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## **BETWEEN DISCOURSE AND NARRATION:**

### **How Can Strategy Be a Practice ?**

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The aim of this text is to explore the idea that strategic management research would profit from a practice-oriented approach, where practice is defined as everyday situated – embedded in local contexts – actions performed by organizational members in order to make strategy. Drawing on two empirical works, we study two kinds of such practice: actions (as accounted for by the actors) and narrations (as structured by the narrators). In the first case, strategic discourse is contrasted to action and its tactics ; in the second, strategic discourse is contrasted to narratives. Their interpretation is aided and dramatically enriched by a contrast between strategy and tactic, as introduced by Michel de Certeau. This contrast emphasizes the discursive – or paradigmatic – nature of strategy opposed to the narrative – or syntagmatic – nature of practice.

## **Towards a practice-oriented approach of strategy research**

Even if organizational studies, especially critical studies, have adopted a skeptical stance towards strategists and their role in organizational life, strategy is a key issue for organizations – especially for companies. Indeed, top executives and managers label "strategies" the narratives they continuously use in organizing. These strategies shape the lives of people and organizations in accordance to their own logic and requests. Strategy is the yardstick by which the quality of individual and organizational effort is assessed. The "quest for strategy" has spread to every organization, following the global managerialization of Western societies.

Thus, the issue of strategy calls for reflection within the context of organizations for at least three reasons:

- the notion of strategy holds a commanding position in organizations,
- "strategic principles" (planning, budgeting, positioning, etc.) have deeply infused everyday social life,
- the institutionalization of "strategy" through education, training and consultancy legitimates the present logic of domination in organizations (Knights & Morgan 1991 ; Whittington 1993).

Since Mintzberg's attempt to classify the schools of thought in "strategy" (Mintzberg 1991), the field of "strategic management" appears to have taken a more reflexive turn. More specifically, the contribution of the new institutionalism has led to a complex interweaving of the social, political and economic dimensions in the study of strategy making. Gerry Johnson and Cliff Bowman as well as Richard Whittington, urge researchers in strategic management to engage in a drastic change of focus (Whittington 1996; Johnson & Bowman 1999). Such shift would consist in paying more attention to day-to-day routines rather than to "grand strategy" emphasized by decision-making

studies, and in including political, cultural and interactional aspects of management into the picture. This so-called micro-strategizing perspective lays emphasis on local rather than universal aspects and is concerned with activities, processes and routines as signs of strategic practice. In such view, the making of strategy is embedded in everyday organizational routines, like the permanent appeal to consultants, the ongoing process of corporate planning and budgeting, the writing of documents, the making of presentations (Whittington 1996).

This essay is grounded into two recent streams of investigation that, on the one hand, explore the discursive nature of strategy making and, on the other hand, try to account for the everyday individual actions and narrations that shape organizational life.

Exploring strategic discourses at the organizational level has been legitimized on the strategic management research agenda (Barry & Elmes 1997; O'Connor 2000). Strategy formation has therefore been analyzed in terms of discourse formation, discourses that will possibly generate opposition and undergo successive modifications within a given organizational context. For example, Carter et al. (2001) have studied how it has become necessary for an English public utility to formulate explicit strategies when entering a new competitive environment: "Strategy formulation, therefore, became a Callonesque obligatory point of passage and was constituted as being of such importance that it was now one of the core responsibilities of senior management." **(Carter, Mueller & Clark, 2001 : 190)** This strategy formulation underwent different iterations, for example by turning from diversification-prone to diversification-adverse when facing internal resistance. In Carter et al.'s analysis, much emphasis is put on legitimacy as both a condition and an outcome of strategy formulation.

A contrasting view pleads for focusing more accurately on the activities of individuals in strategy-making (Johnson & Bowman 1999). This so-called micro-strategy perspective implies conducting analysis across multiple levels: individual interactions, organizational dynamics and social contexts. Whittington narrowed this research program even further by defining strategizing as the specific activity of a group of

strategists (experts, consultants, top managers). Nevertheless, in our view, studying behaviours and discourses at the individual level only is risky as it leads more frequently to reinforcing the production of hagiographic accounts than to providing a comprehensive understanding of strategy-making. The promotion of neo-Schumpeterian heroes in entrepreneurial strategies can thus be seen as a demiurgic drift in research accounts of management (de La Ville 1996).

This chapter is divided into three parts. In the first part, we explain how researchers consider and use the notion of "strategy" in organizations through a brief overview of strategy literature. Building on Whittington's (1996) categorization of strategic research into four perspectives – policy, planning, process and practice – we show how different perspectives conceive of strategy making. By choosing to conceptualize "strategy making" as a matter of telling, recounting and communicating which takes place in organizations, we take up his proposal to develop a practice-oriented view of strategy-making.

In the second part, we suggest the need to explore the notion of practice more systematically to define the possible links between practice and strategy. In order to do so, we explore some concepts and approaches developed by Michel de Certeau in his work *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1988). Drawing on his unusual definitions of tactic and strategy that emphasize anti-discipline and resistance to domination, we may better account for the underlying logic of domination hidden by the discourses of 'grand strategy' (Whittington 1993). Moreover, Michel de Certeau constantly mirrors the relationship of writing to reading to the relationship of production to consumption. In doing so, he suggests that discourses, like goods on a market, are produced by makers and imposed on consumers, thus strongly framing their potential meaning and use. Building on this metaphor, strategy can be conceived as an ongoing creative process involving not only what strategists produce – or write – (budgets, plans, strategies) but also the ways the members of the organization consume – or read – their productions. Seen in this light, studying the practice of strategy implies giving more room to what middle managers and employees "make " or "do ", how they use and transform the

grand discourse of strategy. This "poaching ability", as de Certeau would have called it, relies on a multiplicity of intertwined ways of talking, doing and believing. Following this line of reasoning, we suggest that the change of focus from discourses of "grand strategy" to the minutiae of everyday practice necessarily leads to scrutinizing the differences between discourses and narratives.

In the last part of this article we analyze strategy making as the intertwining of strategic discourses and practice narratives, drawing on two empirical studies of strategic practices (La Ville 1996, 1999 ; Mounoud 1997, 2000). The first study is a four-year idiographic research of a young high-tech firm. The narratives of several organizational members highlight the minutiae of strategy-in-the-making as well as the various tricks and poaching tactics that shape their practice. The second study illustrates the consumption of discourses produced by others (scientists, economists, politicians, ecologists) and the creation of narratives in an attempt to organize an emergent organizational field and to secure domination upon it.

## **Contrasting Theoretical Approaches to Strategy-Making**

In his textbook for managers provocatively entitled, *What Is Strategy, and Does It Matter?*, Whittington (1993) questions the basic assumptions of orthodox strategic perspectives that assume predictable environments, similar competitors and rational decision-makers. His exploration of the underlying assumptions held by different theoretical perspectives aimed at explaining how strategy develops, leads him to distinguish four basic approaches to strategy-making:

- **"Classical" : the planning approach**

This perspective conceives strategy as a rational process of deliberate calculation and

analysis, designed to maximize long-term advantage. If enough effort is made to gather the information needed and to apply appropriate techniques, both the outside world and the organization itself can be made predictable and plastic, shaped according to the careful plans of top managers.

- **"Evolutionary": the efficiency-driven approach**

In this perspective, the environment is considered to be often too unpredictable to anticipate its evolutions effectively. The dynamic, hostile and competitive nature of markets means that long-term survival cannot be planned for. Businesses are like the species of biological evolution. Competitive processes ruthlessly select out the fittest for survival, while the others are powerless to change themselves quickly enough to escape extinction. It is the market, not managers which makes the important choices. All managers can do is ensure that they fit as efficiently as possible to the environmental demands of the day.

- **"Processual": the craft-like approach**

According to this perspective, people within organizations are too different in their interests, limited in their understandings, wandering in their attention and careless in their actions to unite around and then carry out a perfectly calculated plan. Anyway, plans tend to be forgotten as circumstances change. In practice, strategy emerges more from a pragmatic process of learning and compromise than from a rational series of grand leaps forward. The selection processes of the market are actually rather lax: as no-one is likely to know what the optimal strategy is, and no-one would stick to it anyway, failure to design and carry out the perfect strategic plan is not going to entail any fatal competitive disadvantage.

- **"Systemic": the socially-embedded approach**

Referring to Mark Granovetter's (1973) use of Polanyi's (1944) notion of "social embeddedness" of economic activity, the systemic view proposes that the objectives and practices of strategy depend on the particular social system in which strategy-making

takes place. Strategists often deviate from the profit-maximizing norm quite deliberately as societies have other criteria than just financial performance for supporting enterprises. Moreover, strategists might deviate from the text-book rules or rational calculation, because in the culture in which they work, such rules make little sense. These deviant strategies matter because they can be carried out effectively. Strategy reflects the traits of particular social systems in which strategists participate, defining the interest in which they act and the rules by which they can survive. What is important to systemic theory are differences between countries' social systems and changes of such systems. The systemic studies are thus exploring the varying forms of business according to national interplay of state, familial and market structures.

<b>PROCESS</b>	DELIBERATE	EMERGENT
<b>OUTCOMES</b>		
PROFIT MAXIMIZING	CLASSICAL	EVOLUTIONARY
PLURALISTIC	SYSTEMIC	PROCESSUAL

**Table 1: Four perspectives on strategy making** (Adapted from Whittington 1993: 40)

Whittington devotes much reflection to the cultural peculiarities of the very notion of strategy. By contrasting the classical and evolutionary perspectives on market and profitability with the current sociological appreciation of organizational environment in



new institutionalist theory, Whittington exposes the ideological tone of strategic management and its role in reproducing the conditions of hierarchically organized capitalist society, in normalizing the existing structures of Western society, and in universalizing the goals of its dominant elites. Consequently, Whittington considers differences in strategy as enduring, and patterns as hard to change because they are "founded on real economic, social or political conditions " (Whittington 1993: 32). He also says that the "strategy discourse" reflects ideological needs of the professional managerial class and that this discourse entered the business world *via* MBA programs at a time of changes in dominance. In Whittington's view, strategic theory mainly addresses the single audience of the practitioners themselves. He therefore favours the socially-embedded perspective as the one that could help managers to develop a sociological reflexivity, providing them with the awareness of their social and political environments' munificence.

Whittington concludes by saying that strategy has to be understood as the contested and imperfect practice it really is. As he reiterates in a more recent paper, it is necessary to "take seriously the work and talk of practitioners themselves " (Whittington 1996: 732). Such a new direction in strategy thinking – which he calls 'a strategizing perspective' is centred on the everyday activities of the strategists, "all the meeting, the talking, the form-filling and the number-crunching by which strategy actually gets formulated and implemented " (*ibid*). In his terms, the practice-oriented perspective is narrower than the systemic one, but for that very reason, better as a starting point.

<b>LEVEL OF ANALYSIS RESEARCH ISSUES</b>	MANAGERS	ORGANIZATIONS
HOW is strategy made?	POLICY	PLANNING
WHERE is strategy made?	PRACTICE	PROCESS

**Table 2: The '4 P' of strategy making** (Adapted from Whittington, 1996 : 732)

Whittington suggests that "the unheroic work of ordinary strategic practitioners in their day-to-day routines " should become the focus of an investigation program aimed at obtaining "systematic knowledge of what typically the various practitioners involved in strategy-making really do ", and at knowing "the different skills strategy consultants, planners and managers actually use, or how they acquire them. " (Whittington 1996 : 734). He also privileges observation as the suitable methodological device: "to understand strategizing better, we will need close observation of strategists as they work their ways through their strategy-making routines "(*ibid*). He therefore proposes a new research agenda:

We might analyze the changing discursive practices of strategy but – if not yet "enough talk" – we should also get real looking out for the changing physical technologies with which strategizing is actually done. Strategists manipulate spread-sheets, fill in cap-ex proposals, compile presentations and do so often alone and in silence, constrained and enabled by particular technologies (typically Microsoft). (Whittington 2001: 734).

This under-socialized ("enough talk", "real", "physical", "alone and in silence") conception of practice is quite surprising coming from a theoretician previously inspired by over-socialized new institutionalist frameworks. Indeed, in the field of strategic management, Whittington appears to be one of the few researchers who strongly advocate the need to take into account the social foundations of strategic activities. He lays special emphasis on the social embeddedness of strategic processes and he insists on the situatedness of everyday strategy-making routines. In our opinion, he is facing the paradoxical situation that Barbara Czarniawska has identified as the central issue in social sciences: the confrontation between social systems (as consisting of rules) and unruly practice. Whittington's under-socialized practice perspective can be mirrored with Thurman Arnold's<sup>1</sup> conclusion that "the world of practice must conquer the world of norms " (Czarniawska 1997: 190). We can guess that Whittington might be as "torn between his knowledge and the demands of the professional knowledge that he represents " as Arnold was (Czarniawska 1997: 189).

In an attempt to escape both over-socialized and under-socialized views of strategy-making, we shall now explore the notion of practice through the lenses used by Michel de Certeau (1988).

## **Restoring the Narrative Dimension of Practice**

Michel de Certeau's analysis of consumption is oriented towards the ordinary practices of the consumers, who are defined as users of goods imposed on them by producers. Indeed, as an offer of products to the consumers, production entails a logic of domination towards which consumers resist by developing inventive attitudes and practices. By mirroring consumption and reading, Michel de Certeau reveals the two sides of consumption: on the one side, consuming entails a form of acceptance of an

imposed offer of goods, while, on the other side, consumers are neither passive nor docile, they experience freedom, creativity and pleasure – as readers do.

Commenting on empirical investigations of several situated social practices such as reading, talking, dwelling, cooking, wandering around, etc., Michel de Certeau explores the scientific literature to clarify the purpose of the theorizing enterprise he undertakes:

It may be supposed that these operations – multiform and fragmentary, relative to situations and details, insinuated into and concealed ... within devices whose mode of usage they constitute, and thus lacking their own ideologies or institutions – conform to certain rules. In other words, there must be a logic of these practices. (de Certeau 1988: xv)

Adopting this view provides a new way of looking at organizational practice because it leads to see strategic discourses as a production, as an offer of a (cultural) good – a text. This way, we might be able to suggest new forms of accounting for the ways people read, use and transform this particular cultural product. Linstead and Grafton-Small (1992) have already opposed the production of corporate culture to the creative consumption of organizational culture by organizational members.

Using de Certeau's theoretical lenses requires complementing the analysis of the discourse of strategy (representation) and of the time spent attending strategic meetings (behaviour) by a study of what middle managers and employees "make " or "do " during this time and with these discourses. Their making or doing being devious and dispersed, it remains difficult to reach for the researcher as it often remains hidden. In organizations, employees and managers do not espouse, adhere to or share the "strategic" vision or intent of their "charismatic leaders". In their everyday activities, they actively interpret, criticize, learn and experiment possible attitudes and micro-decisions to implement, or to resist to the multiple implications of strategic changes imposed upon them.

To better understand how to link practice to strategy, let us now move to definitions of strategy and tactic introduced by de Certeau:

I call a "strategy" the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an "environment". A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as proper and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it (competitors, adversaries, clientele, targets or objects of research). Political, economic and scientific rationality has been constructed on this strategic model. (de Certeau, 1988: xix)

Strategies conceal, beneath objective calculation, their connection with the institutional power that sustains them. Therefore, in this view, strategy is always linked to the concept of power, as understood by Foucault (1977) who demonstrated that "the logocentrism of 'writing' once translated into formal organization revolves around discipline" (Linstead & Grafton-Small 1992: 349).

De Certeau's definition of tactic is following:

I call a "tactic", on the other hand, a calculus which cannot count on a "proper" (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality. A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances. The "proper" is a victory of space over time. On the contrary, because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time – it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized "on the wing". Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into "opportunities". (de

Certeau 1988: xix).

This view differs drastically from the traditional definition of tactic as a course of action followed in order to achieve an immediate aim and also from the definition of tactics as the art of finding and implementing means to achieve immediate aims. Interestingly, tactics (as the science of manoeuvring forces in battles) comes from the military vocabulary, as does strategy. De Certeau introduces two main differences, firstly a major change of level of analysis – from global to individual – and secondly the emphasis on the resistant nature of tactic, here meant *not* following the strategy!

Focusing on tactic sheds light on the creativity through which groups or individuals escape the "nets of discipline " and resist the logic imposed upon them. Tactic reveals the extent to which ordinary intelligence is inseparable from everyday struggles and the pleasure they provide. Meaningful practice is neither determined nor captured by the set of social rules in which it develops: it calls up a variety of hardly conscious, though crafty, tactics. Multiple tactics appear through a creative bricolage that consists of "the process of association, of building the 'and, and, and' connections between actions and events and negotiating them with the 'readers' (such as other organization members)" (Czarniawska 1998 : 20), that is, an ongoing production of narratives. This is congruent with the more general claim – that social life is a narrative – made by McIntyre, and more precisely that "it is useful to think of an enacted narrative as the most typical form of social life" (Czarniawska 2001).

We must keep in mind that "it is central to the concept of discourse that it is reproduced, can be resisted and is subject to change and 'negotiation'" (Linstead & Grafton-Small 1992: 349). What narratives do is mainly resisting discourses. Therefore strategy in organizations can be seen as an expression of a strong program of integrative and radical change whereas narratives "can be seen as belonging to (giving expression to) the 'weak program', but it is abundantly clear that its existence depends on the existence of the 'strong program' (it needs something to differ from)" (Czarniawska

1997: 173). We can now summarize the contrast between the notions of strategy and tactic in the following table:

<b>A STRATEGY</b>	<b>A TACTIC</b>
Spatially or institutionally located	Time dependent
Circumscribes a proper place	Insinuates in the Other's place
Interacts with an exterior distinct from it	Turns events into opportunities
Writing	Reading
Reproduction	Improvisation, bricolage
Discipline	Anti-discipline, resistance
Strong program	Weak program
<b>A DISCOURSE</b>	<b>A NARRATIVE</b>

**Table 3: Strategy as discourse, tactic as narrative**

These definitions shed light on the different areas where organizational life has to be investigated. On the one hand, institutional arenas are necessary to legitimate, support and capitalize on an integrative discourse called strategy. On the other hand, it is necessary to bring practice back into the picture, thus accounting for the fragmentary, instantaneous and hardly conscious set of tactics upon which practice is based. There are innumerable tactics that constitute a varied stock of potential resistances to dominant strategies. Everyday practices consist of a making without intention of capitalizing on it, unable to take control over time, but that produce perceptible effects such as delays,

resistances, diversions, rejections or displacements (translations for one's own purposes), etc.

As a consequence, the "practice of strategy" appears to associate two contradictory concepts thus being an oxymoron. It reveals that a direct turn to practice in strategic management research is clearly unproductive: both a theoretical and an empirical trap. A research agenda with the aim of describing the practices of strategists would lead to a purely instrumental and restrained view of strategy making that would favour univocal and far too naïve interpretations. That is why, at this point, we want to advocate the need for a mutually beneficial dialogue between the discursive nature of strategy and interpretative approaches that define "organizing as narration" (Czarniawska 1997: 25). In our understanding, Czarniawska's narrative variation of the new institutionalist perspective enables researchers to cope with the embeddedness of practices by including their symbolic reach within a given organizational context. Thus, investigating strategy-making processes actually means operating a perilous shift from discourses of "grand strategy" to the minutiae of everyday practice through a systematic focus on narratives.

## **Exploring Strategic Practice : Interpreting Two Empirical Fragments**

We will present two vignettes extracted from two empirical investigations on entrepreneurial activities where we used a micro-perspective (La Ville 1996, 2002; Mounoud 1997, 2000). Using de Certeau's theoretical lenses to reinterpret the narratives we collected, we will consider the interplay between strategic discourses and everyday narratives. These two vignettes illustrate some of the multiple ways of playing the



other's game and the pleasure of getting around a set of given rules.

### *Vignette 1: Playfully resisting dominant design*

The first vignette illustrates a phenomenon that Michel de Certeau considers as an emblematic figure of the tactics of ordinary practice called in French *la perruque* (the wig). The "perruque" refers to the worker's own activity disguised as work for his employer. The worker who indulges in "la perruque" actually diverts time from the organization to undertake activities on his/ her own that are free, creative and precisely neither directed toward profit, nor in accordance with strategic injunctions.

The vignette is extracted from a four-year investigation in a young French firm called TELIX, operating in telecommunications – whose products combine various advanced technologies and has a very short life cycle – one year as an average. TELIX directly employs 70 people – among which 30 are gifted young engineers. Through successive interviews, we collected at different periods the narratives of 14 individuals who had participated in the development of the firm since its foundation. This investigation gathered 400 pages of accounts and resulted in an extensive monograph of 100 pages. The monograph reconstructs both the history of the firm since its foundation, the main orientations taken for technical development – and their correlated discussions – that took place during the time of the study. As such a short text prevents reproducing extensive parts of this monograph and situating precisely every actor, small parts of the accounts given by the actors are used here to illustrate their collective ability to set up a sort of hidden playground where improvisation could take place.

In its first years of existence, TELIX had routinized a set of design practices that reinforced its subcontractor position by successfully designing products for its OEM (Origin Equipment Manufacture) clients and by developing very specific skills concerning the regulations in European markets. A few months later, TELIX faced sharp competition that dramatically endangered the innovative character of its products developed and improved through the official design rules. Indeed, the efforts made to

design TELIX's own products in accordance with official design rules and to organize an international retail network were sporadic, lacked co-ordination and did not result in routinized practices. As the launching of TELIX's own products was delayed several times, some important retailers refused to keep waiting and decided to favour its competitors. These decisions strengthened the tendency within TELIX to give priority to projects undertaken for industrial contractors, increasing TELIX's long term vulnerability.

Displeased with these orientations, Mathieu, an engineer employed by TELIX since 1988, points out that "the firm is family-owned: if more responsibilities are gradually given to the personnel, in fact important decisions remain centralized by the founders Antoine and Pierre. That's why sometimes concerning some decisions, you know you have to stay in the background..." He continues:

Since TELIX's foundation, within our technical department, engineers have been developing conniving rapports that go far beyond merely technical discussions. Owing to the multiple and lively talks we had within our team to prepare technical decisions, everyone learnt a lot from each other and immediately mastered a comprehensive array of technical skills. We felt that this common experience had strongly drawn us together. Our work interactions rapidly transformed into buddy-buddy relationships. Our deep complicity allows us to benefit from a huge scope of autonomy. This autonomy we have gained enables us to cover up some problems: we have the possibility to do things secretly in order to avoid major crises and direct confrontations. We can develop marginal actions that go clearly against some decisions made by the Board. Indeed, as technical decisions are usually made in a great rush, we are led to make up for mistakes. If a bad decision has been made, what kind of collective behaviour do we have to adopt? That's why we are sometimes led to run a different TELIX at the very heart of TELIX...

François, in charge of the technical department, makes the observation that

... ambiguity within our technical department was very high at the beginning of TELIX. Today, it remains a natural way of functioning between the persons who have known this period. This evidently entails a form of confidence and loyalty between us. It is this ambiguity that enabled us to explore ideas at the margins of the official decisions: we encourage people to follow their ideas through and if it works, it is beneficial for the whole team; but also to feel responsible and autonomous in running the different design projects that were given to the team. But it is obvious that this mode of functioning is very difficult to understand for an outsider and that trying to adapt to it requires great strength of will.

This point of view is corroborated by Denis, another engineer working in the technical department:

Ambiguity can bring positive results if people feel responsible for what they do. It reinforces exploration, the ability to take initiatives and to collect the necessary information. Owing to the specialization of every individual, a collective competence is able to expand in all directions, but it is the quality of our discussions and the ambiguity of our roles that do enable us to keep a global perspective on the design process. Together, we have complementary and global skills: the quality of our relationships allows us to reach and hold each other's knowledge even if we do not have the same practice.

By cautiously engaging in a form of "illicit playing" these three engineers among the design team had progressively structured a hidden playground where they felt free to experiment with alternatives to the developmental path imposed by the rules of the official design game. Without taking the risk of opening a collective discussion about the relevance of the official design rules, these engineers applied improvised rules they found more suitable to achieve effective technical innovations. This concealed illicit playing lead them to develop an intensive production of inventive narratives that

enriched both their personal interpretative repertoires and collective capacity to improvise in a different technological playground: they progressively explored different technical perspectives and found solutions to include high speed connections and radio devices into the products. Viewing the commercial difficulties of TELIX as an opportunity, the three "free players" decided to reveal the divergent design process they had elaborated and managed to impose them on the design team. This sudden change in design rules allowed the integration of radical technical innovations to the products and the progressive restoration over six months of TELIX's prevalent competitive position in the market.

The narratives of several organizational members highlight the minutiae of strategy-in-the-making as well as the various tricks and poaching tactics that shape their design practice. This vignette underlines the agonistic character of the *perruque*, an activity aimed at resisting, and the concepts de Certeau associates to it: *kairos* (opportunities), *metis* (ruses) and the "strategy-tactic duality". In spite of measures taken to repress or to conceal it, "la perruque" (or its equivalent) tends to infiltrate itself everywhere and has to be considered as an important part of strategy making. Indeed, the more an official playground is delimited through the actualization of a set of strict rules, the more illicit playgrounds are likely to emerge in order to resist and explore alternative ways of doing things. For instance, the entrepreneurial team deals with a wide range of technical possibilities and progressively restrains this scope to stabilize collective practices and routines enabling the formation of core competencies. This process leads to contextualize the creative efforts to be undertaken within the firm and to favour some creative behaviours at the expense of other possible ones.

High tech as well as entrepreneurial activities deal with the unavoidable "playing-game" duality, as some areas are delimited as games with compulsory scripts to be followed, fostering simultaneously the ongoing emergence of playful resisting practices. This is a main strategic issue at stake within entrepreneurial contexts in order to foster the progressive emergence of distinctive core competencies. Indeed, entrepreneurial activities are quite often the expression of a strong will to resist well-established or fixed

rules that govern competitive games. In that sense, all the concepts articulated by Michel de Certeau suit perfectly well the categories commonly used in the entrepreneurial literature: opportunities, tricks, poaching, wandering, roundabout means, playfulness, resistance, ruse, arrangement. All these productions are an "invention" of the memory.

### *Vignette 2: Consumption of discourses and production of narratives*

The second vignette is based on the study of an emerging industry, the organizational field of the "green industry". We have been conducting interviews with "green intrapreneurs" (in charge of developing new ventures in parent firms), about how they were shaping their strategy. The aim was to study how statements about strategy were structured and how, in turn, they were contributing to the on-going structuring process of the field (Mounoud 1997; 2000). These interviews were conducted with mixed feelings, as we were deeply aware that they were closer to an inquisition than to a mutual exchange of views, but also that "the power was on the side of the interviewee" (Czarniawska 2002). We were also aware that collected stories were not newly built, indeed they were "well rehearsed, and crafted in a legitimate logic, [as] it is highly unlikely that the interviewee resorts to a repertoire of narrative devices unusual for his/ her practice" (*ibid.* 746). This was an advantage, not a shortcoming, as studying strategists' discourses requires remembering that "'meaningful insights into subjective views' can only be expressed by 'familiar narrative constructs' " as Czarniawska comfortingly says.

Considering Michel de Certeau's view on practice, two levels of analysis could be put forward. On the one hand, we can consider that these texts are aiming at defining a Strategy, they try to set a proper place, than can serve as a basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it, especially with competitors, regulatory affairs or parent companies. Thus they are defining and legitimizing the specific competence of venturing a green business. In order to do so, they will have to show rationality. On the other hand, we can consider these texts as narratives, accounts of the social practices of

their narrators in their everyday struggles, showing their various tactics and tricks, proving their poaching ability.

We collected the narratives of 12 persons who were in charge of the development of the venture inside the parent company. This investigation gathered 150 pages of accounts that were interpreted as texts. As such a short text impedes reproducing extensive interviews, only the interpretation built on the interviews will be used here to illustrate their individual ability to intertwine strategic discursivity and tactical narrativity. The narratives of the "green intrapreneurs" highlight the minutiae of strategy-in-the-making as well as the various tricks and poaching tactics that shape their narrative practice.

We analyzed the interviews as texts , being interested as much in the content of the answers to our questions, as in the process through which they were built during the interviews, i.e. the enunciation process). We looked at *what* texts say and *how* they say it, looking for the various textual tactics and tricks used by the interviewees. Studying interviews as texts requires to stay as close to the texts as possible when analyzing them i.e. considering which words were used including how they were coining new expressions, what topic they were dealing with, how they related one to another through the use of "connecting words " (both causal and temporal).

### *Narrative tactics*

Various narrative tactics have been observed:

#### **Poaching**

Borrowing insights from Moscovici's theory of social representations, we arranged a conversation between the texts from the interviews and institutionalized discourses on environmental management and protection (from various sources: politics, economics, ecology, science and media). These discourses are supposed to be structuring, and

structured by, social representations. But as Michel de Certeau underlined, the presence and circulation of a representation tell us nothing about what it is for its users. We must first analyze its manipulation by users who are not its makers. Only then we can gauge the difference or similarity between the representation and the secondary production hidden in the process of its utilization. Close to Ellen O'Connor's (2000) idea of an embedded narrative, we were able to identify three larger discursive arenas in which the narrators were poaching to build their own texts. Firstly, they were poaching into managerial knowledge, producing and reproducing organizational, technical, legal, strategic and social rules of control. For example new ventures, especially in large firms, were defined as following the *logic of core competences*. Secondly, they were poaching into the science-based discourses of "Ecology " and "Economy", opposing the two to resist some implications of ecology and resolving the opposition between the two when necessary, for example by defining their action as *saving pollution AND costs*. Thirdly, they were playing with the "Environment" category, sometimes linking it to "Nature" that has to be protected and sometimes with "Regulation" that has to be followed.

## **Humour**

One of the main competitor being Générale (now Vivendi Environment), one green intrapreneur was very proud of presenting his company as "a specialist as opposed to a generalist" (with a smile) thus denying competence to its main competitor without explicitly saying it; many anecdotes were meant for questioning innovation capability of the competitors or showing the incompetence of environment policy makers; one largely spread tactic was to oppose "de-pollution" and "anti-pollution", as two different market segments and know-how.

## **Plotting**

Telling a story is about reporting a progression of events across time and uncovering the

causal structure of the events. Because of the large amount of time they ask from their audience, narratives must have a point. They need a plot which must be based on a conflict or tension. Here the links to various discourses are a resource: they might be invoked to highlight the differences between times (past, present and future), spaces (linking the new venture, its parent company, its competitors and policy makers) or discourses themselves. Such differences, or tensions, reveal not only the *how* (*mimesis*) but also the *why* (*plot*) behind organizational action. The specific plotting of a field organizes an interpretative repertoire, linking causal and temporal dimensions such as in the example below of the green intrapreneurship in the chemical industry:

BECAUSE, IN THE PAST, we used to be heavy polluters, NOW, AT PRESENT, we know a lot about pollution and how to depollute at lower costs, SO we can take advantage of our experience and our core competences IN ORDER TO we set up new businesses that generate profits for us, cost savings for our customers and pollution savings for the whole society.

In their multiple ways of dealing with such resources and constraints, interviewees attempted to build a discourse for imposing their own meanings, interests and desires on the emerging organizational field, settling a "proper place" and gaining a strategic dimension .

But we must also consider that "narrativity haunts such discourses" (de Certeau 1988: 78). We better account for what texts do if, following Michel de Certeau's view, we consider talking as a kind of consumption, or a secondary production, a creative way of using words and discourses. Local narratives are not structured by discourses but they are poaching from them, using them as resources for creating new expressions and meanings, which can rely on, or resist to, well-established and technocratic discourses.



## Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, we have suggested that investigating strategic practice requires a drastic change in both conducting research and theorizing in the field of strategic management. In our opinion, the development of a practice-oriented research agenda in the field of strategic management can directly benefit from Michel de Certeau's seminal contributions.

Applying the writing/ reading metaphor to describe strategy making helped us conceive strategy as an ongoing creative process involving not only what strategists produce – or write – (budgets, plans, strategies), but also the ways the members of the organization consume – or read – their productions. As a consequence, studying the practice of strategy implies paying more attention to middle managers and employees' "poaching ability", the multiple ways through which, in their everyday activities, they understand, use and transform the strategic discourses that are imposed on them. We suggest that the change of focus from discourses of "grand strategy" to the minutiae of everyday practice necessarily leads to a theoretical articulation of strategic discourses and very ordinary narratives. Meaningful strategic practice is neither determined nor captured by the strategic discourses formulated at the top organizational level: it calls up a variety of hardly conscious, though crafty, tactics mainly aimed at resisting and transforming the logic of domination imposed by strategic discourses.

We contend that developing a practice-oriented research agenda in the field of strategic management would enable the pursuit of a beneficial dialogue between several theoretical frameworks such as:

- the narrative embeddedness of practice which leads to treat talk as action and not merely as talk (Czarniawska 1998),

- the situated temporality of practice (Clark 2000),
- the recursive nature of social life (Rouleau 2001 ; Giddens 1984).

This framework constitutes therefore an invitation to enrich the concept of "routinization". Usually, routines are seen as being merely an unconscious reproduction and acceptance of stabilized systems of rules (Jelinek 1979). Only a few authors (Nelson & Winter 1982 ; Giddens 1984) consider that routines include a creative part, as they imply an ongoing process of reinterpretation of rules to adapt them to – slightly or drastically – different contexts. But in their rendition, this transformative capacity of routines is limited, allowing for just some margins and evolutions within a general frame of behaviour. These micro-evolutions, however, directly nurture a global process of change by fostering intrinsic variety and thus allowing the progressive emergence of adaptive behaviours. By considering that work practices – such as organizational routines – are not only effortful but also emergent accomplishments, Martha Feldman reintroduces the importance of agency on routine interpretation and lays special emphasis on its performative nature (Feldman 2000). In a nutshell, a routinized behaviour always consists of a creative interpretation of given rules in relation to a specific context. By analyzing four situations where the outcomes achieved by a routine can be contrasted, she distinguishes three modes for routine change: repairing, expanding and striving (Feldman 2000: 621). In our opinion, Michel de Certeau – whose theoretical framework is not discussed by Martha Feldman – goes even further. Indeed, the empirical observation of very ordinary practices such as ways of cooking, wandering around, etc., proves that apparently passive behaviours, ordinarily performed routines or even hardly conscious practices are in fact inherently inventive : they reveal that reflective individuals actively try to understand to what extent – and how – they can play with – and resist – prescribed social rules within different contexts. According to Michel de Certeau, this creativity expresses itself through a narrative ability that resists the rational calculations aimed at efficient action that characterize strategic discourses.

Another conceptual contribution of Michel de Certeau is to show that the recursive

nature of very ordinary activities within organizations is founded on an ongoing process of improvisation. Improvisation is often understood as a peculiar behaviour only suited to very specific organizational contexts – where people do not know exactly what rules to apply, in which the level of ambiguity and newness is quite high – thus allowing a collective exploration to take place (Weick 1993, 1998 ; Hatch 1999). If improvisation is often depicted as occurring outside organized routines or formal plans, it is not meant to occur by accident: it results from a deliberate collective effort made to solve an unusual problem or to create a novel activity (Miner and al. 2001: 305). Here again, Michel de Certeau goes further by shedding light on the resisting nature of improvisation. Although organizational literature depicts mainly micro-improvisations as purely inventive practices, it seems that more attention should be paid to the resistance reflexes collectively developed by individuals involved in improvisations within organizational contexts.

While executing the improvisation, its equivocal meanings are collectively explored through an intensive narrative activity. These narrations are aimed at preserving several plausible meanings of the fragments of experience newly obtained rather than integrating all the consequences of the new behaviour adopted in a global and consistent explanation. Thus, improvisations – defined as unreflexive resisting practices – should not be considered only as a drawback or an impediment to achieve strategic change, but should be analyzed as a continuous and unavoidable process, contributing to an ongoing collective exploration and questioning of the sense-making principles – and their correlated rules – offered by strategic discourses.

People, be they involved in the reproduction of routines or in improvised practices, actually develop their interpretive abilities and their social skills by enriching the perceived set of contexts, social rules and alternative behaviours available to them.

The ruling order serves as a support for innumerable productive activities while at the same time blinding its proprietors to this creativity (like those bosses who simply can't see what is being created within their own enterprises). Carried to its limit, this order would be the equivalent of the rules of meter and rhyme for poets

of earlier times: a body of constraints stimulating new discoveries, a set of rules with which improvisation plays. (de Certeau 1988: xxii)

Only narratives can support these tentative explorations of alternative meanings, goals or ways of doing: they give room to a local transformative capacity by expanding the realm of possibilities available to perform activities and resist the ruling order imposed on by strategic discourses.

As a final remark, we would like to stress that, from an epistemological standpoint, such a practice-oriented research agenda will develop within an intermediate space linking the realms of discursivity and narrativity:

The narrativizing of practices is a textual way of operating, having its own procedures and tactics. ... Shouldn't we recognize its scientific legitimacy by assuming that instead of being a remainder that cannot be or, has not yet be, eliminated from discourse, narrativity has a necessary function in it, and that a theory of narration is indissociable from a theory of practices, as its condition as well as its production. (de Certeau 1988: 78)

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<sup>1</sup> Thurman Wesley Arnold (1891-1964) was in charge of reawakening the antitrust division of the Department of Justice. He has been described as contradictory, dramatic, intriguing, and ironic, and with no desire to clarify the signals. He was an expert on the conspiratorial behavior forbidden by the Sherman Act. His satirical commentaries on government and myth, *Folklore of Capitalism and Symbols of Government*, are famous in political science. Arnold emphasized the irrationality of the symbols of government, pointing to law, the Congress, and the Supreme Court – all symbols which most citizens treat as meaningful in political discourse.

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