



Critical Recipes

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review of:

Mats Alvesson and Stanley Deetz (2000) *Doing Critical Management Research*. London: Sage. (PB: pp. 232, £18.99, ISBN 0 7619 5333 7)

I think it will help the reader, if I contextualise the background to this review, as a relative newcomer to critical studies. Coming from an interpretive and feminist background, I have been moving towards a more critical stance, with a particular interest in postcolonialism. I therefore found an early discussion (chapter two), which concerned alternative social science research perspectives, helpful in situating my own approach to research. Whilst acknowledging the usefulness of Burrell and Morgan's (1979) schemata, Alvesson and Deetz suggest that for future research the dimensions of consensus - dissensus and elite/a priori - local/emergent are more helpful (with the usual reservations about using bipolar constructs). The first dimension concerns the presentation of unity or difference. Using the metaphor of a mirror to reality for a consensus approach, they propose that dissensus replaces this with a lens. Dissensus looks for the contradictions, subtle resistances and the alternative voices that have been suppressed. In relation to their second set of dimensions, elite/a priori approaches apply pre-selected concepts to organisational members, as opposed to local/emergent, where insight rather than truth is offered. Alvesson and Deetz suggest that this latter dimension acknowledges the social construction of research activities, and also that it leads to 'practical' rather than 'book' knowledge, a claim which is surely contestable and privileges the former over the latter. Thus they propose four perspectives: normative, interpretive, critical, and dialogic (which others might term postmodern). They suggest that critical management research draws upon critical and postmodern perspectives, as well as qualitative and interpretive approaches.

I think that this chapter perhaps typifies a tension in this work. Is this primarily an intellectual or practical endeavour? The covers states:

Many researchers know quite a lot about qualitative research methods and about critical management theory; few, however, have carefully integrated these understandings, and critical research methods have not been carefully developed. In practice, most researchers with a critical

bent conduct a qualitative study and add critical concerns ... *Doing Critical Management Research* provides an authoritative and insightful framework for navigating critical theories and methods across the social sciences, but in particular in relation to the study of corporate organisations.

Alvesson and Deetz are at pains to assert that this is not a 'cookbook', and that the reader should look elsewhere for basic texts on qualitative research. It is to some extent puzzling that chapter 3 therefore contains a critique of conventional quantitative and qualitative methodology; this may be unnecessary for the readers of this volume. Chapter 4 is an explication of critical theory and postmodernism as applied to organisational research, and although both are quite helpfully set out, of necessity discussions are somewhat truncated. Thus Alvesson and Deetz select and explore two main intellectual strands to critical theory: ideology critique, and communicative theory. They make the following useful statement about the complementarity of critical and postmodern approaches:

Without considering postmodern themes, critical theory easily becomes unreflective with regard to cultural elitism and modern conditions of power; without incorporating some measure of critical theory of thought - or something similar to provide direction and social relevance - postmodernism simply becomes esoteric. (p. 108)

Chapter 5, which is headed 'new rules for research', is still largely theoretical. They spurn the term 'data collection' in favour of 'empirical material', as this acknowledges the role of the researcher in shaping the information collected. There are also some helpful observations on interviews and interviewees, particularly in relation to impression management and political intent. Nevertheless, the reader has to wait until chapter 6 for substantial practical advice. This has an interesting discussion on the interlocking but distinct roles of insight, critique and transformative redefinition, and they mount a convincing criticism of those researchers who merely offer insight and critique, without making any suggestions for organisational transformation. This chapter seems much more clearly structured, in that theoretical discussion on these three points precedes practical advice on how to implement each, followed by a well discussed illustration. Despite the critical orientation of the book, I found comments about the necessity of grounding any transformative suggestions in the beliefs and discourse of organisational members both sensible and practical.

Chapter 7 has further practical advice, on the use of defamiliarisation and the application of dissensus. They warn against hypercritique and a prejudiced disregard of the principal preoccupations of organisations, and also suggest that the researcher should draw upon an interpretive repertoire of different theories, which they list. In this respect, there seemed to be some ambivalence about gender. On one hand earlier in the book they apologise for the lack of specific focus on gender issues, stating that feminist issues will be 'blended into' the discussion (p.81), and dismiss gender as formulaic, along with class and race. On the other hand they later suggest the use of gender as an analytical framework. This tokenism is curious given Alvesson's record on writing on gender topics (e.g. Alvesson and Billing, 1997), and belies previous advocacy of gender awareness.

Alvesson and Deetz's equivocation in relation to gender is exceeded by a complete absence of specific reference to postcolonialism. The book comments on the lack of

historical consciousness in the social and behavioural sciences, and refers to differences in meaning patterns between sites. However it never tackles the growing field within critical management studies of postcolonialism. Warnings are given against cultural blindness, and the comment made that efficiency, management and so on are primarily concerns of Western culture and business organisations. There is also a sweeping generalisation (worthy of Hofstede, 1991) that individualist people, and societies concerned with control, organise differently to people concerned with fate and community. Thus they appear to position 'non-Western' culture as the Other without acknowledging it, obliteration by omission, and without differentiating between the cultural variety that is found both between and within societies, thus falling prey to the ethnocentrism of which they warn. More fundamentally, they fail to acknowledge how patterns of colonisation radically altered the economies of the colonisers (Loomba, 1998), influenced incipient notions of management (Cooke, 2002) and reconfigured human knowledge (Loomba, 1998). As with class, race, and gender, postcolonialism is an important category for the analysis of power relations, but the book uses the terms 'colonisation' and 'emancipation' in a metaphorical sense only. It might be argued that they cannot cover everything. I would suggest that more extensive treatment of gender, postcolonialism, race and ethnicity could have replaced other discussions that are likely to be familiar to the reader.

Strangely, in the very last chapter, Alvesson and Deetz suddenly launch into more practical issues concerning qualitative research, starting with the ethical and practical issue of access for critically orientated researchers. Some of their advice appears to be quite basic and obvious for a qualitative researcher; this includes their description of 'drilling' in interviews, a procedure where the topic is pursued with repeated interviews and different interviewees, going deeper each time. Surely any competent and experienced researcher would do this without having to articulate it as a technique? This chapter comes very close to the 'cookbook' which Alvesson and Deetz earlier eschewed.

The proof of the pudding is perhaps in the eating. Whilst reading this book, I was in the middle of an organisational case study, and it provided some useful reference points for organising and interpreting what I must now call my empirical material. However I feel I could have gained as much insight from a shorter work, and I would have preferred a longer, more inclusive work, incorporating a wider range of perspectives as indicated above. Would I recommend this book to other readers? I have already recommended selected chapters to research students. I think however it would also have benefited from a clearer structure linking theoretical and practical discussions, preferably chapter by chapter.

references

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