

# **Should Project Management Get Carried Away? On the Unfinished Business of Critical Project Studies**

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## **Is project management research getting carried away?**

In this chapter, I want to raise the following concern: at a time when project management research could actually start to inform the developments of organization theory, the field instead is withdrawing, “getting carried away”, promoting the project form rather than making it subject to informed critical inquiry. I also suggest three practical ways for project management scholars to expand the relevance of project studies to organization studies in general: (1) treating ‘the project’ as label and metaphor, (2) treating phenomena in projects as cases of other things than projects, and (3) always reflecting over the perspective taken and for whom research is relevant.

Projects have become a common form of work organization in all sectors of the economy during recent decades. An increasing number of firms have become “project-based,” that is, almost all operations are organized as projects and permanent structures fill the function of administrative support (cf. Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006; Whitley, 2006). 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 controllable way of avoiding all the classic problems of bureaucracy with which most “normal” organizations are struggle (Packendorff, 1995; Hodgson, 2004; Cicmil et al., 2009). The project is seen to promise both controllability and adventure (Sahlin-

Andersson, 2002) and as necessary when complex and extraordinary business tasks are to be managed (Cicmil et al., 2009). In that sense, project-based work is a part of the wave of new “post- bureaucratic” organizational forms that has entered most industries in recent decades (cf Clegg & Courpasson, 2004; Gill, 2002; Hodgson, 2004; Lindgren & Packendorff, 2006a; Söderlund, 2011). The discourse on projects and project management has grown strong, and is present in all sectors of society (Chiapello & Fairclough, 2002).

This has not always been the case, however. Project management sprang out of the need to handle exceptional situations in a structured manner, and the notion of exceptionality is still with us, in theory and practice (cf. Hällgren & Wilson, 2011). Project management was for long a marginal phenomenon, and was also constructed as an opposite of dominating forms for industrial operations (Lundin & Söderholm, 1995; Ekstedt et al., 1999; Cicmil et al., 2009). Project management research thus set out to understand the specifics of this “different” form of organizing – materializing as projects, temporary organizations, or an aspect of the general notion of post-bureaucratic organizations (Clegg & Courpasson, 2004; Hodgson, 2004; Lindgren & Packendorff, 2006a)

In their 2002 article “How project management got carried away,” Blomquist and Söderholm (2002) made an early attempt at identifying the direction in which project management field is developing. The general trend identified is development towards a more distinct field, co-constructed as such by researchers, consultants, and practitioners in close interaction. This development has continued. Researchers are increasingly well organized through networks and recurring conferences (the International Research Network on Organizing by Projects, the Standing Interest Group of the European Academy of Management, the Making Projects Critical movement, and so forth) and increasingly well published in a growing range of field-specific journals (*Project Management Journal*, *International Journal of Project Management*, *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, *International Journal of Project Organisation and Management*, to mention just a few). Consultants and practitioners are not far away – they let their organizations (i.e. the Project Management Institute, International Project Management Association, and so forth) sponsor research, commission research, and disseminate research. The growing range of bodies of knowledge and individual and organizational certifications is also part of this trend, claiming project management as a

profession rather than an ad hoc task, as a knowledge area in its own right rather than a concoction of things acquired and borrowed from elsewhere.

Current developments in project research pose both promises and problems. Among the promises we find a still-expanding stream of research concerned with the relevance and consequences of dominant perspectives (cf. Packendorff 1995; Cicmil et al., 2006; Blomquist et al., 2010). The problem is still that if these promises are delivered upon within the narrow limits of what is acceptable and legitimate in the project management field, we still run the risk of forgetting about one of the founding insights that brought initiatives such as the Information Research Network on Organizing by Projects, the Scandinavian School of project management, and Making Projects Critical alive – to produce research advancing theoretical understanding of the project phenomenon, employing alternative perspectives to the dominant technicist and rationalist notions built on systems theory and operations research. Twenty years ago, project management was still a marginal phenomenon – now it is a dominant work-form in many organizations and industries, and is also attracting increased interest in general management literature (cf Bakker, 2010; Söderlund, 2011). As researchers with excellent insight into project management, we thus have an even more excellent opportunity to contribute to the general development of knowledge on contemporary management problems and practices.

In a recent article, Jacobsson and Söderholm (2011) raise the issue of the relevance and contribution of current project research. They argue that most of the literature is either directed towards refining best-practices of project management, or enhancing the legitimacy and broadening the scope of project research by incorporating theoretical constructs from “outside” the field. In any case, these dominant streams aim at developing the field as a distinct discipline, rather than at making a contribution to general management knowledge. Jacobsson and Söderholm also claim that there are signs that a fourth research agenda is emerging, one emphasizing precisely that general contribution – but at the expense of reducing projects from a core theoretical phenomenon to an empirical setting or illustration. On the other hand, the opportunity is of course the contribution to general management literature. The question is whether we are seizing this opportunity and delivering on the promises.

My view is that the fourth research agenda is indeed desirable but that its emergence is not by any means “natural” or self-driven. Instead, most fields that want to become distinct disciplines and professionalize their practitioners tend to become increasingly inward-oriented with time, living by their own standards rather than any general ones. I thus want to raise the following concern: at a time when project management research could actually start to inform the developments of organization theory, the field instead withdraws, “gets carried away,” promoting the project-form rather than making it subject to informed critical inquiry. The risk is that we become victims of our own success, informing each other about the nitty-gritty details of project management rather than making a strong and unique contribution to a general management research community that is still struggling to conceptualize what is happening at the forefront of organizing practices. We have to discuss to whom project research is relevant, and in what way(s). But we also have to open up our own minds on taken-for-granted notions of projects and project management. The institutionalization of taken-for-granted assumptions is usually an important ingredient not only in the stabilization and definition of a scientific field (Jacobsson & Söderholm, 2011), but also in its gate-keeping, conservation, and demise (Hällgren, 2012).

I am not going to look back on the past developments of the field – there already exist a number of such overviews (cf Packendorff, 1995; Söderlund, 2011). What I will do is to point out some aspects of project research that should be important in the future development of the field, especially in contributing to management research in general. Although my point of departure is the intersection of critical management studies and its intersections with project research and practice (the Making Projects Critical movement), I think that these aspects should also be important in mainstream approaches aiming at conceptual renewal and the crossing of academic boundaries. First, I will return to the eternal issue of what “a project” actually is – claiming the risk of reification and the necessity of treating it as an open but performative concept. Second, I will discuss the importance of maintaining openness to theoretical influences, in relation to the tendency of relating project management practice to what is published in project management journals only. Third, the equally important issue of whom we make our contributions to is dealt with – claiming that we should maintain a wide intended audience rather

than letting dominant organizations in the field be the sole judges of relevance. The chapter is concluded by a discussion of future developments given these aspects of project research.

### **Project: a label, metaphor, and performative concept**

Some years ago, I was invited to lead a workshop on project management at an institute focussed on construction economics. I started out by asking the audience – most of them male, middle-aged middle managers in Swedish construction firms – what they expected from the workshop. Most of them indicated an interest in line with the program, but one of them said: “Well, I can tell you one thing that I do expect, but do not want. Please do not start out by giving us the definition of projects! We know what it is. And anyone can call anything a project, and get away with it!”

Indeed I had a slide in my PowerPoint file with precisely that content. But instead of silently scrapping it, I immediately used it to continue the discussion. It appeared that most of the audience agreed; first, a definition was not needed as anything in practice could be called “a project”; second, a definition was not needed as everyone in the industry already knew what a project was. This apparent contradiction expressed by a reflexive practitioner – we cannot define it a meaningful way but we know it when we see it – is in my mind a cautionary tale.

The basic problem with a project definition is of course that “a project” is an open concept that can be used in any possible way. It is also an abstract concept, as it is used to frame experiences, issues, and processes rather than something tangible. As soon as we try to squeeze these experiences, issues, and processes into ready-made definitions, we risk the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, the fallacy of reification.

The notion of fallacy of misplaced concreteness is extensively discussed by Wood (2005) in his critique of taken-for-granted notions of leadership. Originally an idea of process philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, the fallacy tends to appear every time we get hold of something abstract in the eternal stream of social events and try to make it concrete and stable. It is human to do so, it helps us get through our daily lives, but we are actually just creating surface

effects and illusions, forgetting about the complexities of the social world, suppressing and excluding alternative meanings and interpretations. Within critical project studies, this has also been discussed with reference to reification – the rationalist construction of projects as objects to be planned, controlled, and managed (Hodgson & Cicmil, 2007). While the practical problems of this are well known – the illusion of the controllable project makes practitioners employ simplistic tools to extremely complex situations (Pellegrinelli, 2010) – the theoretical problems need to be further discussed.

The main problem is of course that anything called “a project” more or less automatically becomes a controllable object of research – with the assumption of far-reaching similarities despite often obvious and vast differences, and with the assumption that the researcher herself/himself does not have to evaluate the “projectness” of the object as this has already been determined. Projects can thus be gathered, counted, entered into databases, compared, and calculated – just because they are “projects.” Consequently, what goes on “in” these “projects” become instances of “project management.” When leadership is exercised in a project setting, it becomes “project leadership”; when someone makes a risk analysis exercise in a project setting, it becomes “project risk management.” The project concept, in its reified form, thus does not only serve the purpose of identifying items and episodes that can be subject to project research, but also brings with it a problematic sense of similarity and a questionable notion of epistemological distinctiveness.

The alternative, of course, is always to treat the notion of “a project” as a label, a metaphor, a performative concept. These three notions are closely related; when labeling something “a project”, we metaphorically draw upon taken-for-granted notions of what projects are and what they should be, leading us to perform “professional project management” as we want to be seen as legitimate and rational (Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006). Kreiner (1995) explains this in the following way:

The label invokes a model of the project that can aid us as a tool in analyzing any particular case and in making inferences about its characteristics. It implies general meaning, aspirations and propositions about what needs to be done. ... Depending on the

contents of the project label we choose, we will come to approach reality differently and to draw different inferences for action. (336)

To the extent project researchers are not aware of this, they may become victims of performativity in the same way. As project management gradually evolves into a distinct field in its own right, characterized by more or less taken-for-granted notions of how projects should be studied and theorized, project researchers will be met by expectations to “perform research” in a legitimate manner. That would mean to accept the labeling of projects without further ado, to exaggerate similarities between projects while suppressing the differences, to aim for the adding of knowledge to extant bodies of knowledge without questioning the *raison d’être* of these bodies – thereby taking part in promoting and sustaining a certain view of reality, of knowledge, of good and bad. It would also imply that projects to be studied are sought for within the usual industries, among the usual professionals, and through the established channels (Hallin and Karrbom Gustavsson, 2010).

The alternative is, of course, to embrace the fluidity and ambiguity of the project concept, viewing project work as an ongoing social construction in which we are all co-constructors, as a process of institutionalization and change, of power and emancipation (Sergi, 2012). But that does imply that research must be founded upon explicit assumptions of ontology, epistemology, and axiology rather than slipping into the comfort of letting project-management journal editors judge what is publishable. An increased concern with basic assumptions will not only enhance the development of project research and its relevance to general management scholars, it may also imply a changed view of how project management knowledge is made available and relevant to practitioners. Project management knowledge is often presented to the public in the form of a toolbox, generally applicable and ready for usage (Packendorff, 1995). Many project management scholars also tend to think that such normative advice is the main reason the discipline exists. Behind this, we find an implicit image of the project management practitioner as an anxious soul, in desperate need of clarity, order, and standardized procedures. Most practising project managers would probably not subscribe to such a characterization. As noted by Pellegrinelli (2010) in his treatment of the performative aspects of project management concepts, research should instead be a reflection and articulation

of their lived experiences –*what they often see and tend to do*. Most organisations today, whether private, public and non-for-profit, seem to face dramatic and unpredictable economic, social and environmental change. Networks of partners, suppliers and contracted service providers, and self-directed teams made up of relatively autonomous knowledge workers, are making organizations far more fluid and the need for engagement and consensus far more pressing. Managing is often less about planning, directing and controlling and more about *coping*. The absence of clarity and certainty is not an impediment to action, but a call for it – to “get on”. Social reality for them feels malleable and changing, amenable (at least to some degree) to their influence. Some practitioners have got over, or learnt to live with, the sea-sickness. (237)

### **Beyond the reified project: what is the theoretical phenomenon at hand?**

If we are then to replace taken-for-granted notions of reified projects as objects that can be made plannable, controllable, and manageable through research with a constructionist critical agenda, what are the consequences for theory development? What are the alternatives to assuming that the project itself is the theoretical phenomenon to be studied?

First and foremost, we need to consider that theory, methodology, and practice are closely interrelated in any theoretical framework. A theory is basically a perspective, a way of viewing, representing and discussing a certain phenomenon. In order to employ that perspective in empirical inquiry, the theory must be linked to a methodology that enables the researcher to study the phenomenon in an appropriate manner. The nature of the knowledge created and its relation to practice is integral to this, as different theoretical perspectives also imply different views about what knowledge is, what good and bad knowledge is, and what purposes knowledge should and should not serve.

A constructionist critical research agenda implies a theoretical perspective in line with the discussion in the previous section, viewing projects as discursive constructions, as complex social processes (Sergi, 2012). With the aim of creating knowledge that relates to the lived experience of project practitioners and that creates awareness of otherwise hidden, suppressed, or



taken-for-granted aspects of that experience, the researcher has to employ methodologies that enable insights not only into lived experience but also into what is left in the dark, in oblivion. But to do that, it is important to choose a theoretical framework that implicates such critical understandings.

In extant critical project studies literature, there are several examples of theoretical frameworks brought from critical management studies in general, which are used to identify and inquire into aspects of project management practice not considered in mainstream technicist and rationalist perspectives. Here, I will briefly give three such examples, namely power, gender, and identity.

### *Project work as construction of power relations*

Given that project management is an increasingly prevalent in contemporary society and that the notion of “a project” is a performative discourse closely linked to rationalism and efficiency, studying project management in terms of power should be a central task for the critically inclined. Power has been a central issue in organization and management studies for over a century, and has been theorized upon from various perspectives in numerous publications (cf. the overviews of literature within organization studies in Clegg et al., 2006 and Hardy & Clegg, 2006). From an initial preoccupation with power as a practice of domination and coercion, based on the control of the means of production (Marx) or on hierarchical organizational systems (Weber and successors), the “field” came early to contain both managerialist and critical approaches. In a managerialist sense, power can be something necessary to use in certain situations, but its very use also signifies deficiencies in the rational functioning of organizational structures. From a critical stance, power was instead seen as strategies undertaken to deprive people of their democratic and economic rights, and as such something that should be uncovered to enable resistance and emancipation. These ways of reasoning both rested upon power as something that sovereign individuals could exercise strategically and successfully in order to achieve certain goals, as a casual set of practices and mechanisms (Hardy & Clegg, 2006). The subsequent emergence of Foucauldian notions of power implied an important shift. Foucault

rejected the idea of sovereign holders of power, and instead claimed that all individuals and collectives are embedded in power relations, where people act according to a socially inscribed normality. Later developments therefore introduced the notion of discourses and identities as socially constructed and, as such, possible for actors to reflect upon and as changeable over time, based on the view that actors are usually exposed to multiple discourses in everyday situations and that they experience continuous conflict and negotiation between these discourses (cf. Fairclough, 2001).

When studying projects with power as the theoretical phenomenon, the analysis thus tends to deal with the contents and consequences of project management as a performative discourse. One aspect of this is the framing of projects as rational and efficient, implying that individuals incorporate project management into their identities and adhere to taken-for-granted project management procedures in performing as professionals (cf. Hodgson, 2002). Another aspect is subjugation to the structural features of projects, that is, as tightly knitted activity systems to which individuals assume they have to adapt (Lindgren & Packendorff, 2006b). A third aspect is the development towards standardized bodies of knowledge that may serve to exclude certain elements of project work and include others (Hodgson & Cicmil, 2007). The common denominator of these aspects is that the discursive notion of projects and project management contributes to the construction of certain priorities, work procedures, and structural settings as legitimate and desirable, while excluding and suppressing others – and that this may well hamper the development of the field in both theoretical and practical terms.

### *Project work as construction of gender structures*

Closely linked to the notion of power is the study of project practices as embedded in gender structures, as processes of co-construction of gender structures. Hirdman (1990) claims that the gender system is the foundation for social patterns identifiable in most societies, patterns that are constituted by two logics; the separation of sexes (segregation) and the primacy of masculine norms (hierarchization). Even though there are differences between societies in time and space, these two logics can be found in the organization of society as well as in the ongoing

construction of identities. Male and female bodies are attributed masculine and feminine characteristics, and what happens to be regarded as “feminine” is thus separated and subordinated to what happens to be regarded as “masculine” normality (Butler, 1999). Femininity and masculinity constitute two different discursive dimensions and both female and male bodies combine these dimensions in their ongoing identity construction (Kerfoot & Knights, 1996). Femininity and masculinity are thus regarded in this chapter as constructed in time and space and subject to re-construction over historical epochs and life paths of human beings (Lindgren and Wählin, 2001).

Given these notions on the construction of femininities and masculinities in work life, the main question is how new forms of organizing – such as project work – contribute to the ongoing construction of these notions. It has, for example, been concluded that project discourse – sometimes despite appearances – tends to reintroduce masculinities in work life through the emphasis on work as priority, urgency, and self-fulfilment (Gill, 2002; Lindgren & Packendorff, 2006a; Segercrantz, 2009; Styhre, 2011), that project management guidelines and bodies of knowledge are highly masculinized (Buckle & Thomas, 2003), and that the underlying ethics of project management knowledge emphasize masculine notions of impartiality, efficiency, and control (Crevani & Lennerfors, 2009). Through such analyses, the assumed neutrality and efficiency-focussed character of project management is challenged, and the consequences of the project management discourse for how categorizations of people are created and sustained can be formulated.

### *Project work as identity-construction processes*

A third example of a theoretical phenomenon that can be studied in project practices is identity – that is, how notions of projects and project management become part of how individuals construct self in social interaction. The concept of identity is widely used on a daily basis in both texts and conversation, and during the last decade it has also entered into public debate in society. Identity is usually seen in a static fashion, implying that human beings “are something” (e.g. a teacher or a doctor) and that their identity construction process is over, more or less.

Against this it has recently been claimed that identities are always in the making; when exposed to discontinuities in life, the identity of an individual is open to change through a process of reflection upon both the past and the future (Giddens, 1991; Lindgren & Wåhlin, 2001). Life can thus be seen as an ongoing process of identity construction, where the individual tries to understand and define her/himself from the various social situations to which they are exposed. With a social constructionist view we therefore treat identity in this chapter as something that is constructed and re-constructed in daily social interaction throughout life.

Identity construction is often based in what we can call “institutionalized identities”, that is, concepts such as professional identity, gender identity, ethnic identity, and so on. On an aggregate level (society, organization, clan, etc) these socially defined identities are valid and homogeneous to a certain extent, but on the individual level they are expressed in a multitude of ways depending on how different individuals describe themselves. They may also use professionalism and/or organizational belonging in their construction of identity, that is, that they identify with their work and their industry and the values and practices that they find there.

As project management is on the increase in many industries, it is also increasingly present in processes of identity construction. When studying this in a theatrical setting, Lindgren and Packendorff (2007) concluded that the notion of project management has become part of the identity construction of cultural workers, but that relating to both project management and cultural ideologies happens through processes of simultaneous confirmation/disconfirmation or even mutual disconfirmation, rather than in a harmonic manner. Andersson and Wickelgren (2009) noted that identity construction in corporate R&D involved project management in a way that justified problematic work-life balances, in terms of passion for the company and passion for the product that they were developing together. Case and Piñeiro (2009) observed an element of resistance in their study of IT industry programmers, who viewed themselves as technical professionals with ethical and aesthetical standards that should not be overridden by project management procedures and deadlines (cf. also Rowlands & Handy, 2012). Through such studies, we can achieve a much better understanding of the interplay between project management and professional identities, not least the processes whereby project management is adopted by, adapted to, or even rejected by a profession – an understanding that is also highly relevant in studying the ongoing professionalization of project management itself.

## **For whom is this a problem? On audiences, benefactors and victims of project research**

When identifying areas for research, there is always the question of audience. Contemporary, publish-or-perish-driven research often seems to become obsessed with notions of “gaps” – that is, that every matter not covered in literature presents us with a publishing opportunity (Hällgren, 2012). To this, I would say that there is often a reason why the gap exists: if no one else has bothered to study a certain empirical phenomenon from a certain theoretical perspective (or did but was unable to get it published in the end), it might be because no one else were interested. Moreover, if we are to take our job as (more or less) critical researchers seriously, we also need to consider why we investigate certain problems and what interests are served through these investigations.

In their outline of four major streams of project research – based on different sets of assumptions on relevance, contribution, and audience – Jacobsson and Söderholm (2011) claim that research must always be understood as embedded in social and cultural norms:

Project management represents an area with strong institutional norms in terms of what is considered to be relevant management practices. However, industrial and organisational practice are not alone in terms of being dependent on their institutional environment and taken-for-granted assumptions. ... [R]esearch also has an institutionalised social and cultural environment in which knowledge of the research field is created, communicated and evaluated. Therefore, research is dependent not only on the culture of the phenomenon being researched, but also on the culture of the audience to whom the research is presented. Consequently, when the audience changes, the knowledge embeddedness of the research also changes, for example, from an audience asking for advice in practical matters to one seeking to explain fundamental social relations. (380)

In the dominant notion of project research as a distinct field aimed at theorizing on reified projects and formulating best practices, the intended audience is rarely discussed. Still, the question of for whom a research problem is relevant should always be a relevant one.

From a critical perspective, it is of course important to discuss the hegemony of project management as an applied discipline, aimed at construing models that ensure project controllability and success (Hallin & Karrbom Gustavsson, 2010). As the research community has evolved more or less hand in hand with the rise of practitioner organizations such as the Project Management Institute and the International Project Management Association, these organizations and their members have become taken-for-granted benefactors (and indeed sponsors) of project research. This implies that researchers, when identifying possible new theoretical problems and practical settings for inquiry, may almost automatically assume the best-practice perspective as the foundation of relevance. With the notion of best practices follow certain theoretical traditions, certain areas of practice, and certain modes of expression. What is of interest here is of course what is excluded without further ado: what theoretical perspectives are not pursued, what empirical settings are neglected, and what ways of presenting research are suppressed?

A critical project research agenda should also be based on awareness not only of benefactors, but also of victims. If the benefactors are taken for granted and their interests served without reflection, then who are the ones forgotten, what are their lived experience of project work? In some of the work discussed in the previous section in which I was involved, there were indeed practitioners to whom the project-form and discourse appeared as highly problematic. There were theatrical workers who saw the project-form as depriving them of professional autonomy and status (Lindgren & Packendorff, 2007), there were IT consultants who saw the project-form as legitimating recurrent states of emergency to which normal rules did not apply (Lindgren & Packendorff, 2006a), and there were salespeople who saw top-down-induced organizational change project-management as disrupting trust and collaboration (Lindgren et al., 2011). It is our job as researchers to attend also to such perspectives, critically scrutinizing rather than admiring and sustaining taken-for-granted dominant notions. And in doing so, we may also contribute to, for example, general research on post-bureaucratic forms or contemporary work life in a highly relevant manner.

The importance of audience is thus not only a matter of identifying who is to read and use what we write, it is also a matter of benefactors and victims: what interests are served and not, what the consequences of research could be or not, that is, the axiological or ethical

consideration of research. If we intend to affect current practices, suggesting new ones, such actions should be explicitly based on the very same theoretical perspectives that shaped our original research (Spicer et al., 2009). The question of relevance should always be with us; explicitly, never implicitly assumed. The same reasoning should also be applied to pure theoretical work – as important as it is to develop theoretical constructs and to forward methodological reasoning, it should be relevant at least to other researchers. Not all gaps are worth closing!

### **The unfinished business of critical project research: what next?**

In this chapter, I set out to discuss how project research could be made more relevant to general management research. Departing from a research tradition based in critical management studies, I have claimed that such relevance requires conscious reflection on the nature of projects, the theoretical perspectives taken, and the notion of benefactors and victims of project research and practices. Otherwise, there is a clear and present danger that project research is instead “carried away” into its own demarcated and distinct realms.

In general, project research may contribute in several ways to current developments in organization theory. Contrary to the expectation expressed by Jacobsson and Söderholm (2011) that projects will then merely become a setting for empirical illustrations, I think that project researchers can also contribute with unique insights into how project management discourse has evolved, the practising of professional project and portfolio management, and also how daily work in several emerging industries and work settings is organized. Organization-theory scholars interested in “bringing work back in” in enhancing understandings of contemporary organizational matters (Barley & Kunda, 2001) should find project research most useful in developing new theoretical notions on, for example, post-bureaucratic organizations, virtual organizations, entrepreneurial processes, the organizing of innovation work, new leadership forms, new HRM practices, and so forth. It is my hope that project management scholars will take an active part in this development.

Critical project research holds a similar potential, as all of the above research fields are in need of informed critical inquiry and theory development based on in-depth insights into project management practices. The consequences of the project as a core discursive phenomenon of contemporary society (Chiapello & Fairclough, 2002), the “projectification” of virtually everything, should be of interest in several disciplines of the social sciences. When work processes, complex tasks, long-term change work, and life in general are increasingly treated as instances of project management, then what happens, who benefits, and what power structures emerge? Are we experiencing a shift towards post-bureaucratic organizing, or is it better understood as re-bureaucratization at different levels of analysis? What about projects as outbursts of emotional labour, as projections of desire and hope rather than as rationally planned activity systems? In addition to this, work-life problems in project-based work need continued attention, as well as related issues of leadership and followership, of entrepreneurship and innovation.

What Blomquist and Söderholm observed in their 2002 text was project management research getting “carried away,” in the sense of optimistically expanding in all directions from an initial position of marginality. My question in this chapter is built on a less idiomatic meaning of the phrase: if project research is indeed getting carried away, then from where is it carried away, and to what place? My concern has been the risk of leaving project research to an increasingly insular community where best-practice perspectives and reified notions of projects as manageable items become taken-for-granted foundations of inquiry. Critical perspectives – based on constructionist notions of projects, alternative theoretical foci, and awareness of consequences and audiences of different schools of thought – are a possible way to prevent such a development and to promote project research as a contribution to general management.

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