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Strategic Management Research in the Age of Post-Positivist  
Turmoil in the Social Sciences: Rigor or Rigor Mortis?

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Post-Positivist Turmoil in the Social Sciences:  
Rigor or Rigor Mortis?

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the future of strategic management research. It begins with a short review of the present status of strategic management as a social science, and finds that little progress has been made. But, this lack of progress is typical of social sciences. Logical positivism, ~~which~~ serves as the epistemological justification for most research in strategy. The paper explains why logical positivism failed. In the second part of the paper, I offer alternatives to logical positivism: critical theory, interpretation, and post-structuralism. The overall theme of the paper is that changing ideas of language and representation have made the traditional stance to strategic management research obsolete.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

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Strategy scholars engage in many internecine debates. For example, they debate the merits of the case method versus quantitative methods, about objective versus perceived environments, about the presumptive benefits of diversification, and so on. But, these passionate arguments mask broad agreements. At a deeper, more fundamental level, scholars fervently subscribe to the idea that empirical research offers the best (I am tempted to write 'only') method to secure valid knowledge about general management and strategy. Although the practical barriers are formidable (for example, seldom having recourse to "crucial" experiments), they believe scholarship is advancing -- IN PRINCIPLE -- towards valid knowledge, anchored firmly upon objective, scientific underpinnings. In short, strategic management aspires to the rigid standards of a prototype science. Unfortunately, the concrete accomplishments of strategic management fail to satisfy those lofty aspirations. Briefly reviewing the status of strategic management as a body of scientific work is one objective of this paper.

Owing to its broad charter, research on general management and strategy demands an interdisciplinary focus. Consequently, strategic management occupies a derivative position. Strategic management relies heavily on knowledge borrowed from other social sciences across its permeable boundaries. In this position, strategic management naturally lags behind important trends and developments originating elsewhere in social science. Therefore, the shape of current conditions in the broad social science realm may offer a forecast to strategic management about what to expect in its own future. But, today the senior social sciences have fallen into schism and disarray. A kaleidoscopic range of schools and traditions have struggled mightily, but none of them have survived long enough to establish a stable, enduring, body of theory — much less a paradigm. The confident optimism of the nineteen-sixties has given way to a spectrum of opinion ranging from nagging doubts, to disillusion, to cynicism. Examining the reasons for these disturbing developments sets a second objective.

Research methods in the social sciences derive chiefly from the theory of logical positivism as expounded by the Vienna School in the 1920s. Alas, logical positivism has



collapsed, withdrawing the epistemological justification for everyday research in social sciences. Explaining the downfall of logical positivism forms a third objective of this paper.

Until now, mounting challenges to empiricist traditions in social science have exerted only a negligible effect on the organizational disciplines. But even within the purview of the management disciplines a process of self-appraisal has begun to worm its way into the insecure foundations of organization behavior (for example, Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Steffy & Grimes, 1986; Smircich & Calas, 1986) and strategic management (Smircich & Stubbart, 1985; Shrivastava, 1986). Although many theorists and researchers in strategic management recognize their disciplinary impasse, few look beyond "qualitative versus quantitative" perspectives. Examining the development of ideas about language and representation in the social sciences as expressed by new research practices marks a fourth objective.

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## II. STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT AS A SOCIAL SCIENCE

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In strategic management, scholarly training, standards for scholarly achievement, professional status, and outlook, each reflect a sacrosanct commitment to probing the empirical world. Conceptual writing is taken seriously only if it has empirical referents and consequences. For example, scholars pay attention to Porter (1980) because he set out a framework amenable to empirical testing (e.g., Dess & Davis, 1984). Moreover, strategy scholars are striving harder after "rigor" (Camerer, 1985).

### 1. A LANDMARK TEXT.

"The Value of New Paradigms" is the first title, on page one, of Schendel & Hofer's (1979) landmark strategic management book. They lament the absence of a paradigm in policy research, and anxiously proclaim that strategic management is on the verge of attaining legitimate paradigmatic status:

"Today, the policy field is in need of a new paradigm than can end the continual and pointless redefinition of concepts used in both practice and teaching. We believe that such a paradigm is at hand, and this book is devoted to developing a a better and wider understanding of it . . . "Strategic Management" (p. 2).

In spite of Schendel & Hofer's proclamation, other scholars (within strategy, in related fields, and in distant fields) have repeatedly chided strategic management about its many scientific shortcomings.

## 2. CRITICISM FROM WITHIN THE STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT RESEARCH COMMUNITY.

The chief complaints about strategic management fall within several broad categories:

i. Imprecision. Leontiades (1982) represents only the most recent in a long list of reviews which decry the constantly expanding confusion about what "strategy" really is. Other pivotal conceptual terms are just as slippery. Shrivastava & Peridis (1985) showed how divergent this terminological morass is becoming. A science which cannot get its fundamental concepts straight is going nowhere.

ii. Poor Theory. Adequate theoretical frameworks are seldom proposed, and those proposed seldom appear in correct form. Many writings present elaborate, excessively-abstract concepts which hint at theory but fail to meet the minimal requirements of a theoretical statement (for example, Chakravarthy, 1983; Porter, 1980; Lawrence & Dyer, 1983; Kotter, 1982; Quinn, 1980; Miles & Cameron, 1982). The inadequacies of these "theories" lead to divergent interpretations, differing operationalizations, and inconclusive tests. Without satisfactory theoretical statements, empirical work is pointless.

iii. Fragmentation. An unruly amalgam of topics, perspectives, isolated empirical generalizations, and quasi-theories, vie for scholars' attention. Shirley (1983) worried about this lack of focus in strategy research. Freeman & Lorange (1985) found so many proliferating theories that they had to build a meta-framework intelligible to Martians. Conceptual beachheads have been recently established by behavioral decision theory (Schwenk, 1984), biology (Aldrich, 1979), industrial economics (Porter, 1980), critical theory (Shrivastava, 1986), and phenomenology (Smircich & Stubbart, 1985). One school of thought in strategy replaces (displaces) another without any cumulative progress.

iv. Empirical Impasse. One by one, topics sink into inconclusive deadlocks. For instance, Lenz & Engledow (1984) described how environmental analysis has become gridlocked

between competing perspectives. A long series of studies trying to isolate the presumed effects of strategic planning on organizational performance have reached a dense impasse (Hogarth & Makridakis, 1981; Armstrong, 1982; Schrader et. al., 1984). Inconclusive but methodologically adroit debates about market share, diversification, and performance are becoming a source of permanent employment for researchers (Wensley, 1982; Reed & Luffman, 1986). Studies cannot soon resolve the acrimonious argument over the relative merits of dialectical inquiry versus devil's advocate (Cosier et. al., 1978; Mitroff & Emshoff, 1979; Chanin & Shapiro, 1985; and Schweiger et. al., 1986).

v. Fads. "Legitimate science" is not vulnerable to fads. Its resistance to fads rests in the insulation dictated by standards of verification, replication, and testing against competing theories. Unfortunately, strategic management is often swept by fads such as the past fascination with "portfolio models" and the current premature acceptance of "competitive strategy." A rapid turnover in theories and concepts, plus an unhealthy vulnerability to fashions and ephemeral topics, suggests that scientific weakness plagues the field.

Summing up an important segment of opinion about the status of the discipline, Camerer (1985) argued that strategic management scholarship should smarten up and follow the examples of marketing where, "mysterious arts . . . have been replaced by an amalgam of sciences, including statistics and consumer psychology," and accounting, which has "been annexed by financial economics, agency theory, and behavioural decision theory" (p. 15).

These internal debates generally encompass a fairly broad range of technical concerns, but lag behind important developments elsewhere in organizational sciences.

### 3. THE ORGANIZATION THEORY WORLD BEYOND THE WALLS OF THE STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT FIELD.

Many scholarly discontents surfaced at a heavily-attended symposium discussion during the August 1986 Academy of Management National Meeting entitled: "Evaluating the Last Five Years of Strategic Management Research." Professor Daft — inspecting strategic management from the neighboring discipline of organization theory delivered remarks entitled, "The Past and Future of Strategic Management Research: On a Fast track to Nowhere?" His concerns were different

from the internal critique — the critique of "lack of rigor." Instead, he pointed out the strategy field's problems in three broad areas: premature commitments to a narrow set of logical positivist social science assumptions, premature commitments to multivariate methodologies, and a premature commitment to a narrow definition of organizational effectiveness. His remarks suggested that the field ought to slow down, to reassess its commitments and its direction. Is it time to re-appraise these "premature" commitments? A wider perspective on developments in the social sciences suggests that a moment for re-appraisal and self-examination has indeed arrived.

#### 4. THE WORLD BEYOND THE WALLS OF ORGANIZATIONAL DISCIPLINES

Although some scholars might think that strategic management merely suffers from the normal confusion of disciplinary childhood, histories of other social disciplines disclose no examples of social sciences which have advanced much beyond a stage of confusion and chaos, except for short periods.

Popper (1963) argued that refutations of particular theories was not a failure for a science. Many theories would be offered, but only a few good ones could withstand serious testing. But, in the social sciences, no such accumulation of grounded theories — much less paradigms — has taken place:

"... there is an extensive and growing body of literature that reveals the empirical, methodological, logical, and ideological inadequacies of empirical theories, including 'functionalist theories', 'equilibrium theories', 'systems theories', and 'social exchange' theories. While there are vehement disputes about how fruitful these theories really are, and in what sense, if any, they approximate the ideal of an empirical theory, no responsible scientist has asserted that we have yet achieved anything comparable to what was achieved in sixteenth and seventeenth century science." (Bernstein, 1976, p. 27).

The development of disciplines such as psychology, sociology, political science, and anthropology, follows a chaotic, seemingly random succession of competing frameworks, perspectives, and approaches. Contemporary perspectives do not borrow from, or build upon, their predecessors — they annihilate earlier perspectives. Only embarrassing theoretical wreckage, conceptual ghost towns, and the tombstones of discarded hypotheses dot the landscape of social science — leaving no residual accumulation of grounded theory.

One notes many signs of growing frustration and discontent. Social scientific literatures report increasing dislocation, disorder, and demoralization. For example, a noted scholar writes that economics reveals nothing about the empirical world:

"To my mind, mainstream American economists reflect more an academic need for an internal theoretical consistency and rigor than it reflects observable, measurable realities in the world we all live in. . . I am convinced that accepting the supply-demand model of the economy is rather like believing that the world is flat, or that the sun revolves around the earth. . . hypotheses used to understand the behavior of the economy found in the real world" (Thurow, 1983, p.xviii, xix).

Recognizing their habitual failure to construct grounded theories and lasting paradigms, many scholars now find social science guilty of intellectual check-kiting:

". . . ideas worked out in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries . . . must be radically overhauled today. . . state of disarray that characterizes social theory today -- a matter of common awareness to anyone working in the social sciences. The past decade or so has seen the revival of traditionally established forms of theory (such as hermeneutics), the emergence of seemingly novel perspectives (especially ethnomethodology), and the attempted incorporation within social theory of various approaches claimed to be drawn from formerly separate philosophical endeavours (the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein, ordinary language philosophy, and phenomenology). (Giddens, 1979, p.235).

Some scholars recommend discarding the logical positivist program altogether:

"As long as there has been a social science, the expectation has been that it would turn from its humanistic infancy to the maturity of hard science, thereby leaving behind its dependence on value, judgment, and individual insight. The dream of modern Western man to be freed from his passions, his unconscious, his history, and his traditions through the liberating use of reason has been the deepest theme of contemporary social thought. Perhaps the deepest theme of the twentieth century, however, has been the shattering of the triumphalist view of history. . . predecessors, as the heralds of the new age of an at last established science. They remain, like their predecessors, disappointed . . . . Now the time seems ripe, even overdue, to announce that there is not going to be an age of paradigm in the social sciences" (Rabinow & Sullivan, 1979 p. 1-4).

Scholars have thrown plenty of XXXX at the wall, but none has stuck for long. The lack of scientific progression and the absence of universal grounded theory frustrates even the most patient social scientists. The familiar argument that the youthfulness or immaturity of the social sciences justifies the absence of scientific progress and is beginning to sound hollow.

Of course, the mere fact that no paradigms have surfaced in the social sciences does not foreclose the possibility that paradigms might yet arrive. The social sciences' Copernicus, Kepler, and Newton may have recently passed their PhD qualifying exams. But, a hard-headed prima facie case holds that the social science research strategy has simply not worked.



## 5. WHAT NEXT FOR STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT?

Many scholars vigorously espouse the ideals of empirical scientific work first advocated by the logical positivists and developed into a methodology by Merton and others. They believe that scientific work without a paradigm will not do. They want to become "harder", "more rigorous," and get a hold on secure knowledge.

The writing of Camerer (1985) bears witness to the continuing attraction of the logical positivist program. Camerer bemoaned the fact that strategic management had obviously failed to satisfy the criteria for scientific legitimacy and success. He confidently argued that strategic management must emulate "harder" sciences like economics, which follow the logical positivist rules more rigorously. Strategic management scholars simply must stop doing bad research. To him, the logical positivist ideal is "idee fixe."

Should scholars rally to Camerer's call? Will an intensified logical positivism generate the kind of grounded, paradigmatic knowledge that Camerer finds so alluring? It is ironic that today, when Camerer and others vociferously advocate a re-dedication to pure logical positivism, logical positivism has been lying dead for decades (See Suppe, 1977). Knowing why logical positivism died is an integral part of understanding just what kind of social sciences are possible in the future.

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### III. EMPIRICIST EPISTEMOLOGY

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Although the development of physical and social sciences has largely displaced and suppressed traditional philosophical concerns about ontology and cosmology, discussions about epistemology have intensified. The particular issue which merits our attention is the perennial search for a general theory of representation, an immutable, eternal foundation for knowledge, an ahistorical, theory-independent ground. To properly understand the pivotal importance of representation in empirical social sciences, and the acute distress currently enveloping the question of representation, one needs to review the genealogy of social research. I want to outline some intellectual history which helps to answer the question, "How did we get the organization theory/ strategic management science we practice?"

## 1. THE AGE OF THE LOGICAL POSITIVISTS (or Logical Empiricists)

i. Origins. Before Locke, no serious scholars thought that sensory data had anything to do with knowledge of Man. Empiricism only became possible when the Renaissance, and then the Enlightenment undermined the Church's monolithic authority over society. Additional changes in the 18th and 19th centuries such as dazzling advances in physical sciences and technology, the painful breakdown of traditional agrarian society in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, and the liberating ideas of the French Revolution, set the stage for drastic realignments of thought about science.

ii. Formation of the Vienna Circle. By the 1920s the thematic elements of logical positivism crystallized with the formation of the "Vienna Circle" of philosophy (Feigl, Neurath, Schlick, Carnap, Ayer, Hempel). These scholars sought to erect standards for a paradigmatic science. Three key assertions defined their program:

a. Verification. Knowledge only comes from science, nowhere else. Science yields knowledge because scientific assertions are warranted by empirical experiment and observations. If there is no way to empirically verify a statement, that statement has no meaning and falls outside the (worthwhile) realm of science. For example, questions such as "What is ethical?" can never be answered by science. The correct scientific basis for knowledge was the "observational sentence." Observational sentences were to be based on incorrigible sense-data experiences, such as "I see red" (with finger pointed toward red apple) wherein a scientific observer made straightforward, non-inferential judgments. Schlick (1959) wrote:

"In order to find the meaning of a proposition, we must transform it by successive definitions until finally only such words occur in it as can no longer be defined, but whose meanings can only be directly pointed out" (p. 106).

Verifiability called a halt to pointless scientific discussions about vacuous, ethereal topics.

"Give us hard data " was the battle cry of logical positivism.

b. Logical Construction. Whitehead and Russell (1911) achieved a stunning advance when they managed to reduce mathematics to logic and set theory. Logical constructions could provide the bridge between sense data and theory. Their theory of logic provided crystal clear

methods to represent sentences and logically important structures within sentences. Using rigorous characterizations, sentences could be proven from other sentences. The logical positivists realized that if theoretical sentences could be tied to true observational sentences by logic, a grand system for linking theory to incontrovertible data was at hand. Therefore, complex theories must be reduced to their simplest elements, so simple that our experience of them is self-evidently true. Logical construction banished insecure interpretations by anchoring scientific knowledge with indisputable sense data. Positivists thought they had finally found an airtight method to substitute real knowledge for mush dished out in fancy language.

c. Unity of Science. The logical positivists argued that because science studies verifiable empirical phenomena, that only one science was necessary. They elected physics as the best approximation of a true science. They expected all the evidence of chemistry, biology, psychology, and sociology to "reduce" to physical evidence. Such was the reductionist part of their program. In the social sciences this principle stimulated the methodological practice of "operationalism."

## 2. THE IMPACT OF LOGICAL POSITIVISM.

Logical positivism united several important dimensions of a new intellectual landscape. First, it expressed a renewed commitment to the empiricism espoused by Bacon, Hume, Berkeley and Locke -- at the expense of scholasticism and against the rationalism of Descartes. Empiricists insisted that worldly knowledge is only gained by experience of worldly phenomena. Christian theology and German Idealism were passionately rejected as the basis for knowledge, as was the authority of the Greek classics. Second, logical positivism made a bold commitment to science. Spectacular advances in physical sciences and mathematics cleared the way for a self-confident, materialist and pragmatic belief in the power of empirical science. Third, logical positivism was committed to the power of logic.

Logical Positivism's grand scheme thrilled the scientific and philosophical communities. With a clean, bold stroke they banished transcendental, other-worldly, ineffable, and shadowy

supernatural junk from the halls of science. It was a beautiful, heroic theory that just had to be true. And it provided a foundation for research. Their no-nonsense program launched a generation of scholars in search of certainty, structure and rigor (eg., behaviorism, structural linguistics).

Before 1945, few scholars working in social sciences had any training in empirical research methods. Robert Merton was a leader in changing this. In *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Merton, 1949) he outlined a sophisticated approach to empirical theory which still largely represents the views of most social scientists.

Merton drew heavily on themes from logical positivism, thinking social sciences should aim for the same type of theories and knowledge which characterize the physical sciences. But, he was cautious, expecting that generating scientific social knowledge would require much careful, patient work and many failures.

According to Merton, theory is not equivalent to collections of variables, approaches, conceptual analysis, or perspectives. He would disapprove of the casual way some scholars apply the term 'theory' in the organizational sciences today. Instead, a theory consists of clear, verifiable statements of relationships among variables — logically interrelated propositions having empirical consequences. From these propositions scientists devise the hypotheses necessary for explanation, prediction, and testing. Exactly the logical positivist program.

Merton proposed the task of constructing "theories of the middle range", aiming at an intermediate range of complex explanations -- between grand theories of society (such as Parsons, 1951) and minor theories relating two obscure variables.

To sum up Merton's view, gaining access to the laws of social reality — theoretical knowledge — is the purpose of the social scientific enterprise. Social scientists should follow the example of physical sciences in ontological, epistemological, and methodological realms. Therefore, competent social scientists had to learn about theory construction, the design of experiments, observation, and statistical analysis. Moreover, generating and testing theory presented the cornerstone task. And searching for theories of the middle-range offered the best prospects for success.

Merton's fundamentals ushered in the hypothetical-deductive explanation: "brute data," objectivity, validity, reliability, context-free operations, generalizability, law-like statements, quantification techniques and scientific detachment — establishing the appropriate methods for empirical research on society. Merton's ideas about empirical science echo throughout organizational literature (Bourgeois, 1979, Kerlinger, 1973; Miner, 1982; Kaplan, 1964). Today, 40 years later, Merton's logical positivist views are humdrum, they wouldn't cause any raised eyebrows among the Academy of Management.

### 3. ALLURING AND ELUSIVE PARADIGMS

Although Kuhn (1962, 1970) originally had little to say about social science, social scientists were interested in what Kuhn had to say. Many social scientists were attracted to Kuhn's writing by his idea of disciplinary "paradigms." Kuhn defined paradigms as "universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners" (1970, p. viii). According to Kuhn, paradigms encompass, "law, theory, application, and instrumentation together" (1970, p. 10). As such, paradigms represent an extension, codification, and institutionalization of Merton's mid-range theories.

Working without a "normal" paradigm connotes chaos, confusion, and frustration. Non-paradigmatic activities accumulate with agonizing irregularity, generate little systematic knowledge, and represent social and professional inefficiencies. Many of Kuhn's readers concluded that locating and mining a viable paradigmatic vein signaled true scientific achievement. Because of their beliefs about the perils of non-paradigmatic activities, scientists search frantically for a paradigmatic umbrella if they don't already have one.

### 4. SUMMARY

The tenets of logical positivism establish a scientific agenda for social research as extended by Merton and others. By following such methods, social scientists expected to produce solid mid-range theory, propelling their disciplines to paradigmatic status.

Social scientists accepted the tenets of logical positivism, steadfastly followed the methods derived from it, and fervently hoped for the arrival of paradigms which would put them on a legitimate scientific footing. We are entitled, indeed obligated, to measure what has been accomplished by these methods in strategic management and in social sciences generally.

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#### IV. HOW LOGICAL POSITIVISM WENT WRONG

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Why didn't the logical positive program work? The chief problem turned out to be logical positivism's reliance on the "picture theory" of language.

##### 1. PROBLEMS HIDDEN IN THE PICTURE THEORY OF LANGUAGE

In defining their program, the logical positivists relied heavily on Wittgenstein's "picture theory" of language (Wittgenstein, 1921). The picture theory argued that language mirrors external reality (See figure one). Hence, the structure of reality could be studied within the confines of normal language. Logical positivists assumed that language served non-problematic representational functions. Words simply reflect something real somewhere outside the language itself:

"Realist literature tends to conceal the socially relative or constructed nature of language: it helps to confirm the prejudice that there is a form of 'ordinary language' which is somehow natural. This language gives us reality 'as it is' . . . as God himself might know it. The sign is not seen as a changeable entity determined by the rules of a particular changeable sign-system: it is seen as a translucent window on to the object, or on to the mind. It is quite neutral and colourless in itself: its only job is to represent something else, become the vehicle of meaning conceived quite independently of itself, and it must interfere with what it mediates as little as possible . . . words link up with their thoughts or objects in essentially right and uncontrovertible ways: the word becomes the only proper way of viewing this object or expressing this thought" (Eagleton, 1983, pp. 135-136).

i. This key element of their program proved untenable. In an astonishing intellectual turnaround, Wittgenstein (1953) rejected his own "picture theory" of language. Instead, he described human interaction as language "games," where words play a variety of subtle, ambiguous and indeterminate roles incompatible with logical positivism. He demonstrated that neither the notion of an ideal scientific language nor the idea that language is an isomorphic representation of reality could hold up under close analysis.

ii. Austin (1962) demonstrated that sentences have no literal, face value meaning. Sentences only take on meaning in a wider context. Sentences were seen to have a performative dimension as well as a literal dimension. Meaning depends on who, when, where, why, and so forth.

iii. Sellars (1968) demonstrated that language acquisition precedes sense data reporting abilities. Therefore, an existing language community always governs the knowledge game (see

Astley, 1985, for relevance to organizational issues).

iv. Quine (1953) pointed out the inconclusive nature of experiments. He showed that experiments can never soundly refute theories, because scientific hypotheses form interlocking, interdependent networks of statements which cannot be tested sentence by sentence. By modifying implicit background assumptions, any theory can always be protected. Even more disturbing, because competing theories rely on incommensurable data, no convincing formal criterion for making a rational choice between competing theories has been offered.

v. Analyses revealed that even the most-direct sensory data cannot be trusted completely. At one time, "sensible" people observed that the Sun moved about the Earth, and laughed at the preposterous idea that the Earth might be a sphere. Additionally, studies show that context, intentions, training and past experiences affect reports about visual perception, hearing, and touch (Churchland & Churchland, 1981). Contradictory experiences of sense perceptions make the idea of infallible sense data hard to defend. The proposition that direct sense data occupy a "privileged" epistemological position has proven untenable.

vi. According to logical positivism, it was necessary to have a "chain" of theories linking different kinds and levels of theory to the procrustean, incorrigible sense data. For example, psychology should reduce to neurobiology. But studies (Kuhn, 1962 & 1970; Feyerabend, 1975; Hooker, 1981) have shown that theoretical change in the sciences almost never fits the positivist account of logical reduction. For instance, Einsteinian field theory will not reduce to Newtonian mechanics. Instead, scientific change moves haphazardly: annihilating old theories, revamping observations and displacing old data.

All these problems in logical positivism were tied to language issues. A growing preoccupation with language, thought, knowledge, and theory has defined the epistemological discussion since logical positivism.

## 2. A CRISIS IN REPRESENTATION.

Today, logical positivism is defunct but not departed. According to the Encyclopedia of Philosophy (1972), "Logical Positivism is dead, or as dead as a philosophical movement ever

becomes." Asked about these developments, A.J. Ayer (a prime mover in logical positivism) remarked in 1978, "I suppose that the most important defect was that nearly all of it was false." Hesse (1972) summarized some of the major changes in scientific thinking which demarcate the demise of the positivist era:

0. Data are not detachable from theory, for what counts as data are determined in light of some theoretical interpretation.

0. Theories are not models externally compared to nature in a hypothetical-deductive schema, they are the way the facts themselves are seen.

0. The lawlike relations asserted of experience are internal, because what count as facts are constituted by what the theory says about their inter-relations with one another.

0. The language of natural science is irreducibly metaphorical and inexact, and formalizable only at the cost of distorting the historical dynamics of science.

0. Meanings in natural science are determined by theory; they are understood by theoretical coherence rather than by correspondence with facts.

She also pointed out that post-empiricist accounts of the physical sciences no longer follow the standard dichotomy which is often described in social science debates:

"What is immediately striking about it to readers versed in recent literature is philosophy of science is that almost every point made about the human sciences has recently been made about the natural sciences, and that the points made about natural sciences presuppose a traditional empiricist view of natural science that is almost universally discredited" (Hesse, 1980).

With the collapse of logical positivism the epistemological scaffolding supporting the whole edifice of the empirical sciences was withdrawn (Suppe, 1977). An intellectual Pandora's box was pried open. The era of grand theories and hegemonic discourses (such as Freud, Marxism, Parsons') has expired. It is not just the content of the theories that is questioned, not a question of quantitative versus qualitative, rather it is the whole paradigmatic style which is under pressure from linguistic concerns. The key feature of this moment is a rejection of metanarratives, paradigms, and grand unified theories — a loosening generally called Post-modernism. Scholarly work retreats toward local, fragmented, momentary, fragile types of description. During the last twenty years sociology, philosophy, linguistics, literary theory, historiography, economics, law, architecture and other disciplines have all experienced a growing anxiety and frustration over the the representational issues between language, thought and knowledge — How shall we describe reality? How do words hook onto reality?



Social sciences appear to be on the threshold of an intellectual free-for-all, where scholarship is awkwardly stranded between the rear-guard actions of the remnants of a discredited logical positivism and the intolerable skepticism, detachment, and meagre promises of postmodernism. The outlook suggests a period of suspended beliefs: a tolerance for eclectic approaches and conceptual risk-taking; an attention toward local, fragmentary knowledge rather than totalizing, global knowledge; preference for explanations of exceptions rather than regularities; an ironic, critical, disbelieving attitude toward one's work; while scholars struggle to find a tolerable mode of representation.

Though the strategic management landscape is littered with the corpses of discarded theories, few scholars advocate overhauling the system which produced those inadequate theories. Although one finds few philosophers who will say they are logical positivists, one finds many researchers in strategy, organization theory, and organization behavior who work as if they still subscribe to logical positivist principles. The situation reminds me of "escalating commitment" (Staw & Ross, 1978), or Pfeffer's (1981) "law of unrequited effort." Although strategic management is currently isolated from these debates and developments behind a conceptual and psychological 'cordon sanitaire', its deep commitments to logical positivist empiricism combined with its inherent need to reach across disciplinary boundaries, will eventually attract the same critiques which rack its older, larger, more fully developed disciplinary kin — with the same fatal result.

### 3. FROM LOGICAL POSITIVISM TO POST-MODERNISM

Following sections sketch out substitutes for a logical positivist science of society. For each alternative I briefly examine its origin, its theory of knowledge and notions of scholarship as potentially applicable to strategic management, and describe its representational departures and limitations. (Of course, in practice these positions are subject to many variations and nuances.) In general, these alternatives trace out a representational field shifting farther and farther away from logical positivist assumptions about language.

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## V. CRITICAL THEORY: HABERMAS AND THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

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1. ORIGINS. A group of philosophers loosely known as the "Frankfurt School", including Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Wellmer, and Habermas, argued that essential ideas contained in the works of Marx and Freud foreshadowed a new type of theory — critical theory. Critical theorists have contributed critiques of capitalism, bureaucracy, rationality, technology, law, the family, art, music, and literature.

See Geuss (1981) or McCarthy (1978) for a more detailed discussion.

2. KNOWLEDGE. Habermas (1971) claimed that knowledge organizes around three "cognitive interests": technical (about work), practical (about human interaction), and emancipatory (about power). Emancipatory knowledge constitutes the rightful province of critical theory. In organizational settings, governing groups might suppress legitimate criticism and distort communication by translating social questions into technical questions. According to critical theory, governing groups institute false ideologies and false consciousness to prevent members from understanding their true situation. People can only emancipate themselves from social repression by freeing themselves from their ideological illusions. Rational critique is the chief method of critical theory for pursuing that emancipatory knowledge. To aid in this revelatory struggle, scholars staunchly contend that critical science must extinguish ideology.

The interaction of ideology with knowledge at two levels sets a framework for emancipation. The first level is the critique of social theory and method; and the second level is the critique of the relationship between scholars and practitioners. At the first level, critical theory is particularly critical of positivist science, as illustrated in the famous debates between Adorno and Popper. Critical theorists charge logical positivism with encroaching on the human sciences, of launching a type of scholarly imperialism:

"For the philosophy of science that has emerged since the mid-nineteenth century as the heir to the theory of knowledge is methodology pursued with a scientific self-understanding of the sciences. 'Scientism' means science's belief in itself: that is, the conviction that we can no longer understand science as one form of knowledge, but rather must identify knowledge with science." (Habermas, 1971, p. 4).

Habermas and other critical theorists claim that ideological interests pollute certain sciences. Is strategic management ideological? Several conditions indicate hazardous ideological ingredients in strategic management science:

i. Social scientists make many prescriptions about society. When allegedly scientific recommendations are not based on grounded knowledge, ideology is using science for camouflage.

An apriori prescriptive element strongly guided strategic management from the fields' inception. The disciplinary history of strategic management clearly shows that prescriptions have always outstripped factual determinations. Scholars rushed pell mell to promote the idea of strategic planning long before empirical research on the topic even began (Ansoff, 1965).

ii. Self-interested groups might manipulate their communications to other groups, as in Machiavelli. If groups treat their selfish interests as universally legitimate for diverse communities and claim that science upholds their interests, then ideology masquerades as science.

Strategic management researchers and writers explicitly tie their work directly to the interests of top management of companies. For instance, Andrews (1980), Schendel & Hofer (1979) and others make strategic management contingent upon general managers' autonomy, inclinations, and interests. These commitments are acknowledged regularly in textbooks, in scholarly meetings, and practitioner literature. Additionally, scholars argue against producing knowledge "not actionable" or irrelevant to general managers' agendas.

By adopting the perspective of companies' managers, scholars implicitly overrule the interests of social units both larger and smaller than a "company." By lionizing general managers, by making sectional interests into determinants of knowledge, scholars inadvertently raise strategists' goals to universally valid goals.

iii. Dominant groups in society naturally prefer to deny and obscure contradictions. If a community refuses to confront the conflicts and contradictions inherent in their social systems and knowledge systems, then ideological interests are suppressing genuine communication. A general manager framework invites scholars to ask obvious questions, but the framework puts critical questions about general managers' motives and behavior out of bounds, by defining-out any knowledge which — although true — is not useful to general managers, or

harms their sacred interests. These commitments relegate strategic management scholarship to a subservient, technical role — handmaidens of the general manager. Consequently, strategic management remains isolated from many contentious issues, such as the nature of capitalism, evils of monopoly power, bureaucracy, class struggle, and so forth.

iv. Powerful groups jealously guard their ascendancy. If social theories claim that the status quo represents a natural condition, and if they imply that changes are unnatural or undesirable, such claims constitute evidence of ruling ideological interests.

There has been no debate in the strategic management literature about the legitimacy and role of top management. If anything, the power and rights of the CEO have been expanded by strategic management.

It is easy to build a case that strategic management has been adversely affected by ideological constraints. Critical theory advocates an approach which:

- effectively critiques its own epistemological and methodological foundations.
- enlarges its research agenda to include critique of the intent of particular research.
- views research as a social practice.
- aims for effective, ethical, institutional change.

To purge ideological elements, a critical analysis of strategic management begins by constructing a taxonomy of strategy's ontology, epistemology, methods, and its practical consequences. Next, scholars must critique the intersections of theory, methods, practice, intentions, and ideology in strategic management. Important issues include:

- What interests does strategy management serve/oppress?
- What ideological elements contaminate strategy research?
- How do bureaucratic and ideological systems legitimate this knowledge?
- What ideological interests control the production and distribution of strategic knowledge?
- What role does strategy discourse play in societal institutions?
- What is the purpose, form, and consequence of interaction with practitioners?

Accordingly, a critical strategic management discipline must constantly engage in self-reflection and self-questioning.

3. METHOD. Critical theory presents itself as an empirical and practical project as well as a theoretical one. An organization facing strategic issues can serve as a site for critical analysis. Steffy & Grimes (1986) discussed some of the methodological components of

applying critical theory at such a site:

i. An analysis of the local language, history, and communicative actions which support institutional activity. This analysis includes empirical and quantitative studies of objective social structures, such as strategy, environment, and organizational structure.

ii. Next, the investigator must interpret the facts which were turned up. Scholars probe participants' viewpoints and the historical context of the so-called facts. Interpretation may reveal alienation, institutional oppression, distorted communication, and ideological contamination.

iii. Lastly, practicing critical theory demands social activism and ethical commitments from scholars. It propounds an overtly political philosophy, aiming to uncover the objective facts about capitalist society and liberate people through a revolution of consciousness. An analysis must include the investigators' analysis of their own values, their intentions, and constraints on their work. A critical study should help practitioners rationally reconstruct their social systems to liberate practitioners' human potential: combatting ideology, overcoming alienation, and restoring an ideal speech community. Validation of knowledge and needed changes are determined by practitioner community-acceptance.

4. SUMMARY. Critical theory offers a useful perspective to strategic management research, because it places major emphasis on critiquing the underlying assumptions, intentions, and methods of strategic management, currently a weak area in strategy.

Critical theory is suspicious of everyday representations. Its principal lines of analysis involve the Freudian idea of the unconscious (something hidden is directing the conscious) and the Marxist ideas of society (something hidden is governing the apparent social structure). It recognizes that language can cover up, deceive, or mis-represent the objective situation. But this problem of mis-representation is a problem of the deceptions of society, not a problem of duplicity inherent in language itself. Objective phenomena are simply being called by the wrong terms. Mis-representation can be straightened out by banishing false consciousness and ideology. In this regard, critical theory views of representation are not different from a positivist view.

However, there is one important distinction between critical theory and logical positivism in validating knowledge. In critical theory, knowledge is valid when a rational community says it is valid, not because of correspondence between representations and their proper objects (although this may be implicit).

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## VI. INTERPRETING TEXTS, INTERPRETING CULTURE.

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This section outlines two types of interpretation, the interpretation of written texts — generally called hermeneutics; and the interpretation of social action — cultural ethnography. These two types of analysis share a general orientation toward representation and some common origins.

### 1. THE INTERPRETATION OF TEXTS.

i. Origin. The term hermeneutics derives from Greek "to interpret." Traditional hermeneutics consisted of the analysis of biblical texts and other religious documents. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Schliermacher, Dilthey, and Heidegger had enlarged the scope of hermeneutics to interpret other types of documents. Hermeneutical analysis plays an important role in the writings of Gadamer, Habermas, Betti, Bernstein, Giddens, and Ricoeur.

ii. Knowledge. Modern hermeneutics differs from logical positivism regarding pivotal epistemological issues:

0. First, hermeneutics does not seek or guarantee certainty. Instead, it recognizes pragmatic, provisional knowledge.

0. Second, hermeneutical scholarship acknowledges that forms of human understanding never entirely escape the self-understanding and biases of a human interpreter, a discipline, or a historical epoch. Because of this reflexive element — in that social scientists study the societies of which they are themselves products — writers refer to the "hermeneutical circle" of understanding/self understanding.

0. Third, a written work always affords many interpretations of its meaning. What the text represents is not limited only to what its author intended, or strictly defined by the words on the page -- signs which point in many directions. Most hermeneutical analyses

downplay the ideal of representing objects as they "really are". They seek no privileged position, no archimedean point upon which to anchor objective representations. Instead, hermeneutics settles for tentative interpretations from multiple perspectives. Rabinow succinctly summed up hermeneutics' epistemological position by remarking, "Hermeneutics is a kind of knowledge without foundations: a knowledge that essentially amounts to edifying conversation" (Rabinow, 1986, p.236).

9. Lastly, hermeneutics takes reading more seriously than seeing. Hermeneutics' quest for understanding follows a model of literary analysis and meaning instead of the model of empirical observing which permeates logical positivism. Hermeneutics scholars are acutely sensitive to the subtleties of language and its ambiguous, inexact relationship with empirical experience. Therefore, hermeneutics is not anchored by the observational, empirical, sense data which drive logical positivism, it eschews cause/effect logic, and does not aim for predictive validity.

These four contrasts suggest that hermeneutics forms an art of human understanding, not a science. As such, hermeneutics' thrust is toward the mental, spiritual, and wholistic.

"The historical-hermeneutic sciences gain knowledge in a different methodological framework. Here the meaning of validity of propositions is not constituted in the frame of reference of technical control . . . For theories are not constructed deductively and experience is not organized with regard to the success of operations. Access to the facts is provided by the understanding of meaning, not observation. The verification of lawlike hypotheses in empirical analytic sciences has its counterpart here in the interpretation of texts. Thus the rules of hermeneutics determine the possible meaning of the validity of statements of the cultural sciences" (Habermas, 1973, p. 309).

## 2. READING STRATEGY.

Any text can be viewed as an invitation to a reading. The longer and more complex the written information, the greater the opportunity to read it in different, interesting ways. Strategic management research is mainly written — journal articles, the business press, scholarly books, courses, speeches, dissertations — a discourse on strategy. Although many scholars "read" these texts for the facts and theories expounded there, few texts have been "read" to decipher their meanings as psychological/social/cultural/political texts.

Hermeneutic analysis of strategic management texts such as Chandler (1962) or Ansoff (1965)

or whole bodies of work (such as Mintzberg's many writings) afford opportunities for reading. Such readings follow an eclectic method:

" . . . there is no general hermeneutics, no universal canon for exegesis, but only disparate and opposed theories concerning the rules of interpretation. The hermeneutic field . . . is internally at variance with itself" (Ricoeur, 1974, p.299).

Some readerly questions about the rhetorical and narrative aspects of strategy writing include:

- ⊙ What is the story, plot? What genre(s) is strategy writing?
- ⊙ What is the relationship between the writer and the text, his/her presence or absence?
- ⊙ What legitimates the writer's authority?
- ⊙ Who is the implied reader? His/her knowledge? Position? How is strategy writing received by its readers?
- ⊙ What is the context of the text? What were the historical and social circumstances of its writing, and what other texts does it tie into?
- ⊙ Which tactics or methods does the text use to justify the plausibility and authenticity of its message? How does it embellish and use jargon?
- ⊙ Which (un)familiar themes, allusions, conventions, imagery, and codes does it use?

Authors have suggested many inventive approaches to the reader's task. Interesting approaches to reading include, Iser (1978), Eco (1979), and Suleiman & Crosman, (1980).

For additional information on hermeneutics see Palmer (1969).

### 3. READING THE CULTURE OF STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT.

Several distinct interpretive perspectives partly find their origins in the idea of Transcendental Phenomenology originating with the writings of Husserl (1931). Husserl wanted a science of the conscious, lived world; knowledge systematically excluded by logical positivism. Unlike logical positivism, phenomenology refused to search for ultimate realities strictly within the confines of objective, sensory experience. Phenomenology probed for the essential structures which shape the consciousness of everyday life.

Because of its focus on the solitary human subject to the exclusion of all social relationships; its static, ahistorical stance; excessive rationalism, obscure presentations, and its inattention to the problems of language/representation, Husserl's original phenomenology



was modified by his successors. After Husserl, phenomenology branched out into existentialism, interpretive sociology, ethnomethodology, and symbolic interactionism.

Some writers proposed that scholars could read and interpret social action as they read and interpret texts (Ricoeur, 1981). Viewing social action as a text opens the field of ethnographic analyses — reading culture. Geertz wrote of the link between hermeneutics and ethnography:

"Doing ethnography is like trying to read . . . a manuscript -- foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior" (1973, p. 10).

Geertz approached cultural analysis from semiotics -- the study of signs (Geertz, 1973). Ethnographers write "thick descriptions" of culture as a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures, while moving away from analyses of structure and behavior. These studies aim to represent the conceptual worlds of research subjects from the "inside." Ethnographies require intensive, sensitive, and detailed field study of cultural phenomena.

#### 4. THE CASE FOR THE CASE METHOD

Many case-method studies appear in strategic management research, for example Kotter's study of *The General Managers* (1982). As a means for acquiring empirical knowledge, the case method suffers from well-known defects. The case method is free-wheeling, informal, and idiosyncratic — clashing with the dominant analytic ethic. Studies like Kotter's leave no clear trail of data and inferences which readers can use to monitor and evaluate the study. Kotter's analysis provokes skepticism when he uses information about a mere fifteen general managers to justify olympian theoretical conclusions and normative proclamations about managerial work. Kotter and other case researchers occupy an odd epistemological position. They try to convince readers by their realism and authenticity, they uphold the priority of empirical data ("I ended up with files on each manager that were four to eight inches thick"), and approve of causal analysis. Yet, unaccountably, case researchers resist standard empirical methods — Kotter offers no hypotheses, no control group and no statistics. For these reasons, the knowledge generated by the case method is a brittle knowledge, wandering outside any framework, uncomfortable about the positivist framework which sets its own basic assumptions.

Analyses by Pondy & Mitroff (1979) and Weick (1979) encouraged Smircich & Stubbart (1985) to combine ideas from phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ethnography to delineate an interpretive research program for strategic management. They observed that as strategic management research strives toward the rigor of elaborate methods, it unwisely retreats farther and farther from the strategist's lifeworld. Interpretive studies aim to restore scholarly attention to the "inside," experiential world of strategic practices, providing useful new directions for the faltering case research enterprise.

But, interpretive ideas are not merely a justification for more case study research such as *The General Managers*. Important issues differentiate interpretive case studies from traditional policy case studies. Chiefly, these differences include:

①. Interpretive studies call for more intensive, more detailed, "thicker" studies than Kotter delivered. They add a cultural milieu, and a historical aspect to the case. They strive harder for realism and authenticity. Where the policy case study offers us the case writer's interpretation of the general manager's world, the ethnographic study offers us the general manager's view of the general manager's world.

②. Language and discourse frame interpretive research issues. Ethnographies of strategy aim to uncover the symbols, codes, and structures of signification which make strategic behavior intelligible. These are subjects that policy case research ignores.

③. Ethnographers try to distance themselves from the values and cultural commitments of their research subjects. At a minimum, they are alert to the issues posed by their intervention, translations, and writing. But, policy case research lacks a self-reflective dimension. Researchers generally (uncritically) share their subjects' values.

④. Ethnographies steer clear of normative judgments or prescriptions. They are not after universal theories, but instead the richness and diversity of general managers' ways of life. By contrast, case research like Kotter's study would be incomplete without prescriptive advice about successful general managing.

⑤. An interpretive account offers multiple interpretations, instead of only the case

writers' perspective, as offered in *The General Managers*. Interpretive research can tolerate some ambiguities, divergence, and pluralistic ends.

Interpretive research could prove most useful to case writers and case researchers in strategy. First, interpretive perspective offers cogent ontological, epistemological and methodological re-modelling for case analysis research. Second, the interpretive approach brings in the hitherto largely unexplored topic of the case researcher's motives, values, techniques, translations, and writing for needed scrutiny. The strategy field needs to study case-study research.

5. SUMMARY. Interpretive research rejects the idea that language serves as a mere transparent medium for mirroring reality as representation in thought. Scholars are suspicious of the notion that objective structures and meanings can be objectively perceived. Interpretive scholarship regards manifest or objective phenomena as smokescreens, it tries to penetrate through these objects. Hermeneutics and cultural ethnography probe behind manifest social objects to examine the conditions and processes that produce and sustain these symbolic objects. Accordingly, mind and reality occupied parallel, intersecting spheres. Interpretive analyses accept approximations, and acknowledge an uncomfortable relativism in their accounts. Therefore, interpretive ideas about language and representation move research one giant step away from critical theory and logical positivism.

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## VII. POST-MODERNISM: STRUCTURALISM AND DECONSTRUCTION

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### 1. STRUCTURALISM.

The works of Chomsky, Levi-Strauss, Piaget, Barthes, Giddens, Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida are often classified as structuralist or post-structuralist. These works share a common genealogical connection to the writings of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1915). His studies of the "sign" provided the foundations for the field of semiotics. In turn, semiotic concepts of the "sign," the "signifier," and the "signified," afforded intellectual linchpins for analyses reaching into sociology, anthropology, history, psychology, art, law, architecture, and literary criticism.

In structuralism, signs are the basic unit of any language. A sign (a spoken or written word) is the "signifier" which represents a mental idea, the "signified." Saussure's great insight was pointing out that neither signifiers (words, signs) nor the ideas signified have any necessary, fixed, or determinate correspondence to empirical reality, "the referent, or object." For instance the written word "rock" (a signifier) represents the mental idea of "rock." But this idea has no necessary relationship to round hard objects in the back yard. The signifiers and the signifieds form a system in themselves, separate and independent of any material reality of referents. Linkage to referents are only a matter of cultural convenience. According to the structuralists, language is always metaphorical, never literal. Figure One illustrates (represents!) how radically a structuralist idea of representation differs from a logical positivist, critical, or interpretive ideas of representation. Because the relationship between sign and referent is an arbitrary one, structuralists never compare representations to "reality," a hopeless task in their view. They don't deny that a material world exists. That world is just not especially relevant to understanding culture. They don't argue for "subjective, social construction" of the world. In fact, they are uninterested in subjective, personal projections. Instead, they just analyze signs (e.g., myths, stories, rituals). Structuralists follow a precise, clinical, detached method to sort out the underlying structures of linguistic systems which govern mental operations (e.g. Levi-Strauss, 1958). Structuralism blocks out the human individual and the variable content of social practices. What remains are the systems of codes and rules which sustain culture:

"Meaning was neither a private experience nor a divinely ordained occurrence, it was the product of certain shared systems of signification. The confident bourgeois belief that the isolated individual subject was the fount and origin of all meaning took a sharp knock: language pre-dated the individual, and was much less his or her product than he or she was the product of it" (Eagleton, 1983, p.107).

Although structuralism in its pure form did not last long, its prominence confirmed the shifting preoccupation with language in social analysis.

## 2. POST-STRUCTURALISM: DECONSTRUCTION Á LA DERRIDA.

i. Origins. In 1966, Jacques Derrida of France's Ecole Normale Superieure made his first

address at Johns Hopkins. Since then his fascinating and jarring ideas have stirred hot controversy in America. Each year Derrida conducts seminars at Yale, now a stronghold of "deconstruction."

ii. Knowledge. Following Saussure, Derrida isolates the essence of language in its ability to mark differences (contrasts) and to defer to other meanings. Defining any idea always requires contrasting signs. "Hat" is "hat" because it is not "rat" or "mat." But "hat" is also not "map," "that," or "revolution." The signified "hat" (or any idea) is the product of a complex interaction of signifiers. Consequently, writing or uttering a sign carries the traces of signs not present ("Good" carries the trace of "Evil"). Putting it another way, all terms are relational, metaphorical; calling a thing something-it-is-not in order to define what-it-

Furthermore, signifiers are not unique, they always "defer" to other signifiers. In the dictionary, "hat" defers to the substitutes, "bonnet," "beret," and "cap." In turn, one can look up the definitions of "cap" etc. The chain never arrives at final definition, the final signified. Deference is infinite. Together, the ideas of difference and deferral constitute the idea of "differance." Infinite differance undermined Saussure's language system, where each signifier aligned with one signified. Whereas structuralism divided the word/idea from the object, post-structuralism separated the word from the idea (See Figure One).

As a result of differance, language is not an obedient vehicle for thought or communication. Language is the precondition of communication, not its servant. Nothing written (or spoken) can be confined to a determinate meaning. No essence is ever immediately present in a word. Instead, meaning is dispersed through an endless web of signifiers. There are no concepts or terms which do not harbor the endless play of absent signifiers.

iii. Deconstructing: a method to end all methods. Derrida invented an entirely new kind of close-reading (Derrida, 1967). Targets for deconstructive readings include any text which presents oppositions (such as good/evil, truth/falsehood, us/them) in a way which confers a privileged status on one pole of a bipolar phenomenon. While structuralism was content to merely identify the oppositions and logic of a text, Derrida set out to dismantle those texts using the idea of differance — to deconstruct them.

Some strategic management materials present an appealing playground for deconstructive activities. For example, some of Mintzberg's texts offer an opening for deconstruction. Mintzberg variously wrote on a favorite oppositional theme:

"There is no science in managerial work. Managers work essentially as they always have — with verbal information and intuitive (nonexplicit) processes. The management scientist has had almost no influence on how the manager works" (The Nature of Managerial Work, 1973, p. 5).

"Second, gestalt strategies seem to be associated with single, powerful leaders. . . Perhaps the sophisticated integration called for by such strategies can be effected only in one mind. The development of a gestalt strategy requires innovative thinking, rooted in synthesis rather than analysis, based on the "intuitive" or inexplicit processes that have been associated with the brain's right hemisphere" (Patterns in Strategy Formulation, Management Science, 1978, p. 944).

"Analysis denies the importance of dynamic factors characteristic of policy making; it fails to handle the critical soft data; despite claims of objectivity, it drives the organization toward a narrow economic morality which sometimes amounts to a social immorality; it tends to encourage bureaucratization and centralization; and it disregards another fundamentally different mode of thinking -- generally called intuition -- which better suits many of the needs of policy making" (OR 78, 1979, p. 106).

"The literature characterizes the entrepreneur as the bold decision maker, fully in control, who walks confidently into the future. . . This is what gave (Steinberg's) its spirit, its drive. . . It is intuition that directs the entrepreneur, intuition based on wisdom, detailed, ingrained, personalized knowledge of the world. . . This study shows how effective such knowledge can be when it is concentrated in one individual. . . The conception of a novel strategy is best carried out in a single, informed brain" (Tracking Strategy in an Entrepreneurial Firm, Academy of Mgmt. Journal, 1982, pp. 495-6).

Mintzberg's texts portray an opposition. Intuition dominates analysis. Deconstruction siezes on the repressed theme of "analysis," using the text itself as a springboard to restore that repressed theme from its marginal exile, and to subvert the nominal theme — intuition. A rigorous deconstructive reading assiduously searches out the systematically concealed inner contradictions, tricks, and slippery moves that sustain Mintzberg's discussion of "intuition" over "analysis." Developing these concealed contradictions and blindnesses, deconstruction "allows" a text to overturn itself. The tactics of "differance", "supplementarity," "marks of erasure" and other gestures propel the literal implications of a text toward their limits. The task is to show that the distinction between "intuition" and "analysis" rests on flawed, contradictory grounds, AND that the argument for the superiority of "intuition" ultimately transforms and rebounds to establish the ascendancy of "analysis" over "intuition!!" What was banished returns to triumph over the putative message.

The deconstructive project works entirely from within a text. No superior knowledge originates outside or above the text. In deconstructing Mintzberg, one never disputes the facts Mintzberg offers, never brings in additional empirical evidence or theories, never strays from the literal text. Since deconstruction never aims for closure, a reading itself remains open for yet another deconstruction.

iv. Summary. Deconstruction is so controversial because it works. In the hands of a clever reader, the target texts always surrender. Derrida and others have deconstructed important texts written by the greatest philosophers and scientists, such as Rousseau, Husserl, Saussure, Freud, Plato, Hegel and others (Derrida, 1967).

Derrida wants to free philosophy from the search for origins, guaranteed truths, and authentic presence. He maintains, "Truth is simply the honorific title assumed by an argument which has got the upper hand — and kept it -- in the war of competing persuasions" (Norris, 1982, p.61). Derrida acknowledges no secure ground for concepts or methods in science. It is at precisely this point that postmodern linguistic issues tie into the issues which trouble logical positivism. Deconstruction shows that the rationalists (e.g., Leibniz, Frege, Russell & Whitehead, Vienna, etc.) dream of a universal language for science will remain forever out of reach. Philosophy and science are trapped within a language system which they can never command. At the practical level of everyday research, differance (an inherent property of language) prevents investigators from anchoring the definitions of terms, from setting fixed meanings, from establishing tight operationalizations, from stabilizing reliable observations from tying inferences or conclusions back to any data. Language will not cooperate.

Deconstruction says "no" to the whole concept of representation in logical positivism, critical theory, and interpretation, not just to whether particular forms or representation are more accurate than others:

". . . nothing is ever fully present in signs; it is an illusion for me to believe than I can ever be fully present to you in what I say or write, because to use signs entails that my meaning is always somehow dispersed, divided, and never quite at one with itself. . . I can never have a pure, unblemished meaning or experience at all" (Eagleton, 1983, p. 130).

Differance also undermines another key idea in philosophy and science, the idea of first

foundations or unimpeachable grounds for knowledge:

"Just as Western philosophy has been 'phonocentric', centered on the 'living voice' and deeply suspicious of the script, so also it has been in a broader sense 'logocentric', committed to a belief in some ultimate 'word,' presence, essence, truth or reality which will act as the foundation of all our thought, language, and experience . . . God, the Idea, the World Spirit, the Self . . . Freedom, Democracy, and so on." (Eagleton, 1983, p. 131).

Rorty (1979), drew on deconstructive themes when he argued that the whole idea of knowledge as a "mirror" image representation of the world in the mind, originated in a linguistic confusion tied to the metaphor of vision:

"I want to suggest that the concept of mind is the blur with which Western intellectuals became obsessed when they finally gave up on the blur which was the theologian's concept of God. The ineffability of the mental serves the same cultural function as the ineffability of the divine -- it vaguely suggests that science does not have the last word (Rorty, 1982, p. 131).

Rorty deconstructed the entire history of Western philosophy and concluded that there is no way to justify beliefs by comparing ideas to objects. Instead, science is an extended conversation. Knowledge amounts to justification, not accurate representation.

After casting out traditional ideas of representation, showing the impossibility of truth, the illusions of meaning, and deceit of all knowledge, deconstruction wisely evades new theories of its own, offering no positive program. It is strikingly indifferent to its own political, social, or cultural implications. All that a deconstructionist can do is deconstruct available texts written in the "logocentric" style, by scholars who don't know what the deconstructionist knows. Deconstruction signals a retreat from any empirical world.

Deconstructing strategic management classics is not likely to interest many scholars in the strategy field, or make one popular among deconstructed colleagues. Scholars have little use for clever nihilisms which totally ignore the familiar world of general managers' practice. Even so, the power of deconstruction hoists an enormous red flag. It conveys a message that social sciences which ignore the pervasive modalities of language are skating on thin ice, especially insofar as they ignore the persistent gnawing of linguistic termites at their representational foundations.

See Sturrock (1979), Eagleton (1983) or Norris (1982) for short, accessible introductions to Derrida's ideas.



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## VIII. THE FUTURE REPRESENTATION OF STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT.

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"Would you tell me please, which way I ought to go from here" asked Alice.  
"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.  
"I don't much care where . . ." said Alice.  
"Then it doesn't much matter which way you go." said the cat.  
". . . so long as I get somewhere," Alice added as an explanation.  
"Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough"  
(Lewis Carroll).

Recent contributions in organization theory (Astley, 1985; Pondy & Mitroff, 1979; Pondy, 1976; Weick, 1979, Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Daudi, 1986; Calas & Smircich, 1986) and strategic management (Smircich & Stubbart, 1985; Chaffee, 1985) signal a renewed debate about questions of representation, ontology (objective versus subjective), and method (qualitative versus quantitative). Several of these have mentioned the topic of language. But, the topic of language in organizational analysis is not new. March & Simon wrote about its relevance to organization theory in 1958 (pp. 161-169.) Pondy (1976) and Pondy & Mitroff (1979) brought up the subject of language ten years ago. But their idea of language was still a "picture theory. For example, Pondy & Mitroff wrote:

"Language is a technology for processing information and meanings just as production techniques process material inputs and outputs" (p.25).

They recommended investigating the "functions of language . . . organizations as . . . language using, sense-making cultures" (p.30). Postmodernism might rearrange this to: "organizations and cultures as sense-making languages."

In a widely cited book Weick (1979) injected the idea of "enactment" into the organizational analysis literature. Smircich & Stubbart (1985), Chaffee (1985) and others have brought enactment into the strategy literature. I think it is safe to say that practically everyone is confused about what enactment really means, purveyors and critical listeners alike.

Recently, Astley (1985) made a vociferous statement about the subjective construction of organization theory. Astley wrote:

"No theory can simply 'describe' empirical reality in neutral linguistic terms; all theoretical perspectives are infused by biases inhering in particular world views (497) . . . Scientific fields are word systems created and maintained through a process of negotiation between adherents to alternative theoretical languages" (499).

A postmodernist might counter: "All world views and perspectives inhere in a particular language . . . Scientific fields and theoretical systems and negotiations are predicated on language systems."

But because Astley continues to rely on picture theory concepts of language, his article ultimately relapses into old territory: "The world of practice has its own 'objective' reality . . ."

On the whole, the insurrection against the received (realist) view have made some limited progress, while stirring up much confusion. I think the chief limitation of this new literature lies in its inadvertent reliance on the obsolete picture theory, which robs their arguments of their radical sense and their potential leverage. Theorists are writing about new theories with an old theoretical language. Pondy & Mitroff, Burrell & Morgan, Astley, and Weick and others are straining against the limits of the old linguistic space, but they cannot write the words to break free, into a new field of possibilities. Only if they shift the frame of reference to language and representation, can the radicalness and full implications of their new views take root and flower. In other words, they are writing about the language of theories when they need to write about the theories of language. Then, contentious issues like macro versus micro, enacted versus given, objective versus subjective or qualitative versus quantitative, fade out. Scholars begin to explore the complex, subtle, and pervasive linguistic field which gives life to them in the first place (Foucault, 1972; 1973). Theorists step back, to assess these debates as language games. It is the linguistic field, the matrix for theories and knowledge, that theory must try to engage.

With logical positivism in extremis, and with the emergence of post-modernism, several difficult issues arise regarding strategic management scholarship:

- ① Will additional empirical rigor lead to legitimate breakthroughs or merely rigor mortis?
- ② Can theories of strategy withstand the deprivations of deconstruction?
- ③ If strategic management research acknowledges its untrustworthy representational system, on what other authority can scholars conduct research, teach students and advise practitioners in good conscience? Is strategy mainly ideology masquerading as social science?

0 Which (if any) of the proliferating, strange, and alienating, post-positivist alternatives merit the field investing its resources? Which are fads?

0 Can professional schools of management tolerate the self-questioning and doubt which critical, interpretive and postmodernist views bring to bear?

Debates among representational and post-representational alternatives are bound to rage for decades. I cannot foretell where that struggle might lead. Surely, I have settled nothing here. Perhaps a truncated form of logical positivism will yet survive, or revive. The primary function of this article is to notify strategy scholars that many epistemological commitments which they currently take for granted are already a lost cause, and that their undisciplined discipline will probably face increasing turmoil in its future if it continues to resist acknowledging thorny language/representation/legitimation issues.

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#### IX REFLECTIONS

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Conventions in scholarly writing dictate that articles should conclude with a pro forma statement of technical limitations and a call for additional research. Certainly, this article carries a heavy freight of limitations, chief among which are:

0 Attempting to cover too much ground in one article.

0 Mis-representation (!), oversimplifications, false inferences about the perspectives described in the paper.

0 Overzealous pronouncements about the complete death of logical positivism and its connection to a particular variety of empiricism.

Like other authors, I too recommend additional theorizing and research.

But, there is something more. Critical theory, interpretation, and postmodernism each stress the need for pervasive skepticism, penetrating doubt, and relentless self-criticism — the need to go beyond reluctant admissions toward genuine critique. In the spirit of those themes, I feel obligated to a need to acknowledge a little bit more than what is required by standard authorship practice.

0 My work here is not merely a dispassionate reading of trends, it reflects an large dose

of my personal iconoclasm. Embracing radical themes pleases me.

① I worry about setting myself up as an authority on critical theory, hermeneutics, and deconstruction. My knowledge of these topics is not as deep or extensive as this paper sometimes implies.

② The paper repeatedly contends that logical positivism is dead. Who cares? Why do we need logical positivism? I don't credit the possibilities that modifications to logical positivism can save it, or that it does not matter even if it is dead. Maybe scholarship can get along without epistemology (Hacking, 1980; Holton, 1984).

③ I am bothered by the uneasy feeling that legions of scholars who are more intelligent, more experienced, and more clever than I am, still see many merits in logical positivism. Can those scholars really be as wrong as this paper ultimately contends?

④ I am worried about the risks of confessing my worries. Is it genuine? Or is it just a tactic, the opposite of "damning with faint praise" -- "praising with faint damnation?"

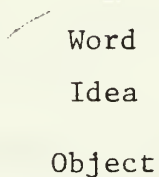
⑤ Lastly, knowing that this writing is full of contradictions, hidden assumptions, metaphorical tricks, and slippery games; I invite readers to deconstruct it.

Figure One

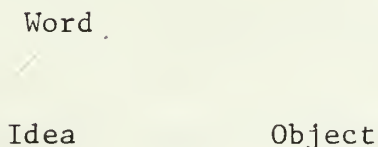
THE CHANGING SHAPE OF REPRESENTATION

Picture Theory of Language

Logical Positivism  
Critical Theory



Intrepretation

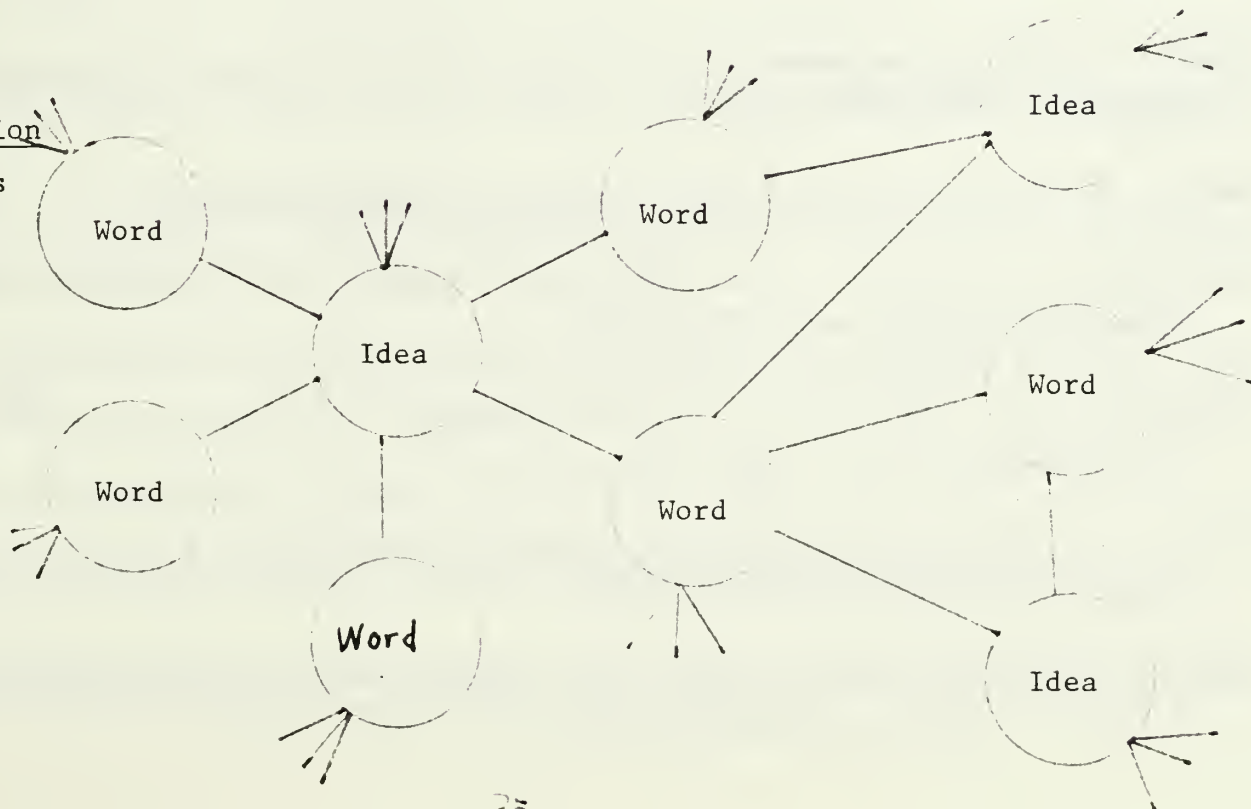


Structuralism



Postmodern Deconstruction

"The endless play of signifiers"



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