how the strategy discourse shaped the city administration of Lahti, Finland. They argue that strategy documents serve several purposes, “they communicate negotiated meanings, legitimate ways of thinking and action and de-legitimate others, produce consent but may also trigger resistance, and have all kinds of political and ideological effects, some more apparent than others” (Vaara et al., 2010: 686). Likewise, Eriksson and Lehtimäki (2001: 202) suggest understanding “strategy rhetoric as a cultural product on which the strategy-makers draw, because the rhetoric is regarded as effective and convincing [... it] is taken as self-evident and legitimate, and is used without questioning the presumptions on which it is built.” These studies share a concern with how the discursive practices of strategizing not only express and legitimate power relations, but also constitute and “create” power, to use Friedman’s phrase: strategy represents the instrument which allows to speak on behalf of others, including people, shareholders, the future or the environment. Collecting these voices in the strategy discourse, the strategist amplifies her power and influence.

On a more micro-discursive level, Samra-Fredricks (2005) offered ethnographies of strategists at-work based on audio recording their naturally occurring talk-based interactive routines. Strongly influenced by ethnomethodological conversation analysis (CA) she carefully investigated how order is produced in and from everyday talk. Strategic practice is re-conceptualized in terms of four forms of knowledge which ‘make-up’ the validity claims of truthfulness, correctness, sincerity and intelligibility

that any 'discourse' must make to be taken seriously by would be rational actors. Samra-Fredericks analysed the talk in use by people, organizationally, in doing strategy as her empirical material, noting that such strategy talk assumes 'much symbolic significance and material consequentiality when skilfully spoken/deployed and combined with other features at the right time and in the 'correct' way' (Samra-Freericks 2005: 828).

Building on both Knights and Morgan (1991) and Samra-Fredericks (2005), McCabe (2010) seeks to supplement accounts of the doing of strategy with those of doing power and stratification.

Necessarily, a critique of the conventional organization theory power literature is made as being overly managerial; instead a relational Foucauldian analysis of power is called for. Unlike Samra-Fredericks' sole focus on talk the discursive materials drawn on also include written documents from within the organization in question. Strategy is analyzed as 'a manifestation of the managerial claim to power' (McCabe 2010: 172). Similarly, Laine and Vaara (2010) analyse strategy discourses as a form of top management mobilization in the struggle for control in the organization. From their perspective strategy seeks to establish hegemony by creating coherence and consensus amongst organization members. What happens, however, is that these attempts at control work as occasions for discursive and other forms of resistance, especially by middle managers who develop alternate but coupled strategy discourses that provide them with room to manoeuvre in controversial situations. Strategy seeks to impose corporate identity that is often resisted – in this case, especially by project engineers who have quite distinct notions of identity. Organizational discourse then becomes seen as a battlefield on which competing groups struggle to assert strategy as they see it. Specific discourses, taken to be strategy by their progenitors, create subject positions for those whom they envisage, configure and constitute as objects of strategy. These others, however, have ideas of their own to draw on as well as discursive capabilities that enable them to do so. Hence, the struggles over strategy become, inevitably, struggles over diverse identity claims: discourses around strategizing involve battles over agency and identity, as Laine and Vaara (2010) demonstrate. Frequently, as in the case considered, these play out in ways that the originators of the formal strategies never envisaged or

anticipated.

Hence strategy represents a form of change, directed or not, intended or not. Change threatens the balance of power and provoked resistance: in fact, resistance is a constitutive element of power relations (Foucault, 1994). Thomas, Sargent and Hardy (2011) show how organizational becoming in which strategic meaning is negotiated occurs in and through organizational talk targeted toward organizational change. While they establish that resistance to such strategy talk often ensues they see such resistance as being potentially generative dialogue, in which resistance can be a positive form of power as well as more oppositional and inhibiting of innovation (see Courpasson et al., 2012).

In sum, what we can learn from reviewing some of the most important studies on strategy-as-practice and power relations is that the use of language is central to the analysis of strategy in practice, whether as written text, formal discourse or situated talk. As we have seen, from the 1990s onwards, a steadily growing body of literature reflected this insight, advocating the study of strategy as narrative, using the tools of discourse analysis to dissect power effects. The underlying assumption of this stream of research is that strategies are narratives and “pedagogic devices” that, through their language, format how organizations are imagined, what their key properties are, and how they should be managed (Oakes et al., 1998). Strategy exercises what Bourdieu (1977) labelled symbolic power: through its aesthetics (think of the often evoked ‘big pictures’ that strategists produce, literally, as images: Kornberger, 2012) it constructs social order.

No doubt, discourse is central to the exercise of power; but an analytics focused on discursive power does not exhaust the ways in which power might operate in practice. In order to systematically explore complementary analytical strategies we have organized our chapter through the following heuristic: the relation between power and 1.) strategy as noun, 2.) strategizing as verb 3.) making things strategic (strategic as adjective). Using the distinction between noun, verb and adjective we can propose a sketch that tabulates the differences implied (see Table 1). As the Table indicates each

perspective focuses on different elements of the strategy-as-practice mix. Next, we shall discuss the distinctions between them in more detail.

	Key concepts	Theoretical inspirations	Who has agency in the strategy process	Locus of strategizing
Strategy	Decision-making, non-decision making and interests	Political science, sociology (Bachrach and Baratz, Lukes and others)	Top management	Headquarters
Strategizing	Practice, discourse and technology	Philosophy, anthropology sociology (Foucault, Wittgenstein and practice theorists)	Top management and others (mainly middle managers)	Organization, including practices, routines, rituals and technologies
Making things strategic	Visualization, valuation and mobilization	Social studies of science, (actor) network theory, new economic sociology, anthropology of markets, accounting	Human and non-human actors; collective action	Networks, devices and obligatory passage points

Table 1: Summary of analytical framework to study power and strategy, strategizing and making things strategic.

STRATEGY: THE NOUN

Strategy, power and interests

Some early strategy writers who were engaged with what were in their day current debates about power relations did appreciate the linkages between strategy and power. One of the best cases in point is Andrew Pettigrew (1973) who wrote on power and strategic decision-making:

“[D]ecision-making is a political process in which outcomes are a function of the balancing of various power vectors. The processing of demands and the generation of support are the

principle components of the general political structure through which power is wielded. The final decisional outcome will evolve out of the processes of power mobilisation attempted by each party in support of its demand.”

Here, decision-making represents the link between the strategist on the one hand, and power on the other hand. In the moment of decision-making both collide. Pettigrew’s (1985) historical account of change at ICI, the major British chemical company, illustrates this collision. Dissatisfied with the simple linearity of existing accounts of strategy as a matter of ‘formulation’, ‘implementation’, and ‘process’ Pettigrew drew on his background as an anthropologist and sociologist to study strategic decision-making as a process deeply embedded in the context of the firm in which it occurs. From this perspective, the idea that strategy is first formulated and then what is formulated is implemented in a linear fashion is misjudged: in practice the two stages meld together, informing each other as a process that elapses through time. What makes decision-making strategic is not the announcement of something as strategic or not so much as the extent to which a strategic direction unfolds over time: we should not expect it to do so evenly or linearly; instead, there will be missteps, some forward and some backwards, that become glossed as demonstrating historical continuities over time. Those glosses that prevail are those with the most clout: it is power relations and political struggles that provide narrative consistency by means of accounts that reflect the outcomes of these relations and struggles. ICI attempted to change its strategy, structure, technology, and organizational culture over the period of 1960-1983. Pettigrew collected both comparative and longitudinal data from four of ICI’s largest divisions and from the corporate headquarters. And indeed, the change process was unlike textbook depictions: divisions were disinterested in the changes that they saw being imposed on them; they contested them, creating not so much an unfolding dynamic strategy unfolding as one marked frequently by inertia and failure to connect in ways that were planned. Plans do not make strategies; politics do. Radical change produces radical resistance and slow absorption of the changes planned.

Pettigrew's work was a useful corrective to some earlier views of strategic choice, which Child (1972) had pioneered. These views assumed that organizational elites were able to make strategic choices that would shape the determinants of contingency theory: the environment, technology and size of the firm. Although Child's views are correct in critiquing the determinism of earlier contingency views of design if only because organizational design is not an adaptive response to structural contingencies over which there is no choice, the perspective that he brought to bear stands corrected by Pettigrew. Organizational elites might make choices strategically but the process whereby these choices may or may not be enacted is a complex and highly political process, the micro-management of which is crucial to the strategic outcomes.

Both Pettigrew and Child focused on decision-making as locus of strategy; what both overlooked is that there is also non-decision making through which power might be exercised. Non-decision making, as introduced into the literature by Bachrach and Baratz (1962) follows this logic – actors with vested interests in particular arenas of power seek to make issues disappear or frame them in such a way that they fall outside of people's agendas. To the extent that they are successful these actors bound other actors' rationality. Following Bachrach and Baratz, choices have to be scrutinized critically as they might conceal more than they presumably offer: to choose between green energy and of other, less sustainable sources of energy might be a choice; yet what this choice conceals is the more difficult discussion about the need to slow down energy usage, change consumption patterns and perhaps discard the imperative of continuous economic growth. A version of the same empirical logic is clearly at play also in Flyvbjerg's (1998) analysis of the different strategies of power relations evident in the municipality of Aalborg in Denmark as a ten-year struggle to produce an integrated bus station and transport hub unfolded in a process in which agents representing cyclists, motorists, local business men and women, councillors, the media and academic researchers became enrolled. Their interests and access to differential resources patterned the logic of the various actors' strategies. Power relations proved to be the authors of strategy: as we have said elsewhere (Carter et al. 2008), policy follows politics, much as Machiavelli (1995) stipulated.

From hidden preferences to “real” interests?

For Bachrach and Baratz (1962) there were two faces of power: the seen and the unseen; decision-making and non-decision-making; the world of issues and non-issues. A few years later Lukes (1974) remade their two faces of power as a two-dimensional model to which he added a third dimension. At the core of the third dimension of power was a conception of power working against the interests of actors.

The notion of interests and of power as a set of practices that serve to occlude interests is potent. It was at the base of Herbert Marcuse's (1964) influential model of one-dimensional man in which he drew heavily on Vance Packard's (1957) *The Hidden Persuaders*. Such a view of strategy could be easily elaborated: strategy would assert itself by systematically developing a false sense of what actor's interests are in order to sell them products that they neither need nor really want. Marketing strategy that builds market share for products based on other than authentic interests is the well-known case in point: power works through making people believe that it is in their own best interest to buy the latest mobile phone or pair of jeans. Power, according to Lukes, works best when people internalize power's interests to the point where they believe it to be their own desires and choices.

Tempting as this line is, it is difficult to hold. First, it assumes that actors have preferences that are, albeit inauthentic, nonetheless coherent and stable; this resembles the image of the *homo oeconomicus* – an atomistic calculative rational actor, just with an inverse mathematical sign. A considerable amount of organization theory research that has its roots in Simon's (1957) notion of 'bounded rationality' has criticized the idea of stable preferences that guide rational actors' decision making processes. Second, the assumption that actors have interests that they do not know but that some other can and does know assumes that someone – the theoretician or the strategist – has some insight into what the “real” interests of the person are. Conceptually, the latter condition reveals the roots of this perspective in the worldview of Marxism, especially the Leninist variant (inherited and inherent in,

one may want to add, some strands of Critical Management Studies), in which stipulative definition of the real interest of whole bio-political categories of ‘workers’, ‘peasants’, ‘kulaks’, intellectuals’ etc., could be assumed. To tell the other what their real interests are against their preferences, however they are shaped or however mistaken one thinks them to be, is a profoundly undemocratic act: it assumes that the other does not know their own mind and that one does.

Analytically, this leaves power researchers in a difficult position: when the people they study claim that they do what they do because of their choice, the theory diagnoses this as sure sign of strong power being exercised. Hence, the researcher has to dismiss what informants tell her and bracket what they say as false consciousness or something along those lines. Indeed, a great deal of critical research on fields such as strategy entails implicit conspiracy logic in which subjects of strategy misrecognise their interests because they have been systematically duped into being sold something that they do not really need. By contrast, the ways subjects constitute their interests are fluid, viscous, and liquid. What we can say is that strategy is oriented towards constituting, framing, shaping, channelling and changing subjects’ preferences and to the extent that it is able to do so then it necessarily affects interests. Perhaps the easiest way to think of this is in terms of political strategy: selling state-owned housing to the people who rent them creates consumers whose life-interest in shelter is now tied in to the fate of those institutions that lend them mortgages; those employers who pay them wages to service the mortgage, and those members of their families who depend on these mortgages and that employment for their shelter. Given the different framing of their interests as now members of a property-owning democracy rather than renters dependent on a state bureaucracy there is a reasonable probability that the preferences they exhibit in the ballot box might reflect this new order of interests: Conservative politicians such as Mrs Thatcher clearly thought so. Yet, interests are fixed neither by structural relations in the broader society nor by abstract theoretical determination. They are a result of countless interpellations, of signifiers that float hither and thither, of competing fragments of narrative through which to grasp a life, its chances, choices and consequences as memory collects, recollects and projects its unfolding.

STRATEGIZING: THE VERB

At the core of the strategy-as-practice perspective is the premise that strategy analysis has to take social practices “seriously” (Vaara and Whittington, 2012). It assumes that strategy work “relies on organizational and other practices that significantly affect both the process and the outcome of resulting strategies” (Vaara and Whittington, 2012: 2). It is opposed to an approach in which individuals or groups are sources and targets of strategic decision-making determined by stable interests, and hence the unit of analysis. Thus, it shifts the focus away from the earlier dimensional approaches that lace through power analysis from Marcuse (1964) to Lukes (1974).

As the review of the strategy-as-practice literature and power above has demonstrated, strategy and power should be analysed through discourse: strategy offers ways of speaking, of thinking, and seeing the world in specific ways, constituting certain phenomena as objects and subjects of strategy, vesting them with various powers as an effect of strategy discourse. Strategy discourse not only fashions the subjects through which it speaks; it also configures objects so that they become a target for strategic interventions. As Knights and Morgan put it, “strategy is actively involved in the constitution, or re-definition, of problems in advance of offering itself as a solution to them” (Knights and Morgan, 1991: 270). In this and other Foucault-inspired critical readings of strategy it is the talk and practice of strategy that becomes equipped with agency (see Ezzamel and Willmott 2008; McCabe 2010; Laine and Vaara 2007; Thomas, Sargent, and Hardy 2011). Strategy is not so much a tool of those in power as it is a form of framing of talk and texts that does something both to those in power and those being governed.

As a linguistic genre (see Pälli et al., 2009) strategy is powerful because it has become taken-for-granted as a way of framing the world in which we live. It is not only discourse that makes strategy a powerful force; inextricably intertwined with it are practices, routines and rituals that perform strategy. In a study of strategy making in the City of Sydney the authors of this chapter have attempted to illustrate how the seemingly mundane practices of strategizing constitute the space, time, objects and subjects of strategy (Kornberger and Clegg, 2011). For instance, through minute organization of interaction with external stakeholders, the strategists attempted to “lift stakeholders’ thinking” which resulted in a discourse that was depoliticized and recast as focused on the “big picture”, a literal projection of the future that bracketed interests and concerns expressed in the here and now. In addition to a focus on discourse and practices an innovative strand of technology-oriented research analyses the power effects of strategy processes. In a study on the epistemic culture of strategy making, Kaplan (2011) analysed how a particular technology – in her case: PowerPoint – formatted people’s thoughts about strategic issues. PowerPoint, Kaplan argued, affords collaboration between individuals through providing space for discussions and integration of ideas, whilst it simultaneously acts as cartographic practice that frames ideas, creating technologically bounded rationalities. In turn, these “collaborative and cartographic practices shaped the strategic choices and actions” in the case study organization she researched (Kaplan, 2011: 320). PowerPoint, with its logical sequencing, its stepwise progression, its formats for expressing ideas, imposes a tacit linearity and causally one-directional rationality on the most sophisticated and the most mundane expression. Indeed, once ideas have been formatted in PowerPoint it is almost impossible to distinguish the mundane from the sublime because the provenance and complexity of ideas effectively disappears: everything is made mundane.

PowerPoint frames the relation between cognition on the one hand and power on the other (Kaplan, 2008). Frames are schemes of interpretation (Goffman 1974) that, in the context of strategizing, legitimize certain perspectives, highlight particular threats, stress certain internal resources and allow for discursively creating cause-effect relationships (Kaplan, 2008; Benford and Snow, 2000). Framing

is the strategic practice that relates the exercise of power to the work of imagination: what is a strategically relevant idea will have to pass through the frame which conditions categories of relevance and significance a priori. The exercise of power is intrinsically related to knowledge, and the creation of knowledge relies on power (to fix, to categorize, to keep stable etc.) in order to be able to flow (Foucault, 1994).

Another way of thinking about power/knowledge relations is to say that power must fix appropriate standing conditions for knowledge to be apparent: think of the massive infrastructure of CERN in Switzerland and the billions of dollars spent in creating the standing conditions in which the Higgs Boson elementary particle, initially theorised in 1964, had its discovery announced at CERN in July 2012. New knowledge confirming the existence of a particle that had to that point only existed propositionally had entered the socially constructed world of science and everyday knowledge but was only able to do so because of the power assembled as CERN – the European Organization for Nuclear Research funded and organized through the auspices of 20 European Union member states – which had created the Large Hadron Collider. Such knowledge demands dedicated strategy and considerable deployment of power to be possible. Strategy works through practices and technologies, even those as rare, exotic, indeed unique, as the Large Hadron Collider. Power was in play working as strategizing through practices, technologies and discourses associated with the power/knowledge that flowed in and through the Large Collider, its scientific community, the funding bodies, administrators, managers, and media advisors that clustered around it. Discourses are always in play; they will invariably be politically contested; they will play an important legitimizing role; they do not have explanatory monopoly; they require assemblage with many other forms of practice, with people, capabilities, technologies, and things.

Which brings us to some of the concerns that a practice-based power analysis of strategizing poses (see for a more detailed critique Carter et al., 2008a). First, strategy is equipped with agency but it remains unclear how this agency exercises power. For instance, in the already quoted paper by Vaara

et al. (2010: 691), the authors claim, “the strategy document became a textual agent, an actor that had the capacity to produce action from a distance (...)”. While this is a nice analytical point, the empirical narrative of Vaara et al.’s study seems to indicate a more traditional picture: the actors in the quotes they provide are politicians, city board members, and members of the city administration. Much strategy-as-practice research still assumes the manager in the cockpit; in fact, this might be part of strategy-as-practices’ heritage in which a “closeness” to practice and managers has been enshrined (see Whittington, 1996).

A second point addresses the realpolitik of strategy-as-practice’s mutual constitution of strategizing and subjectivity: in most practice accounts, strategy discourse and a myriad of strategy practices construct “prospective narratives that both constrain and enable actors in their future activity but that never completely determine it” (Fenton and Langley, 2011: 16). In other words, there is a recursive relation between strategy and actors. The stronger version of strategy-as-practice – the one that takes practices, perhaps too seriously – needs to explain how strategy achieves at least some level of consistency and direction. The “institutional logic” of Vaara et al.’s text is not an actors’ categorical device: it is very much an imposition of an academically strategic discourse on to the categories that the members typically deploy. In some respects it says more about the analytical strategy of the researchers than it does about that of those being analysed. Ascribed ‘institutional logics’ such as New Public Management, post-bureaucratic practices and more generally, neo-liberal ideologies provide the (assumed) pattern that allows the “strategic id” to behave as if it had its own teleology. Such an “as if” assumption is important, for if strategy did not represent something seeking to be consistent and directional, it would be hardly possible to analyse it. Hence, most work that analyses the verb “strategizing” as power has lingering above or underneath it a rather large noun – some kind of third-dimensional power, be it domination, performance, managerialism or something else.

MAKING THINGS STRATEGIC: STRATEGY AS AN ADJECTIVE

Through the lens of strategy-as-practice the world of headquarters, strategy meetings and retreats produce a picture of shifting alliances in which a complex web of practices, discourses and technologies lead to intended and unintended consequences that can only momentarily be disciplined through the relentless labour of strategizing. Practice approaches shift power analysis through focusing on the doing of strategy; practices assume a life on their own, strategy affords certain futures through its technologies. The suspicion is that practices perform futures, sometimes in line with, sometimes against those who deploy them in the name of what is still assumed to be their interests.

An alternative analytical approach to grasp the relation between power and strategy would be to study neither those doing strategy nor the practices they enact (or which enact them) – but to look more closely at how things *become* strategic in the first place. This assumes that strategy is not a thing (with strategy-as-practice) and that strategy is not a practice (against strategy-as-practice) consisting of rituals and routines exercised by strategists. Rather, strategy is most powerful when seen as an adjective – as something that exercises power through its ability to attach itself to people, objects, ideas and events.

Take the example of the global financial crisis – not the recent one, but the one from 1928/9 described by Galbraith (1954/1975) so magisterially. He analysed the role of a minute little object and its massive impact on the emergence of the crisis – the stock market ticker. The ticker was an object that should merely represent movements and prices at the exchange; like a thermostat, it was designed to take the temperature of the market. But in fact what the ticker did was to cause the acceleration of the crisis. When stock prices spiralled downwards in October 1929 an unprecedented amount of people decide to sell. Usually, the ticker would tell them the going price; but because of the firestorm sales, the ticker increasingly lagged behind the declining values, encouraging a further stampede of selling on the back of fear. Because the ticker dropped behind actual prices, the ticker triggered people's worst scenarios; the machine, designed to report reality had turned into a

mechanism that created a frightful doomsday picture, which in the manner of a self-fulfilling prophecy, became true because people believed it to be so (Galbraith 1954/1975; see also Preda, 2006). The point is simple: what had been thought to act as a device, representing only the present reality, turned out to produce another reality (Mackenzie, 2006). In this sense, the device had become a *strategic* actor in and cause of the crisis. Note: the ticker did not figure prominently in any rational strategist's interest-guided analysis (if at all, perhaps only as source of information); it was also not part of strategy practices but it did exercise devastating power that doubtlessly qualifies it as something that deserves the label "strategic". If we take such emergent strategic (perhaps even non-human) actors seriously, we have to ask not only what is their power but also how do they become powerful? What and how do powers attach themselves to objects (ideas, people, technologies, events) so that they have significant strategic effects?

Mechanism for making things strategic: an attachment theory of strategic power

Fortunately, there is a growing body of literature that studies assemblages of human and non-human actors, how they organize and are organized across networks, and how they exercise strategic power effects. The literature is usually summarized under the acronym actor network theory (ANT; Law and Hassard, 1999; Latour, 2005) including related fields such that the study of science and technology (originally focused on laboratories from which ANT eventually escaped), the social studies of finance and various strands of the 'new' new economic sociology and anthropology of markets literature (see for an overview McFall and Ossandón, forthcoming).

Callon and Law (1997) articulated their concern with strategy early on, arguing that it is this combination of artefacts, technologies, social organization and people that create the possibility of strategic action. To attribute strategic action to one person – e.g. a captain on a ship – is possible (in case on an accident for instance) but misleading "[b]ecause the capacity for strategy is an affect of a more or less stable arrangement of materials." (Callon and Law, 1997: 7). Strategic action is always a

“collective property”: “All action is collective since it is distributed; what varies are the mechanisms for attributing the source of action.” (Çalışkan and Callon, 2010: 10).

ANT’s network approach to strategizing has started to be more widely used in strategy-as-practice and related fields. For instance, in Kaplan’s already quoted study (2011) explicit reference is made to ANT and STS, arguing that PowerPoint as a technology should be analysed as exercising a significant influence on the strategy process, if not as having agency. Whittle and Mueller (2010) explored the construction and legitimation of strategic ideas in their ethnographic study of the role of management accounting systems. Both Whittle and Mueller (2010) and Kaplan (2011) focus on the constitutive role of technology in strategizing; they argue that technology, and perhaps more generally, artefacts and their materiality, have a significant impact on the supposedly Cartesian mind of the strategist. In reality, senior managers do not practice strategy. Rather, strategy has to be understood as collective action, as corollary of network action. Power resides not in people not in practices (alone), but in the networks ability to *make things strategic*. What hold these networks together are not only people but also technology, artefacts and a myriad of other devices (Callon et al., 2007).

We can develop this idea further by following a little frog. Building on ANT Tryggstad, Justesen and Mouristen (2013) tell the story of how frogs were translated from being ‘non-existent’ into strategic actors in a construction project. They studied a developer who had acquired land and planned to build residential dwellings on it. Since time is of the essence in development projects, the firm was ready to start planning and constructing as soon as the ink on the purchasing agreement dried.

However, waterholes were discovered on the site, and soon its residents – 500 protected moor frogs – were identified. The project came to a halt. The frogs, hitherto leading blameless and anonymous semi-aquatic lives in obscurity other than for a few mammalian specialists, became a contested object with several spokespersons claiming to know what was in the frogs’ best interests and to speak for them. Such was the articulation of the frog’s interest that the development firm hired their own frog experts as consultants who worked on determining means whereby the frogs could co-exist with the

construction workers and trucks and all the noise and destruction of habitat that these would create. That meant learning to adapt to the cyclical time of the frog's life (as opposed to the linear time of project manager's charts) and constructing frog protection devices, such as corridors through which they could move without being bulldozed. The story has a happy ending, when the frogs became themselves strategic protagonists in the marketing campaign to sell the finished buildings – who would not want to live in a natural idyll with protected moor frogs? Our point: the frog had become a strategic actor in that it shaped the future significantly. Yet it was neither practices nor interests that explain the process. How can we explain the process through which frogs became strategic and powerful? What are the mechanisms that make things strategic?

Visualization: First, strategic power needs to attach itself to something as jumpy as a frog, as mechanical as a ticker, or as massive as a Large Hadron Collider: there needs to be a materiality through which power flows to become strategic. Each of these things became and functioned as obligatory passage points through which meaning, power and knowledge flowed and were condensed (Clegg 1989). As obligatory passage points their materiality becomes an object of strategic contestation. We can see this clearly with the moor frogs, by returning to Tryggestad et al (2013). Far from being just a frog, a thing half amphibious and mammalian, the little creature became the contested object of strategic power. Quite small and local questions came into play: Did the waterholes represent a natural habitat or were they just large puddles that could be bulldozed? Were the frogs a rare species or just one of the many animals that had to give way as the construction work commenced? Once it was accepted that they could and did bring the construction machinery to a halt, who could speak on behalf of them and suggest a safe co-habitation strategy for them? An epistemic machine sprang into action, based on environmental sciences and equipped with measuring tools, which could track the life course of the frogs and ensure they would survive. The frog underwent a series of translations, from being just an animal to becoming a protected species, gaining significance as a valuable part of the ecosystem, until finally ending up on the cover of the sales brochure for the newly build housing, thus making the frog an active marketing agent. In short, the

frogs became objects of visualization strategies that rendered them tangible and hence manageable. The strategic power that the frog exercised was conditioned by the many attempts to turn it into an epistemic object that could be counted and counted on. It is these techniques of visualization, these technologies of accounting through which the frog took on strategic significance.

Tryggestad et al.'s frogs are but one example of how something becomes strategic; there is a plethora of other examples that illustrate the importance of materialization and visualization for making things strategic. Think of rankings and their strategic importance. Espeland and Sauder (2007) argued that rankings are devices that do not simply describe their objects but actively shape them through their representations. Rankings make commensurable what was idiosyncratic beforehand, and through this operation, they create categories and relations between entities that have been unrelated beforehand. Kornberger and Carter (2010) studied city rankings and speculated that they provide the *a priori* for competition between cities to take place: for how else could cities understand competition if they were not quite literally arranged on a (league) table next to each other, reduced to few characteristics that make them similar? The point is that such rankings are visualizations of relations, and without such visualizations the rankings would not exercise strategic power. Rankings order and hierarchize; they distribute a heterogeneous population into bands (the top 10, the top 45 journals etc.); and they summarize their results in simple, seductive formats that can easily be reproduced by newspapers, enacted in meetings, and enrolled in strategies. In other words, it is through visualization techniques that rankings can travel, spread globally, and exercise their power locally. Their aesthetics is the pre-condition for their contagious effects. Indeed, as Pollock and D'Adderio (2012) argued, rankings and other valuation mechanisms have to be analysed as aesthetic devices that exercise their power because they model, illustrate, draw, rank and map their objects. Hats for restaurants, letters for credit ratings, or stars for Amazon sellers' reliability: all these strategic powers are exercised through strong, if simplifying visualisation.

Analytically, an attachment theory of strategic power will study these visualizations and materializations, not as an afterthought but as integral elements of power. In doing so it will address traditional strategy's myopia of focusing on the mind and its models as disembodied, abstract cognition.

Valuation: Second, there needs to be an account, some form of rationalizing mechanisms that makes valuable which has been made visible. The frog has to be “rare”, the ticker has to be a “sign” of something, the ranking has to be legitimate to become a strategic force, the Higgs Boson particle has to be known in theory before it can exist in practice. What is made visible has to be “figured out” (Miller, 2008): it has taken on a *gestalt* that communicates its inner logic, meaning and value. Such “figuring out” is contingent on references to a variety of “gods” (Friedland, 2009) – such as efficiency, truth, nature, democracy etc. Ironically, against the protestations of the CERN scientists the Higgs Boson particle became known as “God’s particle” due to the imagination of Leon Lederman (1993). In both valuation and visualization terms Lederman was doing the scientists a favour that they did not appreciate. God’s particle is much more iconic than a Higgs Boson – even if one knows not what it means at least everyone has some idea about who God might be. The moor frogs became valuable when they jumped on to the list of protected species; God particles make the complexity of theoretical physics’ experiments tangible to a lay public; rankings are powerful because they claim to bring competition and market efficiency to domains where prices are not adequate indicators of value.

Let’s use example of rankings to explore how things are being made valuable in detail. First and foremost, rankings are forms of (e-)valuation that result from calculative practices (Miller, 2001; see also Lamont, 2012). Indicators are defined, measures taken, and numbers added up to assign precise locations on league tables, indicating the relative position of the ranked object, its status and worth. Hence, value is nothing pre-existing but something that is ushered into being through the act of valuation. This analysis follows Dewey (1913; Muniesa, 2011) who spoke of a “flank movement”

with which he moved from the question of value to a processual view of studying valuation as an “activity of ranking, an act that involves comparison” (Dewey, 1939: 5). To assume value to be an essential characteristic of a thing would equate to “calling the ball struck in baseball, a hit or a foul” (Dewey, quoted in Muniesa, 2011: 25); of course, it is not the ball that is valuable, but the apparatus around it that makes it mean something. Without players, judges and coaches, audience, media, sponsors and a myriad of other network actors as well as material and symbolic elements such as the lines drawn on the playing field, conventions and rules, league tables to track performances, tournaments to establish winners etc. – all these elements conspire when the ball touches the ground and give that serendipitous moment meaning beyond its occurrence. The “flank movement” shifts attention from the ball to the network of elements and the evaluative infrastructure that make it valuable.

The study of strategic power implies dissecting how valuation as process constitutes the value of objects in the first place. It means deconstructing calculative practices and evaluative infrastructures with the aim to show how they construct value through their operations. In the final analysis it means asking how legitimization takes place: Which ranking can claim to tell the truth about university education, and legitimize those that act upon it? Why are moor frogs more valuable than other species that may disappear as consequence of the construction work and how, who and why can some speak on behalf of the frogs? In so doing the focus on valuation corrects a second myopia of traditional strategy research: it folds the social into the economical and the macro into the micro through making “the distance between value and its measure collapse in an analytically constructive manner” (Muniesa, 2011: 24).

Mobilization: In order to become strategic, things need to enter circuits of power (Clegg, 1989). Such circuits can be described as networks through which initially non-significant elements become strategic powers. Networks are the medium in which the strategic power of things is configured. Think of commercial strategic battles (such as the fight of German car manufacturers against an EU

wide regulation of carbon emission standards for cars) that flow through networks of media in order to shape public opinion. Or take social movements that exercise their power through communication networks that are faster, more robust and reach wider than those of their corporate targets (Weber et al., 2009).

Strategic network power can be analysed on two levels: the material-technological level (Galloway and Thacker, 2007) and socio-political level (Castells, 2009). First, let us look at the relation of material technology and power. Inspired by Deleuze's short essay on the control society (1992), Galloway and Thacker (Galloway and Thacker 2007; Galloway, 2012) remind us that networks are not liberating per se; rather, they "exercise novel forms of control that operate at a level that is anonymous and non-human, which is to say material." (2007: 5). They do so, they suggest, through 'protocols'. Galloway and Thacker suggest the notion of protocol applies to analysis of the power effects of networks in which "power relations are in the process of being transformed in a way that is resonant with the flexibility and constraints of information technology" (Thacker, 2004: xix).

Protocols refer to power structures that are embedded in technology: protocol is the apparatus that facilitates the functioning of networks and provides the "logic that governs how things are done within that apparatus." (2007: 29). Protocol manages flows within networks; it regulates access and manages relationships between distributed network elements. "Protocols", as Galloway and Thacker (2004: 8) write, "are all the conventional rules and standards that govern relationships within networks."

A protocol is purely process-based: it does not contain any "substance" on its own; it only exists to make things happen. Therein lies its particular power, which derives from its technological function: it is based on code, which in turn is a form of text that exists merely to be executed. In contrast to the law or other codes that exercise power, protocol cannot be spoken nor does it allow for interpretation; protocol is only concerned with performing its operations.

Analysing strategic power includes an analysis of material network control because it is through protocol and its codes that events and ideas are formatted and edited. As Neff and Stark (2004: 186) remarked pointedly, if “architecture is politics set in stone, then information architecture is politics in code.” Protocol is the architecture that defines the conditions for something to be able to travel through networks, and hence to potentially mobilize others. In this sense, interface design in social networks and sharing functions on websites are of strategic importance: Facebook’s *like* button can make or break a cause, and a hash tag on Twitter can provoke considerable controversy (also known as ‘shitstorms’). Analytically, it is important to keep in mind that dissemination strategies represent mobilization potential: they are forms of governance designed to create strategic objects.

Inextricably linked to the material-technological power of networks is their socio-political dimension, analysed by Castells (2009). He argues that the self is a network composition connected to a world of networks; familiar metaphors constitute our sensemaking, constructing socially available narrative frames. Communication between people then occurs through communication networks that range from face-to-face as the most immediate to those that are laced globally as multiple, overlapping, open and socio-spatially interactive systems comprising interconnected nodes. It is the nodes of the networks that configure power relations, which operate as obligatory passage points. Hence, power relations have a structural architecture, expressed in terms of spatial and temporal orderings, focused on the creation of value conceived in terms of various rationalities that are also an expression of power. In recent times, however, with the rise of digital technologies the most important communication channels have become digital mass self-communication networks, operating through social networking channels. These channels are increasingly plural in their messages, customers and products but increasingly concentrated in their ownership. These and other communication networks exercise power as they represent the obligatory point of passage through which an idea must pass in order to mobilize collective action and hence become strategic.

The focus on networks corrects a third myopia of traditional strategy research: it moves the analytical focus from the strategist as author and actor towards an analysis of the possibility of collective action, distributed cognition and mobilization in networks.

CONCLUDING REFLECTION

An attachment theory of strategic power focuses on three key moments that guide its analysis: visualization, valuation, and mobilization. It studies the material conditions for things to become strategic, the processes through which values are attributed to them, and the networks through which they travel and mobilize others. It is a theory of events, objects and things becoming strategic. It extends strategy-as-practice research in important ways: it brings in collectives of humans and non-humans as strategic actors and it extends the locus of strategizing from the organizational practices to networks, devices and technologies. Were an attachment theory of strategic power to have a location proper it would have to be in the fluidity of networks. Most importantly, the attachment theory of strategic power contributes towards understanding how collective action (on organization, movement, field and societal level) emerges: as Becker wrote in a wonderful paper on collective action in the art world (1974), conventions work as the art worlds' organizing principle. Importantly, conventions have to be understood against current institutional theory: not as norms but in the etymological sense of con-venere (like a convener of a meeting, event or conference), as bringing materials and ideas, spaces and times, people and events together as an assemblage that holds together. An attachment theory of strategy would dissect these conventions and analyse how its heterogeneous elements are visualized, valued and equipped to travel the world, unfolding their powers.

The analytical challenge of this approach is evident: if strategy-as-practice was in danger of loosing its object (what is *not* a strategic practice, anyway?) than this danger becomes the *modus vivendi* of an attachment theory of strategy. Frogs, tickers, rankings, the *like* button ... everything can become a

strategic power. If assumed that “strategic” is but a floating signifier, then the task of the analyst will be to understand under which precise conditions that signifier becomes attached to an historical idea, event, object, even a person or a group, making them powerful.

For the future the research agenda is pregnant with possibilities as strategy in practice is further explored in terms of adjectival, noun and verb contingencies. From the ethnomethodological accounts of Samra-Fredricks, inspiration may be drawn for careful analysis of how organization members make sense of and do strategy in everyday talk; from research such as McCabe’s there are possibilities for textual analysis of formal documents; Laine and Vaara demonstrate the uses to which interview data taken not as interpretive insights but as a depiction of languages in use can be put; from studies such as those of Thomas et al. the real time analysis of strategy workshops can be developed further; from analysis such as that of Ezzamel and Willmott there are many affordances with what we have termed an attachment approach in which the devices used to secure specific effects can be analysed in their particulars. Our analysis suggests studying processes of visualization, valuation and mobilization in order to understand how things become strategic. In concluding, we argue that strategy-as-practice should engage with a panoply of methods, approaches and complementary theoretical positions to advance empirical knowledge of strategy’s power in action – as verb, noun and adjective. In concluding, we argue that strategy-as-practice should engage the panoply of methods, approaches and complementary theoretical positions available to advance empirical knowledge of strategy’s power in action – as verb, noun and adjective. No one of them is the right royal road to understanding; just as strategy is multi-faceted so should be its interpretations.

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