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Strategy Without Design: The Silent Efficacy of Indirect Action

ROBERT C.H. CHIA AND ROBIN HOLT

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009

xii + 248 pp., h/back ISBN 978 0 521 89550 7 (£55.00)

The title of this extraordinary book encapsulates the authors' central argument. Robert Chia and Robin Holt are asking us to reconsider orthodox views of strategy-making in favour of an alternative perspective. The focus of their critique is the widespread assumption that the heartland of strategy is the pursuit of 'grand' designs. This may look like familiar territory, but the authors are careful to acknowledge their main precursors and to make a clear case for theoretical reappraisal. In the Preface, we are reminded of the seminal article by management scholars Henry Mintzberg and James A. Waters, which states that, 'strategy formation walks on two feet, one deliberate, the other emergent.' (1985, p. 271) Mintzberg and Waters indicated that emergent strategies could result in an 'unintended' strategic order, but did not consider *how* such an outcome might arise. Chia and Holt seek to fill this explanatory gap. To advance their argument, the authors construct an alternative conceptualisation of strategy. In place of generic navigational aids such as the 'five forces' framework, which are applied in an effort to chart a purposeful course into the future, Chia and Holt call for a more intuitive, situated and open-ended process of 'wayfinding'. Their elaborate epistemological justification for this distinction is captured in another neat distillation, 'we only know as we go' (p. xi and p.186).

There is, of course, a vast literature on corporate strategy, including an extensive body of work on the strategy process and a rapidly expanding stream of 'strategy-as-practice' research. Chia and Holt have taken the somewhat bold decision to side-step most of this work in favour of a much broader and more eclectic survey. Andrew Pettigrew's historical study, *The Awakening Giant* secures a well-deserved place, but many strategic management luminaries are absent. The omnipresent Michael Porter secures just two brief citations, while John Ruskin manages five and Henri Bergson fifteen. The upshot is that readers find themselves embarking on a series of excursions across the disciplines and the centuries. This is very much an intellectual 'grand tour', in which we are guided through a rich itinerary of actors, ideas and concrete illustrations. The Introduction contains a characteristically diverse array of organisational illustrations that also establish a rationale for what is to follow. The virtues of strategy without design are exemplified by cameos of Grameen Bank, Virgin Airways and Toyota, while the counter-examples are provided by the attempted corporate branding of Dr Martens (R Griggs and Co.) and the poorly-coordinated relief effort following the 2004 Asian tsunami. This is followed by seven well-structured chapters that reassert the potency of emergent strategies and examine the contribution of small, seemingly peripheral actions to this process. Chapter 1 argues that Hayek's distinction between 'made' and 'spontaneous' order is blurring, and traces the implications with the help of Hobbes, Heraclitus, the Lao Tzu, Le Corbusier and the Open Source movement, amongst others. Chapter 2 is an extended reflection on the relationship between individuals and the contexts in which they act. It concludes by asserting a weak methodological individualism informed by Bateson's notion of 'systemic wisdom'. Just as the argument seems to be straying from the pragmatic realities of modern strategy-making, we are brought down to earth with a forensic examination of the 2008 credit crisis, a stark demonstration of short-sighted greed and hubris. The remaining chapters construct an alternative vision, founded on a more modest, and inherently relational, view of human agency. This is achieved through a series of reflections, spanning the nature of self-interest, the distinction between purposeful and purposive action, and the implications for our understanding of strategic activity. Chapter 4 is the main bridge to contemporary strategy research. It is followed by further philosophical reflection. Heidegger's contrast between 'building' and 'dwelling' provides the principal dynamic for a radical critique of conventional strategic thinking. By the end of the book, we are being invited to adopt an

alternative metaphor. Navigation of previously-mapped organisational territory is substituted by a process of 'wayfinding', involving immersion in the territory and its potentialities. In a key phrase, the authors point out that, 'Wayfinding precedes navigation.' (p. 166). Perhaps the most significant practical implication is that wayfinding demands different capabilities to map making and map using. The strategist needs to act as a 'bricoleur' (p. 173), a point that is elaborated through detailed examinations of the career of a racing cyclist (Graeme Obree) and the launch of an internet venture (Google). In their final chapter, the authors argue for a move away from spectacular interventions towards, 'a certain strategic blandness' (p. 201). I wonder if this term, derived from François Jullien's investigations into early Chinese culture, might translate more effectively as strategic humility. However, irrespective of the terminology adopted, it signals a radical departure from orthodox thinking in favour of a more modest way of thinking that is more closely grounded in the human condition.

The book's success rests on the thoughtful way that it has been constructed. A few of the excursions into new areas of knowledge demand a little patience on the part of the reader. For example, though fascinating in its own right, I am still not entirely sure why we are offered a half page discourse on the declining salinity of the Atlantic Ocean (p. 53). However, Chia and Holt manage to weave many seemingly tangential topics into their argument, including the Aristotelian distinction between *praxis* and *poiēsis* (Chapter 3): it resurfaces in the following chapter as a key element in their clinical examination of the 'strategy-as-practice' field (p. 124). The book's elliptical and unconventional relationship with the strategy literature is highly effective, but there are some inevitable omissions. For example, potentially fruitful connections between the wayfinding process described in this study and recent work on entrepreneurial 'effectuation' and 'bricolage' might be explored in future studies.

This is a book with strong Romantic undertones, and its critique of contemporary strategic practice extends a long tradition of counter-modernist thinking. At times, the argument recalls Dickens' *Hard Times*, with the corporate strategist playing the role of Utilitarian anti-hero, Gradgrind, 'gauging the fathomless depths with his little mean excise-rod', his well-intentioned actions giving rise to so much unintended harm. But it also carries a powerful message for the present day. The call for greater 'ecological awareness' to check the unbridled economic agency of financial institutions (Chapter 2) has continuing relevance in the early 21st century. There are significant resonances between *Strategy Without Design* and Henry Mintzberg's recent outburst against the, 'mindless, reckless behavior' of modern corporations (2009, p.140). For Mintzberg, the solution is to 'rebuild' companies as 'communities', in which strategies are allowed to emerge through shared experiences and initiatives, rather than in a top-down manner (p. 143). Chia and Holt have provided us with an important theoretical counterpoint to Mintzberg's beguiling yet elusive proposition.

References

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