



Exploring the house built on sand!

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the strategy literature in order to identify scholars who have developed specific models of strategy.

Design/methodology/approach – An extensive review of the literature was undertaken.

Findings – The paper reveals Modernist ideas of several scholars who have developed methods or concepts for delineating the ideas of strategy. A body of economic theory is mentioned but is beyond the scope of this paper.

Practical implications – The paper suggests that a move away from the eighteenth century economic concepts must happen, especially the equilibrium assumption, if the strategy discipline is to be developed.

Originality/value – Very little work, especially in strategy has been done outside the Modernist paradigm. This paper explores the possibility of incorporating open system ideas into a strategic methodology.

Keywords Strategic management, Critical management, Epistemology, Self-adjusting control systems

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

Few writers have attempted the task of organising the ideas of business strategy into a coherent model. The background of the scholars who have attempted this task fall broadly into two categories; those from a management-organisation theory background (Chaffee, 1985; Whittington, 1993; McKiernan, 1996; Feurer and Chaharbaghi, 1997; Mintzberg *et al.*, 1998) and those from an economic theory background based on the “Economic Theory of the Firm” (Jacobson, 1992; Teece *et al.*, 1997; Rindova and Fombrun, 1999; Foss, 1999; Phelan and Lewin, 2000).

The frame of ideas of each of these groups of scholars is discussed. The conclusion is drawn that none of the models or concepts developed is adequate to explain strategic theory from a critical humanist (French, 2009a) epistemological perspective.

The management/organisation theory ideas

As time passes and the strategic process is analysed and investigated by more and more scholars, there appears to be recognition of the need to delineate ideas. In response the above-mentioned scholars have developed various models or descriptions. However, the process has become politicised to a certain extent. Kippenberger (1998, p. 11) reviews the work of Henry Mintzberg and maintains that:

Henry Mintzberg leaves his audience in little doubt about his opinion of other peoples work. Although these three schools [the Classical schools] are, measured by the literature, by far the biggest, it is clear that he does not hold them in particularly high esteem. Partly this is his own prejudice against those who prescribe a theoretical ideal rather than research what actually happens in practice. And partly it may be his frustration that their very success means that other interesting possibilities remain unexplored.



In addition there is very little congruence between the ideas of the organisational-management scholars and the economists, despite the epistemological paradigm within which their ideas are set, both being Modernist.

Mintzberg *et al.* (1998) clearly see the debate as politicised with Mintzberg (1991) and Ansoff (1991) dueling intellectually in the academic press. McKiernan (1996, p. xiii) also recognises the political problems associated with delineating ideas when he declares that:

... in a multidisciplinary area like strategic management, any consensus is likely to be limited.

In this paper, the ideas of the scholars are discussed and some consensus is sought. As the Mintzberg *et al.* (1998) work is the most extensive, it is used as the starting point, but it is important to emphasise that all of these ideas are set in a Modernist paradigm. None of the writers, with the possible exception of Chaffee (1985), whose third school may require a different epistemological paradigm, discuss the need to explore strategy in the context of different epistemologies. There is no attempt in this paper to discuss at length the ideas of the different schools of the different scholars, but to explore the structures of the ideas. This is necessary because the semantics of the strategy subject have become so differentiated that rather than debate endlessly over definitions, congruence is sought in the ideas of the differing scholars (French, 2009b).

Ten schools of thought – Mintzberg *et al.*

Mintzberg *et al.* (1998) offer ten approaches to, or schools of strategy formation, which they further sub-divide into three sections (the Configuration School is the third section). Their first three schools are prescriptive in nature and are described as the Classical schools (see Figure 1).

Proponents of these three schools prescribe how strategy should be formed and each of the schools has a specific methodology that adherents must follow. The next six schools, characterised as descriptive, attempt to explain how strategy is actually formed in differing corporate environments. The body of literature that supports the proposition for these six schools is much thinner (Kippenberger, 1998) than the extensive literature of the Classical schools. It could be argued that there is little theory extant in the literature to support the thesis of ten schools.

It might be argued that the descriptive schools represent ideas for strategic practice rather than theoretical “schools”. Kippenberger (1998) suggests that Mintzberg’s own views place him along with his then publishing partner James Brian Quinn (1995 cited in Mintzberg *et al.*, 1995) in the Learning School but that subsequent publications place Mintzberg’s ideas within his own Configuration School (see Figure 2) which other scholars might describe as the Contingency School (Woodward, 1958, 1965; Burns and Stalker, 1961; Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967; Thompson, 1967; Hofer, 1975).

Kippenberger (1998) is critical of the Mintzberg *et al.* (1998) model in that he finds no evidence of the resource-based view of strategy (Wernerfelt, 1984, 1995; Barney, 1986, 1991; Prahalad and Hamel, 1990; Nelson, 1991; Rumelt, 1991; Peteraf, 1993; Conner and Prahalad, 1996; Teece *et al.*, 1997) where there is an emphasis on capabilities and competencies as the drivers of strategy “even though this is a body of thinking that has gained considerable ground over the last 15 years” (Kippenberger, 1998, p. 14). Two of the proponents of the resource-based view, “Gary Hamel and C. K. Prahalad achieved a

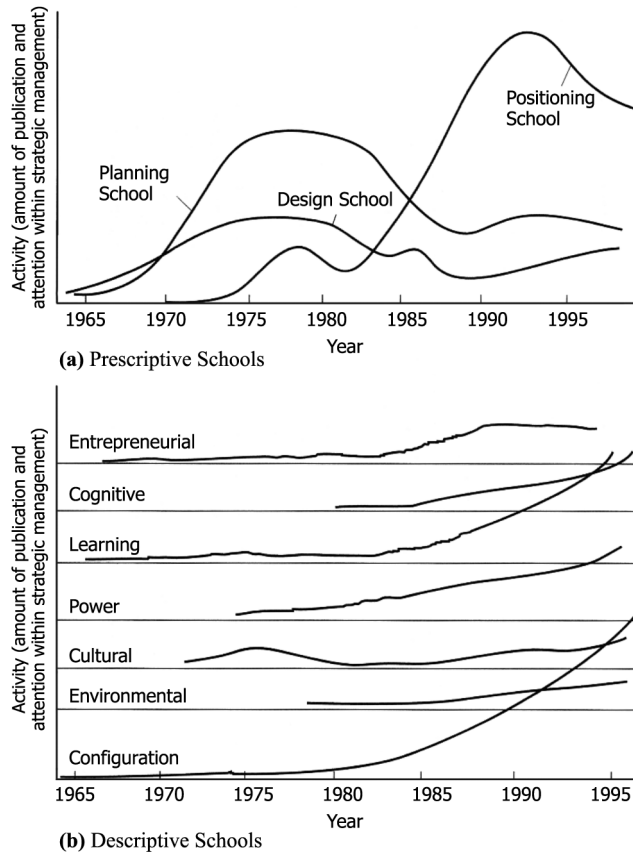


Figure 1.
Evolution of the ten
schools

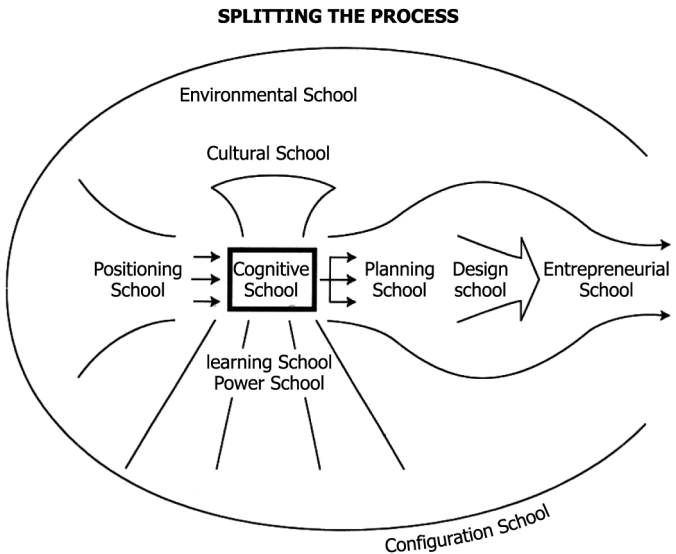
Source: Mintzberg *et al.* (1998, p. 353)

large following over the late 1980s and through the 1990s, [and] they get no references [in the Mintzberg *et al.* (1998) work]” (Kippenberger, 1998, p. 14). Whilst the sentiment of Kippenberger’s view is essentially correct, Mintzberg *et al.* (1998, p. 276) clearly mention the “Resource-based Theory” and also recognise the work of Prahalad and Hamel, however their work is placed in the Cultural School, one not generally recognised by other scholars in the literature.

However, Kippenberger (1998) concludes with a very similar view to McKiernan (1996), that all classifications are arbitrary constructs. Mintzberg has been a significant contributor to the discussion of strategic ideas and he provides an insight into how many different strands of thinking on the subject of business strategy have been developed since the Second World War.

Three models of strategy – Chaffee

Chaffee (1985) describes three philosophical models of strategy: Linear, Adaptive, and Interpretive. First, Linear models within which the ideas are essentially classical, connote the methodological, directed, sequential action involved in planning which



Source: Mintzberg *et al.* (1998, p. 353)

Figure 2. The Configuration (Contingency) School

suggests a causal relationship between goal setting and achievement. These ideas are in line with the concepts of the Classical Schools, particularly the Design and Planning Schools. Second, Adaptive models are characterised by concepts of adapting the strategy of the organisation to provide a best fit between the demand and the supply sides, and adaptive capacity in the face of a rapidly changing business environment. These ideas are also essentially classical but more aligned to the Resource-based View and Contingency Schools. Mintzberg *et al.* (1995) and Mintzberg *et al.* (1998) concur with Chaffee’s (1985) first two models but ignore her third model.

Chaffee’s third model is an Interpretive model within which there is an implicit assumption that reality is not something objective or external to the perceiver that can be comprehended or not comprehended. Instead it is a “process of social interchange in which perceptions are affirmed, modified or replaced according to their apparent congruence with the perceptions of others” (Chaffee, 1985, p. 93). Within this context, strategy becomes a metaphor that allows the organisation to be better understood by organisational stakeholders. Chaffee (1985) was writing in the period before many of the ideas about non-linear systems were developed. As a consequence, to incorporate her ideas within a linear system it was necessary to categorise them as perceptions or metaphors rather than fit them into a new paradigm. Twenty years later, these ideas might fit better into the current ideas of the Learning School which will require a rethink of the Modernist paradigm.[1]

Generic perspectives on strategy – Whittington

Whittington (1993) argues that two intersecting continua labelled “Outcomes” and “Processes” represent the outcomes of the strategic process and the nature of the process itself. The outcomes are profit-maximising or pluralistic and the processes deliberate or emergent. Consequently there are four quadrants (schools) of strategic



thinking or behaviour, which are defined as Classical, Evolutionary, Processual and Systemic. Classical and Evolutionary Schools are driven by the profit motive and Processual and Systemic Schools are driven by more complex ideas.

Whittington (1993) places more emphasis than many other scholars on non-profit-making outcomes; however, his continuum of deliberate process at one end and emergent process at the other is a similar concept to that of Mintzberg *et al.* (1998) and also to Chaffee (1985). Whittington (1993, pp. 3-5) suggests that each of the four quadrants provides different answers to the question, “what is strategy?” From the perspective of the deliberate schools, rational planning and control are viable concepts – essentially traditional Classical School ideas. Evolutionists and Processualists agree that long-term planning is largely futile. Evolutionists believe that “the dynamic, hostile and competitive nature of markets means not only that long-term survival cannot be planned for; it also ensures that only those firms that somehow do hit upon profit making strategies will survive”. Survival is determined by the fitness of purpose. Whittington (1993, p. 3) calls this four-element matrix “Generic Strategies” (see Figure 3), and it can be seen that there are similarities between these ideas and the generic strategy ideas of the Positioning School, in particular the concept that only certain firms with certain specific strategies can survive. Adherents to the Positioning School also argue that the one firm which occupies the “position” of power will dominate the market. However, in this instance, the mechanism is analysis rather than fitness.

Processualists are less pessimistic about the fate of business but agree that planning is of little use because “strategy emerges more from a pragmatic process of bodging, learning and compromise than from a rational series of giant steps forward” (Whittington, 1993, p. 4).

Historical evolution of strategic management – McKiernan

McKiernan (1996) also describes four schools of thought. McKiernan (1996) surveyed “a body of active international researchers in the area to establish what they

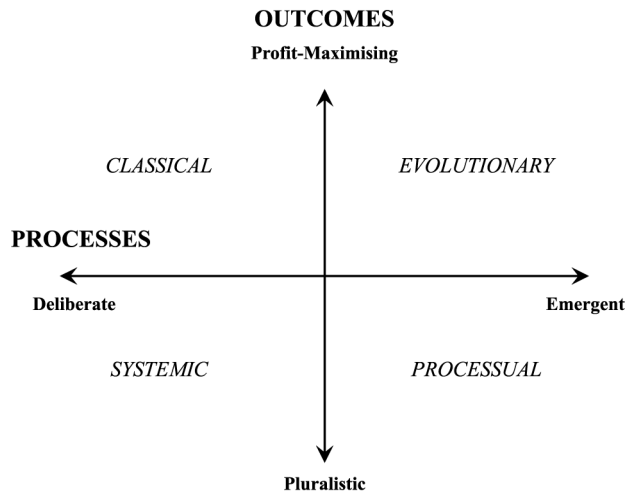


Figure 3.
Generic perspectives on strategy

Source: Whittington (1993, p. 4)

considered to be the most significant journal articles in the development of the field” (McKiernan, 1996, p. xiii). A total of 44 scholars are acknowledged as contributing recommendations that led to the collection of a body of literature that was then divided into four schools of thought. There is considerable congruence between McKiernan’s thinking, that led to the categorisation of these schools (developed with the assistance of 44 scholars) and the ideas of Mintzberg *et al.* (1998) and of Feurer and Chaharbaghi (1997). McKiernan (1996) also recognises that ideas of emergence have been largely ignored, suggesting that the impact of ideas may have to be delayed until “ignited by an appropriate context” (McKiernan, 1996, p. xiii).

McKiernan’s (1996) four schools of thought are:

- (1) the Planning and Practice School;
- (2) the Learning School;
- (3) the Positioning School; and
- (4) the Resource-based School.

These schools broadly cover the same ground as Feurer and Chaharbaghi (1997) (see below) and Mintzberg *et al.* (1998). However, in addition, McKiernan (1996, p. xiii) discusses the problems associated with trying to develop a rational model of the development history of strategic management thought:

Scholars’ individual perceptions of seminal articles that have forged the study ‘domain’ are often formed from their own functional heritage. In a multidisciplinary area like strategic management, any consensus on milestones is likely to be limited.

It might be argued that the Planning and Practice School should be subdivided into two schools renamed the Design School and the Planning School. This accords with Mintzberg’s view and there is considerable evidence in the literature for this delineation. McKiernan’s (1996) collection of papers includes only one paper on Contingency Theory, and he recognises that ideas of emergence have been ignored; emergence as a theory of strategy creation was in its infancy at the time of publication (1996). Contingency Theory entered the strategy specialty through organisation theory, and there is now considerable evidence in the strategy literature for its inclusion as a separate school (Brech, 1957; Woodward, 1958, 1965; Burns and Stalker, 1961; Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967; Thompson, 1967; Hofer, 1975; Donaldson, 1995).

Strategy development: past, present and future – Feurer and Chaharbaghi

Feurer and Chaharbaghi (1997, p. 60) categorise strategy not by schools of thought, but as a continuum (see Figure 4) of developing and overlapping ideas. There are five fundamental concepts of strategy processes which become more complex through time:

- (1) “Strategic Planning”, associated with corporate planning and SWOT[2] analyses.
- (2) “Phase of Generalisation”, associated with life-cycle analysis, portfolio techniques, and PIMS.
- (3) “Competitive Advantage”, associated with competitive analysis and positioning, value chain, gap analysis, and generic strategies.

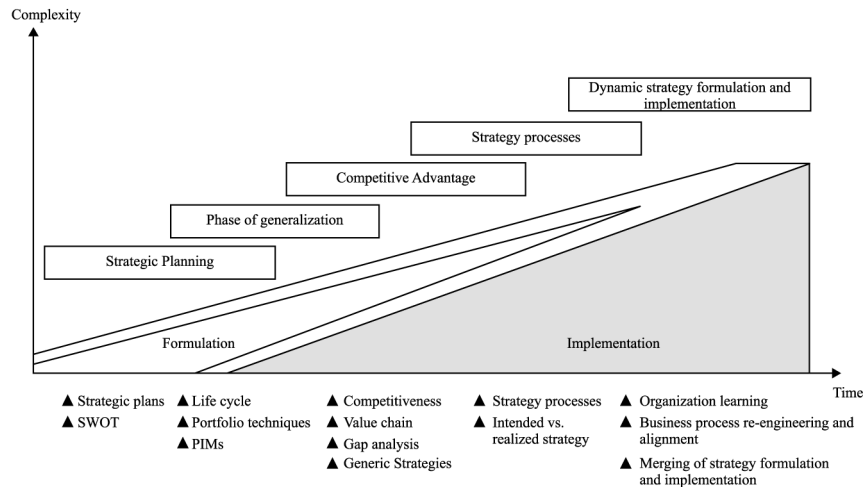


Figure 4.
The evolution of strategy development

Source: Feurer and Chaharbaghi (1997, p. 60)

- (4) “Strategy Processes”, associated with intended versus realised strategies;
- (5) “Dynamic Strategy Formulation and Implementation”, associated with organisational learning and the de-centralisation of the strategy process.

To emphasise an important point, “... in a multidisciplinary area like strategic management, any consensus on milestones is likely to be limited” (McKiernan, 1996, p. xiii); there can be no complete agreement amongst scholars in the field of strategic management on the division of an entire discipline into a number of schools. However, several economists have also entered the debate, generally with Modernist economic concepts, replete with the macro jargon of the economic discipline, specifically “economic rents” and “market position”.

The economic theory ideas

Economists study complex economic systems by constructing drastically simplified models of economic behaviour, based on incompletely verified time and space evidence, in order to derive partially intuitive judgments about the past and future consequences of changes in the social and political context of economic activity (cited in Fitzgerald, 1990, p. 24).

To indicate the utter nonsense of the interference of economists in the field of strategy, I describe one economic model from Rindova and Fombrun (1999) to expose the simplicity of their thinking. There are several other economic models that are as nonsensical, especially as models that practitioners of strategy might try to implement in the real world (Teece *et al.*, 1997; Phelan and Lewin, 2000; Foss, 1999). These simplifications have considerable implications because they are all steeped in the equilibrium assumption and as I have described in French (2009b) a complex self-adapting system in equilibrium is dead. The greatest influence on strategic theory from economists has come from Porter (1980, 1985, 1991, 1997), whose ideas are represented by the Positioning School. A critique of his work is found in French (2009c).

The economist's demand to conceptualise complex organisational design issues merely in terms of organisational "black boxes" interacting with informational and cost influences (transaction costs) (Williamson, 1975), underscores vulnerability to economic dogma, especially unfeted in non-routine management and risk assessments contexts. Organisations are more than asymmetrical, least-cost, information-seeking entrepreneurial units. As in governance, so too with issues of complex organisational and inter-organisational capabilities, new paradigms require that "knowledge/information" join capital and labour as core factors of production Kouzmin *et al.* (2001, p. 22) and these are precisely the factors that are ignored by the economists. A clear example is the work of Rindova and Fombrun (1999).

Constructing competitive advantage: the role of firm-constituent iterations – Rindova and Fombrun (1999)

Rindova and Fombrun (1999) are primarily interested in how firms build competitive advantage. They suggest that "Current models of competitive advantage emphasise economic factors as explanations for a firm's success but ignore sociocognitive factors". They argue that "competitive advantage is a systemic outcome that develops as firms and "constituents" participate in six processes" (Rindova and Fombrun, 1999, p. 691). These statements are examples of several of the problems associated with epistemology, discussed in French (2009b) and of semantics, discussed in French (2009a). Presumably, constituents are people, in the form of employees, customers and other human stakeholders!

The purely Modernist nature of the language of these statements condemns the ideas, from a radical humanist perspective, before the argument has started and is an example of many of the problems associated with the intrusion of Modernist economists into the field of business strategy, specifically the ideas of the Positioning School.

Rindova and Fombrun (1999) are interested in concepts such as the "competitive terrain", wherein they identify four domains of action in two dimensions that drive competitive advantage (see Figure 5).

As is the case with Teece *et al.* (1997) they introduce resource-based theory into their models but from an exclusively Modernist economic perspective:

[...] we include in the resource domain solely material resources – the physical and financial assets that firms and constituents deploy. We do so because drawing a distinction between these resources can enhance our understanding of how each type of resource contributes to rents (Rindova and Fombrun, 1999, p. 694).

But a critical humanist might ask the question as to whether any of these concepts can be identified and separated so as to "enhance our understanding", or whether the separation of the resources between material and human resources has any (critically real) meaning at all?

People are re-introduced in the dimension called the Micro-culture but in the form of "knowledge, values, and identity beliefs in a firm consistent with a broad definition of culture as "the pattern of shared beliefs and values that give the members of the institution meaning and provide them with rules for behaviour" (Rindova and Fombrun, 1999, p. 694). The descriptor might be Micro-culture, but the language is of a macro-culture of a single firm, as if the constituents were one particular homogeneous

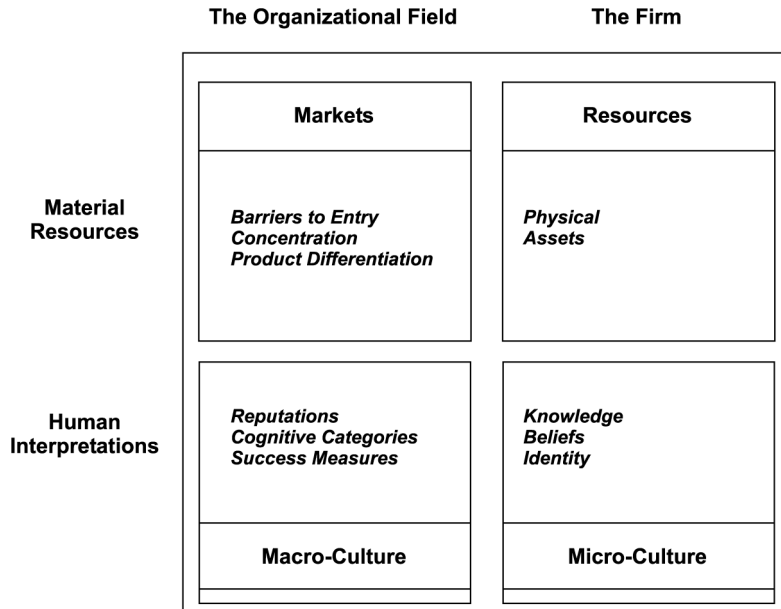


Figure 5.
Sources of competitive advantage

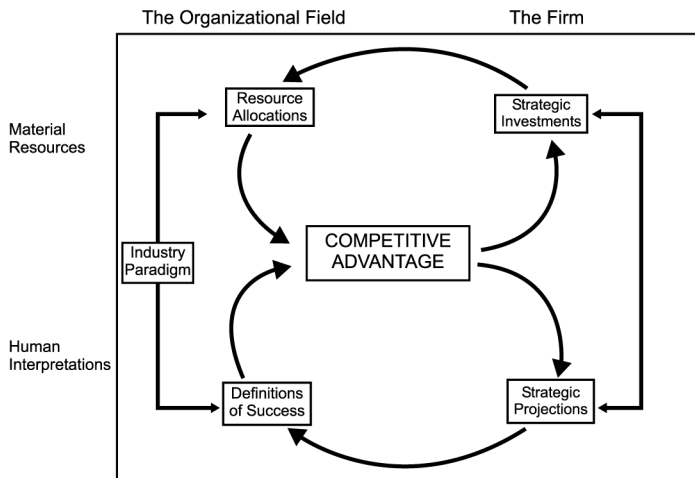
Source: Rindova and Fonbrun (1999, p. 693)

body of knowledge and decision-making capacity, separated from the physical reality of the resources both human and physical, that need humans to deploy them.

Rindova and Fombrun (1999) have re-invented the work of Teece *et al.* (1997), describing the relationship between the firm and its environment in Modernist macro-economic jargon. The implication is that these terms can be defined, separated and measured. Throughout their paper Rindova and Fombrun (1999) concentrate on competitive advantage (see Figure 6).

Also throughout the paper IBM is cited as the exemplary firm that created competitive advantage, but at no stage in the paper is this competitive advantage described or defined. Surely if competitive advantage is the major interest for the strategic process (and in these economic models it clearly is!) then as strategists we should know what it is and be able to define or at the least, describe it. A similar conceptual problem can be discerned in the work of Porter (1980, 1985, 1991, 1997), whose simplifying and “blinding” role of externalities in economics, is unable to postulate the role of government, or de-regulation, in his five factor (see French, 2009c) positioning model at the very time he was proselytising the case of the US Airline industry under severe conditions of Reaganite, ideological deregulation of that industry (Kouzmin, 2007).

The conspicuous inability of economics to theorise about the strategic importance of knowledge as a central factor in increasingly information-driven contexts is particularly startling (Latham, 1998, p. 52). Quite remarkably, new pools of knowledge and organised knowledge capacities are regarded as outside the parameters by which economic growth is modelled within conventional theories of economics. It should be continually recognised that factors of technology and



Source: Rindova and Fonbrun (1999, p. 702)

Figure 6.
A systematic model of competitive advantage

management in economic analysis are, conventionally, disregarded as “externalities” (Marglin, 1971) – an epistemological device known only to the discipline of economics obsessed with, and exalting, a cult of efficiency dangerous to non-economic-based risk understandings of organised capacity and performance (Kouzmin *et al.*, 2001, p. 22).

Conclusion

If we are to practice strategy, we must completely ignore the background noise that derives from economic theory and concentrate on the ideas of the management and organisation scholars. The argument is made (French, 2009a) that one possible method to mitigate the problem of definition of the terms in the strategy lexicon may be to assign the ideas into a philosophical framework. The ideas of scholars from both management/organisation and economic theory backgrounds have been discussed.

Whittington (1993), Feurer and Chaharbaghi (1997), and Mintzberg *et al.* (1998) suggest that the ideas are like a continuum of overlapping and developing concepts. McKiernan (1996, p. xv) maintains that the “schools should not be seen as mutually exclusive. A better analogy is to see them as strands interwoven to form a strong rope”. The assignment of ideas to one discrete school or another might be criticised; Whittington (1993), McKiernan (1996), and Mintzberg *et al.* (1998) recognise this issue but still assign their ideas. The allocation of a particular idea or set of ideas to an individual school is a convenience that allows the discussion of complementary ideas that have similar characteristics. The discussion of the ideas is more important than the allocation of those ideas to particular schools. However, almost all of the ideas of strategic management that have been canvassed have been explored in an epistemological paradigm that is essentially Modernist. This is because mainstream management thinking is a Modernist idea (Parker, 2002).

Harfield (1998) explores the history of strategic thought from a different epistemological perspective and concludes that the third of Chaffee’s (1985) models of strategy, the Interpretive model in which strategy becomes metaphor, is better understood if there is an assumption that “‘strategic management’ is a myth” (Harfield,

1998, p. 5). There is an explicit sense that strategic management should be viewed within a Postmodern or critical sensibility of exploration. The currently accepted wisdom by some who claim a Postmodern identity is that the interpretation of the text by the reader is the actual seat of “power” and authority.

Epilogue

Mintzberg *et al.* (1998, p. 4) expressly refute the idea of seven schools, quoting from Miller (1956 cited in Mintzberg *et al.*, 1998) who suggests that we “tend to favor a quantity of about seven for categorizing things”. Concepts such as the “seven wonders of the world”, the “seven days of the week” and the “seven deadly sins” are provided as evidence of the ability of the human mind to comprehend “chunks” of information that can be comfortably retained in the short term memory of the human being. Mintzberg *et al.* (1998) provide a categorisation of ten schools, and because it is the most comprehensive model postulated by the strategy/organisation scholars, it was the first to be described. There may be evidence for ten schools of management behaviour, specifically Mintzberg’s more subjective schools, especially his Power, Cultural and Environmental schools, but whether ten separate schools of strategy exist is doubtful. Consequently it will be necessary for scholars to re-think the schools classifications and justify their models of strategic behaviour, taking into account that strategy is a modernist idea, but modernism may not present the best epistemology for the development of strategic thinking in an era where businesses are better understood as complex self-adapting systems.

Notes

1. Issues of Chaffee’s (1985) third model are discussed later in this paper.
2. SWOT is the analysis of a company’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

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