

14 Boundary work – power and liminality in management consulting¹

Felix Stein

“I know nothing about insurance, absolutely nothing.” These were the words of my colleague Lucien,² sitting opposite me in our office in the heart of Paris. We were part of a mostly German team of management consultants hired by a financial services firm in the French capital. Lucien, a junior consultant in his late twenties, was writing a PowerPoint presentation, meant as a rough plan for how to sell more travel insurance in Asia. His points for the plan were “all high-level stuff,” he said, and included mostly broad statements such as “start building dedicated global sales team,” or “define timeline for legal and regulatory steps.” Whilst writing these points, he repeated how ignorant he was about insurance activity. He had occasionally made similar admissions over the previous weeks and months, mentioning how little he understood when meeting individual clients, or laughing at how unsystematic some of the assumptions of his spreadsheet calculations had been.

More often than not, Lucien’s assertions of his own ignorance were accompanied by a smile, conveying a sense that much of his work was somewhat fake. I took this smile to mean that he did not know what he was writing about, but that it could be considered funny that he managed to convince others of his “expertise.” His success as a consultant may have seemed absurd to him, as he had no prior project experience in the insurance business and seemed to have little knowledge of how companies such as our client operated beyond what he considered “common sense.” Instead, Lucien seemed to have been placed on our consulting team for socio-cultural reasons, rather than for any specialized knowledge. He was the only French member on a team consisting of three Germans (including myself) working with different European subsidiaries of a financial services company.³ Since we spent most of our time at client offices in Paris, Lucien could interview the French client staff and help our team book offices, taxis, flights and hotels.

At other times however, Lucien’s seemingly facetious comments about his own ignorance appeared to suggest an air of genuine wonder. He appeared to marvel at his ability to be successful at his job, in spite of his self-professed ignorance of the subject matter. In day-to-day work, Lucien

did convey a genuine desire to help our client. He was personally close to some of the managers we worked with and sincerely happy when he could present them with useful insights. When I talked to him years later about this project, he still remembered both contacts fondly. His sense of obligation to them was not simply grounded in personal affection but also in the high salary that we charged for our work. On the rare occasions when Lucien took an evening off, he professed feeling guilty because he “was not adding value” to our client. It therefore seemed that in his comments concerning his own ignorance, Lucien also admired the fact that he did in fact add value to the client, despite having only a superficial idea of how travel insurance operated. He was amazed by his own productivity, so to speak.

This chapter addresses the conundrum of whether and how management consultants who may at times be quite ignorant about a topic can write expensive and sometimes highly influential plans for top management. It argues that management consultants are not first and foremost “knowledge workers.” This may come as a surprise to some analysts of the sector, who tend to represent it as the structural answer to corporate information deficits (McKenna 2006; Thrift 1997). It may also be startling for potential clients and young job applicants, who may have read on consultancy recruiting websites that these companies engage mostly in “problem-solving” or that their product is “their ideas” and “solutions to many of the world’s most complex challenges” (Bain & Company 2014).

And yet, knowledge will here be shown to be one of several means employed in the wider effort of consultants to support the intra-corporate rule of top management. Corporate managers tend to lack legitimacy – in part just because this is a defining feature of corporate elites in general (cf. Mosse 2005: 14; Shore and Nugent 2002), but in part also because of the abstract nature of their work (Stein 2017). Spittler (2016: 126ff.) has helpfully divided workplace rule into that of the “lord” (*Herr*), the “master” (*Meister*) and the manager. While lords reap the benefits of other people’s labour but do not directly interfere in work processes, masters interfere to a much higher degree and have the necessary skills to teach newcomers how to conduct their work properly. Managers, on the other hand, are hybrids of these two ideal types in that their decisions tend to exert a great deal of influence over the work of subordinates, even if they themselves often lack the knowledge or skills necessary to carry it out. This classification is of course not set in stone, and many exceptions exist that complicate it in praxis, but it usefully points to a managerial legitimation deficit, in which consultants intervene as agents of managerial rule.

As part of the legitimizing of top management, the consultants that I observed equally needed to legitimize their own position in a company (Skovgaard Smith 2013). The two efforts of legitimation were interdependent, in that clients who were legitimized by consultants were inclined to accept their work, while only consultants whose work was seen as legitimate were in a position to strengthen their clients. As will be demonstrated,

consultants achieved and created legitimacy for themselves in two important ways. First, they referred to two contradictory aspects of knowledge, namely a positivist one and a perspectival one. Secondly, they positioned themselves either as “insiders” or as “outsiders” of their client companies. Both aspects of their activity made them socially liminal beings, who alternated between different sets of expectations concerning the kinds of knowledge that they were able to provide and the social obligations that did or did not apply to them. However, this constantly liminal position comes with a risk of being seen as a polluting “other” (Douglas 2001; Turner 1991), a problem that drives consultants’ constant re-assertion of their own professionalism, and which partially explains their controversial role in society at large.

This argument should be read as a contribution to recent ethnographic work on how power operates among corporate elites. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu, Ho (2009: 11) has shown that these workers strongly rely on dispositions and habitus, which in conjunction with a matching institutional culture allow them to exert power over others.⁴ Chong (2012: 23) has drawn attention to how consultants operating in China present themselves as exemplars of market-oriented prowess, capable of “upskilling” Chinese workers, and Zaloom (2006) has foregrounded the importance of performing a hyper-masculine maverick individuality in the context of derivatives trading. The material presented here links these insights to the realization that corporate boundaries are much more mobile and contested than frequently assumed (Welker 2009; Welker et al. 2011; Golub 2014; Sturdy et al. 2006). This chapter shows that in the resulting social and epistemic ambiguity that marks corporate settings, power operates via strategic attachment to and detachment from the socio-epistemic boundaries of corporations.

The chapter begins by showing that my colleagues and I working in Paris were in several senses “outsiders” vis-à-vis the client we worked for. As such we alternated between two forms of knowledge and were in a position to carry through socially controversial projects that threatened to undermine the legitimacy of top management. It goes on to show that we were also “insiders,” enabling a new and inexperienced manager to position herself favourably within the corporation she worked for. In a third step, the chapter establishes that being both insiders and outsiders was not a static affair but that we moved back and forth between the two states, thereby occupying a “liminal position” on the socio-epistemic boundaries of the client corporation.

Consultants as outsiders

How did Lucien get into the position of writing a sales plan for travel insurance in Asia if he knew almost nothing about insurance work or about Asia? Our client was looking to expand its business in the travel insurance market, which was growing at a fast rate, and they had hired us to help them with it. The question we were tasked with answering was how best to do

so, in terms of both which markets to target and which institutional set-up to establish. Lucien and I addressed these questions by carrying out some “market-sizing” work first, in which we compared our client with its main competitors. Then, we estimated our client’s “sales potential in Asia,” i.e. we tried to predict how many sufficiently wealthy people existed in the biggest Asian countries, to whom our client might be able to sell travel insurance products. In making these estimates, we relied on frequent calls with research staff who could provide us with rough customer group estimates or supported us in devising a reasonable method for making these estimates.

Once these efforts at “market sizing” and establishing a “sales potential” for the insurance product had been completed, it became our job to develop a plan to carry out the sales over the next five years. So we contacted two sales and marketing managers in their mid-fifties who worked for our client. My colleague Lucien visibly liked both of them. He had taken them out for lunch and he regularly mentioned how much he enjoyed listening to their colourful and often slightly mischievous anecdotes about the difficulties of selling travel insurance and about never overpaying for insurance claims made abroad. Our two contacts probably did not take Lucien or myself very seriously as sources of advice on how to do their job. However, they seemed to warm to us in an almost paternal way and visibly enjoyed teaching two interested youngsters about how their job was done. Moreover, they knew that our boss Paul – the German Partner on our team – was close to theirs, so they tried to share with us exactly the kind of information that would work in their favour. For example, they had long before our arrival argued that the United States was a market with huge sales potential. Now that we had been given the task of assessing the situation, they made sure to repeat to both Lucien and me just how much money could be made in the United States, if only they were given the chance to sell their products there.

Lucien and I were both influenced by their accounts and gave the idea of going to the United States greater consideration than we would have otherwise. However, we also took their view with a grain of salt. While the insurance market in the United States was comparatively large, we were not convinced of the actual sales potential, as competition seemed fierce. Andreas, the German leader of our team, was also uncertain and Paul, the Partner responsible for our project, decided after several analyses and discussions that going to the United States would not be our line of reasoning. While sales potential might be considerable there, he deemed the competition and legal risks to be too high. We followed his logic and presented a few slides making these points to the boss of the two sales managers. Shortly after our meeting, when Lucien and I met the two managers again, they were evidently upset. They had not been present at the meeting but had already obtained a copy of our presentation document, and greeted us with the words, “Now you really did kill the US for us with those slides.” While their critique was harsh, it nonetheless came with a tone of reconciliation, as one of the two remarked that they would probably go to the United

After “Partner”,
please add a
footnote saying “A
Partner is a senior
consultant”

States anyway. As he pointed out, “When you are gone and things quieten down, we will give the US another try.”

The material presented so far points to the fact that consultants legitimized the knowledge they provided by being outsiders. For Lucien and me this was true in many respects. We were not part of the client’s company, had not worked in insurance before, and since we were a good 20 years younger than both our key contacts, they considered us relatively new to the business world as such. Moreover, we worked for Paul, a man our sales contacts never got to meet in person. Our detached stance did not denote the absence of relationships (Strathern 2015). Instead, it was the result of our structural positions, and of the relational work carried out on both sides (McDonald 2015): constant efforts at cultivating an interest and polite humility on the part of Lucien and myself, patience and goodwill on the part of our sales contacts.

Our outsider position came with a specific understanding of knowledge, in which a “fresh perspective” should be economically desirable. In fact, management advice was usually based on the idea that it was advantageous to provide an “outside perspective” to economic actors. This idea was systematically highlighted by the German media as well as by management consultancies themselves. It denoted a perspectival understanding of knowledge, in which economic activity could be seen from a variety of angles and the more perspectives that were engaged on it, the better it was understood. In the Western canon, this view of knowledge is obvious for example in works of Friedrich Nietzsche (2009: 98), who argues that

The only seeing we have is seeing from a perspective; the only knowledge we have is knowledge from a perspective; and the more emotions we allow to be expressed in words concerning something, the more eyes, different eyes, we know how to train on the same thing, the more complete our “idea” of this thing, our “objectivity,” will be.⁵

In the German economy, this perspectival understanding of knowledge has grounded fears of growing *betriebsblind*, a term that Germany’s most renowned dictionary, the *Duden* (2017) defines as “being blind to mistakes or lacunae that emerge in one’s area of work due to long membership.”⁶ Underlying this particular fear of “blindness” was the belief that routinized work activity led people to know their job so well that they began to carry it out automatically. They were thereby expected to take ever more aspects of it for granted and to lose the “critical perspective” on what they did. Knowledge was here perspectival and its perspectives were predominantly shaped by work routines. Once a blinding and – it was assumed – dysfunctional work routine had been established, employees would need help from an outsider, not because they did not know their job but because in a sense they knew it all too well. Once people accepted the three major claims that (1) knowledge is perspectival in nature; (2) work routines predominantly

define this knowledge; and (3) that establishing a work routine limits available knowledge, they might accept that their work required occasional checks from outsiders.

Yet, the outside view had a second component to it, which was surprisingly different in the claims it made. It denoted a positivist understanding of knowledge, where interacting with an outsider promised new information, which could be fruitfully incorporated into client work routines. In these cases, knowledge was deemed to be obtainable and transferable regardless of perspectival issues. This is what Lucien and I were doing, when working with our research staff and Partner Paul on our project. In this case, the consultant was not considered to be limited by his or her own experience but expected to grasp and transfer knowledge to the client. Lucien and I could thus be seen not as individual workers, but as nodes in a wide network of people, all of whom could transfer useful information. This view was highlighted in sales pitches in which the high daily charges for consulting work were justified with the vast network of Partners, experts and researchers presumed to stand behind each consultant.

In the history of European thought, this view of knowledge is frequently traced back to a positivist tradition – either that of Auguste Comte, or more obviously that of the later logical empiricists (e.g. Scharff 1995: 2). It now underlies most of the quantitative branches of the social sciences and is currently undergoing a revival, as part of a scholarly and business turn towards “big data” (Boellstorff 2013; King 2011, 2014). Thereby, the dream of amassing and understanding vast amounts of information from outside a company is given a new dimension (Schrage 2016). In many ways, this understanding of knowledge implies that clients are stuck within the confines of their own institutional affiliation. Consultants are here one of the institutional mechanisms that overcome this restrictive situation. They tried to transfer knowledge from other companies, other sectors, other countries and other times (by using senior consultants with past experience) within the confines of the law.

According to this logic, consultants and their clients subscribe to a three-fold claim that is substantially different from the one above. They hold that (1) knowledge is positivistic in nature; (2) institutional affiliations (rather than work routines) predominantly define this knowledge; and (3) establishing an institutional affiliation limits available knowledge. When these claims are accepted, an outsider’s view may become desirable for clients not because they themselves know their job too well, but because they do not know it well enough.

As institutions, consulting companies seemed to be convinced that both conceptions of knowledge were correct. On the one hand, they hired surprisingly young staff straight from university, and sent them on the job with little substantive training (Sennett 2006: 97). On the other hand, they went to great lengths to somehow “bundle” the knowledge that their staff acquired in different projects, so as to use it in client work. For example,

our company intranet displayed a Facebook-like page for each employee, which stated their names, contact details, positions, time employed as well as previous training, projects and personal interests. Each consultant's site was linked to those of all her former colleagues in the different training courses and projects. This way it took only a few mouse-clicks to find somebody who might know about a particular topic and to write them an email or give them a call. Consultants were also connected through live-chat systems as well as regular telephone and video conferences on business topics. Moreover, the intranet featured a vast repository of anonymized PowerPoint slides from past projects, which were meant to be used by less experienced staff to "get them up to speed" on recurring topics. Writing such slides and thereby contributing to the company's internal "knowledge base" was expected from team leaders, who wanted to move up the company hierarchy.

While intra-firm knowledge exchange was thus actively encouraged, interviews with consultants of various companies overwhelmingly tended to emphasize its limits. In our project, these limits were twofold: first, experienced consultants mostly did not have the time to help other teams. For example, Lucien and I were convinced that market-sizing exercises such as the one we had to carry out for a sub-group of Asian countries must already have been made dozens of times. So I called up a number of colleagues who might be able to help us with them or maybe even pass on their past work. However, senior consultants either had not made the calculations themselves or they were too involved in their own project work to spend much of their time trying to remember them. I managed to get one colleague from a similar project on the phone but he could only briefly provide me with vague statements made in haste about his team's past analyses before he had to move on. The junior consultants in charge of building similar models in the past, on the other hand, had mostly already left our company. Internal estimates put consulting staff turnover at an annual 20 percent, meaning that people would mostly have disappeared by the time their exact expertise in a specific analysis was needed again. While our team leader Andreas eventually did gain access to a series of PowerPoint slides from a past project, we were never able to get anyone on the phone who might have the time to explain them to us in detail. Research staff who might have been able to help or even build such models for us were also often booked for other tasks and insisted on carrying out smaller analyses that could be delivered within a day.

Other limits to internal knowledge exchange also persisted. On the one hand, legal stipulations that prohibited corporate collusion and confidentiality agreements signed with former clients meant that the project summaries shared within our firm had to be "sanitized," i.e. turned into mostly vague and conceptual information. Spreadsheets were hardly shared at all and the numbers in internally available PowerPoint slides had to be changed before being circulated. Moreover, much of the lack of

transparency was enshrined in these technologies themselves. Presentation slides usually lacked detail as well as precise information about sources, as they were meant to convey single and clear messages aiming at an effect of intuitive understanding, rather than lengthy descriptions that could be retraced later. Spreadsheets were usually loaded with idiosyncratic formulae and calculative relations that quickly became impossible to decipher for those who had not written them themselves. So while Lucien and I could see the results of some of the previous market analyses, it was not possible for us to trace who had written a calculation or what calculative logics had been followed. All of this meant that the most stable source of knowledge in our and other consultancy companies was the Partners and long-term staff members. Since Paul, the Partner guiding our project, did not have experience with this particular kind of market scoping, team leader Andreas suggested we start it from scratch, as that promised to be both faster and more reliable than chasing up past work.

While being outsiders allowed us to move between different desirable understandings of knowledge, it also had the social advantage that we could carry through politically controversial projects that risked tainting the reputation of management in the eyes of colleagues and subordinates. As part of the project in question, my team and I would help design a merger of two corporate sub-units that would meet with considerable resistance from parts of the client company itself. In this regard, our social position as “outsiders” or seemingly “unencumbered selves” (Sandel 1984) exacerbated the “social production of indifference” that is attributed to bureaucratic work more generally (Herzfeld 1993). We thereby served as a tool for the “virtuous” detachment of corporate managers (Knox and Harvey 2015), who were keen to dilute the responsibility associated with their authoritative position and high salaries.

The consultants I interviewed mostly acknowledged this structurally created indifference, arguing that they ensured the continuity of the corporations they were working for. This is how one team leader put it:

We are often seen as bad boys and we are indeed frequently hired by the top so as to push through decisions that have already been taken or have already become clear. . . . In a way we serve to facilitate decisions, so people can claim that “consulting firm X said we should [do this],” so as to get things done. This begs the question of whether it is a good thing that a top manager himself refuses to say [for example] that 30 percent of staff should be laid off. I don’t know. I was recently working for a renewable energy client who was deep in the red. They had to restructure as revenues had collapsed. Everyone in that company knew they were only making half the revenues but continued with the same amount of staff. . . . Sooner or later the decision must come that people will have to go, so a consulting firm will eventually be hired to find out where and to put its name behind all of it.

Clients frequently valued us for this social detachment. Consider how this senior public-sector official describes when and how he hires consultants:

I believe that consultancies could help many ministries in two main areas: everything that is truly related to strategy development . . . concerned with large and very [politically] relevant portfolios. . . . Here it is helpful to get somebody external into the process because our ministry simply does not have the knowledge and our [more specialized sub-organizations] are overly bound up in their own business interests so that they do not actually give objective advice. The second area is to do with reducing bureaucracy. While [in this ministry] things are now at least getting done electronically [laughs] . . . many other ministries still use paper files. There are still many processes that are overly complicated and time-consuming.

While the consultant in the interview above presents a popular critical view of his work as a justificatory exercise for corporate layoffs, the public official shows that its use is broader than that: consultants are in fact valued because their position as outsiders of client firms means they seem less “bound up” in social relations. Even if the information needed to write political strategies exists somewhere in her ministry, it would take a socially detached outsider to judge its truthfulness and assess its importance. Furthermore, while the general consensus on the need to reduce bureaucracy may exist across the public sector, the practical work of assessing whose labour is truly needed and whose is not is one that no manager can carry out without losing much of her employees’ support in the long run. She therefore appreciates institutional outsiders doing the unpopular work for her, for epistemic reasons as much as for social ones.

In summary, this section has shown that consultants could in several senses be “outsiders” vis-à-vis the client they worked for. In the project described above, my team could thereby legitimize its work by alternating between different forms of knowledge, and we were in a position to carry through socially controversial projects that threatened to undermine the legitimacy of top management.

Consultants as insiders

While the idea of being outsiders defines the management consultancy business model to some extent, it should be emphasized here that the consultants I interviewed and observed mostly gathered and re-used information from within client companies. For example, rather than bringing in knowledge from the outside, Lucien and I spent most of our time creating presentation slides for our upper management that reified information provided by the controlling and sales departments of the client in question. We often took up the advice of our sales contacts and presented it to their bosses. Upper and middle management would constantly share

confidential information with us, including top-secret quantitative analyses regarding the current and future state of business, personal hunches about preferable courses of action, and occasionally gossip about the personal shortcomings and romantic interests of their colleagues. In my own experience and from what the majority of my colleagues and interviewees told me, consulting work was indeed mostly concerned with synthesizing and transforming knowledge that was already available within different parts of a client company.

Yet, we were not just epistemic insiders, but also social ones, a fact that became most evident when our team first began working in Paris. Upon arrival at the client company, we immediately scheduled a meeting with the person who would guide and oversee our work efforts. Her name was Claudette and she was a French woman in her early thirties who – as our German team leader Andreas had found out by searching online – had made a stellar career in the French public sector before moving to the world of private insurance. Lucien, as the only French member of our consulting team, took upon himself the role of cultural translator, explaining to us that hers was a typical elite trajectory in France, where successful public-sector work stood in high esteem and facilitated direct entrance into the higher echelons of private-sector management. Andreas seemed only partially impressed by this. He was overall dismissive of public-sector work, reflecting the general contempt towards civil servants that remains prevalent in the German private sector. Moreover, Andreas had a degree in engineering and took pride in training to become an officially accredited actuary, both of which meant that he valued mathematical skill and sector-specific expertise in the insurance business rather than public engagement.

Andreas also laughed at the sight of some of Claudette's online pictures, in which she looked overly traditional, wearing heavy jewellery and dark red lipstick that made her appear much older than she was. He had an acute sense of women's physical appearance that influenced the way he worked with them. He occasionally looked up pictures of female colleagues online, and on our intranet, so as to judge their looks. Most women who walked past our office visibly distracted him and he remarked time and again with a peculiar mixture of moral outrage and personal excitement that our French female colleagues wore outfits that would be considered far too daring in a German work environment, thereby affirming gendered notions of propriety and professionalism. Lucien, Paul and I reacted to such remarks with considerable reserve.

Our first meeting with Claudette took place on the upper floors of a luxurious office tower. Paul, Andreas, Lucien and I had come early, whereas Claudette appeared a good 10 minutes late. As soon as she entered the room everyone rose to their feet to greet her. After a round of polite introductions, Paul outlined the general market position of the insurance company as well the performance of its different business units and sub-units. He presented Lucien's and my market analyses with great confidence before going on to describe our upcoming project work, explaining that our goal

was to assess several travel insurance markets, re-define the strategy of key business units and subsequently provide a sketch of organizational implications. Unlike many other Partners, Paul was not inclined to use gossip as a means to relate to clients. Instead, he casually mentioned several meetings he had had with Claudette's bosses, signalling to her as much as to us that he was well connected in the client company and knew it like the back of his hand. In fact, Paul explained that he had been a consultant for this particular firm for around a decade, making him more senior than much of the middle and upper management we worked with. He certainly knew the company better than Claudette.

During this first meeting, Claudette did not leave a positive impression on our team. She spoke English with a very thick French accent, much of the content that we presented was clearly new to her, and she did not provide much input on our planned analyses. Her main contribution was to stress what exactly her boss – whom she also frequently mentioned – was interested in. She became most lively towards the end of the presentation when we were planning future meetings, specifying who should or should not attend them. When we left the meeting, Andreas, who considered himself an industry expert, remarked disparagingly that Claudette had seemed very fixated on the logistical aspects of work rather than its analytical content. He called her a *Prozesstante* (literally “process-aunty”). He also pointed out how short her dress had been and that businesswomen in Germany would not wear such revealing outfits. To him, Claudette had failed to present herself as a professional and respectable member of our project.

Gender played a major role in this negative impression. Management consulting has remained a men's business in Germany, where, in spite of active recruitment policies aimed at young female consultants, the share of women Partners lies at a mere 4 to 9 percent (Tomenendal and Boyoglu 2014: 30). As several of my female interviewees told me, this was largely due to social expectations that women should look after their children. Thus, once they had a child, they faced the choice of either being bad consultants, who took too much time off, or bad mothers who sacrificed their children's wellbeing for their careers.

However, subtler gender dynamics were equally at play. Metaphors used in consulting such as “growth,” “monetary flows” and “market” have been shown to rely upon gendered notions of fertility (Braun 2011: 64), and consulting discourses remain particular masculine in tone, in part as a response to the very ambiguous nature of the work practices involved (Marsh 2009). This makes it hard for women to highlight gendered stereotypes as tools for their own advancement, a technique that in the past has been fruitful for women on Wall Street (Fisher 2012). Moreover, in consulting, as in corporate culture more generally, patterns of domination continue to be frequently based on understandings of desire and sexuality (Pringle 2005). Thus, during my time as a consultant I learned about only one relationship between friends and colleagues in which the woman had the same rank as

the man and about four in which more highly ranked men had shown a sexual interest in lower-ranked female consultants or secretaries. These were accompanied by a considerable amount of unverifiable rumour and gossip about how Partners systematically tried to seduce young female interns, recent recruits or secretaries. What this gossip pointed to, was the double expectation that women in lower ranks would use their sexual attractiveness to entice higher-ranked men, and that women who were considered attractive by consultants were usually of a lower rank than them. Claudette broke with both of these expectations, thereby troubling conventional understandings of professionalism, a fact that situated her as an outsider.

Consultants as liminal beings

Surprisingly, the initially negative view that my team had gained of Claudette changed drastically over time. While jokes about her recurrent references to her boss as well as her broken English were frequent in my team during the first weeks of our project, Paul and Andreas gradually began speaking about her in an increasingly respectful tone. Claudette grasped within only a few meetings the analyses we presented to her, how these were linked to one another, and what should logically follow. While she did not become an expert in risk analysis or private-sector finance more generally, she did rapidly accrue information regarding the nature and workings of the different business units that we were concerned with. Moreover, she skilfully gathered confidential information from the uppermost echelons of her company, sharing it with Paul and Andreas in a manner that oscillated between collaboration and competition. Our work as consultants was relevant to Claudette's success. We continuously provided her with information from within her own company, always tailored for questions and tasks she had at hand. Thereby, our team fulfilled a legitimating function for her, allowing her to enter a position of power over lower-ranked staff with considerable ease and in spite of an initial lack of industry-, company- or work-specific knowledge.

While she rapidly caught up with us in terms of business expertise, Claudette also managed to position herself more and more as an insider in social terms. Arguably her English remained poor and her wardrobe overly eccentric in the eyes of my team (she once arrived at a meeting wearing a fur-rimmed coat so oversized it could have been *haute-couture*), yet her stance towards us became gradually more assertive. Paul and Andreas actually valued this development. They equally began to acknowledge that Claudette was a skilful politician, since she insisted on inviting the most relevant people to our future meetings, and avoided outright *éclats* by ensuring that no gathering would bring actual news to any of its participants. Claudette, Paul and Andreas were all equally keen on ensuring that the content of every meeting would be discussed with each participant beforehand. The three of them agreed that clients constantly needed to be “taken on board”

and that they should regularly “align” with us, i.e. to agree on how to proceed in the future.

As consultants we thus oscillated between the inside and outside of corporate boundaries, not just in terms of knowledge but also when building social relations. Andreas, Lucien and I were different kinds of outsiders in this regard. None of us knew Claudette or had contacts within her company so as to find out about her. Lucien, who was more familiar with French culture, could at least teach us how to properly interpret the online information about her. This information was so limited, however, that her physical appearance and brief performances in team meetings became the principal means of building social relationships with her. In many ways, Claudette was initially the real outsider to this project. She was a woman and unwilling to conform to the industry’s gendered aesthetic requirements. She was also new to the company, new to insurance work, and new to the private sector in general. Her frequent references to her boss were only partially effective in strengthening her social position. However, she was skilful enough to use her work with us so as to quickly improve her standing in the company, becoming an “insider” over time. Towards the end of our project, Claudette was promoted, not least because she knew how to use our analyses to learn quickly about her own employer, its different insurance markets, and the worries and hopes of her bosses and colleagues.

Paul on the other hand was initially the closest to being a company insider. His work with this company surpassed that of most employees in terms of time, knowledge and contacts. Claudette was perfectly aware of this, knowing that she could tap into Paul’s insider status in order to quickly become better at her job. This was a third major goal of our project: in addition to providing market analyses and plans for a potential merger of business units, we had apparently been hired to bring Claudette up to speed. This constellation in which a new manager collaborates with an experienced consultant is in fact very common practice to enable managers to function in positions they know little to nothing about, a constellation in which conventional understandings of managers as insiders and consultants as outsiders is reversed. Towards the end of our project, however, Paul was once again relegated to an outsider position. We ended the project by writing a proposal for follow-up work, so as to seamlessly continue our relation with this client. However, the proposal was not successful. As a result, our key cards to the insurance offices were handed in, our printers and scanners were packed up and shipped off, and the outcomes of further project pitches would have to be awaited. Ties with the client had officially been cut.

While our structural position was thus never wholly clear, this ambiguity of being socio-epistemic insiders and outsiders worked to our advantage. As partial insiders, we could gain Claudette’s favour, provide her with relevant information from other business units, and impress her with our expertise. As partial outsiders we could transfer outside knowledge to her and do what

nobody else could socially afford, as we would be held partially responsible for a merger of business units that would have negative consequences for some of her colleagues and subordinates.

However, the constant oscillation of management consultants between inside and outside the company came with great risks, as ambiguously placed groups in all kinds of social settings are often seen as representative of disorder and pollution (Douglas 2001; Turner 1991). The positive attributes described here could thus all too easily flip into their structural opposites. As outsiders, business consultants have frequently been accused of being ignorant and incompetent (Sauer and Sahnau 2002); as insiders, of being essentially unnecessary (Leif 2005). Their closeness to managers leaves them open to accusations of being obsequious, while their detachment from the majority of the workforce earns them the reputation of being the cold-hearted implementers of mostly neoliberal business logic. One instance in which this flipside of our position became somewhat evident was when the two sales manager contacts essentially told us that they would sit out the project and continue their work as they had planned before our arrival. Our liminal position meant that they could reduce our physical presence to nothing but a delayed future absence. Consultants such as ourselves were thus more than most professions concerned with the performance of urgency, professionalism and success, from the processes through which they were recruited to the ways they dressed, spoke, travelled and celebrated (cf. Stein (2017)). Only as long as these performances were efficacious could they reap the benefits that came with their ambiguous position of socio-epistemic liminality.

“of a mostly neoliberal”

Brackets ok?

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that consultants are frequently hired to legitimate the intra-corporate rule of top management. The latter often suffer from legitimation deficits and hire consultants to improve their standing within a company. This is most obvious when a manager is new, as in the case described above. As part of legitimizing top management, the consultants that I observed equally needed to legitimize their own position in a company. This was achieved by alternating between a positivist and a perspectival approach to knowledge and by positioning themselves either as “insiders” or as “outsiders” of client companies. As a result, consultants were liminal beings, vulnerable to accusations of being ignorant, overly detached or otherwise polluting as they were not part of the corporate core of client companies. This argument should be read as a contribution to the study of power among corporate elites. In the social and epistemic ambiguity that marks corporate settings, managerial power has been shown to operate via strategic attachment to and detachment from corporate boundaries.

“or
otherwise
'polluting' as
they”

Notes

- 1 This research has been generously funded by the Heinrich Böll Foundation. A more complex version of this argument will be published in Stein (2017).
- 2 All names of individuals and companies in this chapter have been altered. Some descriptions of products and analyses have also been modified.
- 3 Technically, a senior partner from Norway and another one from France were also part of our team, but they were absent most of the time
- 4 For similar analyses with respect to managers more widely, see for example Hartmann (2000).
- 5 For contemporary analyses that stress the perspectival qualities of economic knowledge as mediated by technology, see for example Miyazaki (2003), Zaloom (2012).
- 6 Lucien did mention to me in private conversations that consultants could be valuable for providing a “fresh perspective” (using the English term).

“by the Heinrich Böll Foundation. For a more complex version of this argument, see Stein (2017).”

“Technically, a Partner from”

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Proof

296 *Felix Stein*

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