



Progress, Pessimism, Critique

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review of:

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The impression of fulfillment and of end, the muffled feeling that carries and animates our thought, and perhaps lulls it to sleep with the facility of its promises, and makes us believe that something new is about to begin, something that we glimpse only as a thin line of light low on the horizon – that feeling and impression are perhaps not ill founded. (Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*)

Introduction

The appearance of *Organization Studies: Critical Perspectives on Business and Management*, an extensive and weighty collection (including around eighty pieces) edited by the Warwick Organizational Behaviour Staff (or ‘WOBS’), is indicative of the continuing institutionalization of ‘critical’ perspectives in organization studies. Drawing on scholarship both within and outside the field (e.g., Z. Bauman, S. Lukes, D. Harvey, M. Foucault, P. Feyerabend, etc.), this collection presents the reader with a valuable sample of some of the most interesting critical material published over the last forty years. The collection has been selected on the basis of their ‘hard to find’ or obscure standing within the academy, with the expressed aim of eschewing well-known pieces and focusing on influential articles and book chapters not easily accessible to students in common texts (hence the absence of Marx, Weber, among others.). This is a sensible way to employ the space provided by such an anthology, and it will definitely be helpful for students and seasoned researchers alike to have classics like S. Marglin’s *What do Bosses Do?* (Volume One: ‘Modes of Management’), L. Humphries’ *Tearoom Trade* (Volume Two: ‘Objectivity and its Other’) or S. Milgram’s *Some Conditions of Obedience and Disobedience to Authority* (Volume Three: ‘Selves and Subjects’) in one easily accessible location.

Apart from some minor inconsistencies and duplication of themes across the volumes (for example, feminism is discussed in both volumes two and three with little integration by the editors, as is resistance in volumes three and four), the structure of the collection *in toto* holds together reasonably well. Each sub-editorial preface relates their volume back to the *modus operandi* statement in the *General Introduction* and makes a good attempt to integrate the individual pieces in relation to this editorial directive. Individually, every volume develops a specific theme that the editors flag as salient to the reader interested in the critique of contemporary organizations and management. The first volume, titled 'Modes of Management', deals with the concept of management as practice and ideology and reproduces contributions aiming to 'upend' assumptions underlying much mainstream managerialism (with papers by K.W. Hoskin and R.H. Macve, R. Jackall, T. Watson, H. Willmott, etc.). While the second volume, 'Objectivity and its Other' gives perhaps too much space to the already dated 'paradigm wars' that occupied the field in the early 1990s, it tackles epistemological issues and especially the dominance of positivism in organizational science (including work by J. Van Maanen, K. Gergen, E. P. Thompson, K. E. Ferguson and J. Acker). Volume three centres on the topic of 'Selves and Subjects' and is concerned with how the concept of subjectivity has been increasingly theorized and developed in critical research (with contributions by N. Rose, E. Goffman, J. Pringle, C. Grey, D. Kondo, R. Leidner, etc.). And the fourth volume is entitled 'Evil Empires?' It groups together papers that highlight the political consequences of the burgeoning corporations that now prowl the global marketplace, mass culture and everyday life (including articles by E. Abrahamson, B. Townley, P. Thompson and S. Ackroyd, and L. Taylor and P. Walton).

While the collection is eclectic and varied, presenting a rich and colourful array of critical research in organization studies and beyond, a central organizing principle (or thematic) is at work here. This principle is informed by a self-professed *poststructuralist* angle on social critique and critical organization studies (an editorial direction that may sit uncomfortably beside papers like S. Marglin's, for example). Indeed, the image of Foucault in particular looms large in its choice of content and the meta-narrative binding each volume to the broader project. It is in the ominous spirit of an anti-modernist, anti-enlightenment, anti-progress and anti-emancipatory stance that the editors proceed to define what they mean by 'critical' in the *General Introduction* and the suggested protocols readers should practice when wading through each volume (a similar explanation of this version of critique can be found in Burrell, 2001). This statement is repeated in each volume as a reminder to readers about how to go about digesting the contributions. Given this repetition and the somewhat surprising analysis in the *General Introduction*, this review essay will explore WOBS' concept of critique in more detail as a way of assessing the overall tenor of the collection.

That Evil Idea called 'Progress'

The definitive elements of *critical* organization studies as opposed to more mainstream approaches has been thoughtfully discussed in the field as the perspective develops an

institutional identity (e.g., see Alvesson and Deetz, 1996; Fournier and Grey, 2000, Gabriel, 2001, etc.). In the WOBS collection, the editors too endeavour to define what is meant by critique in the *General Introduction*. Here, critical organization studies is said to generally consist of six distinct features, of which WOBS subscribe to only the first four. These are: 1) The *political* (recognizing the ways in which power and domination is manifest in organizations), 2) The *iconoclastic* (an attempt to break down dominant social imagery and icons associated with mainstream management thought), 3) The *epistemological* (a movement away from the dominant positivist paradigm of social and organizational research), 4) The *investigative* (a process of surfacing and bringing to light issues that may have been silenced or dismissed in other research), 5) The *revelatory* (a commitment to unlocking the ideological obfuscations of dominant discourses), and 6) The *emancipatory* (a political stance that champions freedom from arbitrary domination and exploitation). While positively identifying their brand of critical organization studies with the first four elements, WOBS are not so keen on endorsing the last two. The task of revelation, for example, is considered inappropriate because it wrongly assumes that there is a truthful subject 'behind' power relations that can be reached through reason. The notion of revelation also implies that intellectuals are bearers of the Truth that they dispense to the duped masses, a proposition that WOBS will have no truck with. They write, "it is difficult in these post-modern times to hang on to what is itself an illusion, that only a small group of intellectuals is in possession of the one and only Truth" (2001: xxxiii). In many ways, this is a fair enough assertion by WOBS and one that is often required in order to check the continuing hubris in much critical analysis.

The *emancipatory* element that is said to be an important part of the tradition of critical theory (especially in the Frankfurt School) and early models of critical organization studies (that drew mainly on Marx and Weber) is similarly jettisoned. The concept is considered to be fundamentally untenable in these 'post-modern times' because it rests on a notion of *progress*. Indeed, the *General Introduction* expresses the WOBS view that the idea of progress is one of the most dangerous vestiges of the Enlightenment project because it presumes we can move forward towards a space free from power and domination. But, as WOBS intimate, the march of 'progress' has also introduced the gulags, the holocaust, environmental degradation and a frenzied nuclear age. The very assumption of progress, WOBS write, is a dangerous myth that they strongly encourage us to abandon:

It is important for us to belabour the point then that we are not optimistic about the idea of 'progress'. Indeed, we are deeply suspicious of the concept of progress at all. We see it, too, as a myth – a comforting myth from which human optimism may spring 'eternal', or at least spring from the enlightenment. This set of readings does not buy into the concept of progress. It seeks to 'boil the carcass of the old order' and engage in negations in an ongoing but ultimately doomed challenge to the present. We are anti-Panglossian and/but profoundly pessimistic. (2001: xxxiv)

And in the *Introduction* to Volume Four ('Evil Empires?'), it is similarly stated that critique is not about struggling to 'move ahead', but challenging or at least avoiding the poisonous fairytale of progress:

Does critique of its self lead to revelation and emancipation or, on the contrary to further critique? In this volume, we take the latter view. It is not sufficient to critique managerialism – we have to critique the critique, for by not doing so, we fall back into the myth of progress. We are not

therefore optimistic that by critiquing managerialist approaches we enable a different sort of progress occur – a progress towards a more humanistic and progressive sort of work organization (WOBS, 2001: 1592).

Here we can detect a poignant pessimism regarding the idea of political, social and economic progress in relation to organizational forms, economies and structures. Indeed, as far as WOBS are concerned, because we cannot truly escape the clutches of power and domination, the assumption that we can progress out of servitude is at best a sham and at worst a form of thought control in and of itself. They go on to argue:

Since power is everywhere, the myth of human liberty is just that. The manumission of slaves in the USA gave them new won freedom – the freedom to starve. Emancipation from something may almost certainly involve enslavement to its opposite. Emancipation almost always means enslavement for something or someone. There are few grounds for liberatory optimism as chronological time kicks us into the 21st Century. (WOBS, 2001: xxxiv)

It is this pessimism regarding the possibility of ‘emancipatory progress’ that WOBS frame the four volumes, providing the lens through which the reader approaches each contribution. While there are definite advantages to this mode of analysis, for this reviewer at least, there are three key concerns that come to mind when reading WOBS’ manifesto. First, there seems to be a gross ethical ‘equivalentizing’ of domination so that it is impossible to distinguish between slavery, democracy, socialism, communal bartering, etc. This is a good example of what Adorno (1966/73) called ‘identity thinking’ in which important and qualitative differences are forcibly rendered equal. Because each social form involves power, then they must be as ‘bad’ as each other. The implied corollary is we cannot favour or support one over the other. Of course, this is a very problematic method of studying power, politics and social organization because it universalizes an abstraction (‘power’) and fails to identify the substantive particularizations of this abstraction, its various forms, configurations, formats, etc. that press at the wall of the concept. Surely the mechanisms of domination found in pre-civil war American slavery, for example, are somehow different to, say, those associated with the modern middleclass professional. Both involve power and domination, but not in the same way. If ‘emancipation’ and ‘progress’ are defined as ‘the escape from power’, then the *General Introduction* is indeed correct in its pessimism; this would be a dangerous and simplistic illusion. But if, as Laclau (1996) states, emancipation is a *contextual* reconfiguration of power by subaltern stakeholders that simultaneously reaches out to a socially necessary *universal* (the non-exploitive, the egalitarian, etc.), then we must be circumspect about how we conceptualise the notion of freedom. We ought to see it not in terms of an acontextual absolute, but as a kind of *culturally specific absolute* that may be possible to attain in a limited sense.

The second concern with WOBS’ analysis is the implicit conservatism lurking in the text. Because power is deemed to be everywhere, this means that there can be no such thing as emancipatory progress because political subjects merely move from one set of dominating power relations to another. Therefore, it is futile to imagine or envisage any ‘alternative’ to the present because it will be just as oppressive as what we have now. Or, to continue the example in the above excerpt, given that manumission is a myth, the slave can only hope for continued subordination or the prospect of starvation. This is, of course, a very difficult logic to accept. Let’s take the contemporary organization of work. Based upon only a cursory glance of employment conditions around the world,

one can easily reel off a raft of ways in which organization's could be 'better' in relation to remuneration, gender, the environment, decision-making opportunities, democracy, etc. And I believe this can be done without hubris or insipid moralizing. In this sense, the critical organization studies that WOBS propose is far behind the progressive politics that are actually occurring in and around work organizations today as practiced by unions, volunteer groups and community action associations that understand the vast differences in how power can be organized.

The third reservation relates to the question of 'why bother?' with critical organization studies if we cannot make statements about how employment realities might be somehow 'better' or 'improved' compared to the current state of affairs. Given their statements on the topic of critique thus far, WOBS too ask this question in relation to their own approach: "Why bother developing a critical approach? ... contestation is life affirming. Critique can even be fun" (2001: xxxv). While this does have a credible Nietzschean tone about it in which criticism is about affirming life rather than denying it, it does seem, to this reviewer at least, a little introspective. For example, one possible implication of the statement is that critical organization studies is not so much directed at the realities of work institutions or those employed in them, but the desires of researchers themselves. We do critique for mainly personal reasons (and even self-gratification), rather than because we feel that a certain story about reality ought to be told. While it is certainly important to be reflexive about the role of the researcher or theorist in relation to the researched (see Lincoln, 1993), surely a commitment to a critical perspective is more than a cloistered and somewhat solipsistic 'affirmation of life' and 'even having fun'.

Historical and Political Pessimism

The pessimism towards the notion of progress in the WOBS *General Introduction* reflects a variegated tradition of scholarship that is worth exploring in order to gain a better understanding of the issues being raised here. In critical and radical theory more generally there has always been a deeply pessimistic suspicion about the notion of progress – especially the assumption that Western civilization in particular can be depicted as a series of successive stages in which it finally reaches the 'end of history' in the form of liberal capitalism. A pivotal moment in the history of this pessimism was Marx's break with the utopian socialists. As Balibar (1995) maintains in his superb analysis of Marx's philosophy of time and revolution, it is disappointing that his work is so often dismissed as a simple-minded proponent of a teleological view of history in which the laws of social progress automatically propel us towards some preordained future. Although we can certainly find elements of this view in some of his early political writings, he generally maintained a critical distance from the 'ideology of advancement' in bourgeois political philosophy, as well as the radical socialism of the likes of Saint-Simon and Proudhon. Indeed, in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847/1976), he critiques Proudhon's optimistic theorization of historical movement in which a gagged social justice is posited as a prime causal mechanism. Marx's contrary suggestion is that a survey of human civilization only confirms the lamentable principle that "it is always the bad side that in the end triumphs over the good side. It is the bad

side that produces movement which makes history” (Marx, 1847/1976: 174). In other words, it is the bad side that makes struggle and politics the ultimate horizon of human activity.

For Marx, the fundamental problem with utopian versions of social critique is that it envisages a better social formation by retroactively inscribing it in history. That is to say, ‘the good’ is assumed to be a steadfast historical undercurrent that will one day reveal its true hand in the dawn of a new era of freedom. This kind of utopianism is always looking over its shoulder for cues. In Marx’s view, this was a rather naïve and juvenile assumption, which he had given up on, especially by the time that *Capital* (1867/1976) was being prepared (*Grundrisse*) and subsequently written. Marx was also critical of the ideas of progress proffered by the bourgeois economic philosophers. In a similar fashion to the utopian socialists, Bentham and Mill also had their eye on the past, construing all hitherto social history as a mere artificial prelude to a naturally human present (i.e. capitalism). For Bentham and Mill, “there are only two kinds of institutions, the artificial and the natural. The institutions of feudalism are the artificial institutions, those of the bourgeoisie natural...thus there has been a history, but there is no longer any” (Marx, 1847/1976: 174).

It is this dialectical understanding of social development that made such an impact on the first generation of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. Adorno and Horkheimer’s (1947/1973) *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is a cultural criticism born in the enormity of devastating world war, concentration camps, imperialism and rapacious financial crisis. The enlightenment had promised so much but delivered death and mayhem on a gigantic scale. The main target of this dialectical criticism was not only capitalism but modernity generally. The dialectic of the enlightenment is simple to discern: science generates improved means of preserving life but at the same time weapons of mass destruction; capitalism produces a level of wealth never before witnessed, but also pseudo-human wage-slaves, etc. The history of progress is indeed a nightmare that we are trying to wake up from, and Adorno (in his characteristically acerbic tone) even goes so far as to attempt to “free dialectics from affirmative traits” (Adorno, 1966/1973: xix), leading to a kind of unqualified ‘bad on bad’ image of history.

This pessimism is perhaps most famously articulated by a fringe member of the Frankfurt School, Walter Benjamin. In ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, Benjamin reformulates Marx’s principle that history advances by its bad side. The essay argues that the ‘cultural treasures’ of modernity and capitalism must be viewed with ‘cautious detachment’ for “there is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (Benjamin, 1940/1970: 258). Benjamin’s messianic and ‘wizened’ historical materialism recognizes the irony of propounding a progressive politics in a milieu that has perfected misery with mathematical precision. This reflexive pessimism is captured in one of Benjamin’s best known excerpts in which he employs the Klee Painting, *Angelus Novus*, purchased by Benjamin in 1910 for his study:

A Klee painting named ‘Angelus Novus’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one perceives the angel of history. His face is towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon

wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin, 1940/1970: 259-260)

We must place this thesis in its broader social circumstances. It was written in 1940 when the Nazis were rampaging across the European continent. Indeed, this was literally a geography of fire and for the Jewish-Marxist literary critic, a space that represented the culmination of a brief and catastrophic era in enlightenment thought. The angel of history is all that is *novus* (new, inexperienced and not yet ‘wizened’). Its apocalyptic wingspan is caught within the raging gale of progress and change, and as a result, nothing settles for long before being uprooted and wrecked – this is the ironic blindness (its back is facing the future) of the enlightenment tradition (also see Böhm, 2001). For sure, a similar pessimism regarding the assumption that history is about the movement towards a better society can also be found in the work of Nietzsche (morality), Weber (rationalization) and Foucault (psychiatry and punishment). This sort of pessimism is very important for critical thinking. The name of progress has so often been deployed as an ideological weapon to shore up asymmetrical relations of power. A trained pessimism is therefore an indispensable antidote to technological fetishism, the aggrandizement of social rationalization and colonial myths of superiority.

What relationship does this criticism of the concept of progress have with that expressed by WOBS in the *General Introduction*. What I believe has happened is a *historical* pessimism (critiquing the assumption that history automatically moves forward) has been translated by WOBS into a *political* pessimism. The former never forecloses the possibility that things may genuinely improve, while the latter rejects outright the possibility that things might get better. Marx and the Frankfurt School, for example, develop a pessimism about the structure of the past/present in a manner that abandons any teleological preconceptions. However, this fuels a kernel of hope regarding the future, or what David Harvey (2000) refers to in a recent book as a ‘space of hope’ in which barbarism is subverted into a place of intervention. The WOBS approach, however, translates, or more accurately, *conflates* this historical pessimism with a paralysing political doubt in which there is little reason to hope. While there are undoubtedly close connections between these two types of pessimism, they do indicate quite markedly different analytical territories. It is important that history and politics are never reduced to each other; what has been, what is and what might be cannot be smoothed out into a clear chain of equivalences. Even Benjamin’s pessimism, one that conceptually suspended the ‘cultural treasures’ of the Enlightenment, still maintained a glimmer of expectant redemption in the form of a progressive historical materialism. His strange hybrid of messianic theology and Marxist political economy is particularly distilled in this passage: “The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of the Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious” (Benjamin, 1940/1970: 257, emphasis in original).

This urgent ambivalence in which one is deeply pessimistic about the history of capitalism and optimistic about ‘what is to be done’ signifies a politics that is open to

the future. The hope/justice couplet is an important orientating axis here. This space of hope is undeconstructable, in Derrida's (1994) sense of the term, because it is always coming, an unpredictable and haunting murmur of a present that has not yet arrived. The *aporia* between the present and the future is the very stuff of political agency, and it involves challenging the present in a way that is committed to debate about 'how things might be different/better' in relation to social structures and practices, as well as formulating criteria for making such judgements and organizing thoughtful practice.

A Progressive Critical Organization Studies?

In light of this review of how the idea of progress has been approached in social theory, it is germane to ask whether we can have a critical organization studies *without* some kind of a conception of how things could be different and better than the present. Or, to put it differently, what is critical organization studies if it does not involve some kind of notion of political progress? Importantly, perhaps this is less a question of 'a programme' than an ethical relationship to one's scholarship, research subjects and position in privileged and rather cloistered institutions called universities. For WOBS, there *prima facie* appears to be very little room for a concept of progress in critical studies of work and organization. The *General Introduction* might even be interpreted as a concerted effort to dismiss even a speculative attempt to theorize the positive dimensions of a reformulated notion of progress. Its brand of negation might be 'life affirming', but it is ultimately resigned to its own pointlessness as it languishes in the face of a corrupt reality. And it is exactly this kind of negation that Lenin (1914-1916/1961) addressed when discussing Hegel's contention that in order to fully understand dialectics, one must place a radically *political* positivity at the heart of the Negation in order to fully grasp the dynamics of social movement:

This is very important for the understanding of dialectics, Not empty negation, nor futile negation, not sceptical negation, vacillation and doubt is characteristic and essential in dialectics – which undoubtedly contains the element of negation and indeed is its most important element – no, but negation as a moment of connection, as a moment of development, retaining the positive. (Lenin, 1914-1916/1961: 226)

The politically positive dialectics that Lenin is subscribing to (perhaps one that Adorno (1966/1973) would not favour given his attempt to free dialectics of affirmative traits) supersedes the cheap liberalist gesture to 'progress'. But this, of course, then raises an extremely important issue, one that I suspect WOBS has also pondered when developing their version of critical organization studies: *progress for whom?* In the spirit of relativism we could push this querying further and hypothesize, 'might not progress for some be oppression for others?' These are useful questions that need to be addressed by any scholarly consideration of the meaning of critique, in organization studies or elsewhere. As a further step, we might want to pose similarly tough questions, such as 1) Is the idea of progress always an oppressive ruse, designed to justify violence? 2) Can we have an idea of progress without proselytising, preaching or having a vanguard mentality? and 3) Is the word 'progress' so invested with a particular liberalist discourse, that we need to employ a different kind of word altogether?

Conclusions

Upon surveying the contents of the handbook, one does wonder whether WOBS' notion of critique (and its pessimism towards social, economic and political progress) belies a subtle sense of irony (rather than contradiction) about its own logic and engagement with the field of critical organizations studies. That is to say, while framing the contributions in an almost nihilistic manner where there seems to be little room for hope or betterment, many of the articles included by the editors seem to betray, to varying degrees, both a sense that not all is right in the world of work *and* that it could somehow be made better. For example, in the first volume, 'Modes of Management', papers by M.B. Calás and L. Smircich ('Dangerous Liaisons: The 'Feminine-in-Management' Meets 'Globalization') and S. Marglin ('What Do Bosses Do?') give a critical analysis of current management practices with an eye to more equitable alternatives. There are some fantastic contributions in Volume Three, 'Selves and Subjects' by R. Pringle ('Bureaucracy, Rationality and Sexuality') and M. Noon and P. Blyton ('Survival Strategies') that also seem to have a progressive edge compared to the message found in the *General Introduction*. David Collinson and Karen Dale's introduction to this volume provides an excellent overview of developments in the field that is as interesting as the contributions that follow. Moreover, in Volumes Three and Four there are two sections (respectively subtitled 'Survival Practices' and 'Organizations, Power and Resistance') devoted to acts of resistance, subversion and contestation. Notwithstanding the sub-editorial claim in Volume Four that readers must maintain a sceptical outlook regarding emancipation, the contributions in it (such as L. Taylor and P. Walton's 'Industrial Sabotage' and D. Waddington *et al.*'s 'Keep the Red Flag Flying?') could be read in a relatively positive and progressive manner.

This incongruence between the dire political pessimism of the *General Introduction* and at least some of the contributions included in the collection is fascinating and perhaps beyond the scope of this essay to explore in more depth. Indeed, perhaps it is the case that I have been somewhat myopic to discuss *Organization Studies: Critical Perspectives on Business and Management* in terms of its editorial theorizing of critique. The collection does have much to offer by way of gathering valuable material into one source handbook. But the understanding of critique developed in the *General Introduction* (and repeated at the beginning of each volume) is somewhat unconvincing and indicative of a cursory reading of poststructuralist analyses. While this collection stands as a riveting and exceedingly useful set of readings for the student of critical research, its overall message about why we bother to engage in criticism is in need of further elaboration and justification. For the muffled feeling that there is still a space of radical alterity 'to come' is perhaps not ill founded altogether.

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