

PostScript – An Exchange with Henry Mintzberg

[ANOTHER SUPPLEMENT]

After I had finished my manuscript on ‘Strategic Realities’, I met with Henry Mintzberg in Prague to discuss the current state of critical strategy research and the challenge of future theory development. Most of all, we agreed on one aspect: strategic management is still dominated by a narrow set of (mostly positivistic) assumptions. Strategy is a complex phenomenon, one that can be described from various angles, using different theories and methodologies. To grasp a complex phenomenon, one needs multiple explanations and interpretations—in the terminology of this treatise: one needs a variety of *different* strategic realities. The promotion of any strategic reality—even, and maybe especially, my own one—leads to ideology, and that stops thinking in favor of indoctrination. Strategic realities inevitably simplify, that is why we need more diversity.

We also discussed that in strategic management deductive work (i.e. work that tests hypotheses) is valued too greatly over inductive work (i.e. work that comes up with ideas and concepts by investigation of the particular). Today, methodological rigor is mostly defined in terms of deduction. As a consequence, rigor gets in the way of relevance and scholars are more concerned about doing their research ‘correctly’ (i.e. in accordance with the rules of editorial policies) than insightfully. In consequence, scholarly work in strategic management often makes rather ineffective prescriptions. Prescriptions are most of all the job of managers who face an issue *within a context*. Why don’t we value descriptions more than we currently do? Managers are supposed to make sense of our writings and find their own ways of applying the ‘emptiness’ we deliver. Certainly, not all strategy scholars appreciate deductive hypotheses testing. Yet, we do not need so *many* people conducting this kind of research.

Scholars’ strategic realities should be surprising, imaginative, and speculative instead of confirming and approving. Mintzberg (2005: 399) himself quotes Sumantra Ghoshal who wrote to an editor about an article that he had reviewed three times:

“I have seen the article three times... The reviewing process, over these iterations, has changed the article significantly. I believe that the new argument... is interesting but unavoidably superficial... Citations and literature linkages have driven out most of the richness and almost all of the speculation that I liked so much in the first draft. While the article perhaps looks more ‘scholarly’, I am not sure who exactly gains from this look.”
(abridgments in the original)

Mintzberg and I concurred that we need more strategy scholars who turn against established assumptions and traditional methodologies. If others don’t like it, so be it: after all, argumentation is our business!