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## **Book Review: On New Directions in Strategy-as-Practice Literature**

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## On New Directions in Strategy-as-Practice Literature

*Strategy as Practice: An Activity-Based Approach From Process to Practice*, Paula Jarzabkowski. London: Sage, 2005, £22.99, ISBN 0761944389.

In recent years we have seen a practice turn in strategy (e.g. Johnson et al., 2003; Whittington, 1993, 2006). This approach has its roots in the process school of strategy. However, the practice perspective has gradually grown into a research programme of its own providing an alternative to overly rationalistic and positivistically oriented strategic management literature. In particular, researchers associated with this movement have drawn from various social and organizational theories and specific qualitative methodologies—and thus advanced organizational perspectives on strategy. Paula Jarzabkowski has been one of the key persons in this movement, and has now published a book that outlines her perspective on strategy-as-practice. In my view, this book warrants attention by the readership of *Organization* not only because of the promise of this perspective to provide



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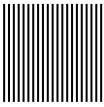
new theoretically grounded insights into strategy research but also because of the opportunity to advance overall understanding of the role of social practices in organizing.

This book has three aims: to explain how strategizing—what managers do when they do strategy—shapes strategy as an organizational activity; to contribute to the empirical interpretation and the theoretical development of an activity-based view; and to generate a set of themes, definitions and concepts that can further the development of the strategy as practice field (p. 13). Whilst the book satisfies all three aims, it is the main contribution to the theories of strategy-as-practice that I wish to focus on in this review.

The book is organized into three parts. The first part provides an overview of the key theoretical ideas behind the strategy-as-practice perspective. Specific theories on social and organizational practices are drawn from to develop a particular kind of view on strategy and strategizing. At the same time, this new view is carefully linked with some of the established theories of strategic management, mostly with the process school. Chapter one summarizes the key theoretical building blocks of this new approach: strategy as situated activity, strategy as continuously under construction, distributed and collective strategic activity, and managerial agency as practical-evaluative wisdom. This is one of the strongest parts of the book and provides a theoretically grounded basis not only for the specific framework developed in this book but also for the strategy-as-practice movement more generally. In fact, these starting points—such as continuous construction and distributed activity—could also pave the way to a much more radical view than the one outlined in the book.

This is followed by the introduction of two key concepts: procedural and interpretative strategizing. Procedural strategizing is defined as the use of formal administrative practices in strategizing. Interactive strategizing is then seen as purposive face-to-face interaction between top managers and the other members of the community in question. These sets of practices and the analysis of their interrelationship in specific settings provide the basis for the remainder of the book. This distinction enables an understanding not only of what strategizing consists of in contemporary organizations but also how particular dynamics of strategizing unfold over time.

The empirical part of the book draws on an impressive longitudinal research project on strategizing in UK universities (perhaps providing an additional incentive for an academic audience to have a look at this book!). The concept of legitimacy is a central theme, which is very helpful in terms of understanding some of the essential but not yet very well understood social dimensions of strategizing. Analytically, structural legitimacy, linked with procedural strategizing is distinguished from interpretative legitimacy established in interactive strategizing. This leads to an elaboration of four types of strategizing in the universities in question: pre-active (low on structural and interpretative legitimacy), procedural (high on structural but low on interpretative legitimacy), interactive (high on interpretative but low on structural legitimacy), and integrative strategizing (high both



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on structural and interpretative legitimacy). This is a useful framework for identifying specific kinds of archetypes as well as enabling and constraining tendencies in strategizing.

The book then moves on to distinguish particular strategizing patterns related to the following kinds of change processes: introducing localized activity in mainstream strategy, changing existing activity, stabilizing activity, unresolved activity and inertial activity. I find this to be the least convincing part of the book. The main reason is that this section—perhaps because of space limitations—provides a somewhat simplified view on strategizing in these universities. A reader with a critical mindset starts to pose questions around the nature and sequence of these patterns: ‘Are these patterns as clear-cut as presented?’, ‘Could not most of these strategizing types actually be found in all strategy processes?’. The final chapter of this part then focuses on the question of multiple strategies in highlighting some of the inherent complexities that are often neglected in strategy research.

The final part of the book mainly summarizes the key points of the first two parts as well as discusses implications for practitioners and researchers. A number of useful research topics are proposed for future research: multiple strategies, the linkage of practice and performance (that should be viewed in a critical spirit), managerial agency, and the role of discursive practices in strategizing. In a sense, I would have hoped for a more detailed reflection around these issues but understand that there are limits of this kind of reflection for a book intended for multiple audiences.

What is then the contribution of this book to strategic management research? Clearly, this is an important effort to spell out a clear-cut but not overly simplified view on strategizing practices and associated activities. Furthermore, the view is linked with an empirical setting that exemplifies these concrete processes. However, I do not see this as Jarzabkowski’s final word on strategy-as-practice. As mentioned, the theoretical starting points outlined in the beginning enable further exploration of crucial issues such as continuous construction or distributed activity. For example, now—quite understandably—the book focuses exclusively on top managers as strategists. However, this effectively limits any serious attempt to analyse distributed and collective activity in organizations.

The practice perspective can be extended to include also more critical analyses of strategy and strategizing (e.g. Chia and Holt, 2006; Hendry, 2000; Knights and Morgan, 1991; Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Vaara et al., 2004). This might include a more in-depth analysis of issues such as power relations, subjectivity, dialectics of control and resistance as well as the various practices impeding or promoting participation. Such analyses are not easy as they involve stretching and re-defining some of the key ideas and concepts that we take for granted both in research and practice. However, as I understand it, such rethinking is very much in the spirit of the strategy-as-practice movement.

In all, this is an insightful book that would be of use to people interested in the actual practices of strategy and strategizing. It is recommended



especially for academics seeking to understand better the activity-based perspective but also to inspire those who want to extend this agenda to a more critical direction. Practitioners too would benefit from reading the book, despite it at times being rather theoretical. But there again, we should not promote simplistic perspectives on complex social phenomena.

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