



From Marxism to Critical Management Studies

Michael Rowlinson

review of:

Alex Callinicos (2006) *The Resources of Critique*. Cambridge: Polity. (PB: pp. 328, £16.99, ISBN: 9780745631615)

Nearly twenty years ago, just when many of our colleagues in the emerging field of Critical Management Studies (CMS) were immersing themselves in the work of Baudrillard, Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard, Alex Callinicos came up with an essential guide and antidote, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (1990). Now, having produced innumerable essential texts on social theory in the meantime, Callinicos has come up with ‘an immanent critique’ of another set of contemporary theorists in *The Resources of Critique* (2006), namely Jürgen Habermas, Jacques Bidet, Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello, Pierre Bourdieu, Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, and Antonio Negri. As I discovered when I attended a workshop organized by the Centre for Philosophy and Political Economy at the University of Leicester in 2005, Negri in particular, or rather Hardt’s and Negri’s *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude* (2004), have a set of self-styled ‘autonomist’ devotees within British business schools who see themselves as too critical even for CMS. And now that there is an English translation available, Boltanski’s and Chiapello’s *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2006) is also acquiring a following amongst the ‘critters’ of CMS. I have no doubt that the acolytes of these (non-management) gurus will dismiss Callinicos’s *The Resources of Critique* as a predictable reiteration of orthodox Marxism, which in many ways it is, although, as I will show, when he sets out his own position Callinicos concedes that there are significant weaknesses in classical Marxism.

Part I offers more or less self-contained critiques of each author. For example, Callinicos provides a neat summary and critique of Boltanski’s and Chiapello’s *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, which he warns is “too long and at points disorganized and repetitive” (p. 63). He sees Žižek’s ‘torrent of books’ as brilliant, but also derivative and repetitive, which makes Žižek more difficult to summarize and critique. Callinicos claims to show how each theorist has “failed in their own terms to provide a sound philosophical basis for social critique and, more broadly, for transcendence, understood as our ability to go beyond the limits set by existing beliefs and practices” (p. 243).

Given that this reads much like a collection of extended book reviews, there is little point in me reviewing the book chapter by chapter. Instead I will pick out some themes that strike me as most relevant for CMS.

In 1990 Callinicos claimed that postmodernism represented a response to the retreat of the left since 1968. In *The Resources of Critique* Callinicos reiterates his earlier diagnosis more forcefully by suggesting that the defeat of the left runs even deeper. For example, he maintains that at the start of the 21st century “the ideological influence of Marxism and of the classical left was far weaker than it had been perhaps since the Revolutions of 1848” (p. 5). He acknowledges that “Marxism has been relatively marginal to the contemporary revival of social critique and anti-capitalist contestation” (p. 9). And he sees it as unsurprising that Walter Benjamin has found favour in the new forms of social critique, given that:

His “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, written after the Hitler-Stalin Pact of August 1939, resonated with a new time of historical disillusion, as the crisis in the Western left that began in the second half of the 1970s climaxed in the collapse of the Soviet Union and the eclipse of “historical Communism”. (p. 85)

Callinicos acknowledges that what is distinctive about the “new styles of social critique” is that they “go beyond exposés of specific institutions or policies, to offer, among other things, what amounts to philosophical justifications of their own existence” (p. 5). But he does not offer any such justification for his own position. How is it, we are entitled to ask, that if the Marxist left is in worse shape than it has *ever* been before, comparable with the time of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, that Callinicos can expect us to believe that Marxism alone offers the prospect of ‘transcendence’? And arguably the reference to transcendence represents a terminological or rhetorical retreat from the classical leftist insistence on the need for revolution. I can imagine many of Callinicos’s comrades in the Socialist Workers Party wondering whether transcendence is simply an academic philosophical euphemism for revolution.

In trying to understand the development of Badiou’s arcane ontology, Callinicos maintains that it is important to give sufficient weight to “the background of what must have seemed to most participants to have been the death agony of French Marxism in the late 1970s and early 1980s” (p. 90). Not only does Callinicos fail to specify the exact nature of this crisis or its magnitude, but he also fails to explain his own immunity to the all-pervasive disillusionment of former Marxists. Of course the cognoscenti do not need any explanation, because they already know that any kind of Marxism that was identified with so-called ‘historical communism’ in Stalinist Russia or China was always doomed to failure, thus vindicating their own adherence to Trotskyism. *The Resources of Critique* is marred by Callinicos’s smug sectarian celebration of the alleged crisis of just about every other branch of Marxism except his own, even if his political commitment makes for a readable polemical style.

The importance of defeat comes to the fore in Callinicos’s critique of Negri. According to Callinicos, Hardt and Negri fail to recognize the importance of the waves of defeat suffered by the organized working class from the late 1970s onwards (p. 137-138). Instead they actually claim this process as a victory for the working class. Callinicos returns to this theme when he tries to locate class conflict within the structural

contradictions of the capitalist mode of production. He maintains that Negri's reinterpretation of Marx's *Grundrisse* reduces history to a "clash of antagonistic collective wills" and that in *Empire* and *Multitude* Hardt and Negri "deny the possibility of labour being defeated and make every restructuring of capitalism a victory, an affirmation of the creativity of the multitude, but this is tenable neither intellectually nor ethico-politically" (p. 205-206). Against this Callinicos reiterates the need to acknowledge the structural constraints within which the working class has endured defeat:

The victory of capital over labour in the 1970s and 1980s no doubt had something to do with the relative qualities of leadership on the two sides, but the kind of hegemonic articulation that, for example, Thatcherism represented in Britain possessed structural advantages deriving from the global restructuring of economic relations that began in the second half of the 1970s and from the profound ideological malaise of the left produced by the collapse of post-1968 militancy, the crisis of the Keynesian welfare state, and the death agony of "existing socialism". The indeterminacies inherent in ideological and political struggles don't require us to say that it is indeterminacy all the way down. (p. 207)

But it is difficult to see where ideology and contingency end and structural constraints begin in this passage. Was the 'global restructuring of economic relations' the cause or effect of monetarism and liberalization? Was 'the crisis of the Keynesian welfare state' ideological or economic? And did the Soviet Union collapse under the weight of its structural contradictions, or because it lost its legitimacy? Inevitably Callinicos falls back on the labour theory of value and the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall (TRPF) as an irrepressible structural contradiction of capitalism (p. 125-126). Even though Callinicos acknowledges that the TRPF is "a highly controversial subject" (289, note 48), his defence of it rests on an exegesis of Marx's *Capital III* rather than any attempt to explain the crises and defeats since the 1970s in empirical terms such as changing rates of profit in capitalist economies. In other words, for Callinicos any crisis must be related to the underlying structural contradictions of capitalism as identified by Marx in the 19th century, and there is no requirement to explain the mechanism whereby these structural contradictions are manifested in specific crises at particular times.

Although Callinicos is open to criticism for failing to account for the existence of his own position, he does raise an issue of relevance for CMS when he highlights Habermas's liability to collapse into contextualism:

At stake here are not simply philosophical issues in epistemology and ontology, but also the fundamentally political problem of the tenability of critical theory. Is it possible for philosophy and social theory to establish sufficient distance from prevailing beliefs and practices to provide a vantage point for social criticism? (p. 36)

Given the prevailing contextualism within CMS, it must be doubted whether CMS can establish sufficient distance from the prevailing beliefs and practices in business schools to provide a vantage point for criticising business and management. If the pressures to teach would-be managers something useful, or to produce research 'for' management that conforms to the constraints of research assessments and journal rankings are even half as bad as many of the more radical adherents of CMS would have us believe they are, then it is puzzling how the critters, autonomists included, came to be teaching and doing research in business schools in the first place. And if they can stand those

pressures, then it is doubtful whether the critters can really be critical. Callinicos argues that in the work of Bidet, and Habermas, modernity has been substituted for capitalism as the target for social critique, and arguably the accommodation of CMS in British business schools and the American Academy of Management is also predicated on a substitution of modernity for capitalism. After all, if critters see their role as drawing attention to the potential excesses of management in modernity, such as the Holocaust, then it is unlikely that anyone but a Nazi will raise any objections to them. In other words, CMS has become increasingly depoliticized as it has been institutionalized. The implicit challenge from Callinicos is for CMS to explain how its rise seems to be in an inverse relation to the strength of the left and the working class.

According to Callinicos there was a significant shift in the 1990s, with the triumph of liberal capitalism, the end of the Cold War, and the Washington Consensus, which meant that “the great *querelle* of moderns and postmoderns was no longer at the cutting edge of theoretical debate” (p. 51). In this context he praises Boltanski and Chiapello both for the richness of their research and for their “explicit problematization of *capitalism*” (p. 53). Callinicos endorses their argument that contemporary managerial ideology is indebted to the anti-capitalist discourse of the 1960s, and on this score his only complaint is that:

The incorporation of *soixante-huitards* into a capitalism that adopted a mellow libertarian rhetoric isn't by any means a purely French phenomenon. (p. 63)

In this context it is worth noting that whereas Callinicos recognizes *The New Spirit of Capitalism* as a “major work”, even if Chiapello is a “management theorist” (p. 53; 63), Anglo-American CMS has obviously completely escaped his attention. Again, when disposing of Hardt and Negri's confusing concept of immaterial labour, Callinicos cites a labour process study of call centre workers (p. 144), rather than any of the research on subjectivity at work from CMS. But if neo-management relies on an ‘artistic critique’ that is attractive to aesthetic rebels, rather than a ‘social critique’, which means that awkward questions about inequality are neatly avoided, where would CMS be located? The CMS complaints against ubiquitous managerialism in the form of research and teaching audits echo the resistance of corporate management to government bureaucracy and regulation. And the aspirations from the self-styled radical autonomist wing in CMS to realize the full possibilities of therapeutic radical pedagogy, along with their desire to eroticize the business school, amount to little more than wacky versions of the ‘experiential’ learning that is popular in business education. Thus, CMS for the most part consists of an artistic critique that is all too easily accommodated in business schools.

In the end Callinicos tires of Boltanski and Chiapello because although they acknowledge that capitalism exists independently of its discursive justifications, their reliance on management literature is “insufficient to support a critique of capitalism” (p. 70). Callinicos endorses Bidet's conclusion that Boltanski's and Chiapello's sociology, “presents itself, strangely, all at the same time, as the critique of capitalism, and as its therapy” (quoted on p. 71). It is hardly surprising that *The New Spirit of Capitalism* resonates with CMS, which is similarly absorbed by critiques of management as a discursive formation, and where it is never clear whether those who are anti-management are really for or against management because it is all just a semantic game

of defining management rather than analyzing the real structures of capitalism that are, for Callinicos, “constituted by exploitation and class antagonism” (p. 70).

Callinicos turns to Bourdieu for a social critique that puts more emphasis on a theory of social structure, focusing on Bourdieu’s analysis of the role of intellectuals. Bourdieu’s critique of ‘scholastic reason’, of the way in which intellectuals fail to acknowledge the very particular and privileged social conditions that allow them to pursue their work applies all too well to the whingers in CMS, as do the epithets Bourdieu uses to characterize the “fallacies produced by the failure to recognize these social conditions of intellectual work”: “scholastic epistemocentrism”, “moralism and egoistic universalism”, and “aesthetic universalism” (quoted on p. 75). But more seriously, it is difficult to see how CMS could possibly deliver the kind of “scholarship with commitment” that Bourdieu called for, “a politics of intervention in the political world that obeys, as far as possible, the rules in force in the scientific field” (quoted on p. 74), because according to CMS the rules in force in the management field preclude anything that is not ‘for’ management. If management academics have to establish reputations in their field by producing research *for* management in order to gain the requisite authority to intervene in politics as intellectuals, they can hardly then use that authority to attack capitalism and management. This suggests that the rise of business schools has undermined the scope for autonomous intellectuals to mount a universalistic critique of capitalism from the study of management that might formerly have emanated from sociology or politics. But more than that, CMS is hardly well placed to critique that undermining process when its own existence is largely predicated upon claims that critical management is good for management, and practising managers who come into business schools and claim that critical perspectives make the most sense of their management experience are hailed as vindicating CMS.

Callinicos’s own position, set out in Part II of *The Resources of Critique*, consists of a critical realist ontology, “a Marxist theory of structural contradiction, and a freestanding normative conception of egalitarian justice”, which he maintains “cannot be found in any of the theorists discussed in part I” (p. 243). Callinicos’ overview and endorsement of critical realism will be welcome for its would-be adherents in CMS, as will his denunciations of various theorists, e.g. Deleuze, Laclau and Mouffe, and Boltanski and Chiapello, for their “anti-realism” (p. 175, 180). Callinicos sees critical realism as the basis for practically effective social critique that sets out the possibilities for transformation within “the limits of the possible” (p. 181). But my impression is that critical realism within CMS represents a retreat from the aspirations for social transformation in Labour Process Theory into a purely explanatory theory of organizations.

One of Callinicos’s themes is “the relationship between explanatory social theory and normative political philosophy” (p. 217). But it is not until the Conclusion that Callinicos makes an explicit concession that his position in relation to this theme represents a significant departure from classical Marxism:

Marx tried to develop an explanatory theory that exposed the mechanism of capitalist exploitation and crisis without appealing to normative conceptions and ideals. This was, in my view, simply a mistake induced in particular by the influence of Hegel’s critique of Kant. (p. 247)

Some mistake! But at least it opens up a field for debate. Callinicos engages with a range of philosophers concerned with equality and normative principles, including G.A. Cohen, Amartya Sen, Ronald Dworkin, Robert Nozick, and, at some length, John Rawls. According to Callinicos, admitting this mistake in Marxism means that:

A theoretically consequent Marxist critique of capitalism requires articulation of ethical principles in terms of which capitalism is condemned as unjust. How else can it succeed as *critique*? Pursuing this insight demands a genuine dialogue between classical Marxism and egalitarian liberalism – i.e. a mutual engagement that does not take the form of one discourse imperialistically absorbing the other. In other words, the pursuit of normative issues does not require one to abandon the explanatory social theory that has been Marxism’s great intellectual strength. At the same time, Marxism may pose some challenging questions to egalitarian liberals about how their conceptions of justice can actually be realized. (p. 221)

But what’s in it for egalitarian liberals? Since Callinicos uses the territorial metaphor of imperialism, this sounds like a vanquished nation suing for peace on favourable terms with its arsenal intact. Besides, Callinicos is probably in danger of exaggerating the common ground between classical Marxism and Rawlsian egalitarian liberalism. A recent biography “emphasizes that Rawls is not a defender of a capitalist welfare state, as he is so commonly taken to be. Rather Rawls favours a ‘property-owning democracy’ in which ownership and control is widely dispersed” (Wolff, 2008).

What is striking is that whereas Callinicos explains the shifts of position by every other theorist in terms of the political and intellectual context he offers no such explanation for his own shift, which is presented as if it is a purely intellectual progression. But it seems likely that his retreat from classical Marxist positions can also be explained in terms of the defeat of the working class and the retreat of the left in advanced capitalist countries since the 1970s. If it is only the depth of defeat that has compelled the likes of Callinicos to reconsider the basic tenets of Marxism, then there is little reason to suppose that egalitarian liberalism, or others strands of thought that were the targets for Marxist vituperation at times when the left was stronger will have much interest in trying to revive what remains intact of Callinicos’s Marxism.

There are several seemingly unnecessary irritants in *The Resources of Critique*. For example, Callinicos is sceptical about Badiou’s invocation of mathematical logic and he rejects Badiou’s “metaphysical baggage” (p. 96; 104). He sees Bhaskar’s “espousal of New Age spiritualism” as a sign of his “intellectual decline” (p. 158). But unfortunately that doesn’t stop Callinicos “from formulating and defending an explicitly dialectical conception of nature” (p. 215). According to Callinicos chaos and complexity theory “include highly dialectical conceptions”, and “sometimes scientists reflecting on their finding explicitly recognize how they resonate with the idea of a dialectic of nature” (p. 214). Well maybe they do, but every social theorist who invokes chaos and complexity seems to find in them confirmation for his or her views. And if Callinicos really requires these mystical allusions to science and nature to demonstrate that the market is not preordained, then the arguments for a preordained market must be stronger than I ever imagined. To me all this just confirms that many Marxists have yet to free themselves from pseudo-scientific mumbo jumbo.

More importantly, Callinicos makes another major concession in his Conclusion when he states that:

It is undeniably a serious weakness of classical Marxism that it tends to portray the management of a communist society as a purely technical problem... As long as resources aren't infinite – namely forever – the result will be conflict among individual or groups with different projects. (p. 254)

Taken together, Callinicos' two major concessions of weakness in classical Marxism imply that Marxists are mistaken if they believe that ethical concerns in relation to business and management in contemporary society can be reduced to considerations of capitalism and that management theory will be redundant once capitalism has been transcended. This vindicates critical studies of management, even if, for reasons implied by Callinicos, the institutional location of CMS in business schools is problematic. I have little doubt that Callinicos would be surprised to find that *The Resources of Critique* is being favourably reviewed in a journal based in a school of management. But if he is serious about Marxists being prepared to debate issues of ethics and management more widely then it would be worth finding out if he could be persuaded to debate these issues with us in Critical Management Studies.

reference

Wolff, J. (2008) 'In front of the curtain: review of *Rawls* by Samuel Freeman', *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 March.

the author

Michael Rowlinson is Professor of Organization Studies at the School of Business and Management, Queen Mary, University of London. His current research interests are related to corporate history and social memory studies, and how organizations represent their past in the present, especially the darker side to their history that organizations would prefer not to know about or to be able to forget. He has published widely on the relation between history and organization studies in journals such as *Business History*, *Critical Perspectives on Accounting, Organization*, and *Organization Studies*. He has also co-authored a series of papers on the relation between Critical Management Studies and Labour Process Theory in *International Studies of Management and Organization* and *Administrative Theory & Praxis*. He is a founding co-editor of the journal *Management & Organizational History*.
Address: School of Business & Management, Queen Mary University of London, Mile End Road, London E1 4NS
E-mail: m.rowlinson@qmul.ac.uk