

# A ‘ZOMBIE’ EXISTENCE: EXPLORING ULRICH BECK’S ZOMBIE CATEGORIES AND CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

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Many construction management researchers continue to be preoccupied with narrowly advancing the corporate causes of productivity and profitability, with relative neglect for the implications of recent developments in the global economy. In this article, Ulrich Beck’s idea of ‘zombie categories’ and his theory of reflexive modernity is drawn upon to critically discuss how these render traditional studies of organisational performance limited. Zombies are the living dead. Like zombies, these are social concepts that are dead and yet kept alive in their use by scholars to describe the growing fiction of traditional social institutions. Through a reflection of two cases - a doctoral research project on construction labour productivity and an ongoing study on servitization of construction - it is argued that one needs to move away from the current complacency in using, and becoming used to, familiar categories in construction management research to question their consequences. The promulgation of ‘zombie categories’ associated with organisational performance in construction might serve only to create the problems that many desire to solve in the first place.

Keywords: post-structuralism, reflexive modernity, research method, zombie category.

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to provide a fresh critical reflection on the categorisations that we, as a community of construction management researchers, have become somewhat accustomed to. In part, the motivation of this article emanated from an email reply posted by a Portuguese academic on the Co-operative Network Building Researchers (CNBR) in December 2012, in response to an earlier posting regarding the measurement of student satisfaction. The Portuguese colleague wrote:

*"In 2010, at the CIB General Assembly held during the CIB 2010 World Congress in UK, I raised the following question: How can we call this CIB World Congress 'Building a Better World' without having a single paper addressing the huge unemployment rate, in 2010, in the European construction Industry. I added that no discussion was held addressing how to put people/companies back to work when construction industry was badly hit by the 2008 financial crisis."*

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This posting questioned whether exchanges over the conditions and consequences of measuring student satisfaction implied the avoidance by the academic community to tackle the tougher, societal challenges that are confronting young people today.

Indeed, recent statistics indicate a sharp rise in youth unemployment in the Eurozone. For example, Spain - which saw her ongoing recession developed, in part, out of disproportionate growth in the property market in the 1990s - recently reported an unemployment rate among young people of over 55%, making her the second worse state after Greece in the European Community in terms of youth unemployment (see Eurostat, 2013). And so, perhaps the difficult questions that the Portuguese academic raised to the global community of building researchers appear reasonable. Yet, his posting was not entirely accurate; there were, in fact, two sessions at the CIB 2010 World Congress dedicated to discussing how the industry could address the global economic crisis. Even if these sessions downplayed the significance of the need to tackle unemployment, I certainly recall presenting an article at this World Congress on the representation of migrant construction workers amidst deteriorating working conditions in the UK following the recent recession.

Admittedly, in the organisation of conferences, there lie a number of problems in the classification of articles and presentations into identifiable sessions. For instance, just how do we categorise a heterogeneous range of contributions into a number of neatly-ordered subjects and sessions that make sense to participants? My article on migrant worker representation was, rather curiously, placed within a track on "Construction Economics" and juxtaposed alongside contributions on economic incentivisation of infrastructure projects. Then, there is the logistical challenge of organising the programme; with the numerous carving up of plenary and concurrent sessions, there is bound to be the possibility that participants might inadvertently miss out on certain articles and presentations of interest simply because of the scheduling of the sessions. The posting by the Portuguese academic might suggest this to be the case.

Yet, this somewhat trivial event of an email exchange over the CNBR network does trigger the question as to how we, as researchers, use (and become used to engaging with) the categories for representing, describing and explaining our observations. The categorising and order of things is certainly not a new problem (see e.g. Foucault, 1970; Bergson, 1988, and; Styhre, 2004); and in the study of academic conferences, categorisations are often a consequence of a process of contestation and legitimisation, negotiation and struggles of hierarchical power across and within academic disciplines (see e.g. Räisänen, 1999; Blumen and Bar-Gal, 2006, and; Gross and Fleming, 2011). The email extract above certainly suggests some form of power relations at play through the categorisation of subjects presented at the conference. So, for example, why is the study of the consequences of the recession on employment seemingly marginalised? Why do the discursive practices at the CIB 2010 World Congress appear to be void of the discussion of practices to help tackle youth unemployment?

In this article, I shall endeavour to reflect on the idea of categories used in construction management research. I seek to explore two interrelated questions here; why do some categories endure and what are the consequences of such persistence? Specifically, I argue that research in the field of construction management is dominated by a performative agenda, and that (social) categories are inscribed within a production paradigm. I draw on the work of German sociologist, Ulrich Beck, to claim that these categories are no longer relevant, or at least less relevant, in a world that is shifting (or has shifted) to a consumption paradigm. In Beck's terms, these categories are known as 'zombie categories', categories that are perpetuated (kept

alive) to describe social phenomenon that are apparently 'dead' (see Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001). I apply Ulrich Beck's notion of 'zombie categories' and his theory of reflexive modernity to reflect on two cases - a doctoral study on construction labour productivity and another on servitization of construction - to explore the consequences of persisting with such categories. Through these reflections, I shall argue that the promulgation of the production-based categories serve not only to reinforce the problems that are being investigated, but also play a crucial part in creating the problems that the research sought to tackle in the first place.

## **CONSTRUCTING CONSTRUCTION PERFORMANCE: WHAT CAN ULRICH BECK TEACH US?**

Organisational performance, as a theme, has been immensely popular in the field of construction management research. Take, for instance, the twelve issues of Construction Management and Economics published in 2012. A majority of the sixty-five articles published that year had, at their core, the object of trying to improve the performance of construction organisations through a range of well-established constructs, including critical success factors, project governance, productivity, knowledge sharing, information and communication technologies (ICTs) and sustainability and resource efficiency. A number of scholars were also keen to address age-old problems of corruption, delays and health and safety. Indeed, one gets the impression that the industry, or rather the scholars studying the affairs of the industry, continues to tackle business-as-usual problems of improving organisational performance. And this is, as the Portuguese academic suggested, done at the possible expense of tackling more tricky societal challenges that have emerged more recently. Remarkably, only two articles could be identified, in a special issue on human resource management (volume 30, issue 7), to have dealt with worker issues in the context of the unfolding economic downturn (Thörnqvist and Woolfson, 2012, and; Gall, 2012).

The enduring category of improving 'performance' found in construction management research has, nevertheless, attracted scrutiny from a fair number of critical authors. Green (2011), for instance, talks of the rhetoric of industry reform and argued that performance improvements are rarely brought about through rational, technical means; change is, rather, situated within a wider historical and institutional context where performance is socially negotiated. Of course, criticisms of the (still) prevailing positivistic traditions of construction management research was first brought to the fore by Seymour and Rooke (1995), who asserted that many of the so-called conventional problems confronting the industry cannot simply be addressed rationally:

*"The objectives of practitioners, for example, quality, efficiency, productivity or profits, cannot be taken to be self-evident by the researcher. An essential purpose of research is to establish what participants in the situation under study, managers, engineers or steelfixers, mean by these terms and what values and beliefs underlie such meanings. Researcher may well share some of the understandings of some of the participants, but it is imperative that they suspend their own understandings (Seymour and Rooke, 1995: 522)."*

This extract, taken from their seminal paper, highlights a number of performance categories - i.e. quality, efficiency, productivity, profitability - that still attract many loyal followers in the construction management research community. Of course, what Seymour and Rooke (1995) started was to challenge the dominance of the positivist paradigm in shaping the research questions about construction management. And this

has certainly resulted in a greater degree of methodological pluralism in the field (see Dainty, 2008). Yet, the point of departure in this article is to recognise that things have perhaps moved on from the battles fought between the duality of objectivity and subjectivity, of essentialism (rationalism) and existentialism (lived-in experiences and contexts). The attention of this article is placed, instead, on disturbing the complacency in the formulation and use of categories in our research. Put another way, just why are these established categories of performance necessarily established? And what are the consequences?

Indeed, any categorising is fraught with the difficulties associated with the incompleteness of language and representation. Foucault certainly recognised the longstanding challenge of finding a 'label' for categorising descriptions of reality, of "seeing what, in the rather confused wealth of representation, can be analysed, recognized by all, and thus given a name that everyone will be able to understand (1970: 134)." Similarly, Bergson (1988:125), cited in Styhre (2004), argued that "every language, whether elaborated or crude, leaves many more things to be understood than it is able to express."

Thus, those who reject the idea that the categories of representation can be taken-for-granted, like Seymour and Cooke (1995) in our field, often treat knowledge about our problems as socially constructed (see also e.g. Berger and Luckmann, 1967, and; Latour and Woolgar, 1979). Categories of our knowledge about the world are constantly in flux, shifting within an array of power relationships, and defined only as "the field of coordination and subordination of statements in which concepts appear, and are defined, applied and transformed [...] by the possibilities of use and appropriation offered by discourse (Foucault, 1972: 182-3)."

In a post-structural, post-modern world, it is the diversity of interpretive capacities that matter, which in turn could yield fresh insights into the world around us.

Therefore, the stresses on 'being' taken-for-granted categories have given way to a growing acknowledgement that society is constantly organising, ever 'becoming' in the moving present (see Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). However, just what are we becoming? This is certainly a question that has prompted Ulrich Beck, a German sociologist, to rethink about modernity, and whose work will be briefly sketched out in the remainder of this section.

### **Ulrich Beck's 'Zombie Categories' and Theory of Reflexive Modernity**

Ulrich Beck is a German sociologist who currently holds Professorships at the University of Munich and the London School of Economics and Political Science. He is perhaps most famous for coining the term 'Risk Society', and for his critique of the politics of globalisation. It is not the intention here to go into too much depth on Beck's ideas, but to outline two main concepts - 'zombie categories' and reflexive modernity - that are relevant to the discussion on 'categories'.

As a post-structural theorist, Ulrich Beck does not subscribe to positivist sociology on the one hand, and is not content with the degree of relativism associated with post-modern scholarship on the other. One of his longstanding interests lies in critiquing the idea of the nation state in light of a reawakening of the idea of cosmopolitanism. For example, he noted how calculating and attributing responsibility for environmental emissions along the lines of national, territorial boundaries was bizarre even though the supposed dangers of climate change were meant to strike the planet on a global scale demanding an inter-national and inter-governmental response (see Beck, 1992; 2009). Thus, for Beck, the notion of the nation state can be said to have

become a 'zombie category', one that is increasingly impotent (dead) but kept alive in political discourse. Yet, at the same time, Beck is uncomfortable with the shifting possibilities, the ever 'becoming', of post-modern thought. He prompted the question as to what modernity is to become:

*"Just as modernization dissolved the structure of feudal society in the nineteenth century and produced the industrial society, modernization today is dissolving industrial society and another modernity is coming into being (Beck, 1992: 10)."*

In his seminal work on 'Risk Society' and a later piece on individualization, he set the groundwork for what was to become his contribution to a 'reflexive sociology'. This bears deep implications for the discussion on 'categories'. There are two key points that are worth explaining here. First, he argued that society is becoming more individualized, not in terms of the ways people relate themselves to the collective notion of society, but that they have a more heightened sense of awareness of their selves to the notion of the collective (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; see also Latour, 2003). In this sense, his idea of a reflexive modernity is one that calls into question the production and reproduction of knowledge between the lay and the experts (and the increasingly-blurred boundary between the two). Thus, much like the argument put forward by Seymour and Rooke (1995) on the relationship between the researcher and the 'practitioner' subjects, reflexive modernity presents opportunities for both the lay and experts to reflect on the terms used to describe the realities of the world around them.

Indeed, Beck would argue that, in many cases, the lay people were probably much more knowledgeable (aware) about what was going on around them than the experts (including policy-makers and academics) charged with responding to challenges faced by society. It is here that one needs to become concerned with 'zombie categories', categories that no longer apply to the world but are continuously perpetuated. Beck uses social class as an example to illustrate how class is constituted by a number of social categories that have become zombified:

*"Until now sociologists have written textbooks and done research on the class structure of Britain, France, the United States, Germany and so on. But if you look at how a class-based sociology defines class categories, you find that it depends upon what is going on in families, in households. Empirical definitions of class identity are founded on categories of household, defined by either a male (head) of the household, or, at least, the leading person of a household. But what is a 'household' nowadays, economically, socially, geographically, under conditions of living-apart-together, normal divorce, remarriage and transnational life forms (Beck, 2002: 24)?"*

Indeed, as Beck and Lau (2005) stressed, "categorical boundaries become less clear and their rationalization more difficult, so it becomes increasingly necessary to decide on one or several new ways of drawing boundaries (p. 527)." It is no wonder why scholars are often seduced into finding 'new models' of representation; the recent excitement over the latest Social Class Survey in Britain (Savage et al., 2013) - drawing in a participant count of over 161,000 respondents and over 6.9 million hits on the BBC website - illustrate both the ongoing quest to redefine categorical boundaries whilst perpetuating interest in an old concept however defined.

Being able to reduce categorical boundaries and delineate between standards and deviance is certainly one of the hallmarks of positivism. This brings us to another of Beck's substantive point about the risk society and reflexive modernity. Accordingly, individuals, and by extension society, have developed a heightened awareness of the

risks around them. However, the prevailing approach has often been one that sets out to assess and mitigate against calculable components of risk. Certainly in the field of construction management research, the approach of hazard identification and calculation of risk(s) probabilities and priorities have become somewhat routinised in textbooks, if not practice. Yet, Beck argues that it is perhaps this very approach of systematising the management of risks - he calls it the anticipation and staging of risks - that, in the end, create the catastrophe that the risk management was initially intended to avoid. Indeed, it the incalculable threats that would "add up to an unknown residual risk which becomes the industrial endowment for everyone everywhere (Beck, 1992: 29)."

Beck uses several contemporary examples to illustrate this idea. Two of my favourites include the state of unemployment and the financial crisis. So, the concern with the high rates of unemployment globally is, according to Beck, somewhat misdirected on to the problems of lack of work and the attributes of the workless. Rather, Beck (2009) posited that current levels of unemployment is a problem created because modernity had created the idea (and ideal) of full employment. Relatedly, it is not that individual financial institutions were clueless about the risks of their investments, but that collectively, the financial system designed to provide safeguards against failures ended up over-protecting the system with institutions indemnifying one another (e.g. through credit default options) that ultimately led to the meltdown. Thus, Beck strongly asserted,

*"The established rules for allocating responsibility - causality and blame - are breaking down [...] the old routines of decision, control and production (in law, science, administration, industry and politics) cause the material destruction of nature and its symbolic normalization (Beck, 2009: 91)."*

## A TALE OF TWO STUDIES

So, how does the preceding discussion apply to construction management research? I shall attempt to apply the two points raised here - the idea of the 'zombie category' and how our 'modern' ways of thinking have created 'catastrophes' of their own - by reflecting on two doctoral research projects on labour productivity and servitization of construction respectively.

### Where is labour in labour productivity?

The first study relates to my own doctoral research project on labour productivity in the construction industry. I had initially wanted to investigate the effects of training investment on labour productivity levels. As I started reading around the subject, I found an overwhelming volume of previous scholarship forensically identifying the factors influencing labour productivity. My moment of epiphany came when I started my fieldwork; the mismatch between what I was observing in practice and what the research articles were telling me could not be starker. Above all, the construction companies that I was collaborating with - mainly large organisations - did not collect and analyse intelligence on productivity levels, let alone delineate the factors influencing productivity. Productivity in practice, it would seem to me, was no longer a matter of concern!

I then set out on a new course, eventually producing a thesis that explored differentiated interpretations between managers and workers of their perceptions of labour productivity in construction (see e.g. Chan and Kaka, 2007). But, has 'productivity' now become zombified? On reflection, my observation of the

irrelevance of labour productivity to these large construction companies was probably an accurate one. The large companies I was dealing with, at that time, no longer employ labour on their sites. Instead, degrees of specialisation and extended layers of sub-contracting have given rise to the growth of non-standard forms of employment, such as agency workers and labour-only-subcontractors (see e.g. Forde and Mackenzie, 2007). Thus, the concept of productivity is no longer a meaningful one, used but no longer usable because these companies no longer produce. Rather, the large companies I was dealing with were managing the production process involving these extended layers of sub-contracting agents. Put another way, the companies I was observing had become consumers of production and so this demands new ways of thinking about performance.

Indeed, a recent study undertaken in the Canadian construction industry goes to show just how the production-based category of productivity has now become a zombie category. Here, the researchers identified a need to find alternative approaches to labour productivity, and concluded their investigation by reconceptualising the performance agenda in terms of the maturity of organisational capabilities (in itself another tiresome prescription):

*"The major implication of this study is that researchers and policy makers are now provided with an alternative to labor productivity and competitiveness as a means of assessing the current state of the construction industry (Willis and Rankin, 2012: 399)."*

By shifting the category from productivity to the maturity of organisational capabilities, the emphasis moves away from a strictly production paradigm towards a focus on the management (and consumption) of production. So, productivity from a production perspective can be said to become zombified. But what has this got to do with reflexive modernity? Arguably, modernity was symbolised in the systematic ways of thinking about (the factors of) productivity, embodied in the wealth of articles I was reading at the outset. It is likely that such systematic ways of thinking about productive versus non-productive aspects of work help sanctioned the ever extending layers of supply relationships that we have come to characterise the construction industry today (see e.g. Chan and Marchington, 2012). Thus, thinking about the drivers and constraints of the productive capacity of construction labour (conventionally owned by a definable employer) has given rise to the management of calculable risks involved in managing labour. This, in turn, led to companies making the gradual transition away from a production-based paradigm to a consumption-based paradigm, thereby dropping labour altogether.

### **The often-overlooked 'hyphen' in Product-Service systems**

If productivity was an old concept that I tried to resurrect in my doctoral study, a more contemporary phenomenon related to the servitization of the construction industry (see e.g. Dainty, 2007, and; Leiringer and Bröchner, 2010). The story goes that the context of public-private-partnerships has given rise to the need for thinking about the whole life cycle of built environment assets created by the construction industry. This in turn calls for novel ways of thinking about moving away from a product-centred offering towards a greater service orientation in construction. Here again, Johnstone et al. (2008) noted a wealth of literature providing recipes for systematising the transition towards a service-oriented way of working.

Much of the literature on servitization of the construction industry recognises two principal forms of business logic, i.e. product-dominant versus service-dominant

logic. In this ever-expansive literature base, there is often a suggestion that one needed to move towards a service-dominant logic in order to stay competitive in the marketplace, and that this required getting closer to the 'customer'. Indeed, the construction management literature has, over the last few decades, seen more nuanced treatment of who the construction 'client' might be and the implications for theory and practice (see e.g. Boyd and Chinyio, 2006, and; Thomson, 2011).

However, there remains constant tension between the two logics - product and service - in moving towards greater servitization of construction. Consider the following quote from an Operations Director interviewed in the study done by Leiringer and colleagues (2009), illustrating how the dilemma associated with moving from a product-dominant to a service-dominant logic often exists.

*"I think it's important that we maintain our identity and we don't diversify to purely a service provider type of organization. I think it's important that we recruit good civil engineers who want to build and construct things and improve things (p. 277)."*

This quote provides an indication that the move towards greater service orientation can be risky. In making the transition from a product-dominant to service-dominant mode of working, there is a sense that the Operations Director in question was clearly marking out the discrete categories of 'product' and 'service' types of organisation, emphasising in his mind the established category of 'building' things. Besides, what would be left of a construction company if it were to stop constructing? And so, comfort is sought in the 'production' paradigm as the argument is made against moving towards "purely a service provider" as this risk losing a sense of identity.

Arguably, the demarcation between 'product' and 'service' is a false dichotomy. Surely, we have always been producing things in order to service the needs of people. Thus, the importance of getting close to and servicing the customer cannot be such a recent phenomenon that has attracted research attention only over the last few decades! So, what purpose do categories such as 'product' and 'service' provide? Are these categories simply zombified too? Perhaps part of the problem, as discussed in the preceding section on productivity, is the idea that some construction companies have moved from being a producer to becoming an orchestrator and consumer of production. So, the current emphasis on servitization of the construction industry can be seen as a consequence of companies and industries being carved up into identifiable categories of 'product' and 'service' type organisations (e.g. through standard industry codes) that promulgates the need to conceptualise their integration.

The case has been made for 'integration' as a new space for subsuming product-based and service-based offerings (see e.g. Leiringer et al., 2009, and; Leiringer and Bröchner, 2010). Thus, what may appear rather insignificantly as a hyphen between 'product' and 'service' in product-service systems is not so innocent after all. On the one hand, the hyphen signifies prospects of joining up and making the transition between the two categories of production and consumption. On the other hand, it symbolises the divisiveness between production and consumption logics, forcing practitioners like the Operations Director in Leiringer's et al. (2009) to take sides.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this article, the problems associated with the formulation and use of categories for describing our research phenomena and the wider world around us have been reflected upon. Specifically, Ulrich Beck's ideas of 'zombie categories' and reflexive modernity have been used to argue how complacency in the use of production-based categories

led to the stickiness of the (organisational) performance agenda in the field. Thus, this article contributes by extending beyond the object-subject duality ignited by Seymour and Cooke in the mid-1990s, by exploring the question as to what the often taken-for-granted and, as I have argued, 'zombified' categories do to reinforce the rhetorical discourses in our field. More critically, I have suggested that the pursuit of more elaboration on these production-based categories can potentially create the 'catastrophes' we have so often been eager to avert. Thus, knowing more about productivity might just make us less concerned about being productive, as companies move away from production to becoming consumers of production. Similarly, the call to integrate between 'product' and 'service' modes of working is a possible implication of the modern pursuit of specialisation. The question that remains unanswered is just why such zombified, production-based categories continue to endure in our field. Exploring this deeper would require a further reflection on the political and institutional dynamics of construction management research.

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