Radicalising Organisation Studies and the Meaning of Critique

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abstract

On July 6th, 2001 egosNetWork (www.ephemeraweb.org/egosnetwork), a group initiated to facilitate the exchange of ideas between junior and established academics and aims to nurture the diversity and critical thinking in Organisation Studies, invited some of the major figures who have been involved in expressing critical voices within the formalised institutions of management and organisation studies to respond to a set of 'provocations', which pose questions about the meaning of critique in an effort to contribute to the radicalisation of organisation studies. What follows is a transcript of this discussion that took place as part of the 17th EGOS Colloquium 'The Odyssey of Organizing' in Lyon, France.

Campbell Jones:

I have been asked to start with some 'provocations', which will take the form of four questions that I want to open out to the panel and to everyone here. This is not particularly well structured, but is basically a set of ideas which reflect some of my concerns about the way that critique, critical studies of management and organisation and 'critical management studies' have been emerging.

The first is around the relationship between critique and dogmatism. Quite often we evoke some kind of Kantian metaphor of the relation between dogma and critique: the task of the critic is to refuse or to resist common sense, common sense being in some way dogmatic or 'doxical'. There are, of course, are a couple of problems with this basic Kantian distinction. The first problem is that critical understandings are never able to totally differentiate themselves from, or totally step outside, the common sense of the time. There is always some kind of co-implication of critical reason with common sense, with dogma if we want to call it that. The second problem is that critical thought itself can become dogmatic. It can be just as repetitive of the common sense of the day as dogma itself. So the question that I want to pose around this is the extent to which critical management studies and other variations of critique, as they have been manifested in organisation studies, are today crystallising as a form of dogma, with a certain set of rules about how we do critique. So critique must follow a particular form, must be enunciated in a particular language and so forth. This might be my first question.

The second question I have relates to the status of post-structural theory in critique and critical management writing. My reflection here comes out of a concern with the way that critical management studies is described by Fournier and Grey in a recent paper[1]. Fournier and Grey are pluralistic and outline a number of positions which they describe as being critical management studies (CMS). For them CMS "encompasses a broad range of positions including neo-Marxism (labour process theory, Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, Gramsci 'hegemony theory'), post-structuralism, deconstructionism, literary criticism, feminism, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, environmentalism…post-colonialism and queer theory".[2] So there are, it would seem, a plethora of critical discourses. But as Paul Thompson has noted, when Fournier and Grey go about describing what CMS does, how it works, they tend to identify a quite specific aspect of these traditions they identify. Thompson suggests that in Fournier and Grey's analysis there is "no significant difference between what is claimed on behalf of CMS and those made for post-structuralism and post-modernism in general".[3] So the suggestion is that when Fournier and Grey describe what CMS is, the kind of strategies of critique, which include non-performative intent, de-naturalising and reflexivity, these strategies represent a quite particular version of what critique could be. It may be possible, with the rise of post-structural theory, which, of course, has been valuable to the field of organisation studies, that we still have a 'marginalisation', to use the language of post-structuralism, in which critical management studies takes on post-structuralism as if post-structuralism is, and should be, the hegemonic form of critique. 'If you don't do critique post-structuralist jargon, that you are not *really* being critical!'

The third point I want to make is about the quite particular ways in which post-structural theory has been read. Here I am referring to the tendency which we have seen in critical management studies to suggest that following post-structuralism we must no longer make the grand claims that used to be made on behalf of progress or whatever. So the critic, following post-structuralism, should be far more modest. So modest, in fact, that even goals such as 'emancipation' are no longer acceptable. Not acceptable in their traditional form, and for some writers not even acceptable at all. I am thinking, for example, of Alvesson and Willmott's suggestion that we must work towards 'micro-emancipations'[4], or what I saw represented in a recent issue of *Organization Studies* in which Andrew Chan suggests that discourses in which we hope for a radically different future belong to a 'tired paradigm'[5] of revolution. By juxtaposing this with some of

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1 Valérie Fournier and Christopher Grey (2000) 'At the Critical Moment: Conditions and Prospects for Critical Management Studies', *Human Relations*, 53(1): 7-32.

2 Fournier and Grey (2000: 16).

3 Paul Thompson (2001) 'Progress, Practice and Profits: How Critical is Critical Management Studies?', Paper presented at the *19th Annual International Labour Process Conference*, London, 26-28 March, p.1.

4 Mats Alvesson and Hugh Willmott (1992) 'On the Idea of Emancipation in Management and Organization Studies', *Academy of Management Review*, 17(3): 432

5 Andrew Chan (2000) 'Redirecting Critique in Postmodern Organization Studies: the Perspective of Foucault', *Organization Studies*, 21(6): 1070.

Derrida's recent comments on the goals of critique, we could open up this question a bit. A couple of comments of Derrida, which I want to indicate. One is when Derrida says, "Nothing seems to me less outdated than the classic emancipatory ideal".[6] Another comment from our 'post-structuralist friend'. Derrida says: "I refuse to renounce the great classical discourse of emancipation. I believe that there is an enormous amount to do today for emancipation, in all domains and all the areas of the world and society....I must say that I have no tolerance for those who—deconstructionist or not—are ironical with regard to the grand discourse of emancipation. This attitude has always distressed and irritated me. I do not want to renounce this discourse".[7]

My fourth point is to do with change and hopefulness. What we seem to find in a lot of versions of critical management studies in relation to the suspicion of grand narratives of progress and change is the total disappearance of the suggestion that there could be something alternative *at all*. Here I want to mention three comments from Slavoj Žižek, who is possibly one of the more 'optimistic' among contemporary critical writers. The first is where he identifies the way in which today it is very easy to think of total environmental collapse: it is almost as if total environmental destruction, the end of the world as we know it, is easy to think, however, even modest change in the relations of production is almost impossible to imagine. The second from Žižek is the way in which, in the analysis of the social and organisational world today, "the very mention of capitalism as world system tends to give rise to the accusation of 'essentialism', 'fundamentalism' and other crimes".[8] In doing so, imagining ways in which there might be alternatives is erased. The third comment from Žižek, which I want to evoke, and my last comment, is where he writes that today "the moment one shows the slightest inclination to engage in political projects that aim seriously to challenge the existing order, the answer is immediately: 'Benevolent as it is, this will necessarily end in a new Gulag!'" Žižek argues that "in this way, conformist liberal scoundrels can find hypocritical satisfaction in their defence of the existing order: they know there is corruption, exploitation, and so on, but every attempt to change things is denounced as ethically dangerous and unacceptable, rescuscitating the ghost of 'totalitarianism'."[9]

So there are four comments or four questions that I want to open up, and hopefully, with a little luck, I may have provoked some response.

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6   Jacques Derrida (1992/1994) 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"', trans. Mary Quaintance in Drucilla Cornell, Michael Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (eds.) *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*. New York: Routledge. French: *Force de loi: Le "Fondement mystique de l'autorité"*. Paris: Galilée, p. 28/62.

7   Jacques Derrida (1996) 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism', trans. Simon Critchley, in Simon Critchley, Jacques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau and Richard Rorty (eds.) *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*. London: Routledge, p. 82.

8   Slavoj Žižek (1997) 'Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism', *New Left Review*, 225: 46.

9   Slavoj Žižek (2001) *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* London: Verso, p. 3-4.

Stewart Clegg:

It is enormously hard to say that one is critical or that one is doing critical work. While admiring enormously the philosophical breadth and facility that Campbell just gave us, I'd like to take a very concrete case, because I think that empirical cases can make things clearer. My country is Australia, as you probably know, and in Australia the indigenous people are usually referred to as Aborigines. Up until the 1960s in our country there was a policy by state governments, welfare agencies and church bodies of removing light skinned children from Aboriginal families, where they were regarded at risk, and placing them into institutions or adoption by white families. Now, this policy was done at the time by people of liberal disposition, and certainly even though the consequences may have been quite different from the intentions, certainly were not done with bad intentions. Now, a couple of years ago a report was published called *The Stolen Generation* and it was about the plight of the Aboriginal people who had been, at an early age, separated from their family, their culture, their traditions and their beliefs, often placed in quite cruel and cold situations, and it created a great furore, a great outpouring of discussion. Now, the critical position on this is rather hard to identify because, on the one hand it would seem to be a very good thing for children not to be removed from their parents under any circumstances whatsoever, and I think that many intellectual people, perhaps of a critical disposition, would have held that position. Until, perhaps, two or three weeks ago, as a result of some internal politics in the peak organisation of the Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islanders Commission, ASTIC, one notable Aboriginal activist, Pat O'Shane who is the Chancellor of the University of New England, raised the issue of the distressing levels of violence and abuse in Aboriginal families, in the context of a debate sparked by some remarks she made about an allegation of rape made against a prominent Aboriginal leader. Now, the historical reasons for that violence are clearly not unrelated to the life experiences that many people in the community had gone through. In turn, this lead to the publicity about some research which had been done by some critical social scientists, lead by an Aboriginal anthropologist, in the state of Queensland, who discovered that in Aboriginal families and communities something like 70% of women and children had suffered, and were suffering, major physical abuse. Now, the question of how one should react to that is very, very difficult. What is the correct critical position, and how does philosophy help us find a correct critical position in this situation? A care for the person, a care for the self in the Foucauldian sense would probably say 'well, there should be some intervention, the children should be removed'. But it was precisely those kinds of liberal instincts that led to the traumas that were reported in *The Stolen Generation*.

So I think that the point of my little story is to say that I don't think that we can define critical positions in any way irrespective of context, which was, I think, one of the first point that Campbell was making, and I think that sometimes, contextually, it is extraordinarily difficult to do so. Sometimes with the best of intentions in the world we wreak the worst kind of agency, and thinking that our agency emanates from critical intentions is no guarantee against the havoc that we can wreak.

Hugh Willmott:

I'd like to endorse a lot of what Stewart said. I have to confess I was quite surprised with the line that Stewart was taking here and I didn't expect to agree with so much. Of

what I could say about that is that I think that critical thinking has a role to play in precisely what Stewart was drawing our attention to. These issues are difficult, the are problematic, and one of the things that critical thinkers can help us with is to draw our attention to that, to make us more aware of that, to enable us to perhaps 'hesitate' and reflect a little before we do things. Maybe hesitating a little before we decide to take these particular children out of those families. Hesitating now to think that maybe it was the best thing that we could have done. I don't think critical thinking allows us to achieve closure. I personally think that it is a mistake to believe that somehow we are going to get to some theory or some form of thinking that will solve those issues for us. I think it is much more about drawing on a whole variety of critical thinking to be open to the possibility of understanding ourselves and the world in a different way, and therefore being able to make decisions that are aware of the undecidability involved in making those decisions. I believe that Foucault, Habermas and others who people in critical management studies have drawn on can be helpful to us in that regard. I believe that is where we can learn from and benefit from and, if you like, 'enrich' our understanding of management and organisation, and indeed inform the practice of managing and organising, in making those kinds of very difficult decisions that Stewart was drawing our attention to.

David Boje:

I'd like to make a slightly different response, if that's OK. I am travelling with a good friend of mine, Steve Best, a post-modern philosopher. He used the word 'poser', and suggested that critical theorists and post-modern theorists maybe are posers. You can intellectualise the activity of critical theory, post-modern theory, deconstruction, or whatever terms you want to lay on it, but words are actions. In my association with members here, and with Steve, I've tried to reflect upon my own action, and whether I'm just a poser or whether I'm somebody who is getting involved. Now a number of ways I'm involved. You may not like these ways, cool, but I try to be a vegetarian. I'm into that. Ecology, critical accounting theory, trying to do something about nature, something about the environment instead of just functional accounting; biotechnology, virtual organisations, predatory capitalism.

No, I don't think we should dismiss of the grand narrative of capitalism. It's there, and definitely affects us, and we need to take it on, head on. But it is very difficult, and I agree we get dogmatic. I know I get dogmatic about Nike corporation when I see the swoosh. I wonder, well how could this person be so gullible, to go along with this system of sweatshop exploitation, of which the victims are 720,000 women, aged 15, 16 to 23 (they are fired when they are 23 so that they can hire someone else who is 14 or 16). These are people that are caught in very exploitative situations, and we can say 'well, it's better than not having a job'; or 'capitalism gave them this opportunity to work'; economic development and so on. Now deep down I just don't buy it. I don't buy that explanation, that Tiger Woods should get 100 Million Dollars for multiple contracts to put logos on his body, when the bodies of these female workers are being abused.

Grace Anne and I went to Mexico. We went to a factory. We interviewed these workers. We couldn't interview all the workers, because just to be interviewed, you'd be fired.

Just talk to Boje and you'd be fired! But we were able to interview a couple of sisters, who told us their account of what it is like in a Nike factory, what it's like to try to negotiate situations like maggots in your food, like earning $2.90 a day for ten hours work. They are forced to work six days a week, sometimes six and a half, sometimes more than ten hours in the same day, not to get their pay sometimes. And then they got so distraught that they actually took over the factory for two days. Here are these women, girls, young girls, and they are going to take over a factory from a bunch of bullying militarist management, and go against that whole system, and where the hell am I? Where am I in that situation? I'm writing about it, I'm teaching, but what is my action in that situation? What is my accountability, once I know that that story is there? They told us that the police were called in, because the ambassador from Korea made a deal with the FROC-CROC Secretary General of the State of Puebla. They actually called in the riot police with their shotguns and batons and shields and wounded them up, these women, forcing them out of the factory. Their parents had brought them blankets, their boyfriends had brought them food, and they were in there with their children, and the riot police forced them through the gauntlet. They were being beaten with batons and shields. Fifteen went to hospital and the women among them said that two of those women lost their babies; they were pregnant.

Now we tried to get that story into the news. Nobody wants to touch it. We tried to get that story to Nike. They deny it. So, yeah, I'm dogmatic about it. I think I've got a cause to be dogmatic about it. I don't believe the advertising bullshit. I don't care if you deconstruct it with Derrida, Habermas, or whoever. That is not important. What is important is not to be an academic who is sitting in an office somewhere turning out articles that don't mean a damn thing.

Audience question:

It's impossible not to be moved by the fairly dramatic stories that we have heard, and I certainly wouldn't disagree with the points made. For me as well, I think it's important not to forget a lot of the mundane stuff, because as well as the extreme examples, there is a lot of boring everyday stuff that controls, and subverts power and the way it is used. I wonder whether there is a role for us as well, in looking at what gets taken for granted, taken as normal, and isn't obviously evil, but is fashionable. Surely the critic has a role to play in problematising these very mundane and apparently normal things, as well as pointing to things that are obviously troubling.

André Spicer:

I think David's presentation was excellent. The scary thing is that we don't even represent these stories in academic journals. They don't appear. Studies of people working don't appear in academic journals. We are more interested in talking about discourse and philosophy, as opposed to these actual stories. So they don't appear in the press, and they don't appear in academic journals, which are more interested in talking about managers than workers.

Catherine Casey:

There are plethora of academic journals in industry and labour, and what you are saying is probably reflective of the disciplinary demarcation of management and organisation. And of course, there is such a multiplicity of such stories. In fact, the first which came to mind after Campbell's comment was that I couldn't help thinking of Horkheimer and Adorno's line about our role as one of 'unceasing interrogation' of all forms of knowledge and work practices. And this may mean a more modest self-interrogation, to endeavour to unceasingly interrogate all forms of knowledge and work practice and to scrutinise ourselves.

David Knights:

I agree with that absolutely. I think that the major problems with critical theory or critical management studies, or whatever we want to call it, is too great of an ambition. I think that if we are more reflexive and if we examine that ambition, we might begin to recognise that, to some extent at least, this is a project for ourselves, it's a project of identity. But if we allow that project of identity to contaminate too much of what we do, there is great danger that we do things for ourselves rather than for our so called 'victims'. I agree that we should be doing what David [Boje] does, we should all be doing a lot about these things, but let's not be too ambitious, and let's realise that a lot of what we are doing is *teaching*. Teaching students, and teaching the next generation of academics, and the next generation of people in the media, and people in business, to be more reflexive about the kinds of things that get done to people through some more exploitative activities. We are not going to destroy capitalism. That would be foolish to think that we could. But we can perhaps make things better for this small group of people, including ourselves I suppose, but as long as we don't get hooked on the project, as it were, of securing ourselves through critical work – being narcissistically preoccupied with our own identity and how we are seen by others and ourselves.

Steffen Böhm:

I'd like to respond to what David [Knights] said about not being too ambitious; I have an uneasiness about that, which relates to Campbell's point about the loss of an emancipatory project and with that some kind of feeling of paralysis. I would like to invite the panel members to talk a little bit about this loss of an emancipatory imagination. What is your view on an emancipatory project? What would that look like?

David Knights:

Again, I think there is a problem with an emancipatory project, because it leaves us, very often, deciding for endless others how should they live their lives, and I think that this is not for us to do. I think that something that critical theorists *can* do is to put up a series of alternatives and say 'there are other ways in which you can live your life'. But it's not for us to impose our particular ways in which we think that people should live their lives onto them. And therefore I think that emancipation can only come from the other, not from an academic who can tell people the truth about their lives, and tell them how they should go about their lives and how they should emancipate themselves.

Mike Reed:

I think that what we are arguing for here is a more discriminating understanding of critique. Emancipation is a big word, and it has all kinds of big connotations attached to it. And as Stewart, David [Knights], Hugh and various other people have said, we need to be very careful about it. We need to be careful about the way we use words like this. It seems to me that even if we do try to develop a more discriminating sense of what critique is, and recognise that it can take different forms, and it can serve different purposes, at some point it seems to me you will get back to some engagement with some of the classical tradition. It's almost unavoidable that at some point you have to engage with something that is in the past. That is the bigger context from which we make a critical statement. So I am all for a more discriminating sense of critique, a sense of critique that is more pluralistic, more focused, more practical, but I don't think, whatever kind of critique you try to develop, that you can, in some way, take it out of the classical context. One other small point: I think you can make a statement about, or at least some kind of estimation of political activism. You might want to try to do that. You might want to say that what we do should be coincident with some kind of political activism. But I think there are potential dangers with that. There are problems with that, of the kind that I think David [Knights] has just articulated. With political activism, maybe we rush to judge, we rush to actively intervene, we rush to recommend. So I think what we need to do is to be more discriminating. But whether we like it or not the classical tradition is part of our heritage and we will draw on it.

Alessia Contu:

Perhaps the point is that we continually rush to make decisions. Continually we are making decisions, and continually we are doing something which involves intervening with the other. So in a sense our political activism is not like a project that is somewhere else and then suddenly we are linked to it. We are already political in whatever we say and in whatever we do. So politics is something which immediately we should, via our selves, confront with. We should put that forward, rather than keep it in the background.

Silvia Gherardi:

I want to start with something personal, starting with something from myself. I want to start with the fact that I'm 51, and a woman. I am telling you my age for a reason. That means that I was a student in 1969, in the Faculty of Sociology. At the time it was the only faculty of sociology in Trento, even in Italy, and one of my memories of that time was that our Dean was standing on the stairs of our faculty, I still have the image of him, and he said that we were going to be a critical university. So I grew up, and a generation of sociologists in Italy grew up with Marx, Gramsci, and all that, and we learned very easily the rhetorics of 'being critical'. We learned the tricks of the trade. Still, I can recognise some of my generation who grew up together with me with the same fashion and the same fads. You learn how to do it, then it doesn't matter to what you apply it. You do it quite easily. And so what I could see was a critical approach being turned into a rhetorical trick, and producing a 'correct' critical position: a new orthodoxy.

This is not the end of the story, however, because since I remained in the Faculty of Sociology as a young teacher back then, there was a second wave of critical thinking. Since Italy and France are quite close we didn't have to wait for the Americans to import Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari back to Europe. We would read in French. So at the end of the seventies and the beginning of the eighties we had a new generation of sociologists in Italy, they were producing dissertations deconstructing everything. And when I was talking with my colleagues, they would say 'Oh no, gosh, another deconstructive dissertation'. So the reason I feel uneasy talking about critique is not that I conceive of something different. The point is that I can't conceive a way of knowing that is not critical. How could that be, a non-critical knowledge? I don't have models, because knowing, in any case, is a claim grounded in power, and is always coming from some sort of position.

I should also say that I'm a feminist. My other experience is in feminism, and over the last years I've been reflecting on why the feminist movements are still so powerful in expressing a critical position. I think that one reason is that feminist thought, instead of assuming a critical position on somebody else's philosophy, expresses a radical thought of its own, it appropriates 'otherness'. And from a position of authorized 'other' it speaks back (and not against) and speaks for its own. To be other, and to think, to act and to produce knowledge from the point of view that your identity is grounded in otherness is a way for being and knowing already decentred, nomadic, questioning subjectivity, questioning the politics of knowledge. Towards any claims of knowledge the feminist question is: 'Who's knowledge is this? Who is making the claim to knowing and why?' My answer to Campbell's questions is simple: to be able to express a radical thought is an/other story!

Bogdan Costea:

I just wanted to echo Mike's points, but to add that I often find myself trapped in not knowing exactly what level I am operating at, engaging in a critical project that has a tradition, in the West at least, which is much longer than the latter part of the twentieth century. So, the return to classical analysis and philosophical analysis that we might call critical, as a project, in order to understand the world and our place in it from a philosophical perspective, this is often confused with the problem of political engagement. Now once I do the critique, should I do something with it? Does critical thought always lead to something? Is it of the now, or does it allow me some sort of historical contextualisation of contemporary processes? In the act of teaching, and in this regard I must say that I agree with David [Knights] about the important role of management education, is the recovery of a historical sense of organisations, management and work a worthwhile enterprise to engage in? Does that contribute to any sort of critical understanding of what is going on? I don't know. Maybe I don't know enough about the whole plethora of authors who claim to be critical, whose voices are very loud. Of course, everyone wants to be the loudest. But I think there is an interesting paradox: at least recently with the exposure of post-structuralist, post-humanist philosophical discourses there is a danger that some noises obscure their own internal contradiction.

Audience question:

This debate is going along rather too nicely, so I want to throw in some questions. What about resistance? What about practice? What about capitalism?

David Knights:

Foucault said regularly that one of the reasons he didn't talk about resistance, or tried to avoid talking about resistance, is precisely because it could be co-opted so easily by the powerful. But I think we should engage with practitioners, I don't think we should avoid that activity. I've done it all my academic career. I probably haven't had much effect, but it's worth trying to do. I think that managers are not as stupid as sometimes critical theory makes them out to be. And they can be critically reflective as long as they are given the opportunity to think. Now that is not very often, but there are occasions when they can do, and I've found a way of doing that. I don't think I would be so ambitious as to say that this is going to transform capitalism.

David Boje:

I really believe that teaching is a way to get through to the project we are talking about. I just wanted to say that MBAs, when they hear the kind of presentation I just made about Nike, they find it rather irrelevant. Until they have had the experience of the situation themselves, they'd think I was interfering with their consumption habits. If you intervene with their food, their clothes, that's the worst thing you can do. But I did break through to them when I tried panopticism for a number of years. Just recently I had a real breakthrough, and it relates to France, where we are now. France is moving to a 35 hour week of work. Now if I ask MBA students in America how many hours a week they are working, just about everyone of them, if you add in their school time, is working 50, 60, 70 hours. And if you go through the workaholic questionnaire with them, they start to self-reflect about the system that causes them, or induces them, or seduces them to put in that much work. Only *then* are they willing to read some of the classics, like Adam Smith or Chapter 10 of Marx's *Capital*. They read that and they think: 'OK, this is how the system does this to me, where I give up my family, I give up my life, and I devote myself to this work'.

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