



Making choice, taking risk: On the coming out of Critical Management Studies

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abstract

The successful institutionalisation of Critical Management Studies is now beyond doubt; but the consequences of this process on the efficacy and legitimacy of critique are more contentious and require attention. Despite recent calls by senior critical scholars to make critique more relevant by engaging with pressing political and social issues and addressing a broader public, there have been few attempts to reflect upon the way our own personal positions and choices are implicated in the realities being denounced. Yet, we argue here that taking risk and making choices that would achieve some consistency between what we say and what we do, are essential elements of critique. We also explore what it would mean to make our critique more personal and give example of the choices we could make to bring some consistency between our critique and our personal position.

Introduction

Critical Management Studies (CMS) has been quite successful at establishing a respectable place for itself within the academic community; at least in the UK, it is associated with well-recognised journals, conferences and key figures (Grey and Willmott, 2002; Rowlinson and Hassard, 2011).

But the way critique is performed within management studies, and CMS in particular, has been the object of severe criticisms in recent years. Critique has remained firmly situated within academic circles and therefore has had little impact on work organizations or the practices it aims to challenge (Parker, 2002; Butler, 2008). CMS has tended to spell out its critiques mainly amongst itself and has failed to engage with a broader public; it has yet to demonstrate its ability to make a difference to actual organisational and management practices outside the academy (Grey and Willmott, 2002). Perhaps even more damning, not only has CMS kept its critiques to itself, but it has also failed to engage with current political issues. As Dunne et al. (2008b) demonstrate, management studies – even in its ‘critical’ guise – has had little to say about war, violence, or global injustice; yet these are realities in which modern organisational practices have been deeply implicated. In this

respect, critical management scholars' silence is only a sign of complicity and irresponsibility.

Finally, critical management theorists are also accused of failing to embody their proclaimed ethical commitments in their own academic practices, and in particular in their relation to the 'researched', thereby reproducing asymmetrical power relations. For example, Wray-Bliss (2002) argues that CMS authors routinely separate themselves from those they study and subordinate the voices of the subjects they claim to speak for under their own authority.

To sum up, CMS has been accused of failing to engage with current social and political issues, to reach out to a broader public in the name of whom they supposedly speak, and to reflect upon the ways their own practices reproduce the power relations they condemn. As a result, critique within management studies has remained ineffectual and has had little impact in changing practices, worse it has reproduced patterns of inequalities that it denounces in the outside world (Tatli, 2012). In short, CMS has been little but self-serving.

Reaching out

In a letter published in *The Guardian* in 2009, fourteen business school professors called for a windfall tax on bankers' bonuses to save public services such as education, health and arts projects (Carter et al., 2009). They argued that the bailout of banks, funded by taxpayers, was threatening public services, and that it was now time for banks to reciprocate the favour and make up for funding shortfalls in public services through a windfall tax on all bonuses. Such public denunciation of unjust business practices by management academics seem to have become more common following the financial crisis (e.g. Harney, 2008; 2009; James, 2009; Parker, 2008; Simms et al., 2010; Starkey, 2009).

What is of note about these public condemnations by academics is that they do, to some extent, address many of the criticisms recently levelled against critical management studies; they are made outside the close circles of academia and address a broader audience through the 'quality' press (e.g. *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *Financial Times*, *Times Higher Education*). They also engage directly with current social, economic and political issues by pointing to the injustice of business practices, such as rewards systems in banks, and the complicity of business schools in reproducing the conditions that lead to the excesses of financial capitalism. Central to these engagements is also a certain ethical commitment that calls for more responsible forms of management and management education, ones that would emphasise ethics and corporate social responsibility, and contribute to more sustainable economies.

So could this form of public engagements by (senior) academics help address the irrelevance to which critique in management studies had been condemned?

If we go by the arguments outlined above, it would follow that addressing current political issues – for example the role of the banking industry in the recent financial crisis – and disseminating our critique in non-academic media, say the press, would save critique from its current morass and help give it more teeth. So the letter to *The Guardian*, for example, could be seen as re-invigorating critique.

Why then did we recoil so?

We certainly don't have a problem with the broad intent of these statements, indeed it is difficult to imagine who, within the audience to whom they are addressed, could disagree with the content of these statements (to fight against injustice, to develop more sustainable, fairer ways of managing and so on). And that is one problem. By confining their interventions to safe grounds, making statements of principles to an audience that largely shares these 'progressive' ideas, are the authors not avoiding the sort of difficult political and ethical choices that would need to be brought into relief if they really wanted to make progress towards the ideals they are preaching? Without this, what are these statements with which the targeted audience is largely bound to agree meant to achieve?

Additionally we find this form of engagement particularly problematic for it fails to reflect any personal commitment that may be inconsistent with, or threaten, the critics' own position within institutions which are themselves sustained by the sort of practices they are critiquing. Yet, critique can only have impact, be meaningful, if it starts from the personal. Denouncing certain practices seems insufficient if we are not prepared to look at our own position in relation to these practices; and this means both considering the choices we do, can or fail to exercise in relation to these practices, and the way these choices may make us complicit.

In what follows, we first argue that the type of critique we have been discussing so far reflects bad faith in that it involves no acknowledgement of personal choice or implication in the conditions or realities being denounced. We then look at what it would take to make choice and here discuss the importance of risk or sacrifice. Finally, we explore some of the choices we could make as academics wishing to sustain critique.

Bad faith

Returning to the letter published in *The Guardian* it is notable that the critique was issued from a position of authority as 'professors' in 'business schools'. And indeed institutional position, and perhaps more recently the 'celebrity status' of some intellectuals, has been one of the bases for establishing the authority or legitimacy of academics' voices in public debate (Mitsztal, 2007). Within the context of CMS, this might involve exploiting one's status or visibility, as for example management professors, to offer critique of contemporary organisational practices which resonate outside of the academy. For example, Martin Parker (in Dunne et al., 2008a) wants 'us' as 'Business School experts to

shout loudly if we are offered the microphone' (293) to provide critique about modern organisations.

But caveats are immediately registered. He warns against the danger of co-option of such interventions by pointing out that our university press office will be only too pleased to count the number of times our university gets named. Later in the same article, further doubt manifests itself as he argues that 'superhero' professors might be asked to pronounce themselves on various things, but that

no-one listens [...] the cultural counterpoint to the wise tenured expert is the irrelevant boffin who uses 10 words where one will do and leaves his umbrella on the train. This is the box we are really in, one in which we can imagine ourselves to be important, whilst our squeaky mannered voices simply don't travel far enough for anyone to hear. (Parker, in Dunne et al., 2008a: 290)

However conceiving of critique, or the type of critique we can issue, purely in terms of institutionally derived 'authority' seems problematic on several counts. Wray-Bliss (2002) argues that rationalising the authority of the researcher as a necessary political device might be a tenable approach if critical theorists were able to persuasively show that their voice was actually heard and that they did have a positive impact in changing oppressive practices. Thus, this self-authorisation could maybe justified on the grounds that the voice of those we seek to emancipate would not be listened to whilst our academic voice carries more authority and does make a difference. Yet, as Wray-Bliss goes on to argue, there is so far very little evidence that critical research has had much success in changing oppressive work practices. Moreover, in practice, CMS has been preoccupied with engaging with *management* and its possible transformation to more enlightened practices, rather than directly seeking to advance the prospects of the disenfranchised *managed* (Brewis and Wray-Bliss, 2008: 1534).

But this is far from the heart of the problem. Additional difficulties arise from the very terms of engagement. Besides being (at least so far) ineffectual in making any difference, grounding critique in institutional status is problematic because it raises fundamental questions about our own position in relation to the critique we issue. There are at least two problems here.

Firstly, it masks incoherence between what we claim to speak for (emancipation, equality, justice), and the grounds we use to speak out (institutional status based on hierarchy of knowledge and status). Considering the implication of our own institutions (the business schools) in the state of affairs that CMS scholars claim to critique, how can we use the status that these institutions confer to critique the system they are a part of? Universities, and business schools in particular, are deeply implicated in sustaining the current economic order, both by producing its elite and by relying on the wealth it generates (e.g. Jones and O'Doherty, 2005; Roszak, 1971). So, what legitimacy or credibility can there be in a critique issued from the very grounds (the institutional position of critical management professors and business schools) it is meant to target? Can management professors, whose very position and status rely on rewards and career systems based on hierarchy and

competition, and whose institutions are deeply involved in serving the corporations whose practice they claim to denounce, use this position to critique the logic that has given them their 'right' to critique?

Secondly, grounding critique in institutional status masks the moral or ethical commitment that makes us want to speak in the first place. We do not have to put our own (ethical) position on the line. We speak from knowledge or position rather than moral commitment. Would critics be prepared to call into question the role of their own institutions (and hence their own personal positions) in sustaining the practices they are denouncing by slapping the hand that feeds them (or perhaps more pertinently rejecting the offered food)?

These problems amount to a failure to put ourselves into critique since our own practices remain unquestioned. We take no risk. Critique can be issued from the security of institutional positions. In other words, we avoid making choice, or at least we only make choices that are not personally threatening. Worse, we shun alternatives that are more consistent with the arguments that are issued. This foreclosure of choice amounts to bad faith.

Risk, sacrifice and critique

Risk has been central to much discussion of critique. In a minimal sense, one could argue that critique, being oppositional, inherently involves antagonism and therefore threat, danger and risk. For critique to act as critique, it must have the force to 'go against', shock, shake, provoke. Therefore it has to break away from norms and accepted conventions. This suggests that critique will always involve an element of risk, of danger, of exposing oneself. Indeed, in the Enlightenment tradition, having the courage to think beyond authoritative regimes, and especially having the courage to question the rules governing one's actions and beliefs, constituted the essence of critique, as exemplified by Kant's invocation: 'dare to know' (Bohm and Spoelstra, 2004). But what does this 'daring' or courage mean in a democratic society where freedom of speech prevails? Where speech is 'free', can speaking out, however loudly, be regarded as an act of courage? Can it have any critical power to shock, shake, provoke?

If courage and risk are essential elements of critique, then critique needs to involve more than 'free speech'; rather it becomes a practice, or even a 'virtue'. Drawing on the Enlightenment tradition of critique as 'daring to know', Foucault (1997) proposes to see critique as a virtue, one that calls for self-transformation, for questioning the way and extent to which we are governed. He further explores the relationship between critique and risk in his discussion of parrhesia, or fearless speech (Foucault, 2001). Again, he stresses the personal quality of critique. One speaks out of 'moral duty' rather than as an institutional right. Critique here becomes an everyday practice, an 'attitude' rather than a performance one enacts as part of one's job. And it is inextricably linked to risk, danger,

threat: parrhesia involves ‘the courage to speak to power in the face of personal danger and out of a strong sense of moral duty’ (Foucault, 2001: 16).

One of the pre-requisites of parrhesia is some coherence between one’s beliefs and actions, one speaks the truth out of a sense of personal commitment and this commitment is demonstrated by the harmony between what one says and what one does. Critique is the art of not being governed ‘quite so much’ in the name of these principles. This would suggest that offering a critique of exploitative practices, or greed, in modern organisations would also involve questioning the extent to which we are ourselves governed by these principles, and to manifest the desire not to be governed ‘quite so much’ by these same principles. It means that we cannot denounce unfair practices whilst holding on to the benefits that these same practices give us.

This involves risk in two ways. Firstly, it insists that there is no certainty within which we can anchor our criticisms, for critique must take place at the limit of truth or knowledge. It operates by undermining the terms within which it could be justified, challenging the regime of truth within which its claims will be judged. Critique cannot appeal to, nor hide behind, the authority of truth or institution; rather it works by ‘putting forth’ values that can only be justified in terms of one’s own commitments (Foucault, 1997). Secondly there are obvious material consequences to questioning, or refusing to be governed by, principles we want to denounce but that give us privileges and the authority to speak. Fearless speech is opposed to free speech in the sense that ‘it always exacts costs both in its production and effects’ (Jack, 2004: 121). Critique cannot be conveyed by speech that is ‘free’ or gratuitous, that carries no consequences for the speaker. Rather it requires some personal engagement and sacrifice. In other words, critique has to come at a cost to those who make it. It cannot be ‘free’.

Returning to our discussion of critique within CMS, it is clear that formulating ‘critique’ has so far been envisaged in terms of speaking out, either to the academic community, or more recently to the ‘public’, or in terms of ‘free speech’. And we would argue that it is precisely because these ‘critiques’ are ‘free’, come at no cost to those who issue them, that they have remained, and can only remain, inauthentic and ineffective.

CMS, or the type of critique that has been made within its auspices, is ineffectual precisely because it is ‘free’, it fails to provoke, to stand out of line. It fails to provoke the outside world because as many have suggested, most of the time it does not even engage with it; and even when it does engage with the public, no one listens. It does not provoke the academic community because it has tended to obediently submit to, and reproduce, its institutional logic and reward system. Consequently Jack (2004) suggests that CMS academics are probably not prepared to engage in fearless speech because of the potentially adverse material consequences that would follow. Fearless speech would involve risking and perhaps sacrificing the privileges and recognition that come with our institutional positions.

Does this mean that we as ‘critical management academics’ are condemned to irrelevance, our voices tolerated only because it can be safely assumed that they won’t make a difference? Only if the only way we can imagine critique is in terms of free speech. If critique, as practiced within CMS so far, has involved little consideration of the choice we exercise, or fail to exercise, in relation to the arrangements we aim to denounce, what would it involve to make coherent choices, to put ourselves into our critique? We should ask ourselves how many of us attempt, less realise, such consistency. It seems that the reconciliation of these questions is vital to the integrity of CMS. Yet these questions are irresolvable without some institutional and individual sacrifices. In the last section, we want to explore what it would mean, to go back to Foucault’s conception of critique, to refuse to be governed ‘quite so much’.

Making choices

Grey and Willmott (2002) concede that CMS is parasitic on the business schools in which its members are employed. They admit financial dependence upon corporations and recognise that these resources are generated in a manner counter to the principles of CMS. Their response is to present it as a vehicle of reform, ‘the project of CMS should be the transformation of management practice in tandem with the transformation of B-schools. The latter without the former means impotence of CMS, the former without the latter is all but unthinkable’ (Grey and Willmott, 2002: 417). This is a strategy of engagement, of change from within. As Zald (2002: 374) remarks, ‘as we think about the prospects of CMS we must think about how it may be institutionalised and its position in the stratification order of management education and research. What journals are respected and how open are they to CMS works? How are critical works of different kinds likely to be evaluated in hiring and tenure decisions at the Department, the school and university level?’ In short, the strategy is to play the game by its rules until CMS is in a position to change these rules. But the dangers of incorporatisation are hardly unknown. Similarly familiar is scepticism that radicalism can emerge from conditions of privilege and many economic injustices are defended by the assertion that rewards will eventually flow downwards. There are also certain, perhaps unpalatable, realities that have to be faced. CMS emerged out of and exists within the business school. Its students (and corporate clients) are rarely attracted by the prospect of critique or advancements in social justice, but rather by the ‘value’ that will accrue from the ‘knowledge’ to be obtained. Current changes in the funding of higher education and the continuing difficulties in the labour market will clearly accentuate these instrumental assessments. Crucially, many universities are heavily dependent on the financial contribution made by the business school. Any moves that might affect this contribution are received sceptically.

The point here is that these consequences are also a matter for the CMS ‘community’. Benefits that derive from high student numbers and serving corporate clients are not wholly redistributed to support less marketable disciplines. Rather, these activities serve to fund critical scholarship, the recruitment of like-minded friends and colleagues as well as

conference travel. Again, to take an analogy from the economics of globalisation, Amory Starr (2000) provokes critics to face up to the material consequences of their ethical positions. Some, she argues, 'seem to fantasise that first worlders can maintain their current living standards, consumption and technology while relieving third world debt, destroying the military industrial complex, and rescuing third world workers from inhumane working conditions on the global assembly line' (79).

CMS academics seem similarly to want it all. They want to enjoy the (financial) benefits that come from a marketable and commercially successful product, whilst criticising its very worth. They are often resentful of the other parts of the university benefiting from the income derived from management courses.

Moreover this strategy of engagement still imagines critique in terms of speaking out from institutional positions, as academics, or even better it seems as 'professors'. But is this the only choice we have? Critique need not be a matter of shouting loudly, however authoritatively. It could be imagined in a different way, for example in the form of quieter, smaller interventions, ones that would avoid publicity and which could not be self-serving for they would take place outside any forms of institutional recognition. Consequently the best way to fight the 'common disease' of self-congratulation among academic intellectuals (Parker, in Dunne et al., 2008a: 290) would be to 'de-institutionalise' intellectual practice and critique (a suggestion that Parker himself makes briefly at another point in the same paper). This of course would come at great risk and sacrifice to academics, for on these terms, engagement in critique would offer no institutional rewards or recognition, no headline grabbing, not even the guarantee that anyone would listen. But decoupling critique from institutional rewards may take us closer to fearless speech.

So what would it involve to turn our critiques into fearless speech, to make them more 'personal' and less 'institutional'? What sort of choice could we make to bring some consistency between our critiques on the one hand, and our personal positions and actions on the other? Maybe a good starting point to explore these questions would be to look at our relationship with the academic reward system, a system which serves to link individual aspirations with 'corporate' objectives.

The reward system within universities, and perhaps business schools in particular, has often been pointed at as the main culprit in encouraging 'moral bankruptcy' in academia (e.g. Murray, 1971). The rewards themselves (e.g. money, promotion, recognition), as well as the principles upon which their distribution is based (competition, hierarchy), seem to differ only in magnitude from what is on offer in the corporate or financial sectors. In addition, the reward system creates conflict between serving the public interest and individual interests (Harney, 2008); academics are not rewarded for making the world a better place but for publishing in top ranked journals.

And there is an even stronger performative aspect whereby the significance of academic work becomes almost solely valued in terms of its marketability within the professional structures of the academic career; the development of, or identification with, a well-funded

research ‘project’ or the publication of an article in an ‘influential’ journal all score points. There are strong institutional pressures to conform to particular expectations. All this is before we begin to consider the more overtly cynical institutional game playing that sometimes accompanies the realisation of career projects in a collective environment. Within the United Kingdom, the dreadful effects of past research assessment exercises have been often heard. We hear of its various consequences, the sapping bureaucracy it entails, the perversion of academic freedoms and deleterious effects on collegiality. Willmott (2011) has recently outlined the consequences of ‘list fetishism’, specifically the use of the Association of Business Schools (ABS) journal rankings, in assessing the value of research and by extension informing strategy and policy decisions. List fetishism involves ‘making calculations about elite journal selection and the pay-back (e.g. appointment, promotion) from this form of scholarly subjection; and it involves collusion in a hegemonic genre of scholarship which is technically well-executed but “conservative”’ (43).

But the point is that we know all this and have known it for quite some time. Willmott (2011) even concedes that (most) university managers who ‘promote fetishism’ are also aware of its ‘perverse and farcical’ nature. A more pertinent question is the tepid response of individuals subject to its regime. How many have rejected it and refused to submit to its requirements? Of course, to do so would be to withdraw from the system of promotion it supports and to reject the benefits that this produces. But such deeds would require principled acts involving certain individual and collective sacrifices.

Therefore what makes our conduct morally incoherent is not the reward system itself but our choice to abide by its rules, to accept to be governed by it. Moral consistency would only follow an antagonistic, ‘riskier’, approach to life as a CMS academic and business school employee. Pointing to this conflict of interests to explain the irrelevance or complicity of business schools in addressing current social and economic injustice obfuscates the fact that we do exercise choice in privileging particular rewards over others, and that we could make different choices.

Considering the compromised nature of the reward system, and its conflict with serving the public good, we can choose to make choices that would maintain a coherent relationship between our claims and our own positions. CMS academics could certainly more rigorously challenge the organizational arrangements that they are part of. It seems curious that criticisms can be applied to external organizations but rather forgotten when there is the difficulty of facing consequences for our own activities. So it is not as though alternatives are unconceivable, they are simply rarely sought. They might encompass smaller, more localised, structures and a rejection of a growth imperative, a refusal of strict division of labour, hierarchy and the compartmentalisation of knowledge in favour of self-management and self-governance. How might the CMS academic seek to translate such principles and practices into her/his institutional and professional existence?

There are ways in which individuals can, and have, practiced activities that are more consistent with CMS principles and more marginal to the conventional functions of the

business school. For example, we might select organizations whose objectives are consistent with our own and offer them our expertise on a pro-bono basis. We might direct our research towards protest movements and other overtly antagonistic manifestations of alternatives, so we might do free consultancy with an NGO rather than for-profit multinational corporations, or have a conference on Occupy (with associated publication of selected papers) rather than on the National Health Service. The problem is that these activities often seem to take forms entirely consistent with the institutional context that they are supposedly challenging. So these efforts to engage with alternatives only renders them digestible by the institutional systems of recognition and reward that also appreciate consultancy with MNCs, research into the National Health Service and four star publications. Why not simply do consultancy? Join Occupy? Talk to protest movements? Why must these activities be always instrumentalised?

We anticipate a number of counters to these arguments. Firstly, some may deny that these activities of broader engagement are institutionally valued or instrumental. In this case, our professorial colleagues might need to contemplate the source of their relatively well-paid positions. Consulting with NGOs or ‘protesting’ are not traditionally well-paid occupations. Funding of business school posts derives from their traditional activities and not those more palatable to CMS. What explains the growth in size of business schools and senior academic salaries over the last 15 years? Why didn’t we also see growth in sociology, social policy, philosophy and similar disciplines?

A further rejoinder is that without undertaking activities that provide markers of academic esteem, CMS academics will be pushed to the margins of business schools, maybe condemned to mainly unrewarded teaching positions. Our first response is that whilst CMS seems to have constructed its identity around some imagined threat of marginalisation, there is no sense that it is enjoying a less comfortable position within academic institutions than the mainstream, be it as a community or at individual level (Tatli, 2012). Secondly, it would seem preferable to be on the margins of institutions whose objectives and practices are not wholeheartedly shared. From this perspective, being on the margins may actually be a good place to be; and being placed on the margins of teaching leaves us with one of the greatest possibilities we have to make a difference.

We also recognise that many of our arguments have been directed at more senior, well paid and resourced colleagues. What then of the young academics setting out on their career, perhaps burdened by student loans, facing years of low income and high expenses, and realising that the redistributive commitments of their more prosperous elders are not really *that* redistributive? We recognise that this may appear a bleak message of despair; of inaction over action, withdrawal over influence.

But this is not at all our intention. Our message is simply to make honest choices. We all have to make a living and sometimes this is what is most important. Doing or not doing things is not the only question, what is important is that we recognise the reasons, conditions and consequences of our action or inaction. Sometimes not doing things is better

than doing them. Sometimes different choices have to be made. But we need to admit the consequences of action and the commitments that follow. And we also need to admit that there are many ways of not being governed 'quite so much' by the academic reward system if that is our desire. The reality is that there are more and more ways to challenge the established mechanisms of this system. For example, with the development of open online journals, there are many opportunities for non-ABS publishing. No longer do we need the institutions of capitalist publishing to make our voice heard. Of course deliberately targeting non ABS-ranked journals, or making anything we feel worth saying available freely online, may not be a career building strategy. But this is a choice we can exercise.

More generally, we could choose not to participate in the broad spectrum of activities that serve to promote the academic marketability of CMS and our own individual status within it. For example, we could question whether yet another conference on critical management studies would achieve any more than reinforce its/our institutional status. We could not apply for promotion. We could acknowledge when a conference simply provides a pleasant location and go on holiday instead. We could admit when we have nothing to say and simply not write anything rather than fabricate an industrial product or build our CV. We could do something entirely different.

What we are trying to say with these limited examples is that we can exercise choice. The rewards system may make recognition, salary increase, and promotion conditional on certain forms of engagement that would conflict with CMS acclaimed intent to work for the greater good of society, but it does not dictate our desires for these rewards, we chose them.

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