Dominant narratives, uncertainty denial, negative capability and conviction: A commentary on Fenton-O'Creevy and Tuckett 2021

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I have had a somewhat varied career that has among other things included stints working in multinational and in smaller consultancies, as-well-as working for government, and in the higher-education sector. Yet, this disparateness masks a certain commonality across my various experiences in these jobs. I have found that managers behave in a similar way regardless of context and denial is usually a central part of their behaviour. In every department or unit of any organisation a dominant narrative prevails, which can act to unite and galvanise, but also, and perhaps more often, to suppress and marginalise. The latter seems often to occur by accusing anyone with a different narrative, and especially one that challenges that which is dominant, of being 'negative'. This accusation is a weapon designed to dispel uncomfortable and inconvenient alternative perspectives and silence those voicing them. This ensures those whose interests depend on maintaining the dominant narrative need not face what might be a better (by which is meant a more accurate) representation of reality. In this way, attention is directed towards standard issues and answers that are deemed legitimate and worthy, and are usually representative of 'business as usual', in the process delegitimising and marginalising others that are less convenient and anxiety-inducing (Ocasio, 1997), but which might be transformative.

I once worked in a consultancy company in which the managers were well aware of, but did not wish to accept, their inability to point forecast the economy due to uncertainty, the existence of which in its radical form their econometric models denied (see Kay & King, 2020; Knight, 1921; Keynes, 1936 Shackle, 1955, 1961). To prove accurate as a guide to the future econometric-based tools require a stability that never exists over the long term due to novelty, complexity and openness. Instability – by which I primarily but do not exclusively mean disruptions to prevailing trends brought about by surprises (see credit crunch) and 'crucial' decisions (see Brexit) – negates the parameter relations that such models need to remain valid in order to prove accurate. Herein, we see the classic, and much discussed (then usually ignored), non-stationarity problem associated with standard forecasting and econometric methods, which is the very raison d'être for our futures and foresight field.

I joined that consultancy company early in 2008 and worked there for four years. At the point of my joining, the credit crunch was well under way, but its central acts, such as the collapse of Lehman Brothers, had yet to occur. Each Monday at 9am, all members of the company would gather to hear the following week's proceedings read out from the company diary. Since I started on a Monday, attending this meeting was the first thing I did. Given the company's focus on economic matters, and given what was then unfolding, on this particular occasion conversation naturally turned to the ongoing credit crunch. The Chairman of the company, who was also the designer of its econometric models, suggested that the company's models were better able – indeed, it was suggested by him, were the best – for understanding how the credit crunch would play out and affect the economy. This, he explained, was because these models were not based on assumptions of equilibrium as other models are. The models could thus account for the fact that, for example, the economy does not necessarily bounce back following an extreme event like the credit crunch, and may instead get stuck at a less desirable and depressed level, in the manner followers of Keynes' (1936) logic will find familiar.

Being aware of the company's output which I had looked at in preparation for joining, in this meeting I asked a question as to why it was, if its models were so much better, the company had only begun belatedly to realise that a major economic event was under way, and it had failed to forecast this event. Didn't this failure imply, I asked, that the company's models were perhaps not as superior as had been suggested? I thought my question would be taken in the spirit it was intended, which was as an opportunity to engage in meaningful discussion as to the company's modelling endeavours, the causes of the credit crunch, and (being from an alternative, complexity-science background myself) the usefulness or otherwise of econometric-based modelling methods. Alas, that was not the case. On my

first day in the job I had inadvertently challenged the company's dominant narrative and introduced an inconvenient, uncomfortable and anxiety-inducing alternative narrative.

The dominant narrative in that company was that its models were superior to others because they were not based on the dubious notion of an equilibrium. While I would sympathise with that view to a degree, what was worrying was that the ability of those in the company to forecast the future seemed unchanged in their own minds, despite their egregious failure to forecast the most important economic event in over one hundred years. Their logic was partly correct: an economic model that does not assume a return to equilibrium might be more likely to forecast what happens *after* an event like the credit crunch. Yet, what was overlooked was that that would thus be an after-the-fact 'prediction', whereas what people really need is to anticipate and prepare for extreme events of that type in advance. Moreover, it also overlooked the fact that such events, of one type or another, while seemingly extreme are not the exception but the norm in the world of business and economy (Andriani & McKelvey, 2007, 2009; McKelvey & Andriani, 2005). Other such events would thus come along and negate any subsequent long-term forecasts that were produced in response to the changed circumstances brought about by the credit crunch (see coronavirus). The company was in the thrall of what I have elsewhere called 'modelling hubris' (Derbyshire, 2021). Moreover, those running it had failed to develop what Fenton-O'Creevy and Tuckett (2021) call 'negative capability' after Keats and after Simpson et al. (2002), which is a concept I find compelling.

Managers who have 'negative capability' are able to receive criticism without responding that the dispenser is being 'negative' in order to silence them, dispel the criticism, and prevent whatever it is they are saying from gaining currency. Negative capability is a tremendously important skill for managers to possess, yet one that almost no manager does possess, at least in my experience. Maybe I'm just very unlucky with the managers I get, or maybe negative capability (or, rather, the lack of it) is an issue afflicting many organisations and most managers. Fenton-O'Creevy and Tuckett (2021) employ the excellent example of Nokia, as I have done elsewhere (Derbyshire & Giovannetti, 2017). The blindness of Nokia's management to alternative perspectives and its managers' lack of negative capability, as manifest in its dominant narrative of business as usual, is well captured by a quote from Nokia's then CEO that is highlighted by Fenton-O'Creevy and Tuckett (2021):

> 'We fell behind, we missed big trends, and we lost time. At that time, we thought we were making the right decisions; but, with the benefit of hindsight, we now find ourselves years behind' (The Guardian, 2011; Financial Times, 2011).

Of course, though easier said than done, the trick is to have *foresight*, not *hindsight*, as my previous employer did in relation to the credit crunch, and Nokia did in relation to the development of the smartphone, to which this quote refers. This is why we plough our sometimes thankless alternative furrow of futures and foresight science and in so doing adopt a perspective that runs counter to the mainstream in many of the domains we cut across – one which emphasises uncertainty rather than certainty, and unknowledge about the future (Shackle, 1955, 1961), rather than knowledge. We recognise the tendency of many to deny the existence of fundamental/radical uncertainty and to shoot the messenger who forces due consideration of it.

However, we also recognise that this issue is not a simple one. As Fenton-O'Creevy and Tuckett (2021) imply, organisations in many ways need dominant narratives in order to establish conviction, cohesion and collective effort towards a particular strategic end. Might highlighting uncertainty act against this? No, because a false, contrived and imposed conviction that is based on denying uncertainty and suppressing alternative perspectives will not do the job. Only by surfacing and facing the reality of alternative perspectives and possibilities, and the full extent of uncertainty, can it be hoped to achieve a cohesiveness that enables a strategic direction to be pursued by all in earnest. Only by accepting and acknowledging that the programme inevitably has flaws can people be expected to 'get with the programme'. Denying these flaws will have the opposite effect. Finally, only by accepting the right to

dissent can the organisation develop its negative capability, which is key *not only* to its long-term survival, but also to it being a desirable place to work.

Fenton-O'Creevy and Tuckett (2021)'s Conviction Narrative Theory provides fertile ground for researchers in our field to consider both why denial of uncertainty occurs in many organisations, and also how futures and foresight tools and methods may assist in bringing about an Integrated Stated, rather than a Divided State, as Fenton-O'Creevy and Tuckett (2021) call them. In an Integrated State, alternative perspectives are embraced, welcomed and explicitly sought out as an opportunity to reconsider and re-evaluate. Uncertainty is acknowledged rather than denied. Conviction is instilled by acknowledging problems and flaws, rather than suppressing their acknowledgement. Under a Divided State, in contrast, the organisation seeks to suppress and marginalise dissenting views, with potentially devastating long-term consequences, as Nokia discovered. In such a Divided State, those highlighting uncertainty are accused of negativity in order to silence them. The conviction that is engendered is a false, contrived and inadequate one based on fear and not openness.

Thankfully, while very difficult once a Divided State has taken hold, I have also learned in my varied career that it *is* possible for organisations to transition from a Divided State to an Integrated State. However, it requires that managers develop their negative capability, which they often dislike doing. Changing managers' habit of a lifetime is a difficult thing. Managers in the consultancy company in which I worked, as referred to earlier, were even sent on a training course specifically designed to help develop their negative capability, yet seemed still not to have any. A key question for those of us who are scholars of scenario planning is: to what extent, and specifically how, can scenario planning assist in this process of developing negative capability by providing a psychologically safe environment for surfacing conflicting, deeply-entrenched, emotive and incommensurable views on the organisation's external environment and its uncertainty?

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