Megaprojects and Postmodernism

By Dr Rodney Turner
London School of Economics

Project management has traditionally been based on a modernist perspective. However, since the 1960s, postmodernism has been proposed as an alternative view. Postmodernism does not replace modernism, but overlays alternative choices. In this article I explore what a postmodernist perspective means for megaprojects. I discuss the differences between modernism and postmodernism, and then discuss some of the consumer choices that emerge from a postmodernist view. I then describe some of the consequences of postmodernism for megaprojects. As an example I use the project HS2 in the UK. Projects need to do marketing, (Turner & Lecoeuvre, 2017), and the best way to do marketing is be telling stories. I discuss why that is and how projects can tell stories. In the last section, I discuss a related issue relating to external stakeholders. Megaprojects can destroy communities and cause people to lose their identities, which can have severe psychological impacts.

Modernism versus postmodernism

Modernism is said to have started around 1450, and is the scientific age. Modernism tries to replace dogma, religion and superstition with reason, science and knowledge. It is also the world of home economicus where we try to manage our lives to optimise the economic output. Max Weber (1919/2004) thought that modernism led to a disenchantment of life. He said we try to control everything through calculation. There is no room for mysticism and wonder. He however thought we are controlled by mysterious and unpredictable forces and we cannot control everything.


Max Weber

The only god worshipped in the modernist world is Mammon. Georg Simmel (1919/2011) suggested that money leads to more rationality in economics by changing people's way of thinking. Homo economicus feels the need for continuous calculation in their daily transactions. Many people spend their lives calculating, weighing, evaluating and reducing qualitative ideas to quantitative values. Welcome to time and cost control on projects. Georg Simmel said that money is the most extreme example of a means becoming an end.

Georg Simmel

Geoge Ritzer (2103) proposes the concept of the McDonaldization of society where society adopts the characteristics of a fast-food restaurant. This leads to further disenchantment of the economic world in our society of consumption through the instrumentally efficient means of distribution of goods and services.
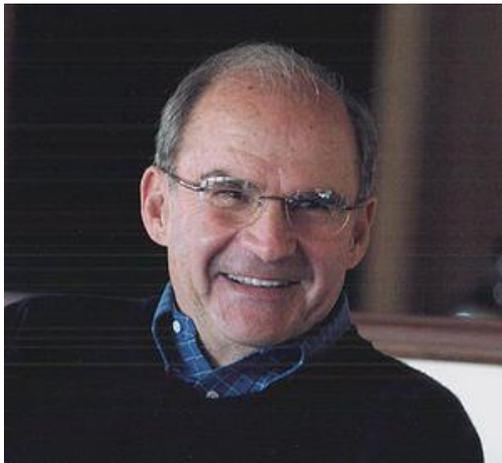
George Ritzer

Postmodernism attempts to re-enchant society by adopting pluralistic styles, where people have multiple identifies and live each experience to the emotional peak. In the postmodernist world, consumption is important. The modernist view was that production creates value and consumption destroys value. That of course is ridiculous, because things do not have value until they are enjoyed in consumption. In everyday economic life, re-enchantment is a movement from a utilitarian perspective to an experiential perspective based on consumption. The benefits are not in the products but in the consumer experience of enjoying the product. Steve Jobs said you have to start with the customer experience and work back to the technology, not the other way around. People have several identities, and buy different products to satisfy their different identifies. Marketing creates different realities. In the postmodernist world reality is created not given, the media providing us with fantasy, fiction and no-fiction.

Postmodernism and megaprojects

In the modernist perspective, projects are successful if they finish on time, cost and quality. Quality means the technically desired solution, not a beneficial outcome that customers can enjoy. Project management emphasises control, leading to the McDonladization of projects. Anne Keegan and Rodney Turner (2002) said this can lead to a loss of innovation as rules are followed rather than new ways found to do things. Damian Hodgson and Svetlana Cicmil (2006) talk about the reification of projects, where projects are viewed as concrete things rather than constructs to achieve an objective.

In the postmodernist perspective, projects are successful if they produce benefits, and as I said above, the benefits are not in the product but in the consumer experience. People value experiences. On megaprojects the social benefits are very important, (Turner & Xue, 2018). If the social benefits are included many megaprojects have a benefit to cost ratio many times greater than one. Rodney Turner and Xue Yan give the example of the West Coast Main Line upgrade in the UK, where the social benefits took the benefit to cost ration from 0.85 to almost 3. On HS2 the social benefits include:

- pleasant travel experiences on high speed trains
- reduced overcrowding, giving more pleasant travel, and meaning Jeremy Corbyn can get a seat between Watford and London
- reduced journey times
- reduced congestion on roads
- reduced air travel
- improved safety, with a switch from road to rail
- environmental improvements from the above
- people better able to visit family and friends, go shopping, have a day out, and travel to work

But nobody knows because HS2 has done no marketing. HS2 needs to do marketing, informing people of the benefits, and selling the consumer experience. They could identify a typical traveller from several cities, Watford, Rugby, Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester, Glasgow, and build a story around them and what HS2, and the increased capacity on the West Coast Main Line means for them. That leads us on to narratives.

Narratives

People prefer to think in terms of stories. Homo economicus loves boring statistics. But the man on the Clapham omnibus is by and large not numerate. It is best to communicate with people by telling them stories. Narratives have a greater impact than the dry communication of data.

- narratives are more engaging, easier to recall and have fewer counter arguments
- people think in terms of narratives
- stories connect ideas to deeply held values and needs
- narratives are part of the experiential system so a better way to communicate social benefits

As I suggested above, HS2 could create narratives around typical people from many of the towns impacted by HS2. The person from Watford won't travel on HS2, but because of

increased capacity on the West Coast main Line they will be able to sit on the train to London. Somebody from Leeds, why will they travel on HS2? To visit friends in Birmingham? To work in Manchester? To go shopping or attend the theatre in London? To transfer to the Eurostar to Paris. The project could create stories, describing their experiences, and the benefits of travelling on HS2. But up to now the project has done NO marketing. You get the impression that marketing is not something that projects do.

It is a little bit difficult to find to whom the quotation is due. Mark Twain is reputed to have said a lie can travel half way round the world before the truth has its boots on. That was before even the days of the telegraph, but no one can find the quotation in his writings. Winston Churchill not very originally said a lie can travel half way round the world while the truth is putting its pants on. It is in his writings, but several people are credited with saying similar things between the two. (Jonathan Swift is said to have said something similar in 1710.)

On a projects, the central communications department issues some dry statistics for homo economicus to read. Trolls pick up on it, distort it to their world view, and spread lies, while nobody reads the truth. The lie is several times around the world, and the truth has not even thought about putting its boots or pants on. Projects need to employ advocates. They will use social media to spread positive narratives about the project, before the trolls know anything, and before the central communications department issues the dry statistics. Projects need to be doing marketing, and using social media to tell people stories about the financial and social benefits of the projects, and about the experiences they will have using the project outcome.

Identity of external stakeholders.

Many philosophers, psychologists, sociologist, anthropologists, etc, have spoken of how our possessions build our identity. We get our identity from the things we own. I spoke of that above. After a wildfire in California destroyed a town in 1994, a resident was quoted as saying:

- "We became orphans without a past. Like we had amnesia, like we didn't exist before the fire. I got new clothes, but they weren't like the old ones. The new ones were sad colors not bright ones. And they were long skirts instead of short ones. I had become another person; the former person was lost in the fire." *Quoted in Sayre, (1994)*

HS2 is inevitably knocking down buildings. People with medium to large business can find new premises and move their business. But somebody whose business is a corner shop, and whose home is an apartment upstairs, loses both their business and their home. They lose their identity. Megaprojects need to be much more cautious about the psychological impact they have on people. Some people were quoted recently in the British press saying they were losing their identity because they were losing their home and business to HS2.

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