



## Critical Project Studies

Call for Papers & Proposal for a Special Issue of *ephemera: theory & politics in organization* ([www.ephemeraweb.org](http://www.ephemeraweb.org)) to be edited by

**Svetlana Cicmil, Monica Lindgren and Johann Packendorff**

From its origin as a rational operations management methodology in construction and defence industries, the project concept and the project form of organising has diffused into almost all sectors of society. The basic reason for this diffusion seems to be that the project – viewed as a task specific and time-limited form of working – is perceived as a way of avoiding all the classic problems of bureaucracy that most “normal” organisations struggle with. In many industries and companies, the project is thus now the normal work form. This is obvious in cultural life, advertising, consulting, R&D, IT etc, but also in politics (e.g. most European Union initiatives) and in several large industrial corporations who execute numerous projects on a daily basis. Given this trend, one might assess that society is becoming increasingly “projectified”, i.e. that substantial parts of human activities are spent in projects and similar temporary forms of organising.

The project form is strictly defined in project management theory, a set of formal methods and techniques derived from systems thinking and operations analysis. In this literature, the project is commonly defined as a unique, complex task with a foreseeable date of delivery, subject to goal formulations in terms of time, cost and quality. This literature tends to rely upon the language of design, regularity and control to propose models and prescriptions as a route to increasing the ability of humans to control complex worlds, to the exclusion of other approaches or ways of reasoning.

As a whole, research into projects and project management remains heavily reliant on a functionalist, instrumental view of projects and organisations. Most textbooks and professional associations for project management promote this normative view of the field as practiced. Governed by the tradition of ‘natural sciences’ (e.g. systems theory), the project management body of knowledge emphasises the role of project actors and managers as ‘implementers’ narrowing down their role to the issues of control (time and cost) and content (planned scope of work), marginalising their wider potential role as competent social and political actors in complex project-labelled arrangements. Dissemination of ‘best practice’ carries a message about the possibility of the progressive rationalisation of action and a belief in the progressive and cumulative character of knowledge. This typically assumes rationality, universality, objectivity, and value-free decision-making, and the possibility of generating law-like predictions in knowledge.

At the same time, the foundations and practical application of this managerial technology, embodying the scientific achievements of operational research in work scheduling and control under specific constraints of time, cost, and a unique outcome, have been seriously questioned by both the academic and practitioner communities. Several important writers in this field maintain that little radical examination of the intellectual foundation of project management has been done within this stream of research, calling for a re-examination of the dominant doctrines in project

management for their failure to deliver on their promises. Nonetheless, there are limitations to this self-critique; the tendency in the field is still to start from the assumption that the basic framework of project management is compelling and essentially sound. Project management is thus still seen as a set of inevitable, natural tools to be used in the solving of complex problems, and issues of morality, equality, oppression, exploitation and politics are almost never discussed.

The need for critical project studies has so far resulted in a series of workshops titled 'Making Projects Critical', and an edited volume (Hodgson & Cicmil, 2006). The broad range of themes addressed in past MPC workshops include issues of power and domination in project settings, ethics and moral responsibility within projects, tensions between standardisation and creativity in project organisations, the limits to projectification and the dysfunctions of project rationality. Likewise, critical analyses of issues of leadership, management competencies and the ongoing professionalisation of project management has been of interest. By this call, we intend to continue and expand these lines of inquiry and to initiate a wider critical conceptualisation of projects as a societal discourse in Western capitalism.

### **Call for Papers**

Our proposal in this call is to draw on the insights offered by writers and academics within the broad grouping of Critical Management Studies to widen and deepen the theoretical foundations of project management and to provide novel approaches to project management, project based organising and the 'projectification' of society. We foresee that this would require a fundamental reappraisal of many of the core tenets of project management theory and techniques, as well as articulation of their relations to societal discourses. In particular, the intention is to draw upon wider intellectual resources than the instrumental rationality, quantitative and positivist methodologies and technicist solutions which have been traditionally brought to bear in attempts to understand and control the project form of organising.

The next workshop will take place in Stockholm in March/April 2008, and the focus of this workshop will be the effects and tensions caused by the projectification of work, of organisations and of society. Conference information is available at: [http://www.eiasm.org/frontoffice/event\\_announcement.asp?event\\_id=544](http://www.eiasm.org/frontoffice/event_announcement.asp?event_id=544). We would therefore particularly welcome critical contributions which address the widening range of sectors in which organisations and organising are increasingly structured around the project form. This might encompass fields such as,

- New Product Development
- Entrepreneurial and Intrapreneurial processes
- International Development projects
- Consultancy and Consulting projects
- Organizational Change projects
- Urban Regeneration and Community Development projects
- New Media and IT related projects
- Art and Exhibition projects
- Innovation projects
- Event Management projects
- Research projects in both industry and academia
- Political and societal projects
- Ideological and philosophical aspects of projects
- Projectified organisations and labour processes

### **Submission of manuscripts**

Manuscripts shall be sent no later than 30<sup>th</sup> April 2008 to one of the guest editors below, conforming to the ephemera submission guidelines available at <http://www.ephemeraweb.org/journal/submit.htm>

Authors will be notified on the first editorial decision 30<sup>th</sup> August 2008.

### **Guest editors**

Dr Svetlana Cicmil

Bristol Business School, University of the West of England, UK

[svetlana.cicmil@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:svetlana.cicmil@uwe.ac.uk)

Dr Damian Hodgson

Manchester Business School, The University of Manchester, UK

[damian.hodgson@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:damian.hodgson@manchester.ac.uk)

Dr Monica Lindgren

School of Industrial Engineering and Management, KTH – Royal Institute of Technology, Sweden

[monica.lindgren@indek.kth.se](mailto:monica.lindgren@indek.kth.se)

Dr Johann Packendorff

School of Industrial Engineering and Management, KTH – Royal Institute of Technology, Sweden

[johann.packendorff@indek.kth.se](mailto:johann.packendorff@indek.kth.se)