# What Peter Morris's books meant to me: an *Amarcord*

PLEASE CITE THIS PAPER AS “Locatelli, G. 2022. What Peter Morris's books meant to me An Amarcord. DOI10.1016j.ijproman.2022.01.001. pp.95-97. In INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT - ISSN0263-7863 vol. 40 (2)”

I have on my desk three Professor Peter Morris's books: "The Anatomy of Major Projects", "The Management of Projects" and "Reconstructing Project Management". They have been my companions for research ("The Anatomy of Major Projects"), they made me fall in love with projects and supported my teaching ("The Management of Projects") and ultimately helped to conceptualise/discuss project management ("Reconstructing Project Management") over the last 15 years. Unfortunately, I never met Professor Peter Morris, but his books played, and still play, a major role in my career. With this essay, I do not intend to discuss the content of these books, in this special issue there are excellent references for that, but I would like to share with IJPM readers how these books shaped my research and teaching, and how can help other researchers.

"The Anatomy of Major Projects" was the first book on project management that I read. Despite being a "Professor of Project Management," I never attended a project management module as a student. It was about 2006-2007, and I was investigating the economics of nuclear power plants. My background at the time was a technical high school and five years of Mechanical Engineering, so my understanding of economics and management was rudimental at best. Therefore, looking at nuclear power plants, I had a few basic questions such as: *"Why are nuclear power plants so expensive? Why is their cost so different worldwide, despite the designs being similar? Why, in most of the cases, does the construction end up over budget and late or terminated before commercial operations?"* In the previous months, I read several documents and reports about nuclear power plant cost, but the vast majority were explaining the different technologies or dealing with questions "What's the historical cost of building Nuclear Power Plants? What's their cost driver? How is it possible to estimate their cost?" (EMWG, 2007). I was simply looking in the wrong place. Retrospectively I know that I was looking for "Why questions", while technical/engineering documents are about "What and How". As

argued by Müller & Klein, (2018), I needed a theory – explanatory power that, only good management publications can have. The first half of "The Anatomy of Major Projects" is a collection of cases.

One case, in particular, captured my attention "Heysham 2 Nuclear Power Station and the AGR Programme". This chapter is remarkable since it discusses a major nuclear power project in the context of a nuclear power programme. It speaks about decisions and their consequence *from a management perspective.* This chapter was written in November 1986 but has several elements (e.g. governance, learning across projects) that have been later more formally recognised and discussed in the project management literature. It tells a great story, interesting even for people outside the nuclear sector. It is a great example of a case study, a method still incredibly relevant in project studies (Martinsuo & Huemann, 2021a, 2021b). While the "nuclear reports" that I was reading tried to explain nuclear economics according to the design of the reactor (e.g. tons of concrete), labour cost or regulations, the chapter shows the intimate link between a project (or programme), the governance and the organisations involved. In other terms it shows how project outcomes are driven by the interplay between temporary organisations and permanent organisations, something later elaborated by people like Prof. Karlos Artto in Project Business (see, e.g. (Artto & Kujala, 2008)). The chapter clearly benefits from Professor Peter Morris' experience since 1967, when he newly began work as a site engineer at Dungeness nuclear power station. The chapter explains the game of power played by the different consortia pushing for their respective technologies, the links with politics, the role played by innovation etc. These are all topics that are now commonly discussed in project studies journals, but that were incredibly new and fresh in 1987. Remarkably they were totally new for me and the vast majority of people in the nuclear community that never thought that a "Project Management professor" had something to say to them about "their technology". I still love this book since it is a great mix of technical aspects and organisational and policy discussions; it shows how engineering and management are ideal companions. Re-reading the book now, I still have one question: how did Professor Morris manage to collect all those technical and managerial information across so very different infrastructures without the internet?

Alessandro Barbero is one of the most popular Italian professors. He is a historian professor, mostly focused on the middle-ages who became a television personality in the last few years because of a series of very engaging history lectures. A few times, he made a very relevant point, "why are we studying history?" his answer is incredibly simple: "because history is very interesting". Provocatively, he says, that there are many "useful professionals" such as lawyers, cardiologists or electrical engineers that tell him that their passion is history and spend their free time visiting

museums or castles or reading history books, but he never saw a history professor enjoying reading books of law or solving engineering equations. Professor Morris understood this idea perfectly: people love history and good stories. The first seven chapters of "The Management of Projects" are an engaging and passionate excursus on the interplay between projects and managing projects with the development of various tools, techniques and approaches. As pleasant as reading a good novel, "The Management of Projects", is necessary to understand the roots of project management as a profession and discipline. It was about 2010 when, as a second-third year PhD student, I started to teach project management. I was teaching engineers in Politecnico di Milano (and later in Lincoln and Leeds); therefore, I needed something "practical" that would be relevant for them. Obviously, engineers should be interested in project management since *"Technology is a central issues in most projects (even in so called pure change management ones" (p. 5),* but there is always the challenge of making "management topics" concrete and relevant for them. Here, Professor Morris and "The Management of Projects" came to my help.

"The Management of Projects" is not a textbook (even if figures on page 262 "the project planning process" and page 266 "Task responsibility matrix" are in my teaching slides), but it is ideal reading for people teaching project management to engineers since it puts tools and instruments in context. For instance, the chapters about the 1950s clearly explain why people came up with both with Critical Path Method, PERT, and Precedence Diagram method (or precedence schedule). This is not trivial since most of the textbooks might present the PERT and Precedence Diagram method without explaining why they are structured that way and why we came up with two methods. Again, we go back to the point of "explaining why", not just a plain presentation of tools, techniques, instruments and process but, using Professor Morris words, the reasons for the "development of a management discipline". It is incredibly interesting how Professor Peter Morris, links projects to programme, organisations and context, even political context and external stakeholders. These were later conceptualised in the "Three domains of project organising" (Winch, 2014) or project ecology (Söderlund, 2004)(Hedborg et al., 2020). Those topics are all presented in my first lecture when I introduce students to the interesting "reality of projects".

The last section of the book, chapter 9, is called "and now?" Professor Morris courageously asked (himself) a bold question "how will the management of projects develop over the next 10-20 years?" (p. 273). The book was published in 1994, so 28 years later, we can check if his "forecasts" were good or not. I encourage the reader to do so, I won't spoil it, but I just want to share some good points. Already in 1994, Professor Morris pointed out an IPCC report linking greenhouse gasses to an increase in temperature and the consequent environmental disaster that we are now beginning to witnesses. Other sentences seem to be written yesterday *"While the market trend toward sourcing*

*financing from the private sector will continue, it would be naïve that there will not be a major role for public-sector financing"* (page 286). If we look at the status of the nuclear new build programme in the UK (and newcomer countries) we might think that Professor Morris had a crystal ball on his desk. Remarkable also his analysis of macro-economics shows the vast knowledge and deep understanding of the international context that Prof. Morris had. A concluding general point on this book: the recurring (implicit and explicit) theme on value creation through projects. The link between value and projects is recently receiving increasing attention, for instance with a special issue in IJPM in the 2019 (Martinsuo et al., 2019). Professor Morris had this idea in mind in the early 90s.

'Reconstructing Project Management" was published in 2013. At the time, I was a 31 years old lecturer at the University of Lincoln. I take two holidays at year and on each holiday (usually on a beach), I read an 'academic book" and a novel, along with a paper a day (suggestion for young academic: try to develop this routine, reading on holiday is far more effective than reading during workdays, and over the years it pays off. Yes, I know it is a holiday, but I don't feel that reading good project management literature is work). So, on one of these holidays, I read this book. This book gave me amazing ideas for research. Chapter number 2 starts discussing projects in pre-history, with examples such as the Egyptian pyrimidines, the workforce and related project management aspects. What this has to do with my/modern project management research? The introduction of one of my recent papers (Locatelli, 2021) goes like this "*There are thousands of years of experience in traditional "front-end" projects, like building new infrastructure or developing a new product. The Giza pyramid complex was built around 2600- 2500 BC; the Great Wall construction started in the 7th century BC and the Colosseum in Rome 70-80 AD. What all these marvellous and complex projects have in common from a management perspective? Surely a complex supply chain, workforce organisation, leadership, financing mechanism etc. but also little or no considerations regarding the end of their lifecycle. Indeed nobody thought about dismantling a pyramid! […] The issue of dealing with infrastructure decommissioning is far more recent, reasonably a few decades old.*" (pp.175). So this paper is a summary (for a practitioner audience) about my five years of research on decommissioning projects and megaprojects, where key elements were the historical perspective and comparison with new builds, a clear inspiration (mostly unconscious) reference to Professor Morris' book(s).

In November 2014 I published my first paper as a lead author in IJPM (Locatelli et al., 2014), discussing the role of system engineering in improving complex projects. I think that Morris' background influence is clear from the range of topics in the paper (complexity, system perspective, governance, front end, Vee model, etc.) and from the writing approach. Indeed the first of the three sections of 'Reconstructing Project Management' is again a historical excursus; my section 2.2.1 and

Figure 2 is the timeline of how system engineering standards evolved from 1969 to the present with their rationales. The case of "West Coast Route Modernisation" has a supporting narrative that mimics (good or bad, let the reader decide) the approach of Professor Morris in using examples to explain concepts.

The second part of this book is incredibly useful for teaching. For instance, Figures 9.1 and 9.2 (page 124) clearly present for the same case the difference between Product Breakdown Structure (PBS) and Work Breakdown Structure (WBS). Also, this section brings up ideas that I further developed in my research: value (Invernizzi et al., 2019), leadership (Cao et al., 2021), stakeholders and people (Locatelli et al., 2021), just to name a few. The last section of this book influenced me in the last 4-5 years when I tried to move away from the normative approach typical of industrial engineering, and I started to seriously supervise PhD students. As a mechanical engineer, I am not ashamed to admit that I struggled to understand why we need to bother about ontology, epistemology or why we need a theory[1]. Professor Morris's last section is *"A cry for rigour in methodology when putting forward new ideas"*; in this last section, he clearly explains these concepts in the context of project research. I try to do the same with my PhD students.

Here my Amarcord[2] ends. So, why I love Professor Peter Morris books? Simply because I love history and stories (many of my papers are based on case studies), I love engineering, and project management. Those books have them all. They showed me the importance of a good story, the importance of asking "why," and how to respond. My job is now to pass these books and knowledge to my PhD students or practitioners who are not satisfied with knowing facts or "best practices" and want to know the "why"… and of course recommend these books to people who know how to enjoy a good story.

Bergamo, 24 December 2021

[1] For this point (Müller & Klein, 2018) is incredibly clear and useful

[2] "Amarcord" is a univerbation of the Romagnolo phrase "a m'arcord" (literally "I remember"). "Amarcord" is the title of a 1973 Italian semi-autobiographical comedy-drama film directed by Federico Fellini, one of the greatest Italian film director. The title then became a neologism of the Italian language, meaning "nostalgic revocation".

**Acknowledgements**

I wish to thank Jeffrey Pinto and Graham Winch for the invitation to write this paper, their feedback and constructive comments. I feel that I belong to the "new generation – the 80s" of project scholars and I acknowledge the great effort done by the fathers and mothers of our discipline. We would not be here without all your work paving the way! Thanks!

REFERENCES

Artto, K., & Kujala, J. (2008). Project business as a research field. *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, *1*(4), 469–497. https://doi.org/10.1108/17538370810906219/FULL/PDF

Cao, T., Locatelli, G., Smith, N., & Zhang, L. (2021). A shared leadership framework based on boundary spanners in megaprojects. *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, *14*(5), 1065–1092. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMPB-03-2020-0090

EMWG. (2007). *GIF/EMWG/2007/004 COST ESTIMATING GUIDELINES FOR GENERATION IV NUCLEAR ENERGY SYSTEMS Revision 4.2*.

Hedborg, S., Eriksson, P. E., & Gustavsson, T. K. (2020). Organisational routines in multi-project contexts: Coordinating in an urban development project ecology. *International Journal of Project Management*, *38*(7), 394–404. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.IJPROMAN.2020.01.003

Invernizzi, D. C., Locatelli, G., Grönqvist, M., & Brookes, N. J. (2019). Applying value management when it seems that there is no value to be managed: the case of nuclear decommissioning. *International Journal of Project Management*, *37*(5), 668–683. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2019.01.004

Locatelli, G. (2021). Is Your Organization Ready for Managing "Back-End" Projects? *IEEE Engineering Management Review*, *49*(3), 175–181. https://doi.org/10.1109/EMR.2021.3098064

Locatelli, G., Greco, M., Invernizzi, D. C., Grimaldi, M., & Malizia, S. (2021). What about the people? Micro-foundations of open innovation in megaprojects. *International Journal of Project Management*, *39*(2), 115–127. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2020.06.009

Locatelli, G., Mancini, M., & Romano, E. (2014). Systems Engineering to improve the governance in complex project environments. *International Journal of Project Management*, *32*(8), 1395–1410. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2013.10.007

Martinsuo, M., & Huemann, M. (2021a). Designing case study research. *International Journal of Project Management*, *39*(5), 417–421. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.IJPROMAN.2021.06.007

Martinsuo, M., & Huemann, M. (2021b). Reporting case studies for making an impact. *International Journal of Project Management*, *39*(8), 827–833. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.IJPROMAN.2021.11.005

Martinsuo, M., Klakegg, O. J., & van Marrewijk, A. (2019). Editorial: Delivering value in projects and project-based business. *International Journal of Project Management*, *37*(5), 631–635. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.IJPROMAN.2019.01.011

Müller, R., & Klein, G. (2018). What Constitutes a Contemporary Contribution to Project Management Journal®?: *Https://Doi.Org/10.1177/8756972818791650*, *49*(5), 3–4. https://doi.org/10.1177/8756972818791650

Söderlund, J. (2004). On the broadening scope of the research on projects: a review and a model for analysis. *International Journal of Project Management*, *22*(8), 655–667. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.IJPROMAN.2004.05.011

Winch, G. M. (2014). Three domains of project organising. *International Journal of Project Management*, *32*(5), 721–731. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.IJPROMAN.2013.10.012