



Classics in megaproject management: A structured analysis of three major works

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Abstract

The paper explores three texts in the field of megaproject management that intersubjectively, in terms of community sentiment, might be considered ‘classics’. We deploy four criteria for a structured analysis that determines if the status of the works in question may be considered classic. The works examined are *Megaprojects and Risk: An Anatomy of Ambition* by Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius and Rothengatter; (2003) *The Anatomy of Major Projects* by Morris and Hough (1987) and *Industrial Megaprojects* by Merrow (2011). Based on these works we conclude with a prospectus for future research that will serve to develop the field of research into megaproject management.

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1. Introduction

One of the ways in which a field of research consolidates, gaining cohesion and consistency, is through significant and outstanding works that play a defining role. Kuhn (2012, p. 10) describes the way in which significant scientific achievements, often encapsulated in the classics of a discipline, become paradigmatic by being disseminated through textbooks and other normative texts. The paradigm forms the accepted framework for the body of theory in a discipline. Over time, the boundaries for what is considered normal science within a particular field increasingly become institutionalised within the paradigmatic frame.

This paper examines three works that might rightly be considered classics in the field of megaproject research:

Megaprojects and Risk: An Anatomy of Ambition by Flyvbjerg et al. (2003) *The Anatomy of Major Projects* by Morris and Hough (1987); and *Industrial Megaprojects* by Merrow (2011). The extent to which they form a paradigm for megaproject research is another matter. Two matters need to be resolved before proceeding further. First, what constitutes a megaproject? Second, what constitutes a classic?

2. What constitutes a megaproject?

Research into the management of megaprojects has emerged only relatively recently as a distinct area of study. It draws on research into project management and can generally be considered a sub-set of, or specialisation within, the broader field of project management. Overall, the research paints a dire picture of the field of practice in terms of its goal achievement. Boateng et al. (2015) cite the tendency for gross estimation errors; Davies et al. (2014) chart a litany of failures to reach specifications; Eweje et al. (2012) note the disproportionately negative impact of megaprojects on corporate survival. The proportion of global GDP spent on megaprojects (Flyvbjerg,

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2014) certainly justifies an increased focus on this topic, especially in light of the history of flawed goal attainment.

Some analysts, such as Flyvbjerg (2014), stress that megaprojects should be defined quantitatively, in terms of their cost:

“Megaprojects are large-scale, complex ventures that typically cost a billion dollars or more, take many years to develop and build, involve multiple public and private stakeholders, are transformational, and impact millions of people.” (Flyvbjerg, 2014, p. 6)

We demur, considering that the real mark of a megaproject is the organisational complexity, ambiguity, ambition, politicality and risk that are entailed (cf. Baccarini, 1996; Bakhshi et al., 2016). Not all expensive projects need be complex, ambiguous, ambitious, political and risky; somewhat smaller, but still costly, projects might well be all of these.

3. What constitutes a classic?

Alexander (1989, p. 9) describes classics as “*earlier works of human exploration which are given a privileged status vis-a-vis contemporary explorations in the same field*”. While this is one possible answer to the question of what constitutes a classic there are other considerations. Multiple categories and criteria exist that determine a classic. Söderlund and Geraldi (2012), for instance, categorise classics into four types, each using a different criteria to determine whether a text is a classic. The first type is called ‘obvious classics’, a type of classic determined by its prominence and acceptance in the field, signified through the number of citations received. Other publications become classics due to the influence and impact they have had on the field, in terms of shaping its current state. This second type of classics they call ‘latent classics’. The third type is what Söderlund and Geraldi (2012) label ‘potential classics’, works of scholarships that present innovative ideas and solutions ignored by scholars at the time of their publication. The fourth type is the category of ‘unintended classics’, works never intended to contribute to a particular field to the extent that they did. An example for this could be Henry Gantt’s work and the contribution that it made to the field of general project management (Söderlund and Geraldi, 2012). While we agree with these categories, we argue that a classic must meet a combination of *all* the above-mentioned categories and criteria – rather than just one.

As Söderlund and Geraldi (2012) rightly argue, the process of determining a classic is not a “scientific exercise” (2012, p. 568). Kuhn (2012) proposed four criteria for constituting something as a classical work. First, one characteristic of a classic is the novelty of the idea which it conveys. Second, a classic must be communicated effectively so that it can reach a broader audience. Third, classics must be measured by the widespread awareness of the work amongst relevant scholars in the field. Fourth, dissemination of research in the mass media is an effective technique to measure the impact of classics. Drawing on another, perhaps unlikely,

starting point for assessing a classic in megaprojects and for developing specific criteria for the exercise, is the literary writer Calvino (2000), who offers a postmodern literary perspective on what constitutes a classic, providing fourteen criteria. His definitions are tailored towards understanding the value of great works in literature, focusing on the role of classics as formative points in a society or culture but also consider their personal impact and the way that they shape perspectives on the world.¹ Calvino’s criteria can be customised for an enquiry into academic classics, focusing less on the impact on an individual, and more on the objective influence of the work on the formation of a field. Hence, this paper combines Calvino’s (2000) work with Kuhn (2012) and elements of Söderlund and Geraldi (2012), to establish four criteria that were used in our assessment of whether a work is a classic in its academic field.

The first, and simplest, criterion relates to the influence of the work, or what Kuhn (2012) terms a spread of awareness. A classic is a work about which much is spoken; “*...a work which constantly generates a pulviscular cloud of critical discourse around it...*” (Calvino, 2000, p. 6). Whether it is in praise or condemnation, a classic must make an impact, and the simplest way to understand this in an academic context is the number of times a work has been cited.

The second criterion relates to the persistent value of the work in terms of its impact on public discourse, as Kuhn (2012) contends. An academic classic should be a work that is not only of a particular time but whose relevance as a point of reference persists through time. In an academic context this could be judged through reference to the long-term citation rate of the work, a criterion particularly relevant to older works. If an older work continues to be cited, despite its age and the changing whim of the times, it clearly has had a lasting impact upon the field. The long-term significance of recently published works would, of course, be impossible to judge.

The third criteria we consider in this paper relates to the way in which classics serve to shape a discipline. Calvino describes classics as “*... those books which come to us bearing the aura of previous interpretations, and trailing behind them the traces they have left in the culture...*” (2000, p. 5). A classic has a formative morphological function in a discipline. Influential texts provide unity to otherwise disparate elements, providing a common focus, concepts or language to a discipline, framing the context within which future developments can be built. Classics define the discourse by enunciating significant aspects of the discipline that have hereto remained unexpressed. Kuhn (2012, p. 10) talks of classics as being “*...sufficiently unprecedented to attract an enduring group of adherents away from competing modes of scientific activity.*” He

¹ Calvino talks of classics with a sense of romantic wonder. To Calvino, “*...the classics help us understand who we are and the point we have reached...*” (2000, p. 9). Classification of a work of literature as a classic can be a very interpretive process and although he provides criteria, Calvino acknowledges that “*...what distinguishes a classic is perhaps only a kind of resonance we perceive emanating either from an ancient or modern work, but one which has its own place in a cultural continuum*” (p. 7).

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