Foucault, Governmentality, Strategy

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Introduction

The idea of ‘strategy’ has a peculiar place in Michel Foucault’s work. On the one hand, he rarely discussed strategy directly, although it was an important element of his work, especially through the 1970s. On the other hand, Foucault’s encounter with that arch political strategist, Machiavelli, represented a shift towards governmentality, an infinitely more complex and open-ended notion of power than he had used before. Foucault was far from the first to turn to Machiavelli as a founding father of strategic thinking, about power and action rather than ethical legitimacy. We trace this development in Foucault’s thinking, and the specific place his changing conception of strategy played. Like Marx, Foucault was indifferent to the motivation or the moral or technical adequacy – or otherwise – of rulers, whether that be a class, a political party or profession. Foucault asked how power was exercised and what were its effects, not why. Foucault offered a series of cultural economies of rule rather than a political economy of capitalism. For Foucault, Marxist and liberal interpretations of historical processes already contained their answers before empirical analysis began. Each social domain or institution had its own specificity, dynamics and history, irreducible to a single root cause, whether economic or political. We then turn to Tom Peters as a key figure in the emergence of new management thinking in the last three decades. Peters represents someone who – initially - spoke to power directly but who increasingly aimed his message about leadership, organisational restructuring and empowerment to an ever-wider audience. If Peters initially spoke strategy to strategists, then over the two decades when his popularity was at its height, he spoke to a constituency of subaltern strategists. We examine the development of Peters’ thinking and his presentation style not to understand his popularity but to consider what this meant in terms of power, population and strategy. Following Foucault, classic corporate strategy spoke – like Machiavelli – to elites and how to interpret and dominate their environment. Peters spoke to the multitude, not to the few; and of how to transform the experience of organised working lives, an objective far beyond competitive advantage.

Governmentality and Strategy

‘How to govern oneself, how to be governed, how to govern others, by whom the people will accept being governed, how to become the best possible governor’.
(Foucault, 1991a: 4)

Foucault wrote little about strategy, at least directly. Yet strategy was central to Foucault’s understanding of power, especially in the last decade of his life (Foucault 1979: 102). Strategy remained a difficult concept for Foucault because it came loaded with assumptions of agency, motives and interests. Foucault was uninterested in who benefited or their motivation. Strategy could not be usefully read as derived from interests, economic or
otherwise. To make strategy a central concern would be to invite humanist concerns into the very core of his research project. Power, then, is not organised by subjects, even abstract subjects such as ‘the state’ or ‘class’. It is pointless to search for the organising logic of power – or rather specific forms of power – in the motivations or interests of particular subjects. Nonetheless, Foucault consistently writes of power as having a logic. That is, the logic and meaning of power is not something that is ascribed to it from outside but saturated with calculation about means and ends, objectives and mechanisms.

In one of his few extended comments on strategy, Foucault (2008b) draws upon commonsense meanings: game theory, anticipating the next moves of an adversary, and gaining an advantage of some kind. The images he uses are no less familiar: of control, frontier, and insubordination. Foucault also discusses strategy in his tentative suggestion that politics should be regarded as a continuation of war by other means: a reversal of Clausewitz’s more famous dictum. Now, if we discount Foucault’s unusual lapse into a language that veers close to speaking of control, we can identify three principles of how Foucault thought about strategy. First, that strategy entails anticipatory rational calculation and those responses deemed consistent with initial premises. Strategy, like resistance, is a necessary element of any power relationship. Second, strategy is geared to expanding the reach of power towards some form of domination, the moment that strategy becomes unnecessary and, by definition, which power disappears since, without resistance, there can only be domination. Third, that strategy targets the relationships of power that pursue the maximisation of individual freedom compatible with the formation of different, improved, autonomous individuals. Despite the heterogeneity of power, there is a broad logic ‘organised into a more-or-less coherent and unitary strategic form’ (Foucault 1980: 142). In spite of this, there is a deep and continuing ambivalence in Foucault’s scattered comments about strategy.

For Foucault, strategy is not the preserve of the powerful nor confined to specific places and times. But this is a transitional position, that harked back to Discipline and Punish and is insufficiently supple to accommodate the open-ended complexities of governmentality (Reid 2006). Governmentality emphasised the oblique management of conduct at a distance: ‘the conduct of conduct.’ No less important, governmentality did not simply acknowledge the agency of individuals to shape themselves and their behaviours but also that this did not involve coercion or confinement. The ‘arts of government’ were not restricted to the state but found anywhere that power sought to manage conduct, however indirectly (Thompson 2003: 121). Rather than talk of control and frontiers, strategy becomes almost universal, found everywhere in which there is a relationship in which specific forms of power and knowledge are used to ‘direct, in a fairly constant manner and with reasonable certainty, the conduct of others’ (Foucault 1982: 225). Here, Foucault anticipates in the proliferation of strategy talk across all sorts of organisations, not just firms, not just executives, not just specific technical planning languages (McKinlay et al 2010: 1013). Foucault intersects with one of the doyens
of corporate strategy, Richard Rumelt (2012: 6-8), who also notes the late twentieth century explosion of strategy talk. But, where Foucault would regard this as unremarkable, Rumelt laments this development. Indeed, for Foucault, turning ‘strategy’ into an open-ended linguistic trope was necessary if the concept was to travel across entirely different types of institutions. For Rumelt, the ubiquity of strategy has devalued the term conceptually and diminished its practical utility. ‘Good’ strategy, Rumelt insists, requires analytical clarity, organisational coherence and clear practical routines. ‘Good’ strategy must be restricted to technical and managerial elites if it is to regain conceptual and practical value. The everyday working out of power entails a variety of interactions in which the individual makes choices and responds tactically. The active role required of the individual confirms the everyday experience of choice and agency as a lived reality (Dixon 2007: 289).

Perhaps one of the main reasons for Foucault’s relative silence about strategy was that he took it as axiomatic that all power relations entailed some form of strategic interplay. Power is intentional, normally associated with purposiveness and subjectivity. Here, Foucault is suggesting that subjects strategise but that power relations are far from being the result of such choices. Nor should we invest ‘power’ with a consciousness and strategic sensibility. Power, suggests Martin Kelly (2009: 48), ‘is completely subjectless – we should not fall into the trap of reinstating the subject by making power itself a subject. …Power’s intentionality lies in its strategic nature, but its strategies have no strategist. It has rationality, but it is the rationality of a machine’. In his invocation of governmentality, Foucault asks two disarmingly simple questions. First, how did neo-liberal languages and practices of all kinds of government come to be so taken-for-granted? The discourse of strategy has itself become an important vehicle for neo-liberal assumptions about autonomy, responsibility and competitiveness, applicable to firms, not-for-profit organisations and individuals. The disruptive, innovative force of markets and their restless transparency is contrasted with the inertia and opacity of bureaucracy. If such basic assumptions provided the ideological starting-point for neo-liberalism, then strategy becomes about how to increase the organisation’s use of external markets and how to insinuate proxies of market forces inside bureaucracies (McKinlay & Carter 2013). Neo-liberal strategy entails a double transformation: of bureaucracies that seek to challenge their own existence through introducing and expanding markets; and of individuals who assume ever greater responsibility for their fates, a responsibility that can only be wholly legitimate when realised through exercising market choices. The organisation’s purpose is no longer planning and direct provision of services but the brokerage of internal and external markets. Individuals are no longer citizens of colleagues but, ideally and always, consumers: a constant regression to the thin logic of homo economicus. Second, how can we best analyse all those many complex systems of rule that ‘make power work’ (Joyce 2010). Equally important, Foucault insists that we examine the specific histories of power as it was imagined, as it was articulated and its operation in all its complexities, without succumbing to explanations that trace everything back to an idealised concept whether that be religious or secular.
Governmentality has three defining principles. First, governmentality is founded on the principle that strategies offer pragmatic solutions to specific problems, however intractable. Second, strategies that are justified in terms of expanding individual freedom. This is in sharp contrast with social theory predicated upon logics of social control. Third, the particularity of such strategies is their capacity to define, monitor and assess a population in order to identify and target specific types of individuals for intervention. In turn, the impact of intervention can be evaluated, costed, and contested (Foucault 1980). Governmentality suggests that theoretical representation and practical intervention are necessarily intertwined, both discursively and practically. Governmentality was ‘that group of practices by which one can constitute, define, organise (and) instrumentalise the strategies that individuals deploy between and against each other’ (Foucault 1984: 728). Clearly, governmentality was not restricted to the state but was common to all the institutions that govern social life, including the firm. At this level of abstraction, theory verges on the tautological. Governmentality was to be the starting-point for historical and empirical research, and certainly not a search for theoretical resolution. Foucault’s intention was to redefine the object of study from the motives and politics of governing elites to the techniques of governing. Here, Foucault’s intellectual project reflected his personal experience of grassroots politics that challenged not just, say, the condition of prisoners but also the practices that defined them as deviant.

David Knights and Glenn Morgan’s (1991) ‘Corporate Strategy, Organization and Subjectivity’ was a seminal moment in the translation of Foucault into mainstream management and organisation studies. This intervention was part of the ‘first wave’ of foucauldian research in management and organisation studies, a key moment in the shift from exegesis to application. Knights and Morgan’s call to examine strategy discourses and practices was also influential in shaping the nascent ‘strategy-as-practice’ agenda (Seidl & Whittington 2014: 3; Rasche & Chia 2009: 713-714). Knights and Morgan propose a radical new way to think about how corporate strategy enmeshes managers and workers alike and shapes the ways that both experience and understand work, organisation and themselves. This appeal to subjectivity was at once controversial and liberating: controversial in that it displaced any notion of ‘strategy’ simply as a weapon wielded by managers against workers; and liberating in that ‘subjectivity’, however sketchy the concept, provoked new questions about the meanings of work and the role of work in defining the self. Power as a ‘possession of management has, nevertheless, proved a remarkably resilient assumption of, for example, the ‘strategy-as-practice school’ (McCabe 2009: 155).

Knights and Morgan’s ambition was to produce a genealogy of strategy. A genealogy was necessary because ‘conventional history’, they suggested, emulated positive science, if not positivism, and saw time unfolding unilinearly and was prone to ‘frequent’ lapses into Whiggish histories or progress or thoughtless endorsements of ‘the “great man” thesis’ (Knights 1992: 517). More specifically, their genealogy of strategy rested upon a partial reading of business history, at best. The ‘conventional’ historiography of strategy equated
with Alfred Chandler. Chandler is doubly damned: first, as a ‘conventional’ historian who reads chronology as causality; second, to concentrate on corporate executives is a form of ‘great man’ thesis applied to the boardroom. Strategy, for Knights and Morgan, is essentially tautologous: strategy is that set of practices that identifies, measures and seeks to resolve the problems it defines. Chandler is criticised for imputing strategic intent. However, Chandler identifies a short memo written by Alfred Du Pont in 1921 as critical to the separation of strategic and operational management. A twelve-page memo then becomes the blueprint for the multidivisional form as the definitive modern corporate structure. Du Pont’s memo was not a strategy in search of a problem but explicitly intended to impose tight financial control over an unwieldy portfolio of businesses haemorrhaging cash. Strategic intent was, then, real enough and the financial problems confronting Du Pont were urgent and compelling (Chandler 1962).

Rather than dismiss Chandler as a ‘conventional historian’, reading Chandler through Foucault produces a very different picture. For Chandler, the ‘robber barons’ of late nineteenth century capitalism were usurped by the rise of professional, managerial capitalism: sovereign power was slowly displaced by disciplinary power (Coopey & McKinlay 2010). Chandler’s ‘visible hand’ of the corporation was superior to the hidden hand of the market in terms of efficiency, quality and profitability (Chandler 1980). Chandler’s dictum that structure follows strategy established a causal chain, but this has been endlessly qualified by business historians. Equally, Chandler’s stress on organisational structure was an invitation to research the ordinariness of disciplinary practices, a project entirely compatible with a foucauldian genealogy. Chandler offers a starting-point for a genealogy of strategy, but not if he is presented as a straw historian to be so lightly dismissed.

A second distinction made by Knights and Morgan is that strategy is outward-looking, primarily about market positioning. Until 1945, management science was about the internal workings of the organisation, especially about labour control. Here Knight both signals his debt to, and break from, labour process theory with its abiding fascination with Taylorism and deskilling. After, strategy is understood as increasingly centred upon competitiveness and market position. Strategy is about planning the corporation’s relationship externally. Paradoxically, Knights and Morgan render strategy as a near synonym for planning at the moment that new management philosophers such as Tom Peters were decrying the futility of corporate planning as they venerated the everyday. Where Peters equated competitiveness with employee empowerment, Knights and Morgan imply that internal organisation, particularly labour control, had been settled. Of course, this was to project back to 1945 from the ascendancy of neo-liberalism after 1979. Here Knights and Morgan point to the importance of strategy as crucial to the subjectivities of managers and workers. Employees become autonomous, empowered subjects to the extent that they embody and enact corporate strategy in their everyday working lives. We applaud the value of this insight, even if we reject the exaggerated way that it is expressed (Ezzamel & Willmott 2010: 89, 95; McKinlay
et al 2010). However, ‘labour’ was not an unproblematic category. Rather, is labour was no longer a troublesome category to be contained and countered then new issues of empowerment, commitment and engagement emerged (Miller & rose 1992). ‘Labour’ may no longer be understood as a hostile, organised force but individuals and teams had to be re-imagined, re-categorised, and mobilised anew as positive potential rather than negative constraint. For corporations, the labour problem was now about effective technologies of freedom rather than control.

Governmentality, Power and Knowledge

Foucault was clear that a governmentalist project did not necessarily create a knowledge base or a complete administrative apparatus de novo. Why a new technique of power emerged was of little interest to Foucault. His concern was how a specific technique actually operated and what its effects were. Technologies can be available before a new technique of power is deployed. Statistics and forecasts, in the case of birth rates, were established before there was a concern with demographics or public health ‘to modify any given phenomenon as such, or to modify a given individual’. To modify ‘at the level of their generality entails ‘security mechanisms’ ‘to be installed around the random element inherent in a population of living beings so as to optimize a state of life (Foucault 1997: 246). Implicit is the classical liberal model that individual self-interest exercised through the invisible hand of the market can produce the optimal outcome for all. Innovations in practices can precede, anticipate, or stimulate the emergence of novel forms of knowledge.

Studies of the mundanity of power are rare. One exception in Bent Flyvberg’s teasing out of the complex relationships between power and knowledge entangled in a city planning process for a bus station. Flyvberg (1998:6) asks not so much who governs as ‘what “governmental rationalities” are at work when those who govern govern?’ Not only are knowledge and power indivisible but power itself is knowledge: the definition of what constitutes rational, relevant and so authoritative knowledge. Rendering questions technical consolidates a governmentalist project, effectively placing it beyond political debate in anything other than those technical terms (Flyvberg 1998: 161, 226). As an example, Foucault uses vaccination campaigns against smallpox that proceeded successfully well in advance of medical science or public health statistics. A given practice can, then, emerge and be accepted before ways of administering and understanding it in abstract population terms (Foucault 2008a: 60). This, insists Foucault, is a quite different logic from the disciplinary. Disciplinary logic developed its knowledge from its operation. That is, the science of penology developed from the experience of managing prisons: all interventions were measured against a single norm of the reformed criminal. Epidemiology measures the distribution of disease against demographic sub-groups, a measurement of differential risk. In this sense, Foucault observes, the governmentalist norm is statistical rather than normative (Foucault 2008a: 63). For those
who govern, this entails a much more restrained way of thinking about their power and how they govern: governmentalist ‘mechanisms, unlike those of law or discipline, do not tend to convey the exercise of a will over others in the most homogeneous, continuous, and exhaustive way possible. It is a matter of revealing a level of the necessary and sufficient action of those who govern’ (Foucault 2008a: 66). If we unpack this complex formulation, Foucault is suggesting that disciplinary power aspires to certainty; to constant, efficient and effective surveillance of individuals measured against statistic norms. Disciplinary power tries to balance efficiency and predictability. Governmentalist projects, by contrast, are prepared to concede – or sacrifice – a level of autonomy to individuals, groups and populations to reduce costs and increase personal freedoms. To govern becomes the pursuit of minimising discipline and surveillance, an acceptance of probabilistic risk in order to maximise individual freedom and responsibility.

Agency, in Foucault, is not synonymous with intentionality and choice and is not invested in the individual in any consequential sense. Indeed, it is precisely how best to avoid conflating individuality with agency that underpinned the archaeological and genealogical Foucaults. Paradoxically, particularly in his later books and lectures, Foucault searches for the ways that individuals assume responsibility for changing themselves (Caldwell 2007). Foucault implicitly acknowledges this paradox in the hesitant tone of his prose but also, perhaps, in his retreat to ancient philosophy as the place to explore these issues. The difference is that the logic and intentionality of power is not synonymous with that of subjects enmeshed in power relations. To confuse the logic of power with that of subjects would mistakenly restore the interests, motivations, and intentionalities of subjects as necessary to explanation (Kelly 2009: 47).

‘Power relations are both intentional and nonsubjective. If in fact they are intelligible, this is not because they are the effect of another “instance” that explains them, but rather because they are imbued, through and through, with calculation: there is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives. But this does not mean that it results from the choice or decision of an individual subject; let us look not for the headquarters that presides over its rationality; neither the caste which governs, nor the groups which control the state apparatus, nor those who make the most important economic decisions direct the entire network of power that functions in a society (and makes it function’ (Foucault 1979: 94-5).

Foucault readily conceded that subjects may deploy languages and practices of strategy to denote their agency and authority, to allow individuals or groups to express what they regarded as their freedom of choice, however constrained. Here Foucault issued a methodological warning: ‘The logic is perfectly clear, the aim decipherable, and yet it is often the case that no one is there to have invented them, and few who can be said to have formulated them: an implicit characteristic of the great anonymous, almost unspoken strategies which coordinate the loquacious tactics whose “inventors” or decision makers are often without hypocrisy’ (Foucault 1979: 95). There should be no search for the taproot of
local strategies in terms of the interests of this or that class or professional group. Rather, the burden of causality should be reduced precisely to understand the interaction of the assemblage of strategies, technologies and resistances in its historical complexity.

Foucault’s persistent ambivalence about ‘strategy’ is clear in that it is sometimes acts almost as a cipher, a secondary place where some dominant logic or other is expressed or applied, with adjustments for specific institutions. On the other hand, however, understanding how specific governmentalist assemblages operate is critical to political strategy. Foucault was questioning those Marxist political strategies which, despite 1968, constantly sought the chimera of revolution as a single event that would turn the world upside-down. Or, conversely, that any modest local gain proves politically counter-productive by shoring up the status quo. Here, Foucault comes close to a Gramscian politics of manoeuvre: ‘to analyse the specificity of mechanisms of power, to locate the concentrations and extensions, to build little by little a strategic knowledge’ (Foucault 1980: 145). Importantly, unlike Gramsci, Foucault does not prioritise the strategic role of the communist party in this new cultural politics beyond the state. Strategy is local in form but always draws from global logics, discourses and techniques. Strategy, then, involves not so much an act of creativity or innovation so much as curation. To understand a specific strategy, involves much more than the consideration of the means-ends thinking of a particular elite, of whatever kind. What made a particular strategy thinkable; what are its key terms; what is the specific set of relationships that are targeted; what are mechanisms that are necessary to its deployment? Foucault sets out some of his provisional thinking about strategy and governmentality in his reflections on the state. A close reading of – and extrapolation from – his lectures on Security, Territory, Population provides some methodological clues about how to locate strategy. Strategy is an element in the process of knowledge creation, when grassroots practices – or problems established from above – become systematised. Foucault calls the first stage in this complex process, ‘reflected practice’. What he seems to mean here is that practitioners begin to capture and compare their diverse experiences and practices. A few sentences on, Foucault uses the term ‘conscious practice’ which could be read as a synonym but might be more usefully understood as that moment when practice becomes ‘an object of knowledge and analysis’. That is, when individual practitioners need no longer simply compare their experiences on an ad hominem basis but have at least the beginnings of a body of knowledge that can act as an external, neutral referent. He then introduces the term ‘reflected and concerted strategy’ to denote the moment when the effects of state action is debated not in terms of its material effects on a specific client group, but on the power and authority of the state itself (Foucault 2008a: 247). Here again we can posit a hierarchy of authority, ranging from tactics to strategy: practitioners, abstract knowledge, strategy, institution. Governmentalist discourse constitute strategy when their power effects are not necessarily bound to an individual, role or organisation. Discourses become strategies when they are immaterial, abstract and unremarkable. The unremarkability of strategies minimises resistance and so maximises the efficiency of power. It is the very ordinariness and uncontro versial nature of routinized, administrative power that intensifies its effects and
increases its mobility across social domains and institutions (Hardy & Thomas 2014: 321; Foucault 2008a: 123-4). Scientific management, for example, moved from the small-scale experiments of engineering professionals to become a commonplace logic applicable to the family, state agencies and even the production of church sermons (Alexander 2008; Wilson & McKinlay; McKinlay & Wilson). Efficiency emerged as the metaphor that generated measurement tools in both generic and highly specific forms (Shenhav 2002; Miller & O’Leary 1987). A failing intervention can be ascribed to a specific practitioner without necessarily reflecting upon the strategy or the institution. Conversely, an institutional failure also entails the loss of authority for strategy and practitioners. Strategy is authoritative to the extent that it convincingly renders practice neutral and unremarkable.

**Foucault/Machiavelli**

Foucault’s reading of Machiavelli marked of his transition from thinking of strategy as tied to the body of a sovereign to being part of complex governmentalist projects. The lure of Machiavelli for Foucault is obvious: the first strategist of modern power had a natural resonance for the pre-eminent philosopher of power. Equally, the Florentine scribe, like Foucault, emphasised the historicity of power and rule, refuting any suggestion that it could be derived from transcendental principles. Machiavelli occupies a peculiar place in Foucault’s work. On the one hand, Machiavelli is relatively marginal, referred to only in passing in his texts. And Foucault offers only an extremely partial reading of Machiavelli. But, on the other hand, Machiavelli is a pivotal reference in Foucault’s 1976 and 1978 lecture series in which the concept of governmentality emerges. In Foucault’s account, Machiavelli’s *The Prince* signifies the high-water mark of thinking about sustaining or extending sovereign power as the rationale for all politics. Machiavelli’s sovereign moves between power and duty, ‘the strategic principle of virtue’ is ‘at the same time, a hermeneutic principle for understanding the real’ (Del Lucchese 2009: 144). Machiavelli secularised power, again echoed in Foucault, and made it immanent in the world. For Machiavelli, the world is structured by forces. To be in harmony with the world is to understand those forces and to be able to seize any opportunity to confront the world with courage and vision. To act on the world, those who would govern must cultivate their strength of character and vision (*virtu*). To govern effectively requires the sovereign cultivate the capacity to understand and improve the self. Improved self-knowledge and self-government are necessary to the improved government of others. This is a recurring theme in Foucault across the various phases of his intellectual and political life. A precondition of virtuous action is knowledge. The most effective – and virtuous knowledge – is that which is dispersed, heterogeneous and versatile: a republic rather than a sovereign, the multitude rather than the singular. For Foucault, Machiavelli articulates the limits of sovereign power by acknowledging the greater capacity of a republic for understanding the population. The centralisation of power and knowledge embodied the sovereign necessarily limits the capacity of other institutions, far
Foucault’s interpretation of Machiavelli is open to three main criticisms. First, that Foucault deals only with *The Prince* as the foundational text of government or political science. Ironically, Foucault exaggerates the contribution of Machiavelli’s reactionary critics to the emerging arts of government (Korvela 2012: 76). Machiavelli played two roles in Foucault, the first analytic, the second stylistic. Both roles are familiar devices in Foucault’s work. Machiavelli is no longer portrayed as a founding father of political theory precisely because his concern with the prince is superseded by emergent liberal concerns who see the conservation and legitimation of the state, not the domination of the sovereign over a given territory and population (Senellart 2013: 104). Second, Machiavelli serves as an epochal marker, an event or form of reasoning that is disturbingly alien to modern readers (Dean 2013: 71). Elsewhere, Foucault had used the calibrated brutality of the execution of Damiens, a would-be regicide, to signify the nature and strangeness of sovereign power. Nor did Foucault restrict himself to real events: he used the fictitious ships of fools that endlessly transported the mad between reluctant ports to symbolise the exclusion of madness from captivity and civil society (McKinlay 2009). The status of such individuals, events, myths or texts is never fully clarified by Foucault: heuristic convenience or historical ‘fact.’ Of course, this criticism could be made of *all* Foucault’s historical works in that they rely on symbolic figures or events to convey both the strangeness and the logics of different power/knowledge regimes. This is both a structural and literary device. Foucault’s overwhelming historical concern is to avoid depicting progress from bewildering, barbaric pasts to more rational, enlightened presents. Foucault is little concerned with the historian’s questions of origins and contexts and much more with the effects of different forms of power and knowledge. Importantly, Machiavelli drew more on the classical arts of government than Foucault admits. And, as with Damiens or the ship of fools, Foucault avoids locating Machiavelli as a historical figure, conventionally located in his complex political and theological context, but uses him to signify a new type of political debate about the legitimacy of the state and ‘the art of government’ (Holden & Elden 2005: 11-14).

Foucault’s historiography is controversial. Not only has he been accused of tearing *The Prince* from Machiavelli’s work as a whole but also of grossly distorting his views, a distortion caused by his reliance upon an unreliable guide, the German historian, Friedrich Meinecke (Barthas 2010: 261-2). After all, *The Prince* was written more than two centuries before the emergence of liberal political economy. However, this misunderstands Foucault’s purpose. The ‘art of government’ was developed not by Machiavelli but through ‘a vast and monotonous literature on government’ that unfolded from the Renaissance until the early nineteenth century, especially when the idea of the state was a matter of practical urgency (Foucault 1991b: 88). For Foucault, Machiavelli’s importance was that there was no attempt to legitimise sovereign power or action through theology, but considered policies solely in
relation to the prince’s interests. Once the sovereign’s interests – and character - were put to one side by Machiavelli’s successors and critics, this opened up debate about the nature and rationality of the state, ‘the art of governing.’ And it is this that Foucault reads as novel and productive in Machiavelli: that he is a historian of government as contingent and pragmatic rather than as a philosopher of government as ideal (Pocock 1975). Third, by exaggerating the importance of Machiavelli’s critics, Foucault ignores the medieval origins of governmentality in texts aimed at all manner of city, military and commercial administrators. Foucault, then, overstates the novelty and ignores the commonplace, if not derivative, nature of Machiavelli’s advice. Paradoxically, this downplays the novelty of Machiavelli’s rethinking of the relations between the sovereign, the state, and the population without recourse to religious authority; Machiavelli’s integration of Greek philosophy represented conceptual continuity but was, nevertheless, controversial since the principles of statecraft were no longer necessarily derived from, or dependent upon, Christianity (Donaldson 1988: vii).

For Machiavelli’s Prince, strategy centred on how best to achieve his ends without violating the popular or elite constraints he had to acknowledge and accept as legitimate or, at the least, inescapable. Machiavelli’s aim was to allow the sovereign to reign which required him increasingly to govern. Such stratagems were inadequate for the sovereign whose power and authority depended upon the security of his population. The security of the population required much more extensive knowledge about the populace. This was a strategic shift of the first importance. Where the immediate, indeed sole, object of strategy had been the security of the sovereign’s power, now that was but one of the possible outcomes of a shrewd and well implemented strategy. Strategy had now to be thought of in terms of the security of the population which, in turn, would ensure the sovereign’s personal safety and the integrity of his rule. Strategy no longer began and ended with the problem of securing or extending the sovereign’s power. Rather, the object of strategy becomes the security of the population which, if protected, underwrites the sovereign’s power and authority. For, as Singer and Weir (2006: 448) observe, ‘Where governmentality was tactical, desiring the abundance of things and means for their acquisition, sovereignty sought to defend and elaborate law. The character of the sovereign, symbolised by the sword, is warlike in defence of the realm; by contrast, the character of the governmental ruler, variously symbolised, is patience and industry.’ There are two significant departures here which are left unstated. First, that sovereign power becomes more contingent and dependent upon the will or people, or at least their security. Paradoxically, the first priority of the sovereign must not be his personal safety or the certainty of his right to rule but the security of the population he governs. Power may well sustain its singular locus but this will continue only insofar as its objective is the population not the prince. Second, the source, nature and legitimacy of sovereign power experiences a fundamental shift. Strategy, here, is a radical founding act that anticipates the new republic and its citizenry before that reality exists (Breiner 2008). Strategy has a performatve logic: the sovereign’s exercise of power is legitimised to the extent that it is sanctified by a republican future yet to unfold (Fontana 1993: 96-7). It is precisely this
attention to the prefigurative potential of Machiavelli that attracted Gramsci for whom the communist party – the ‘modern prince’ should reimagine its relationship to the masses. Foucault, like Gramsci, was drawn to Machiavelli’s open-ended, contingent vision of politics and strategy going beyond the state. Sovereign power was derived from God and the legitimacy of rule was dependent upon conformity to religious norms and traditions of sovereign behaviour. After the long moment of Machiavelli, the sovereign’s reign was no longer judged simply by its capacity to sustain itself but by the quality of his stewardship. That is, a sovereign’s rule was assessed not just in terms of its own finite existence but how effective it was in terms of stewardship, protecting the legacy of those who had gone before and that inherited by his heirs.

The sovereign had been external to the state and unique in every respect. Machiavelli’s advice was designed to strengthen the prince’s grip on his territory and over his subjects, while leaving this relationship of externality unchanged. The sole purpose of the state was to sustain the sovereign’s power: any and all measurement of wealth or wellbeing was an indirect measure of sovereign authority. Government, on the other hand, fundamentally alters these assumptions. The sovereign becomes, at least in part, a governor charged with responsibility for the wealth and wellbeing of others. Moreover, the prince no longer dominated a passive population whose only alternative to obedience was insurrection, but a citizenry that required its members to be active and suspicious of all authority as a condition of their citizenship. To be a citizen required the development of individual self-knowledge, agency and responsibility (McKinlay & Mutch 2015). In Machiavelli, the impossible perfect homo politicus becomes a passionless calculating figure. The sovereign has to be rethought – and to rethink himself - not as a specific individual but as one element of a political field (Althusser 1999: 94, 99). In this way, government becomes analogous to the ways that households, enterprises or cities are governed. Government acquires a plurality of purposes and, equally, the arts of government are not restricted to the prince’s court or the state. Government implies both an expanding range of purposes and techniques which can originate beyond the state (Rose & Miller 1992). The state must develop specific knowledges of its own capacities – ‘concrete, precise and measured’ – not just derived from abstract or religious principles (Foucault 2001: 316-317; Senellart 1995: 20-22). Equally, the government of other institutions also develop ways of understanding how they govern.

Methodologically, Foucault suggests that the arts of governing are not hidden in ‘spontaneous, blind practices’ but are the subject of careful, clearly-defined debates that produced abstract knowledges and principles (Foucault 2001: 313-314). Governmentality examines the practices that constitute power. Governmentalist research looks to the debates of those experts that define and redefine objects to be observed and monitored and the management practices to be developed, evaluated and refined. Governmentalist strategies cannot be understood solely through interviews with elite strategists. It is not that the ‘strategy-as-practice’ approach is mistaken so much as it does not consider the vocabularies
of strategy beyond the firm; or the translation of those strategic vocabularies into everyday practices for beyond the boardroom or the strategic retreat (Chia & Holt 2009: 118-132). Nor, contrary to mainstream accounting and business history, does governmentalist research rely upon deep archival research in specific firms. Rather, a governmentalist methodology focuses upon developments in the grey literature of the trade and professional press, those sphere where experts develop and debate categories, measurements and practices that mediate between strategy and everyday life (Miller & Rose 1997: McKinlay m&oh).

Government itself becomes problematic, no longer natural or inevitable. The authority of the prince and the state was now contingent upon the broad security and wellbeing of the population. The sovereign’s right to rule was now contingent, to a greater or lesser degree, upon the delivery of security and welfare. The move to population also entailed a shift in the definition of the subject. In sovereign regimes, the individual and the collective is held in a single juridical relationship with the crown. Population, conversely, ‘is a set of elements in which we can note constants and regularities…and a number of modifiable variables’ (Foucault 2008a: 74-5). The art of governing becomes infinitely more complex, dispersed and oblique. As this concept of population gains ground, particularly in the new human sciences, so sovereign power is eroded, displaced by discipline. Individualising government is a complex process that relies upon an assemblage of centralised monitoring and devolved administration. Nor is the array of techniques linking strategy and the individual necessarily designed for that purpose or even tightly coupled. This is precisely Foucault’s point: governmentalist strategies are hubristic by nature and almost certain to fail, at least in their own vaulting terms.

**Strategists of Empowerment**

The real power of strategy lies in its capacity to become a self-evident truth: anthropological, historical, economic. This truth-making entails a double reshaping of, first, the organisation’s relationship to the market and, second, the individual has to understand their role and themselves in terms of the organisation’s strategy. Moreover, the success of organisational strategy is upon how thoroughly individuals remake themselves. While rendering strategy the commonsense of an organisation certainly involves discourse, it is not only a language game. Indeed, much academic and consultancy labour has been expended on how to make strategy practical at all levels of the organisation. This is a slow, awkward, hesitant process, doomed to failure when measured against its own ambitions (Miller & Rose 1990). In much Foucauldian research, however, this cumulative process of making strategy practical is often glossed over in the search for ever more perfectly remade neo-liberal subjects. Here, we discuss Tom Peters the management guru who defined strategy for everyday organising, not as the exclusive property of corporate elites.
Tom Peters represented - and helped to create – new organisational spaces where management disciplines became an ascesis of performance: those languages and practices freely accepted by individuals so that their practices came to embody the organisation (Pezet 2007: 3-13). Even Peters’ massive book sales under-estimated the reach and influence of his thinking (Clark 1998: 140). Peters’ was the wellspring of a succession of anti-bureaucratic languages, strategies and technologies. Peters, like Machiavelli, articulated a dual political strategy that, first, aimed to destabilise settled bureaucratic orders and, second, to establish new managerial languages, new forms of power and authority: to unsettle and dislodge homo hierarchicus (Guillen 1994). Unlike Machiavelli, Peters did not develop a theory of power. In Peters there are no Machiavellian proposals for controlling the forces that drive the world. In both Peters and Foucault, the strategist is not a sovereign and there is no prospect of completely understanding, far less mastering, complex games of power.

Foucault wrote wearily of the tedium of consulting the multitude of republican texts produced in the two centuries after Machiavelli; Peters unleashed the ‘new management’ debate that was equally colossal and no less tedious. Sales of the ‘management guru’ genre eclipsed that achieved by any previous generation of management thinkers (Greatbach & Clark 2005: 9; Huczynski 2006). *In Search of Excellence* was an inflection point in the ways that management was imagined and performed. Equally, Peters drew legitimacy – and inspiration - from the human relations tradition in American management thinking and from social psychologists, notably Karl Weick (Peters 1992: 91; Peters 2001). Tom Peters routinely portrayed himself as challenging – in every sense – embedded forms of power and taken-for-granted knowledges. One of Peters’ several biographers described him as ‘the arch-revolutionary, the Trotsky of the New Management’ (Heller 2000: 5). This was a familiar trope in commentaries on the guru genre. Perhaps there is more in this analogy than its authors appreciate. Like Trotsky, the new managerial revolutionaries were intended to develop a sense of themselves as a marginal group who would use their marginality as a source of legitimacy and a place from which to make increasingly impossible demands of the status quo. Resistance to their initiatives was to be expected. Indeed, every reverse was testimony to the necessity and urgency of their project and to their personal conviction. Peters, like Trotsky, was the prophet of permanent revolution. On the face of it, this is the opposite of Machiavelli’s advice designed to bolster the sovereign’s power. However, at no stage does Peters question the legitimacy of markets or corporations per se only the need for these to be completely reimagined and wholly reinvigorated. Again, like Machiavelli, Peters – a former McKinsey consultant – begins by offering private advice to the corporate prince but that knowledge almost immediately becomes public and pervasive. Peters’ spiralling populism abounds with ambiguities. Indeed, he revels in the ambiguities that traverse his liberalism: ‘not a simple conservatism but a liberal mixture. It mixes conformity to with revolt against concentrated, private, and hierarchical corporate power’ (Newfield 1995: 34).
Machiavellian political knowledge is necessarily public in its open-ended, mobile precepts and transformative in its aim to trigger the agency of those who were formerly passive and deprived of political knowledge.

Tom Peters’ first book, *In Search of Excellence*, written with Robert Waterman, was the outcome of a large-scale exploratory project by the McKinsey consultancy. Their results were summarised in the 7-S framework, the common practices of excellent organisations. Peters and Waterman deploy a familiar quasi-academic model of research to justify their findings, albeit expressed in explicitly practical terms and straightforward language. At best, *Excellence* is methodologically flawed, if not tendentious and tautological. Conceptually, *Excellence* fares no better: focusing exclusively on the firm excludes important questions such as factor cost, social and political context, and much more besides. And yet, the text retains a seductive plausibility, derived from the obviousness of its precepts and by raising the tantalising prospect that all organisations can become ‘excellent’, reverse decline and claim to be making the same journey as successful global corporations (Collins 2007: 32-38).

For Peters, the search for excellence was necessary not just competitively but justified through historical change and anthropology. History, in that better educated employees who were also democratic citizens were less inclined to accept their passive subordination at work; anthropological, in that empowerment resonated with human’s innate search for meaning. For Peters, to govern is to accept responsibility for empowering others the better to govern themselves. Empowerment was thus doubly legitimised: at once, a competitive necessity and an extension of individual freedom. Of course, this is a peculiar liberal sense of history – one of barely interrupted progress, but the seductiveness of Peters’ message was established: increased individual freedom was a moral and practical necessity, a prerequisite for competitiveness. Management, Peters advocates, should be a hegemonic activity, an intellectual and moral project. This initial call for empowerment in what were depicted as frustrating, moribund corporate bureaucracies echoes Machiavelli in that its practices worked on the inert present as if the empowered future already existed. This was a language that always spoke in the future perfect tense: quite literally performative (Pitsis et al 2003).

Where Machiavelli sees unavoidable dangers in rendering the masses active, Peters sees the masses only as an untapped intellectual and moral resource. Peters shares the Machiavellian presupposition that the social world is the product of the active will of those who govern. Peters attack on corporate planning as, at best, futile draws on Hayek’s trope of the inevitably violent subjugation of individuals that accompanies centralised state planning (Armsbruster & Gebert 2002). The most benign reading was that corporate planning was a displacement activity, a fog that obscured the limited, clearly definable objectives necessary for competitiveness.

At the heart of Peters’ project was a demand for personal identification of paradoxical intensity. On the one hand, the individual identification with the organisation and its purpose is assumed to be both a means to competitive success and as an end in itself. On the other
hand, the individual’s identification is contingent upon the consistency of the organisation’s empowerment project. Individual commitment, then, is intense, precious and precarious. One of Peters’ best known precepts was ‘managing by walking about’ – MBWA. This speaks to how managers could collapse the distance between themselves and the organisation, literally and symbolically. Self-aware executive exemplarity is the modern managerial virtu. Machiavelli’s virtu becomes Peters’ excellence. Executive authority is not vested in the office but in the extent to which the individual manager adopts, embodies and projects the persona of Excellence. This is a profound challenge to the classic managerial bureaucracy where power becomes more impersonal and inscribed in structures and routines, the more distant from organisational life it becomes. MBWA is a practice that requires subtle strategic interpretation by individuals. Front-line operational managers have to become – quite literally – involved in the day-to-day routines not just of production or service delivery but in living out a corporate philosophy. The creation of relations of dependence and domination are masked in the humdrum ‘violent innocence’ of contemporary leadership in practice (Vince & Mazen 2014). Executives, on the other hand, have to consider how their bearing, as much as their decisions, conveys new management precepts. Executives have to regard themselves as symbols of change and conscious that their acts and demeanours have resonance throughout the organisation. In organisations such as Motorola, executives became acutely aware of their symbolic power – their presence, their appearance, their language and silences. Corporate leaders self-consciously embody how they want their employees to govern themselves and each other. Indeed, Motorola’s founding family, the Galvins, were conscious that their capacity to embody the organisation’s ‘corporate philosophy’ was critical to its projection across the organisation (McKinlay & Taylor 2014). Discourses of strategy and culture cease to be abstract and exclusively elite languages but become a part of ordinary organisational life (Balogun et al 2014: 186). Strategy discourse acts as a pervasive cultural form of managing at a distance.

Famously, Excellence had seven ingredients. A decade later, Thriving on Chaos had endless lists, principles, and questions. There was little to guide the prospective user in terms of priorities, practices or sequencing. If Peters was the Trotsky of the managerial revolution then this was his way of making impossible demands on the status quo. In Chaos, the moral binaries of Excellence were replaced by hesitation, paradox, and a willingness to accept structure and planning, the twin evils of a decade before. Peters did not just concede his inconsistencies so much as positively revel in his brazen inconsistency, an attitude that embodied any sense that there were permanent solutions (Crainer 1997: 195-6). Again, where Excellence was something that could be found, then in Chaos offered something altogether more elusive, a permanent revolution, in which the organisation had to be a constantly evolving experimental space (Giroux 2006). Peters was offering a magic realism for management: a familiar yet fantastical representation of what the worlds of work and management actually were and what they could become. One continuous thread was the insistence on a bias for action, albeit now exalted as an organisational first principle rather than a means to an end, Excellence.
In Search of Excellence represents the search for a liberal sense of order. To be organised is to seek consensus, but not to accept organisation as inherently plural and conflictual. There is no possibility of pluralism in the sense of legitimate dissent among citizens. Citizens expressed membership of the political through an equality of rights and voice. To command an employee rather than persuade a peer, a fellow organisational citizen, was a profound failure. First, the individual issuing the command relinquishes their claim to authority based on shared, equal citizenship. Second, it strips the person being commanded of their citizenship, even if only momentarily, and served as a reminder that their citizenship status was not an inalienable right but contingent upon the whim of another. Continued citizenship involved maintaining a common symbolic space. Only those who shared this definition could become - and remain – organizational citizens. For the manager, the key task is the shrewd management of organisational cultures to ensure the intense identification of members, akin to a spiritual fellowship in which belonging requires continuous self-examination and self-improvement.

The cold passion of Peters’ vision of the highly committed employee echoes Weber’s despairing evocation of the stultifying life-world of the career bureaucrat (McKinlay 2013). Paul Du Gay (1994) suggests that the anti-bureaucracy rhetoric of the ‘liberation management’ movement represented an attempt to ‘re-enchant’ the disenchanted world of bureaucratised work. Although Du Gay’s point of departure is Max Weber, when he speaks of the ‘excellence’ promise to the individual it bears the imprint of Foucault’s argument that neo-liberal organisations no longer require compliant individuals but that everyone becomes ‘an entrepreneur of himself’ (Foucault 2008b: 241). ‘Liberation management’ promises new technologies of the self: individuals can become more productive, more innovative, more valuable to the organisation to the extent that they remake themselves as more responsible, innovative and open (Du Gay 1994: 663). Commitment also means that this individual commitment is the minimum requirement for membership of a collective that is both intensely self-disciplined and yet suspicious of that commitment (De Cock & Bohn 2007: 822). At first sight, the excellence movement represents the very antithesis of what Foucault called ‘pastoral power’, that power concerned for the wellbeing of an undifferentiated flock: the shift to ‘excellence’ entailed an end to bureaucratic paternalism. Indeed, bureaucratic paternalism was understood not just as economically damaging but also morally enfeebling for the individual. Where Taylorism imagined docile bodies whose smallest movements were orchestrated from above, the new management stressed freedom over control, and energy over passivity. Bureaucratic paternalism was damaging not just because of the unreality and inflexibility of its centralised planning but for its primary concern with controlled populations, rather than empowered individuals. That is not to say that individuals were neglected rather that they were known and acted upon in their singularity only when they were exceptional, at the extremes of a normal distribution. The purpose of the excellence movement was to make individuals ‘excellent’ or, at least, provide them with the opportunity to liberate themselves. The resilience of contemporary power lies in its
dispersed, heterogeneous forms which makes it adaptable and difficult to challenge beyond the particular (Riahi 2011: 236-7).

Less remarked was Peters’ emphasis on constant and universal measurement: if it cannot be measured, it cannot be managed. In Chaos he spoke of simple, direct measurement of key data, at the lowest organisational level possible. Stripping out complex, centralising control systems was not an abdication of managerial control, however. ‘These devices’, he added reassuringly, ‘vision, symbolic action, recognition, are a control system in the truest sense of that term. The manager’s task is to conceive of them as such and to consciously use them’ (Peters 1987: 486). But, at the same time, Peters celebrated judgement and intuition over calculation and professionalism. In a sense, then, Peters looks to the edges of technocratic rationality as the spaces that have to be created and within which innovation thrives. Again and again Peters acknowledged the paradoxes of his strategy while insisting that these uncertain, liminal spaces are inescapable but can be navigated so long as corporate leaders rely only upon a handful of fundamental measurements - commercial, technical, and beliefs (Peters 1987: 245; O’Malley 2000: 463).

With Peters’ 1992 Liberation Management, the emphasis shifted even further towards action, to a reverence for ‘dynamism’ matched only by his now almost complete disdain for order. This is evoked, for instance, by the central image of the carnival as a mobile, networked, efficient and, above all, dynamic space conjured up nightly by the manager as impresario: ‘Say “carnival” and you think energy, surprise, buzz, fun. The mark of the carnival – and what makes it different from a day at most offices – is its dynamism. Dynamism is its signature, the reason we go back. To create and maintain a carnival is never to get an inch away from dynamic imagery. As chief, you must feel the dynamics in your fingertips, be guided by them in every decision’ (Peters 1992: 17). The linear structure and propositional logic of Excellence was replaced by altogether more chaotic structure, more akin to hypertext. In part, this reflects Peters’ own authorial strategy but, perhaps more importantly, it was a structural choice to forsake straightforward presentation in favour of an eclectic series of alternatives for the reader and the would-be managerial revolutionary. Peters no longer writes as an external analyst-provocateur. Rather, from Liberation onwards his texts demands that readers become his co-authors –almost co-conspirators - as they become producers of innovation. Peters’ Liberation is an agitational management text, whose prime purpose was to create a cadre of self-aware organic intellectuals for the ‘new management’. Although Peters’ texts retain the physical form of the book, they dispense almost entirely with familiar structures and conventions, in favour of case studies of radically different length interspersed with commentaries that veer from homilies to deeply personal vignettes about his life. Peters is not an innovative author so this was unlikely to have been a stylistic choice. Nor does the increasingly fragmented structure betoken a lack of self-discipline, or, at least, not entirely. Rather, Peters’ choice of structure – chapters of wildly different length and feel, no sense of an argument developing through logic or evidence – reflected his insistence on
the combinatory, generative requirements of innovative individuals and organisations. Peters’ repetition of familiar themes belie the promise of the texts’ adventurous structure. On the face of it, this is a humble way of presenting ideas and experiences to a readership that is now regarded as active collaborators. The message of Liberation has changed little, although the language has become more frenetic, the tone even less analytic and more impatient. The rehearsal of long-familiar principles, accompanied by ellipses and gaps, was intended to reassure the diligent reader of continuity while suggesting the provisional nature of the text. Perhaps the most eloquent parts of the disjointed text are precisely where it is most fragmented. Novelty was the responsibility of the reader, not the author. Perhaps, the post-1992 Peters should be approached as a form of disorderly managerial Diderot in which his later texts assume a hypertextual quality, each entry sufficient in itself but intended to provoke the reader into becoming a co-producer of knowledge and action by making connections inside and outside the text, unplanned, unknown and unanticipated by Peters (Collins 2007: 78-9, 86).

Over time, as a practice becomes institutionalised so legitimating discourses gradually become simplified and localised. The introduction of a new practices such as TQM initially relied upon complex arguments that established little understood links between prosaic categories such as quality, waste and cost and macro-anxieties such as competitiveness and globalisation. The appeal to logic and global competitive imperatives is gradually displaced by increasingly evidence-based claims. As the practice is institutionalised and taken-for-granted so it becomes increasingly divorced from material predictors and diffused across radically different domains (Green et al 2009: 12, 20). Peters addressed managers in the most abstract terms, woven around everyday concerns treated as symptomatic of existential crises for Western capitalism and management. Peters’ claims were never tested as his concepts, categories and slogans became the lingua franca of the new management. All techniques to increase workplace efficiency and flexibility were predicated upon employee commitment to an organisational strategy. Reshaping work organisation was no longer the preserve of external experts but an essential part of everyday working lives. To produce these effects, organisations have created new abstract languages of commitment and constructed new spaces where this discourse can be translated, reconciled and negotiated (Iedema & Scheeres 2003). The textualisation of work makes subjectivity both the subject and object of technologies of government.

Conclusion

For Foucault, Machiavelli’s importance was that he provoked a debate about how to think of power without the sovereign. There is no sense that Foucault read Machiavelli through Althusser, far less Gramsci. Foucault was, however, engaged in an extended, if oblique, debate about the nature of progressive politics and the fate of the ‘modern prince’, the French
Communist Party. This was the backdrop to the emergence of the concept of
governmentality and the radical rethinking of power and strategy. Foucault’s consideration
of Machiavelli’s break with the sacral conception of politics, a single source of power and
authority was central to this moment of conceptual innovation. Foucault’s conception of
strategy takes as axiomatic that actors will perceive themselves as exercising agency.
Governmentality heralds the death of the strategist, not just the author. Foucault’s suggestion
is that strategy becomes an attribution that makes an action comprehensible. The practice of
strategy becomes the translation of vocabularies of strategy into the everyday of
organisational life.

Strategy is no longer the privilege of an elite with some holistic, long-term overview, but
inherent in the making and negotiating of mundane power relations. At first sight this is a
disconcerting notion but in contemporary organisations we are asked routinely to think of
strategy without the strategist. At first sight, it appears fanciful to discuss Tom Peters in
similar ways to Machiavelli but both triggered a deluge of writing and experimentation about
how to reconfigure organisations, populations and individuals. Machiavelli whispered only
to the sovereign. Sovereign power was singular, expressive, identified as the capacity to
exert one’s will over others. Tom Peters was a modern Machiavelli who spoke to the Prince
and to the multitude. Peters’ innovation was to reverse the logic of strategy – to use the
familiar themes of control and efficiency by reversing them. Strategy formation, after Peters,
should be considered not as something to be contested and costed but as a rhetorical and
motivational resource. In a certain sense, Peters – and the multitude of mimics and critics
that followed his lead – were not just rhetoricians but strategists of governmentality.
Radical only in their abhorrence of hierarchy, itself an attitude that always prioritises – celebrates
the individual over the collective and the organisation. Power is a positive and productive
influence on life. Peters’ explicitly sees himself as a creative force. In an important sense,
Peters was the perfect liberal management thinker. Peters, like liberalism, offered something
that aspired to provide both the principles and practices of management as that which
increases individual freedom and organisational citizenship. Liberalism – and Peters –
worries about the very possibility of the state - or the corporation – and how to maximise its
effectiveness while limiting its scale and reach (Cutro 2010: 172). Peters’ personal tragedy
was that the long third act of his professional life saw him gradually but irreversibly
marginalised: like Trotsky, a guru outcast. Alternatively, Peters, certainly in his later work
and presentations, can be read as the canniest artist of the new managerialism. Peters’ call
was to aestheticise corporate life, to use sentiments, images and symbols – not just rational
argument or accurate analysis to galvanise individuals. To mobilise those previously
rendered passive, rather than to perfect ways of making individuals docile.
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