Human Relations

The 'Long March' of the Management Modernizers: Ritual, Rhetoric and Rationality

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ABSTRACT   This article deals with a transition process from a professional engineering archetype to a modernizing managerialist archetype in a British electricity utility. This took place in the context of the substantially changing utility sector characterized by privatization, the introduction of efficiency targets, the introduction of a regulatory system, the prospect of mergers and predatory takeovers. The high-flying rhetoric of modernizing managerialists needs to be seen in the context of institutional templates, which carried substantial mimetic legitimacy, in particular programmes such as total quality management, teamworking and job redesign. They provided a basis to displace entrenched engineering rituals, and establish a new 'dominant rhetoric'. One reading ascribes such projects as striving towards objectified and technocratic organizational improvements – the modernizers' rhetoric. An alternative reading is one that problematizes such an understanding by instead drawing attention to the largely ceremonial and rhetoric intensive nature of modernizing managerialism – the critics' rhetoric. A third perspective is provided by engineers who were fighting a largely rearguard action, as professional expectations emphasizing engineering safety were gradually losing force, but remained in sedimented form. The rhetoric intensive practice of talking 'spin' and engaging in elaborate rituals may well, whether in political or in organizational life, lead to critical, and sometimes cynical responses. In this article we highlight the way in which the scripts of ceremonialism, reformism and cynicism have

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played out among managerial and professional groups in the organization.

KEYWORDS   archetype ▪ bifurcation ▪ ceremony ▪ institutional isomorphism ▪ managerialism ▪ modernizers ▪ professional engineers ▪ rationality ▪ sedimentation

Introduction

This article is concerned with the process of organizational change in a UK electricity utility shortly after privatization. There were substantial pressures that inexorably led the organization to move away from a 'professional archetype' (Cooper et al., 1996) towards what might be usefully described as a managerialist archetype. Far from being a smooth transition, however, because of factions legitimating different ways of proceeding, the process of change was characterized by contestation, stalling, internal critique and, thus eventually, bifurcation. The major analytical concern germane to this article is to unpack the impact of initiatives, which can be broadly considered to be drawn from the pantheon of managerialism, upon professional groups; more particularly, this article is interested in the specific effects with regard to professional engineers. The argument that follows places a particular emphasis on the institutionalization of managerial rituals (or ceremonies), which were to displace engineering rituals. This took place within a context of transformation that can broadly be characterized as archetypal change.

More specifically, our research question is 'what were the processes involved in the archetype transition from a professional (engineering) archetype to a managerial archetype?' In order to address this question it is first necessary that we engage with theoretical perspectives that deal with: (i) professionalism, especially professional engineering; (ii) archetype transition; and (iii) the institutionalization of ceremonial behaviour. Our discussion of these literatures is, by necessity, focused, dealing specifically with issues that are *directly* relevant to answering our research question.

Theoretical perspectives: Professions, archetypes and rituals

Taking an Orwellian cue, it is important to note that *'some professions are more equal than others'*, meaning that professions differ both in their relative power (Armstrong, 1987, 1991) and embeddedness in particular societal

contexts. This is borne out by numerous studies that range from suggesting that the market in fact opens up possibilities for professions (Starbuck, 1992), to those that highlight the encroachment and tense co-existence between professions and managerialism (Cooper et al., 1996; Kitchener, 1998; Reed, 1999). Notions of change need to be tempered by a more recursive view – such as that of Ackroyd (1996), who has noted that professions are likely to *remain* important modes of organizing within the UK context. The foci of such accounts generally restrict themselves to the venerable liberal professions of law, medicine or accounting; groups that have arguably been successful in smuggling themselves from the pre-modern to the modern world. In contrast, professions that are held to be especially vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the modernizing forces of the New Right and Managerialism are those that have traditionally encountered difficulties with regard to establishing their warrant to *legislate* (Bauman, 1987) over a particular domain, and British engineering would certainly fall into this category. As a reflection of this, Aronowitz (1999) has spoken of the *'twilight of the professions'*, similarly other labour process writers have pointed to the logic of de-professionalization at play within contemporary capitalism (Meiksins & Smith, 1996a, 1996b). Such work is a manifestation of the profound changes that have become a commonplace part of present day organizations.

In the context of the UK, a profession held to be particularly vulnerable to a hostile colonization of their territory (Laughlin, 1991) is that of professional engineering (Lee & Smith, 1992). The work of Smith (1987) attests to the precarious position occupied by British engineers. Manifestations of this problematic position include the following: engineering in the UK is a poorly defined profession; engineers are represented by relatively weak professional bodies; and engineering is far from an obvious career route into senior management. Smith (1987) argues that many of these weaknesses can be attributed to the failure by engineering to cut the Gordian knot with its craft origins. Turning to the means through which the challenge to professionalism has taken place, it has often been through rendering *transparent* what it is that a profession *actually* does. In this sense, through managerial techniques such as process mapping, immanent to both total quality management (TQM) and business process re-engineering (BPR), the hermetically sealed black box (Scarbrough, 1995) of professionalism has increasingly been prised open. Thus, in theory at least, this has allowed activities that were once the preserve of a profession to be carried out by other occupational groups. This logic of de-professionalization extends to a problematization of the claims of rationality that are infused in many aspects of professional behaviour. Such claims are very often no longer taken as self-evident or justifiable: safety activities, for example, can be re-classified as wasteful. Some theorists

(Gibbons et al., 1994; Tranfield & Starkey, 1998) have characterized such shifts as being constitutive of a change in the mode of knowledge production, to one whereby the importance of the context of application is elevated over the concerns of self-regulatory professional disciplines. What we want to take away from the professionalism debate is a focus on the specific work context in which a professional (or occupational) mandate gets re-negotiated through 'recursive scripts' (Nelsen & Barley, 1997: 650).

A theoretical perspective that has done much to try and make sense of the challenges faced by professions generally is the archetype literature. Archetypes can be identified through the analysis of recurrent action patterns and coherence in the relationship among the provinces of meaning, structure and process (Ranson et al., 1980). The corollary of this is that structures and processes tend to be legitimated by the ideas, values and beliefs that comprise the core of an organization's interpretive scheme. An archetype is thus characterized by 'convergence' (Tushman & Romanelli, 1985), or 'internal fit', between structures and values, or coherence between interpretive schemes and organizational structures and systems (Greenwood & Hinings, 1993: 1056). Interpretive schemes can be seen as shaped by intentions, aspirations and purposes (Hinings & Greenwood, 1988: 13–14). According to Greenwood and Hinings (1993: 1069), archetype coherence means that 'structures and systems consistently embody one set of ideas and values'; often, however, there will be at least some organization members 'who are not fully committed to those ideas and values'. Indeed, if current organizational actors were committed predominantly to 'alternative interpretive schemes' then this would constitute a key (potential) dynamic for change (Greenwood & Hinings, 1993: 1075). Furthermore, 'Any organization has within it the seeds of alternative ways of viewing the purposes of that organization, the ways in which it might be appropriately organized and how actions might be evaluated' (Hinings et al., 1996: 894). Indeed, unless an organization has a very strong culture, it is likely that a variety of commitments co-exist and one might distinguish among 'status quo', 'reformative', 'competitive' and 'indifferent' commitment (Greenwood & Hinings, 1993: 1075). Cunningham et al. (1987) and Hinings et al. (1996) for sport organizations and Hinings and Greenwood (1988) for mature public bureaucracies found that change was value led: 'that structures change when the senior managers are already committed to an alternative archetype' (Hinings et al., 1996: 909). Thus, the researcher's task is to relate the interpretive scheme to corresponding structural attributes and processes (Greenwood & Hinings, 1988: 299), and hence to interpret the archetype in *normal circumstances* as existing in a state of 'external fit' with its business environment. Engineering values can be expected to be dominant where an electricity utility

company exists in a static, monopolistic environment of public ownership – whereby the engineering profession has been 'mandated' by society to perform certain functions. But a dynamic of change will arise where new values or commitments (to markets, to competition) manifest themselves. By way of qualification, however, it is quite clear that different values are likely to be at large in an organization at any one time, as such, those held by the organizational elite may well collide with other competing views (Hinings et al., 1996: 892). Archetype theorists regard such a collision as being fairly exceptional, and before long regard it as being resolved through a restoration of a state of 'fit'. The implication is that the value system of the organizational elite, i.e. senior management, will carry the day. (This is not to deny that somewhere along the way an 'old guard' of senior management might well get displaced by a 'new guard'. This is a point made in Pettigrew's, 1985, seminal study of ICI.) Meyer et al. (1993: 1177) have argued that configurational approaches such as archetype theory are suitable for application to the analysis of episodic bursts and frame-breaking change. For instance, Greenwood and Hinings (1993: 1070), in their study based on a large-scale sample of local authorities, illustrated that 'contextual factors were pushing organizations out of one set of coherent structures toward another'. Thus, *archetype literature* seems suitable in order to analyse a transition from a professional engineering to a managerialist archetype, as this has resonance in the extant literature: similarly, Greenwood et al. (1990) talk about transition between competing archetypes within the accounting industry. In the same way, Laughlin (1991), conducting a secondary analysis of 'European Railways', discusses a 'colonization pathway' of change: from a 'railway culture', in which the purpose of the railway was seen to run trains, to a new interpretive scheme, the 'bottom line'. Case studies of two Canadian law firms have suggested that, rather than one archetype displacing the previous archetype in a neat and somewhat seamless process of transformation, in an altogether more complex way, archetypes become layered on top of each other, that is, there is a process of 'sedimentation' (Cooper et al., 1996). This suggests a similar focus to that we derived from the professionalism debate from above: namely, a need to focus on the dynamics of contestation, rather than coherence and fit.

From the vantage point of institutional theory, the pressure for organizational change can be theorized as being primarily concerned with the adoption of policies that could often be understood as allowing the organization both to attain and retain legitimacy in the eyes of external stakeholders, thereby ensuring their continued support. Indeed, the mimetic force of institutionalized recipes, ready-made packages, within an organizational field, but also the perception of the ceremonial character of behaviour that

claims to be 'rational', is a core insight of institutional literature (Baron et al., 1986; Dacin, 1997; Edelman, 1990; Tolbert & Zucker, 1983; Westphal et al., 1997). In their seminal work, Meyer and Rowan (1977) showed how budgeting played an increasing role in (relatively) poorly institutionalized settings such as universities. In such locations, there is often a need to demonstrate some form of 'rationality', even if it is largely ceremonial or ritualistic (Meyer & Scott, 1983). Management action might therefore be symbolically meaningful whilst largely devoid of instrumental, or operational, rationality. Emphasizing, for instance, the adoption of cost accounting or the use of certified professionals in the public sector may owe far more to considerations associated with communicating the organization's desired image to stakeholders than it does to issues of productivity. Where institutional theory becomes directly relevant for our research focus is in its emphasis on multiple competing rationalities (Townley, 2002) or the 'many competing and inconsistent logics' (Scott, 1995: 130) that exist in modern societies. This suggests a need to analyse contestation within an organization.

The preceding discussion has bridged three literatures that are analytically relevant to our research question. Our focus on these literatures was provided through our research question. In this sense, we would by no means claim to have provided an even remotely comprehensive survey of these literatures. Instead, we have focused on the role of contested processes of change: between professional mandates; during archetype change; and between institutional logics or rationalities. By drawing on these three literatures, this article attempts to illuminate the reasons why a form of behaviour regarded as 'normal' within an archetype becomes subject to question and critique during a period of organizational transition. We demonstrate that this is a process that involves rhetorical intensive claims of rationality, qua answering competitive needs.

The rest of this article is given over to our attempt to answer our research question, namely, what were the processes involved in the archetype transition from a professional to a managerialist archetype. Below, we discuss methods and methodology. We then deal with CoastElectric as a professional engineering organization, archetypal change at CoastElectric, and finally implications and conclusions.

Methodology, research methods and case study

In this article, we draw upon longitudinal research (1992–98) into the governance of CoastElectric, a regional electricity company in the UK. The empirical data for this article were derived from in-depth case study research

conducted by one of the authors. The argument for using case study research is well established within organization studies (Child & Smith, 1987; Pettigrew, 1973, 1985; Starkey & McKinlay, 1993) and within the social sciences more generally (Yin, 1994). The particular strength of the method is that it allows the construction of a rich narrative of the unfolding of events in a single organization. This is supported by Huberman and Miles (1994: 434), who argue that 'plots still unfold over time and must be understood that way at the case level'.

The research featured in-depth interviews, observation of company meetings and the use of company documents. A feature of the research was that the access was both formal and informal, and involved talking to a range of staff from the chief executive through to a cadre of meter readers. Tsoukas (1989) argued that we need to go beyond the data themselves in order to identify 'generative mechanisms' through conceptualization. Similarly, Van de Ven (1992) advocates that we need to understand the logic behind observed temporal progressions. Langley (1999: 706) describes a 'narrative' and 'grounded theory' as very high in accuracy but very low in simplicity and generality. Kirk and Millard (1986: 42) have suggested that, in general, the reliability of a qualitative data set has not generally been held up to scrutiny. Resonant with this critique is Eisenhardt's (1989a, 1989b) call for the need for greater attention to be paid to the verisimilitude of case studies, advocating the production of 'data displays'. In accordance with Eisenhardt's position, it is necessary to be more specific about our data sources. This is shown in Table 1.

For the purposes of this article, use was made of 75 interviews with senior management and professional engineers; the interviews were unstructured (Kvale, 1997). A feature of this research was that it addressed the dynamics of organizational change as *they happened*. Following Langley (1999: 692) 'Process research is concerned with understanding how things evolve over time and why they evolve in this way . . ., and process data therefore consist largely of stories about what happened and who did what when – that is, events, activities, and choices ordered over time.' Theory derives from data in ways different from the 'variance theory' approach, as process research is predicated upon events rather than variables. Indeed, our own analysis links a sequence of events to an outcome, a typical scenario for a process study. Theory building is incremental, however, this constrains rather than eliminates selectiveness. The choice of interview quotes, the choice of extracts (Table 2), the merging of extracts with theoretical concepts (Table 3) is still selective, but, we believe, *by inserting these steps into the process*, we can make a more analytically and methodologically rigorous case. We will return to this issue in the conclusions.

Table 1 Data display of the study of CoastElectric

Temporal period	Event/ description	Data used to study the event
Nationalization	The creation of CoastElectric	Secondary data on the Attlee government
Pre-privatization	Description of CoastElectric as engineer dominated	Interviews with engineers that had been employed by CoastElectric since prior to 1985 Organizational charts from pre-1990 Internal personnel documents: Describing the role of engineers
Privatization 1990–91	CoastElectric becoming largely owned by institutional shareholders	Data from the investor relations department at CoastElectric
1990–onwards	Characteristics of the regulator	Secondary data from the regulator itself Media reports on the role of the regulator Interviews with managers within regulatory affairs in CoastElectric
1992	The need for change	Interviews with senior management, including the director of corporate development
1992–95	The TQM programme	Regular interviews with Peter Marsh, the TQM manager Attendance at two TQM training events Attendance of a union meeting called to discuss TQM Attendance of two quality champion meetings Interviews with engineers, managers and industrial staff into their experiences of TQM Internal company reports into the performance of TQM
1994	The job redesign proposals	Company documents outlining the proposals Attendance of presentations by Watkins and Peters Interviews with senior management Interviews with trade union representatives Interviews with engineers Access to trade union documents relating to job redesign Access to HRM documents on the job competency model Interviews with senior HRM managers
1996	The implementation of job redesign	Interviews with senior managers Interviews with newly created team and distribution managers

The rationale behind the choice of CoastElectric as a research site was the confluence of both theoretical and practical considerations. With regard to the former, CoastElectric was of particular interest as it was one of the smaller regional electricity companies (of 12), and as such was held, according to industry logic, to be under greater pressure to change. This was as a consequence of the organization being more vulnerable to a predatory takeover. The practical rationale for using CoastElectric was that they were interested in supporting management research. As such, they afforded access of an unrivalled quality to the senior executives within the organization. This research was mirrored by the development of informal links with other occupational links within the organization. These links, developed through attending training courses and company presentations, were a rich source of data, especially as they represented alternative views to that of management.

The high quality of access that was granted for this research was predicated on the preservation of the confidentiality of both the organization and the actors within it. For this reason, the pseudonym CoastElectric was employed. Following the data collection, the case of CoastElectric was written into a narrative. This narrative was then discussed with members of the organization, to establish whether they recognized the events that were recorded and various positions taken on such events. The narrative was independently analysed, by both authors, as a part of the process of writing this article. As such, the authors argue that every attempt was made to ensure the empirical accuracy and analytical validity of the article.

Given the nature of this research it would be problematic to make grand claims as to its broader applicability and in that sense it is important to be reflexive about the claims on truth that are being made for the account in this article. That said, subsequent feedback of the ideas to practitioners highlighted that the experience had been mirrored in a variety of other utility contexts, to the point that one employee of another utility was claiming in a most forceful manner that the study was based on his organization! Any such claims are, however, secondary to our interest in using empirical data to explore analytical and theoretical issues.

As we deal with a narrative that unfolds over time, it is useful to identify the key protagonists through the use of pseudonyms. Therefore, we illustrate the background of the modernizers chronicled in the study.

Dramatis personae

Barry Reed (Chief Executive). Reed had spent his entire career in the UK electricity supply industry. He had held senior positions in the industry before joining CoastElectric in the run up to the privatization. Reed was an engineer by profession.

Peter Marsh (TQM Manager). Marsh trained as a professional engineer with CoastElectric and spent his entire career in the organization. In the 1970s Marsh moved out of operational engineering, and took up a succession of posts in the marketing of CoastElectric's energy products. In 1992, he was appointed as TQM manager, as he was held to be an employee who 'operated in a TQM fashion'.

Kevin Watkins (Network Services Manager). Watkins trained as a professional engineer with CoastElectric. He obtained a first class degree in engineering and, within CoastElectric, was widely regarded as one of the leading engineers of his generation. Watkins held a number of senior engineering posts, spent a time in charge of technical training, before becoming one of the two most senior engineers within the organization. Throughout his time in the organization, he was renowned as a deep thinker, and known as an avid reader of management books. He held a MBA from a prestigious UK business school and harboured ambitions of writing a book on managing change.

Bob Peters (Network Services Manager). Peters trained as a professional engineer with CoastElectric. He spent his entire career within the organization, rising to become one of the two most senior engineers in the organization. He was cast as the unlikely modernizer within the organization, in that, it was a great surprise to many that he was involved in designing 'job redesign'.

Richard Preston (Network Services Manager). Preston had trained as an engineer within CoastElectric. His entire career had been spent within the organization. Preston was appointed as a Network Services Manager in 1995. It was regarded as a reward for his role in restructuring a subsidiary. In many respects, his promotion was regarded with some surprise, as he had neither worked at Head Office at any point in his career, nor was he known to be particularly sympathetic to TQM and job redesign.

CoastElectric as a professional engineering organization

CoastElectric was founded in 1948, its formation was part of the wave of nationalization that was executed by the Attlee government in their post-war programme of social democratic reform. CoastElectric itself was formed from myriad small-scale municipal and private sector companies in the region. It was one of 12 regional electricity boards.

In view of our earlier discussion, we use the archetype framework to structure our narrative. Consequently, we examine: (i) the requirements of the organization, (ii) the dominant orientation, (iii) the language of organization, (iv) the role of training in the organization, and (v) the levels of

professional autonomy in the organization. Ignoring any one of these dimensions would render as incomplete the characterization of the organization. We make the argument that CoastElectric was best understood as being characterized as a professional engineering archetype. The section below is an application of the archetype framework to CoastElectric.

Requirements of the organization

The requirements of CoastElectric were very clear: the raison d'être of the organization was to create and maintain the electricity distribution network The former requirement can, in part, explain the 1948 nationalization of the electricity supply industry, which, in contrast to, for example, the creation of the National Health Service, was wholly uncontroversial. Throughout its history as a nationalized organization, from 1948 to 1990, the creation and maintenance of the electricity distribution network were the key objectives of the organization. These objectives placed technical requirements to the fore, in contrast, financial expectations were relatively modest, with returns set at 6 per cent on capital employed.

The dominant orientation

There was a broad consensus that the only plausible means of creating the necessary electricity distribution network was through state intervention. Such thinking was of course emblematic of the dominant discourse of the day, grounded in Fabianism, which highlighted the efficacy of state planning and state-employed experts. Therefore, CoastElectric, along with the other UK electricity boards, was run by professional engineers. The technical rationale underpinning this statement is that quite simply to run an electricity board it was taken as axiomatic that electrical engineers were required in senior management. This, in the context of the UK, was far from typical for British engineers (Smith & Whalley, 1995). The physical challenge of constructing an electricity distribution network combined with the huge expansion of demand for electricity (demand doubled every seven years during the period 1948–1970) were factors that were to legitimate further the apparent *'naturalness'* of the electrical engineers' hegemony. All of the senior management *positions* were filled by professional engineers; in fact in the history of the organization only one senior manager had been a non-engineer. For instance, in the dramatis personae section above, all of the key actors identified were professional engineers. In 1990, Peter Marsh, Bob Peters, Barry Reed and Kevin Watkins were all senior managers, whereas Richard Preston was a mid-ranking engineer. It must of course be recognized that the

exogenous performance measures that CoastElectric were subjected to and objectified by were such that they reinforced the engineers' dominance, as financial expectations were relatively modest. We would suggest, therefore, that CoastElectric was remarkable for its hermetic qualities: the organization was an engineering organization that experienced very little engagement with the broader social world, especially the world of management thought. The point being that the absence of external performance criteria created the conditions that allowed the organization's orientation to be dominated by engineering concerns.

The language of the organization

Engineering *language* dominated the organization: management jobs were described solely in engineering terms. The *term* 'engineer' was used exclusively for personnel that were associate (*and above*) members of the Institute of Electrical Engineering. This in the context of the UK is significant as the term engineer is used very loosely and can range from describing a PhD-trained engineer through to someone responsible for changing the toner on a photocopier. In CoastElectric the term was carefully policed and used only to describe 'qualified' engineers.

The role of training in the organization

In terms of producing engineers, CoastElectric trained more engineers than they required. The corollary of this was that a post-qualification competition for jobs ensued. This phenomenon was something that was to add to the mystique of the engineer, as being special, within the organization. Once in post, engineers received a good deal of 'continuing professional development' in the form of short courses. Such training, however, focused virtually exclusively on technical and safety issues.

The levels of professional autonomy in the organization

Professional engineers within CoastElectric, although part of a bureaucracy, in relation to their engineering tasks enjoyed a remarkable amount of personal discretion over engineering tasks (i.e. *task autonomy*), high *task significance*, and high *discretion*. For instance, in a relatively small town in CoastElectric's area it is possible to find neighbouring areas that have a wholly different electricity network design. This was the result of different engineers exercising their respective judgements as to what the most appropriate design should be. The sharp distinctions between engineer and

non-engineer within the organization demonstrate that, although there was a functional rationale for the dominance of engineering, the professional engineers were hegemonic in the sense that they amounted to a regime of power: that is, it elevated the concerns and interests of engineers over other groups. Immanent to this process was the dominance of engineering as being recognized as the 'natural order of things'. Drawing on Abbott's (1988) seminal contribution it can be seen that the cadre of engineers in CoastElectric enjoyed 'full professional jurisdiction' over their work, this being mandated to them by the state, and were therefore in a position to help fully enforce safety, maintenance and technical concerns. It is well established within the literature that in regulated environments, especially where aspects of health and safety are significant, professional groups often occupy powerful positions within organizations. The status of professional groups, however, is inextricably bound up with the *power* with which normative institutional expectations are enforced (Powell, 1985). Before, the cadre of professional engineers had been in a legislative (cf. Bauman, 1987) position, whereby the engineers defined the requirements of the organization, invariably framed in terms of engineering need.

In this section, we have demonstrated why, drawing on archetype theory, CoastElectric could plausibly be described as a professional engineering organization. Furthermore, we have unpacked the elite position that engineers occupied within CoastElectric. Our discussion that follows draws extensively on this framework.

The process of archetype transition

In 1990, CoastElectric was privatized. This was a highly significant event in the organization's history. With privatization came expectations that CoastElectric would change. In the section that follows, using the archetype framework, we introduce and analyse the changes that took place in the organization.

Requirements of the organization

The privatization of CoastElectric led to the establishment of new objectives for the organization. In particular, they aimed at enjoying good relations with the financial community and the newly established industry regulator. The requirements of the organization in terms of financial performance and customer service were being set outwith of CoastElectric. This marked a major sea change for the organization, one that was exacerbated by the poor

regard in which the newly privatized utilities were generally held by the financial community. This reputation was a consequence of the generally negative views that the private sector reserved for the public sector. Equally, the City cast doubt on the managerial abilities of the senior executives within the electricity companies: this was a consequence of the managers having never 'proved' themselves in the corporate world. Not only did CoastElectric want to deliver excellent financial results, but the organization also wanted to be regarded as a 'leading' company.

The dominant orientation

In 1992, CoastElectric embarked upon a TQM programme, which was hugely significant for the organization, as it signalled the genesis of the marginalization of engineering values in the organization. In symbolic terms it marked the first major managerialist initiative ever embarked upon by engineering-dominated CoastElectric. The commitment made by CoastElectric to TQM was substantial, it was well funded and the initiative was the personal project of Barry Reed, the chief executive. A senior executive, Peter Marsh, was appointed internally to act as TQM projects manager; he was to report directly to the chief executive. One of the consequences of TQM within CoastElectric was that it served to act as a device that was to open up a fissure within the organization between those that were pro- and those that were anti-TQM, respectively. This was engendered through the infrastructure that was established to 'drive the TQM message'; it consisted of a quality council at a senior level, regional quality boards and quality champions at the operational level. TQM, as an initiative, with its master concepts of empowerment, customer service and leadership, envisaged a very different future for CoastElectric than did the pre-existing engineering organization. The senior executives' embrace of managerialist thinking marked a significant change in the dominant orientation of CoastElectric.

The results of the TQM initiative were relatively modest and in early 1994 the two regional engineering managers, Kevin Watkins and Bob Peters, put new proposals forward for consideration by the board of directors. The proposals, which were termed *'job redesign'*, constituted a major change in thinking about the mode of organization in the engineering business. The proposals consisted of flattening the organizational structure through semi-autonomous team working. Kevin Watkins, the other chief architect of job redesign, explained how the concept had come about:

> We needed to understand teamworking more fully, by talking to people

who had done it, and by reading about it. *We spoke to Rolls Royce, Xerox and the Automobile Association'.*[1]

The corollary of the proposals were that through a combination of engineering redundancies and a significant increase in the administrative function of those engineers taking up team and distributive manager posts, there would be a shortfall of staff able to carry out the necessary engineering tasks. The progenitors of *'job redesign'* proposed to outflank this problem through *'rule based engineering'*, a procedure whereby non-engineers would carry out engineering tasks by following a step-by-step guide. The instructions in the guide were produced by analysing and then codifying engineering repertoires in order to enable what Watkins and Peters termed a *'total task, lowest level approach'*. The idea for this had come from collaboration with the Automobile Association, who employed similar techniques in their '*Breakdown Recovery Service'.*

The 'managerialist modernizers' within CoastElectric viewed the future of the organization in terms of applying lessons and practices 'from leading companies' as being the route to corporate success. Legitimacy was no longer derived from conformance with engineering standards, but rather from the application of 'best practices'. The new managerialist legitimation was partially derived from CoastElectric discussing their plans with self-styled 'world class' organizations. In addition, external management consultants were utilized extensively in order to support the process of the importation of 'best practices'.

Engineers' concerns over rule-based engineering were dismissed as parochial and anachronistic by the modernizers among senior management were for instance, Peter Marsh, the TQM manager argued:

> Currently we have senior authorised staff (engineers) to check work. We don't need these checks as a worker is not going to work on a live line as it would kill him. He doesn't need an engineer to tell him that. *It is against TQM principles, people need to be empowered.*

Moreover, the experiences of the Automobile Association, and other organizations, were cited as both an inspiration and a legitimation of the rule-based engineering proposal by the modernizers within CoastElectric:

> If this rule-based system works for *the AA* with their checklist then it can work for CoastElectric.

The AA is, of course, a somewhat arbitrary point of reference and comparison.

It was the role of rhetoric (see below) to make it sound plausible and *non-arbitrary*.

New management positions filled by

In the past, the route to senior management within the organization was restricted to those that were professional engineers. Following privatization, a number of 'executives' and senior managers were hired in from the private sector. In addition to this, many managers within the organization were encouraged to think of themselves as executives; significant numbers were to enrol on management study programmes such as MBAs. Increasingly, the group of modernizers were regarding their allegiance to managerialism rather than engineering. Kevin Watkins, for instance, stated 'I used to be an engineer but now I am an executive'. This change in construction of identity may go some way to help explain why it was that the very senior managers promulgating the destruction of professional engineering were in fact engineers themselves. An alternative, perhaps complementary, view could be characterized as the 'Stockholm syndrome' (Burrell, 1997), whereby the executives come to share the view of consultants, government, analysts, etc. that the organization, dominated by professional engineers, constitutes an anachronism.

Outside the confines of senior management there were also significant changes in the composition of the management. As we have seen, team-working was to form a central pillar of '*job redesign*' and it was proposed that teams of around 15 people would carry out the majority of tasks for a particular geographical area. Therefore, the team would be led by a team manager (one of 77) who in turn reported to a distribution manager (one of 24). It was fully expected that the team manager positions would, in the main, be filled by engineers, but, and highly significantly, it was not a pre-requisite. Thus, for the first time in the organization's history, engineering credentials were no longer an obligatory requirement for the appointment to a management position. A training and development manager justified this:

> In the past we had people that were technically excellent, now we need excellent leaders – we don't need the technical skills.

The language of the organization

With the embrace of TQM, a new lexicon entered CoastElectric. Terms such as brainstorming, processes, customers, leaders and empowerment became

commonplace within the organization. The establishment of the quality structure, explained above, played an important role in the changing language within the organization. The quality infrastructure was to function, in effect, as a 'shadow' organization: for instance, relatively junior 'quality champions' would report to Marsh, the TQM projects manager, as to whether managers in their region were 'supporters' or 'blockages' of TQM. To be labelled a '*blockage*' was to be viewed as an anachronism, that is part of 'Old CoastElectric'. This labelling process was but one manifestation of the growing tensions between those for and against TQM.

Indeed, the 'team manager' and 'distribution manager' posts were partially an exercise of re-*labelling* – but language and labels are important as they shape social reality. The expectations of team managers and distribution managers were outlined in the 'job competency model', something that was designed by the 'modernizers' within the HRM department. Thus, rhetoric was employed in order to define technical skills as less crucial for achieving organizational objectives, than the usage of teamworking or TQM. The 'job competency model', within the context of CoastElectric, is remarkable for its silence on engineers, and thus implicitly de-valuing their contribution to the strategic objectives of the company.

The role of training in the organization

The TQM programme heralded the first major non-technical training initiative ever to be run in the organization. The training was run by 'quality champions' and consultants. The emphasis on management training extended to individual managers pursuing MBAs and for cohorts of managers to attend specialist executive courses run in British business schools. Whereas management training and development became increasingly subject to certification, technical training in contrast became more the preserve of workplace assimilation. For instance, 'job redesign' aimed to reduce numbers by 20–25 per cent over a five-year period, it was anticipated that part of this reduction would take place straight away, that is through early retirements, whereas the rest would take place gradually over the five years. The 'job redesign' blueprint anticipated that engineers, who were not taking up team or distribution manager positions, would work in a training capacity, imparting their skills to team members through workplace assimilation (cf. Abbott, 1988). (Partially informal) knowledge transfer was thus perceived as a hopeful mechanism in order to prevent the destruction of expertise (cf. Mueller & Dyerson, 1999).

Levels of professional autonomy in the organization

TQM provoked the questioning of professional engineers within CoastElectric. The concept of empowerment combined with a focus on viewing the organization as a set of processes served to problematize many of the features of the engineering professions' dominant position. The move to 'job redesign' deepened the scope and significance of this challenge to professional autonomy. Although at a general level, the impact of teamworking on the skill level can vary widely (Mueller et al., 2000) – in our particular case, the ramifications were profound as teamworking raised the spectre of a reduction in the task autonomy, skill level and task significance enjoyed by most *engineers*.

> *Professional engineering skill is being turned into a rule-based technique.* This is like the A.A. experience . . . where the recovery man comes and basically has a checklist. Is the battery flat? Is it the spark-plugs? If there is a real problem he loads the car up and takes it away. *We can deskill what was done by clever people.*

This was a view widely expounded among senior management, in this vein Kevin Watkins maintained that 'CoastElectric didn't need engineers any more, in the way we once did'. This is a change in the way that tasks were described and legitimated, partly as an intended result of work redesign aiming at task de-composition and re-composition. Not surprisingly, most of the engineers interviewed felt that '*rule-based engineering*' constituted a threat to professional engineering within CoastElectric. Most engineers acknowledged that, at least in the short-term, this policy would have considerable cost savings; serious concerns were, however, expressed about the implications for engineering standards. For instance, one engineer argued that,

> We all feel that we are no longer seen as being important. Operational engineers believe that they are important but the company doesn't think that. . . . They are retiring experienced engineers because they are too expensive to keep. *The trend will continue to deskill engineers.*

The managerialist agenda was therefore one that amounted to the decomposition of engineering jobs. This is something that was highly significant in terms of how it affected the dominant orientation of the organization by removing the centrality of engineering. Many engineers held that it was non-rational as it served to *destroy expertise*. One senior engineer denied the

ceremonial character of engineering work behaviour, and referred instead to its rational justification in safety terms:

> The implications for foremen to do a lot of the engineers' work is that there is a lot of potential for them to cut corners, I think it is inherent in the team structure. I think this is a sad state of affairs. It is always said that safety is paramount but *safety costs time and money*.

In contrast, management modernizers imply that engineering safety procedures have largely ceremonial character. The modernizers' view was dismissed by senior engineers, one of whom specifically emphasized the role of engineering expertise:

> Only so many rules can be written, *eventually engineering judgements based on technical knowledge need to be made. These can only be made by engineers . . .* In other words you need to know why as well as how. Non-engineers tend not to know the issues that are important in engineering matters, let alone being able to make judgements.

Another senior engineer also spoke of his concern about what he perceived as a destruction of expertise in the company:

> *There are so many inexperienced people expected to do jobs at all levels. These people often do not know how much they don't know . . .*

Problematizing the new archetype: The perceived ritualization of modernizing managerialism

Under the stewardship of Reed, as has been outlined above, the modernizers gained the ascendancy within the organization; in so doing they were locked into an antagonistic relationship with the cadre of professional engineers. This was the major clash: modernizer versus engineer. The modernizers were attached to the idea that by adhering to particular 'behaviours' and by utilizing certain 'tools and techniques' the result would be improved organizational performance. There was an exacting articulation of what was considered to be 'good' managerial practice in newly privatized companies. The modernists attempted to refashion the organization by being committed to private sector 'gimmicks' with substantial symbolic value, especially league tables and targets.

Modernizing managerialism was therefore embraced by the organization and was to become pivotal in the identities of many modernizers. The

modernizing managerialist precepts of process efficiency, modernization and customer satisfaction were to prove irresistible to CoastElectric. It would be mistaken, however, to bring the narrative to a close at this juncture. We have seen the way in which the critique of the modernizers from the vantage point of professional engineers was founded upon technological and safety concerns. The arguments of the modernizers were to prevail and 'job redesign' was implemented. Yet, what ensued was not the simple displacement of one archetype by another. Instead, the modernizing managerialists were themselves to become subjected to critique. The critique came from a group of managers – formerly engineers – who accepted the need for change but who questioned the ability of the modernizing managerialists to deliver organizational change. The most vocal critic of the modernizing managerialists was Richard Preston, a senior manager. The source of the critique was that ceremonies had begun to replace *real action*:

> Basically it was a mush, no action just talking about things. *There were many layers and nothing got done.* I've got an expression I use, J.F.D.I. – 'Just fucking do it'.

This expresses critique of ritualistic management *by management*. Some managers demonstrated far greater concern with end results, *being unconcerned how they were achieved*, and were critical of excessive ceremony. For instance, Preston explained that he had three key objectives, namely to: (i) reduce customer minutes lost, (ii) cost reduction, (iii) reduce OFFER complaints. The action bias was pronounced, particularly when compared with the perceived ceremonial procrastination of the modernists. This initially peripheral discourse, which could be seen as a trivialization of the trivial (such as Peters & Waterman, 1982), gradually gained in strength and began to represent a serious challenge to the dominant discourse.

Furthermore, the contest between Watkins and Preston was reinforced through the circumstance of geography. Although CoastElectric was a relatively small regional electricity company in terms of employee numbers and capital employed, it was spread over a wide geographical area. CoastElectric accommodated this by having two regions, east and west respectively. Watkins was in charge in the east region, whereas Preston presided over the west. This spatial distinction if anything exacerbated the differences between the two managers. For instance, a head office human resources manager commented:

> Watkins and Preston are in competition with each other. They both want to outdo each other. Each thinks that they are right and that they

will win . . . If you go to the eastern region then to the western region *it is like being in two separate companies*.

The difference between east and west was particularly stark in terms of the respective approach to organizational change adopted by each of the managers. This was to be witnessed in the approach to the implementation of 'job redesign'. Watkins, the chief progenitor of the project, was now having to implement it in the context of people leaving the organization and a foreshortened timetable. Despite these considerable constraints much of his original plan was implemented in his region: young distribution managers were matched with older, more experienced distribution managers; there was extensive training and an emphasis on building the 'right culture' for a team-based organization. In contrast to the approach of Watkins, Preston adopted an action-biased strategy of implementation, which he referred to as the 'Big Bang' approach:

> I started on the first of January but basically *I was brought in to stop the flying in the clouds that was going on*. . . .To start doing something and to stop all the crap. . . I am set specific goals and they are fairly stretching but I think that they are achievable. . . job redesign was stuck in a theoretical hole, and my job was to drag it out.

Whilst modernizing managers were critiquing the 'unnecessary' rituals of engineers, they themselves seemed to start to become *victims of ritualization*:

> I think the problem we had with TQM was we were more concerned at being able to demonstrate a result, that we built a bureaucracy on top of it, paper, forms, targets, and numbers of process improvements, and all sorts of things. And I think that made it something that *most people paid lip service to it* as opposed to let's find something that can be done as part of our normal business. They wanted a target and it was very much a *competition between senior managers as to how they looked in the league* that went up to Barry Reed at the time, and how they were improving TQM.

Indeed, the critique of ritualism implied that the modernist ideology was shrouded in a 'cloak' of rationality, yet its practices were becoming rituals that were increasingly being regarded as not being any more rational than the safety rituals of engineers.

Attempted archetype transition can be portrayed, admittedly in a simplified format, in Table 3. In order to increase transparency in the way

our data have helped us to construct Table 3, we have listed the italicized sections of used quotes in Table 2 and refer to these in Table 3.

What then is our account of the third column, the internal critique of the modernizers and, more generally, what is the relationship, or even interaction, between the columns? What seems to be necessary is an understanding of the exact strategies (Oliver, 1991) or scripts (Barley & Tolbert, 1997) employed in dealing with a perceived divergence between rhetoric and actual practice. Suchman (1995), building on an earlier argument made by Meyer and Rowan (1977) identifies three so-called 'segregation strategies', which are open to agents in such scenarios: '(a) exalting ceremony while ignoring performance, (b) displaying cynicism and openly acknowledging that entrenched rituals serve no purpose, and (c) promising reform, thereby segregating today's reality from tomorrow's ideal' (Suchman, 1995: 590). We see this as a useful starting point, but it is no more than that. One of the main problems seems to be an *assumption that performance-driven behaviour is not ritualistic* (*or perceived as ritualistic*) – an assumption that we think is problematic given the insights from the literature on management rhetoric and management fashion (e.g. Abrahamson, 1996). We would suggest, therefore, that a fourth category along the lines of (d) 'ritualistic pursuit of performance standards' is required. In summary, modernizing managerialists represented the engineers as belonging to category (a). In turn, the modernizing

Table 2   Extracts from quotes

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[1] We spoke to Rolls Royce, Xerox and the Automobile Association
[2] It is against TQM principles, people need to be empowered
[3] . . . the AA . . .
[4] In the past we had people that were technically excellent, now we need excellent leaders
[5] 'blockage'
[6] Professional engineering skill is being turned into a rule-based technique . . . We can deskill what was done by clever people
[7] The trend will continue to deskill engineers
[8] safety costs time and money
[9] eventually engineering judgements based on technical knowledge need to be made. These can only be made by engineers
[10] There are so many inexperienced people expected to do jobs at all levels. These people often do not know how much they don't know
[11] There were many layers and nothing got done
[12] it is like being in two separate companies
[13] I was brought in to stop the flying in the clouds that was going on
[14] most people paid lip service to it
[15] competition between senior managers as to how they looked in the league [table]

Table 3 A schematic representation of archetype transition at CoastElectric

	Professional engineering archetype	*Managerial modernizers archetype*	*Critique of modernizers by managers*
Requirements of organization legislated by	professional group (engineers)	modernizers (managers)	
Dominant orientation	normative compliance [9] de-skilling as a threat [6,7] technical excellence [4] engineering need safety [8, 9, 10] 'maintaining the network'	mimetic learning [1, 3] TQM [2], empowerment [2] financial return changing the culture 'the need to change' [4] 'blockage' [5]	[11, 12, 13, 14, 15]
Management positions filled by	professional engineers	former professional engineers describing themselves as managers incoming managers from the private sector: 'excellent leaders' [4]	
Language	dominated by engineering terms	customer service partnership quality improvement inevitability of change	
Role of training	technical	management training with certification. Technical training through informal transfer of skill	
Professional autonomy	full jurisdiction being seen as important [4]	attempt to encode and remove professional autonomy [1,3,6]	
Basis of critique of the 'new hegemony' (i.e. the managerialist modernizers)	engineering values that have become 'sedimented'		rituals perceived in modernizers' behaviour

managerialists were regarded as belonging to category (d) by more action-oriented managers. REFORMISM is an appropriate label for understanding the talk and behaviour of the emerging, but as yet powerless, group of modernizing managers operating within the confines of the professional archetype. CYNICISM expresses the dissatisfaction in the organization

whether it arises from the engineering group who are frustrated at the sidelining of dominant values such as health, safety and supply reliability; or from a group of managers who were frustrated at the intensity of management rhetoric, not matched by action, and the bureaucracy associated with fashionable management techniques (such as TQM).

Summary, theoretical implications and research agenda

Summary

Broadly speaking, this article has dealt with a transition process from a professional engineering archetype to a modernizing managerialist archetype. This took place in the context of the substantially changing utility sector characterized by privatization, the introduction of efficiency targets, the introduction of a regulatory system, the prospect of mergers and predatory takeovers. Such pressures were of course a 'world wide discourse' that was applicable to a broad range of organizations. The developments in the sector played a significant role in generating pressure for organizational change. The high-flying rhetoric of modernizing managerialists therefore needs to be seen in the context of institutional templates, which carried substantial (mimetic) legitimacy, in particular programmes such as total quality management, teamworking and job redesign. They provided a basis to displace entrenched engineering rituals, and establish a new 'dominant rhetoric' (Lawrence et al., 2001: 627). One reading ascribes such projects as striving towards objectified and technocratic organizational improvements – the modernizers' rhetoric. An alternative reading is one that problematizes such an understanding by instead drawing attention to the largely ceremonial and rhetoric intensive nature of modernizing managerialism – the critics' rhetoric. A third perspective is provided by engineers who were fighting a largely rearguard action, as professional expectations emphasizing engineering safety were gradually losing force. Nevertheless, the value system of engineers emphasizing safety and supply reliability remained in sedimented form, even after the archetype transition.

   Furthermore, the article demonstrates that the managerialist archetype contains considerable amounts of internal complexity, so that talk of a single, senior management value system would be an oversimplification. This article has identified the way in which the newly emergent managerialist archetype, in the view of some (senior) managers at least, displayed ritualistic features fairly early on in its implementation. The rhetoric intensive practice of talking 'spin' and engaging in elaborate rituals may well, whether in political or

organizational life, lead to critical, and sometimes cynical responses. In this article, we have highlighted the way in which the scripts of ceremonialism, reformism and cynicism have played out among managerial and professional groups in the organization.

Engaging critically with the literature

Was it useful to draw on archetype, institutional and professionalism literatures? It is useful to discuss this question by first clarifying where, we believe, fruitful avenues for future research lie.

We have analysed the critique emanating from the engineering value system that continued to exist in a sedimented form within CoastElectric. It is fruitful to pursue this line of inquiry in the context of the debate about status struggles, professionalization efforts and challenges faced by professions (e.g. Lounsbury, 2002: 264). New 'professions', in our case ex-engineers reconstituted as managers, play an important role in representing and 'promoting' new belief systems (DiMaggio, 1991; Lounsbury, 2002). In their research on architectural practices, Pinnington and Morris (2002) found that elements of the professional partnership archetype (importance of consensus, tolerance of diverse objectives) persisted in these firms, even after transition to a new, managerial, archetype. But it is also important to pursue the cross-national line of inquiry: setting professional archetypes within a broader societal context can explain varying degrees of engineering's success/failure to establish an effectively guarded jurisdictional territory (building on Meiksins & Smith, 1996a, 1996b). Under what conditions, therefore, can established territories be threatened with change?

In CoastElectric, at some point disappointment with conformity to institutionalized recipes arose, and gave rise to an internal critique directed primarily against the modernizers. The ensuing critique, which was inherently critical of 'theory', offered, in its place, a modus operandi that was very much more down-to-earth: it was an approach that concentrated on the 'doing' rather than any other concern. An interesting theoretical sideline, that has to remain unexplored in this article, is the parallel with '*theoretical*' and '*practical*' *rationality* as analysed by Townley (2002: 164–5). A further line of theoretical development would be along the following lines: whereas other studies have analysed the features of *co-evolution* between changing interpretive schemes on the one hand, changing practices on the other (e.g. Haveman & Rao, 1997), we found, if anything, *lack of* such co-evolution. Indeed, given the reflexivity of human behaviour, this deficiency was observed not only by us, but also by the actors themselves: thus, the new managerialist archetype was *challenged* by internal critics, who noted rhetoric galloping far

ahead of 'reality' – even the board was happy to watch this internal critique taking place. This competition was conducted in the form of a contest between interpretive schemes and their respective utility for putting the organization on what was constructed as constituting a sounder competitive footing, amounting to additional 'resistance' to institutionalized packages (Townley, 2002: 176). The more introspective, action-biased managers were partly taking their starting point from the lack of implementation of 'talk'. This stemmed in part from the modernizers' inclination to sell themselves as 'facilitator-magicians', which 'may inspire false confidence among company participants, a confidence that is vulnerable to subsequent disappointment as change proves difficult' (Edmondson, 1996: 582). Thus, the internal critique by sceptical management perceived safety rituals as becoming replaced by managerial rituals, with a concomitant (perhaps primarily perceived) lack of getting the actual practice sorted out. Indeed, a further theoretical lead that could be explored in future research is Denis et al.'s (2001: 833) point about the shattering of a leadership constellation through internal rivalry, which they analyse as 'strategic uncoupling'.

Research implications and research agenda

On the basis of this case study, our claims on generalizability must necessarily be modest. The prime contribution of this article, namely, to highlight the dynamics between ritual, sedimentation and internal critique within the organization change process, has, we believe, a reference that extends far beyond the confines of our case study organization. Further research is needed in order to attempt to refine and develop the analytic insights presented in this article. To our mind this research would fall under two broad methodologies: (i) archive-based business history, and, (ii) case study ethnography. The latter would take the form of the study presented in this article. When the case study of CoastElectric was researched events were taking place in 'real time'. With the passage of time, it would now be possible to reconstruct a narrative which could then be subjected to theory-guided analysis. This method, while lacking in the ability to capture the immediate richness – the gossip, the quarrels and so forth – associated with ethnography, would put in place an account that would incorporate a full set of corporate documents, reports and memoranda.

Although we would envisage further studies examining other regional electricity companies, similar to CoastElectric, an empirical programme of research would extend far beyond the British Electricity Supply industry. Organizations in the public sector, the privatized sector and 'professional firms' would all be obvious candidates for such research. The longitudinal

study of the accounting profession (Greenwood et al., 2002), the medical profession (Denis et al., 2001) and the profession of the architect are examples here (Pinnington & Morris, 2002). In particular, it is interesting to note the relative experiences of different professions as they engage with managerialism. The rise of managerialism, and the challenges that it poses for professional forms of organization, is a global phenomenon; the corollary of which is that research should necessarily engage with the experience within different societies.

Notes

1.   Italicized sections are used as extracts in Table 2.

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