Is Another Way Possible?

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It is often said that *Critical Management Studies* is devoid of hope and alternatives. Whilst offering an informative and lucid critique of society, many consider CMS impotent when it comes to suggesting ways to tackle our disciplining and conditioning (Parker, 2002a). Through its constant pursuit of "the dark side of organizations" (Willmott, 1993) (fittingly as I write this an email comes through as a conference announcement with this very title), and purposeful avoidance of blueprints (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996), CMS is seen as a council of despair (Adler, 2002), unable, and possibly even unwilling, to aid resistance and transformation (Thompson, 2004). Little wonder therefore that many feel downhearted and cautious of what can be achieved (Fournier and Grey, 2000; Grey and Willmott, 2002).

This is certainly the view I took when first introduced to the subject. As a final year undergraduate student introduced to critical interpretations of management, I was fascinated and excited but also despondent and confused about what I encountered. Whilst the CMS concepts (Knights and Willmott, 1999) provided greater explanation than the mainstream management education I had previously received, like most of my fellow classmates, I wondered what could be done with this knowledge. I accepted the basic premise of CMS that the current form of organized capitalism has destructive and dehumanising effects that perpetuate social inequalities, but I felt that without any guidance or even indication of other ways of acting it was difficult to see a way forward. I have witnessed this same reaction countless times by students I have taught *Critical Management Studies* to. Without any indication of alternatives to orthodox management practice, many resign themselves to the status quo and conventional management. *Cynical Management Studies* might thus seem a more suitable title for our discipline.

This despondency is not restricted to the academic community. Many consider that since the collapse of the Berlin Wall there is little alternative to free market capitalism, that consumerism has triumphed and managerialism dominates society. As politicians battle on the head of a pin for the centre ground, Marcuse's dystopian vision of a one

dimensional society (Marcuse, 1964) now appears truly with us. As the radical politics of the 1960s has faded from the collective memory, neo-liberal free-market capitalism increasingly appears ubiquitous and few alternatives seem to exist.

The Dictionary of Alternatives provides a timely and thoughtful repost to those who say that this is the only way society can be organised. Its primary purpose, as the authors state in the introduction, is to demonstrate that despite appearances there are many alternatives to the current hegemony of contemporary capitalism and "to show the massive diversity of ways in which human organization can be imagined". This argument is constructed through presenting 237 alphabetically arranged entries, detailing alternative ways of living, thinking and organising. The breadth of these entries is wide-ranging, including contemporary and historical, factual and fictional accounts, all aiming to encourage the questioning of current societal arrangements and open the possibilities for future action. Acting as what they call an "almanac of possibilities" the dictionary is thus a chocolate box of alternative and radical ideas, all neatly presented and arranged. Users are thus free to pick and choose their ideas, build their own perspectives and broaden their worldview.

The Dictionary of Alternatives is therefore, as the back cover states, intending to be more than simply a reference text but also a polemic and source-book. The following section will assess it against these aims, exploring subject matter, style and format of the text. The dictionary also offers an indirect challenge to critical thinking and presents the need for alternatives. This review will therefore reflect on the nature of this challenge to current debates in CMS.

As a Reference Text

Martin Parker, Valérie Fournier and Patrick Reedy, alongside their team of 20 contributors, have provided a wonderfully engaging collection of alternative thinking and practice. The text is at its most immediate level a reference book of alternative thinking, providing factual accounts of theories, social movements, historical situations and practical examples of alternatives to neo-liberal capitalism and managerialism. Consisting of entries between one paragraph and four pages, the text introduces and discusses subject matter as diverse as intellectual heavyweight Karl Marx to the modern practical concern of sustainability. In common with other features of Parker's work it has a strong interest in Utopia (1998, 2002b) as well as organizational theory.

As a reference text the dictionary functions extremely well. It is rigorous, well researched and can act as a reliable companion to introduce and deepen one's understanding. It is certainly comparable with reference texts such as Jary and Jary's *Collins Dictionary of Sociology* (2000) and arguably is written in a more direct and accessible style. The book successfully introduces subjects to the uninitiated without the dual dangers of being patronising or exhibiting pedantic bookishness. Each subject is stripped down to its essentials whilst still providing enough understanding and embellishments to provide context and interest. The dictionary has an informative tone whilst remaining light and entertaining enough to be a good read. Whilst obviously well researched, this knowledge is worn lightly. The result is that the dictionary functions as

somewhere between a well written textbook and a journalistic text, avoiding the arid tone of the former and the hyperbole of the latter.

The dictionary is particularly helpful to those who are already engaged in alternative thinking and practice but find they regularly come across theories, historical or practical examples, be it in academic texts, conferences or meetings that require further background information. It acts as a reliable source of cultural information about the alternative scene, which is advantageous not only on an individual level by aiding personal learning, but significantly, by opening up and explaining these traditions, it can play a vital educational role deepening and extending cultural awareness of these radical traditions. Whilst this book will appeal most directly to a CMS-style audience – many of the references cited as supporting evidence are more familiar to the academic community than activist networks – it has the potential to have a far broader scope. Not only are the topics covered of considerable interest to voluntary sector practitioners, activists, anarchists, social campaigners and those engaged in alternative lifestyles, but the manner in which it is written enables it to be an interesting and engaging read.

The dictionary is more than merely a reference text as many entries critically analyse their subject matter. In an approach that simultaneously acts as a dictionary and academic debate, the authors examine some of these alternative perspectives, identifying their possibilities and flaws. This prevents the dictionary, despite its avowed political agenda, from becoming a hagiography; sycophantically or dogmatically promoting alternative perspectives. Moreover, this approach allows the editors to select from some less automatically radical perspectives that otherwise may have been excluded. This critical edge therefore enables the dictionary to offer a distinctive approach and sustained argument.

Polemic

However, to judge it as a reference book alone would be ungenerous. The dictionary's chief concern is to construct the polemic argument that there *are* alternatives to free market capitalism and the current organization of society. This is achieved by providing a wide range of alternative ideas, drawn from many different social movements, experimental societies and even new technology innovations. The alternatives they offer are not exclusively anti-capitalist as it includes movements as diverse as Focolare, the Slow Food Movement, Web 2.0 and Friendly Societies. This polemical approach also enables the dictionary to bring to light particular features that conventional tomes would ignore. Robinson Crusoe, for instance, may not initially be seen as a topic for an alternative dictionary, but through their reading, placed in connection with the works of Marx and Rousseau, a critical and alternative perspective is drawn out. This helps give the book a distinctive edge and despite the wide ranging subject matter and multiple authorship enables it to maintain a certain coherence and regularity.

The argument is thus constructed not through lengthy exposition but through the plethora of examples the dictionary offers and is consequently polemical simply through its function as an almanac. The sheer number of entries collected in one volume acts as a reminder and testament to the great variety of alternatives which exist to conventional society, both the familiar and long forgotten. By immersing oneself in the

text for an hour one cannot help but be persuaded by their central argument that there are many alternatives to neo-liberal thought, even if one is not persuaded by the applicability to current situation.

The Dictionary of Alternatives could thus be seen as a dictionary of the possible. As a polemic, many of the entries are encouraging and quite a few are inspiring. The question becomes how one puts them into practice.

Source Book

Whilst it would be overstating the case to suggest that by itself the dictionary has transformative possibilities, by revealing these various alternative concepts it can provide vital cultural knowledge that can help free one from the hegemony of modern society and allow a fuller and richer participation in alternative theory and practice. This has three primary benefits. Firstly, the dictionary demonstrates the wealth of alternatives that exist. Secondly, through the description of these alternatives, it can aid understanding and awareness, equipping the reader with cultural knowledge and discourse embedded in these traditions. Thirdly, through the acquisition of this discourse it can provide an alternative way to think and act in the world. The text thus works best if it could be thought of as a primer, alerting and sensitising the reader to alternative social movements, political theory and history that conventional media do not often present.

However, the question arises what one does with this knowledge. It is at the level of sourcebook that the dictionary is least successful. Whilst as a reference book and polemic it might provide useful background information and awareness of alternative perspectives, as a means of acting on these insights both the format of a dictionary as well as its content are limiting. It is notable that the only further information section is for further reading rather than engagement and action. Whilst there is a danger of obsolescence with this approach – website links break down, postal addresses and key information about organizations change – in performing its function of a sourcebook these features are essential. There are other ways that this could be catered for. For instance by means of an accompanying website kept up to date with further sources of information, web links and even the potential for blogs and interactive features where those inspired by the book can discuss their experiences. Whilst the editors state that websites are easy enough to find, this is still based on the premise that the reader is sufficiently informed to do such research. Given that the focus for the book is on alternative perspectives more information would certainly have been beneficial. Different readers will have their own take on how useful such an approach would be but for this reader certainly some form of practical advice as to how to get involved in these alternative projects would have been useful.

Having described the benefits of the dictionary against the criteria they offer there are a number of further questions that need to be asked about the content and format of the dictionary as well as the wider project the authors have engaged in, to which we will now turn.

Focus and Omissions

A dictionary explicitly about *alternatives* represents a number of opportunities and challenges. Whilst it may not contain the number of entries as in Jary and Jary, given its subject matter it is considerably broader in scope and arguably more interesting. This, however, represents a double-edged sword. On the one hand it is an interesting read, covering diverse topics from novels through to eco-villages. On the other it lacks focus which makes the dictionary an interesting, although somewhat erratic companion. It is thus not always consistent in the type of entries it carries and therefore cannot be depended upon to have the particular entry one is looking for. Moreover, as a reference text one needs a degree of familiarity with a particular issue to know if it is *alternative* and therefore likely to feature in *The Dictionary of Alternatives*. It is difficult to imagine how one might encounter an entry such as the *Llano del Rio* without some form of prior awareness about its existence and alternative credentials. Therefore, the dictionary will not necessarily be the first port of call as a reference text.

As indicated above, the subject matter of the book is at times slightly erratic and limited. The bias of the book appears to be towards theoretical and historical conceptions rather than practical or lifestyle forms of non-conformist modes of living. There are many alternative ways of living and thinking that fall below the radar of this dictionary, such as small scale community and arts projects, protest movements and alternative lifestyle options that are simply not incorporated in this book. This unfortunately creates a bias towards more established or visible groupings. There is also an absence of writing about artistic and creative projects that involve art, music and film, alternative non-conformist folk traditions and underground movements. Consequently, the book has a certain white, middle-class and western bias. Although the editors admit to these limitations in the introduction, little, it appears, was done in the establishment of the writing team to rectify this omission. They are almost exclusively drawn from UK universities hence the narrow subject matter.

There is also a preference for large scale masculine theorisation rather than a focus on the domestic quotidian alternative ways of living. This is unfortunate because often change can begin and be sustained through these small scale processes of *Buycott* and *Boycott*. Whilst not necessarily deserving of entries on their own some discussion on the relative merits of such consumption patterns as bio-nappies, mooncups, wind-up radio and eco-balls might have engendered at the very least some debate. In a similar vein there is a heavy focus on theorists rather than practice inventors such as Trevor Baylis and Buckminster Fuller, social entrepreneurs like Anita Roddick or social campaigners like Edwin Chadwick, Bolivian activist Oscar Olivera or social theatre creator Augusto Boal. Again, these do not necessarily have to be glowing endorsements but like other features of this dictionary could have been the focus of interesting insight and critical analysis. In a similar vein recent social business processes such as 'Triple Bottom Lines' and 'Carbon Trading' could have been analysed for their potential and pitfall alternative credentials.

Another area of major omission is on alternative building and technology, particularly those that involve and address the climate change agenda. Whilst self-sufficiency is mentioned as are eco-villages, little is made of more scaled down projects such as self-building, straw bale building, bee-keeping or the revival of older artisan processes

which increasingly are a part of broader social movements and alternative lifestyle projects. Groups such as the *Low Impact Living Initiative*, *World-Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms* and *Radical Routes* do not receive a mention. These alternative perspectives are significant not only because of their environmental credentials but also because of the alternative cultures they create and sustain. Moreover, with its focus on the conceptual side of alternative thinking the format of the book does not allow its authors to touch on the experiential benefits of participation in these alternative forms of organization. Had a broader range of authors been utilised, then a more wide-ranging set of sources could have been employed that may have made the text richer in content and more appealing and accessible to other groups.

Format

Although cross-referencing is good (if not slightly erratic), alternative indexing would certainly increase the usability of the text allowing for the organising of the entries in different forms and groupings and thereby opening up the dictionary to other possible readings. By placing the entries by name it also makes it difficult to find information when one does not have an exact subject in mind.

The dictionary might also not be the first port of call as a reference text due to its format as a book. In these interactive times of Wikipedia and other web based reference resources, a book, as a reference guide, has a certain old fashioned feel. There are certainly advantages to publishing in book format but as we increasingly look to the internet as the starting point for reference material there is a danger that *The Dictionary of Alternatives* might miss out on some opportunities. Due to its editing process and direct acknowledgement of authorship it is a more scholarly or reliable source than web based references such as Wikipedia. However, the format limits the number of entries it is able to make (they had to cut some 5000 words) and links to other sources of information often will relegate the dictionary to a secondary, although useful, point of reference.

Moreover, and arguably more significantly, the format limits the audience that the book would be available to. A paid for dictionary seems an oddly conventional approach, and at RRP of £16.99 relatively expensive for those with a passing interest which, if the agenda the book pursues is to be realised, is vital. A web based approach would have enabled it to connect with a broader audience, give more instantaneous access and a collectivist production process (albeit with the accompanying challenges of editorial control and reliability) and would have provided the opportunity of being continually updateable. As a reference text therefore the key benefit is that it is reliable but also comes from an alternative viewpoint.

The Need for Alternatives?

Ultimately the publication of *The Dictionary of Alternatives* raises a number of questions for the field of CMS. The very fact that the book has been written is testament to the struggles and tensions which exist in the field and the responses that academics, students and practitioners face when confronted with CMS.

There will be those who will see the production of the dictionary as a welcome step forward for critical thinking. They will be craving for answers, as I was when I initially encountered CMS, and welcome the opportunity to put some of the ideas into practice. Many see that CMS, if it is to have any impact on organizational practice needs to move in this more pragmatist direction and needs to be involved in dialogues which open up other ways of seeing. The authors state that if CMS can put forward a positive research agenda, it "just might emerge as leaders of the Academy of Management (and management education more broadly). A move to the core is quite possible. But this move requires a departure. CMS must add construction to deconstruction, problem-solving to problematizing, and prescription to reflexivity" (Walsh and Weber, 2002: 409).

Many others, however, will see this dictionary as a backward step for the critical project. The role of the academic, they argue, is not to be involved in the production of solutions, or the presentation of alternatives but the creation of more profound and stimulating questions. They suggest that alternatives rather than opening up possibilities might in fact close down the capacity for critical thinking as it leads to the assumption that the solutions already exists (Boje *et al.,* 2001). They argue that to advocate alternatives would be merely another imposition of power and domination by 'the critical academic' (Fenwick, 2005), a tendency too much in evidence already in CMS research (Wray-Bliss, 2004; Clegg *et al.,* 2006).

This is a dilemma that has been evident ever since the inception of CMS (see for instance Alvesson and Willmott, 1996), and has acted as a fault line throughout the project (Fournier and Grey, 2000). In my view, however, *The Dictionary of Alternatives* does not fall neatly into either side of this divide and is doing something slightly different. Although the dictionary may be read as a 'solutions book', its actual intention is to demonstrate that there are alternatives rather than stating these are necessarily the right ones. Parker, Fournier and Reedy are not placing themselves as grand intellectuals, formulating solutions for the masses, but neither are they retreating from the question. As Alvesson and Deetz argue:

> It can easily be claimed that critical writings in both the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment traditions have placed too much attention on awareness and understanding and not enough on enabling alternative responses. The implicit faith – that if people knew what they wanted and the system of constraints limiting them, they would know how to act differently – has little basis. (2000: 20: see also Fay, 1987; Alvesson and Willmott 1996; Fenwick, 2005)

By bringing together a range of alternatives, the dictionary helps people imagine other ways of doing things, drawing on numerous histories and traditions that embody the potential that people *can* formulate their own solutions. Social movements and radical forms of action do not originate from nothing but neither should we have slavish adherence to a particular perspective as *the* solution to our troubles. It depends upon how we use it. The academic thus exists as a node within a network, linking theories and ideas from one domain to those that exist within another domain, and thus opening new opportunities for thought and action (Grey and Willmott, 2002).

Conclusion

Overall *The Dictionary of Alternatives* is a success. From an academic viewpoint *The Dictionary of Alternatives* fits comfortably within the canon of Critical Management Studies and should become a mainstay of texts within the field. It certainly is useful to academics who are seeking to broaden their understanding of CMS and the social and cultural traditions in which it sits. It also provides an excellent supplementary text to those studying critical studies of management at 2nd, 3rd and Masters level who wish to broaden their knowledge and understandings. For activists and social campaigners it also provides a useful companion to thinking about and engaging in social transformation. It is a good starting point but naturally has its limitations.

Whilst *The Dictionary of Alternatives* might contain some flaws it does present a timely and important challenge to those who say there is no hope for transforming society. To students and practitioners it gives much food for thought about different ways of organising which can aid imagination within their own situation. For activists and academics it can plug gaps in knowledge and lead to an expansion in understanding of different perspectives. And for *Critical Management Studies* it provides an important challenge to how we think about critique and the possibilities of changing practice. Whilst it may not completely satisfy my next cohort of students and practitioners, it is a useful tool to present when they reach that moment of questioning existing society and thinking about alternatives.

The Dictionary of Alternatives will happily sit on my bookshelf and regularly be pulled off to answer questions, provide alternative ways of thinking or keep alive the hope that another way is possible.

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