



Practical Criticism and the Social Sciences of Management

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Introduction

As we are reminded by the strong programme in the sociology of science, the processes by which ideas come to be counted as knowledge may have little to do with their intrinsic merits. Particularly in the social sciences and more particularly still in those social sciences relating to management, the absence of any analogue to Kuhnian anomaly enables certain favoured texts to circulate within the influence networks of academia, accumulating authority and creating alliances until certain of them achieve quasi-foundational status. Since these are the social mechanics of fashion, there is no more point in asking why the received ideas of an academic network are as they are than there is in asking why that which is in fashion is fashionable. Within this socially constructed reality there is a fusion of power and knowledge which places normative limits on the field of enquiry such that the questioning of certain foundational ideas and texts, even on the basis of empirical findings, is taken to symptomize not an active mind or an interesting piece of research but a failure of understanding (e.g. Sosteric, 1996: 305-6, O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001: 468).¹

Legislative put-downs of this kind are the prerogative of reputational capital accumulated through authorship-claims which translate all-too-readily into the instrumentalities of 'professorial power' (Bourdieu, 1988). Once this is accomplished examinations, editorships, appointments committees, and the boards of grant-giving bodies become means whereby established authority-figures are able to favour loyalists and infiltrate them into positions of influence. Thus embedded in networks of mutual interest, professorial power is in a strong position to suppress any interrogation of its academic basis. Nor, in the ordinary way of things, is there much prospect of such impertinence. The socialization of the young academic sees to that. Woven into numerous textbooks and re-enacted in countless tutorials is the intellectually passive

¹ To Sosteric's empirical finding that resistance to managerial control could be both collective and effective, in contradiction to their own theories on the matter, O'Doherty and Willmott responded with the following specimen of academic hauteur: "It would appear that a limited and cursory reading of Foucault leads Sosteric to overlook the complexity of surveillance and discipline associated with management control". As we know, however, appearances can be deceiving!

syllogism which informs the life of the undergraduate: what is on the syllabus is there because it is knowledge and it is knowledge because it is on the syllabus. Those in whom the worm of doubt stirs for a while learn to practise a suspension of disbelief which, slowly and sadly hardens into belief itself.

Coexisting with these repressive tendencies, the study of management has also undergone a kind of Balkanisation (Whitley, 1984). The same uncertainties which have created the enabling conditions for the currents of fashion have also made it possible for the energetic and determined scholar to manufacture 'new' fields of knowledge as an alternative to an apprenticeship of conformity and deference. Of this process, the creation of the Critical Management Studies brand (Thompson, 2005) out of some of the less inconvenient fragments of critical theory (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Gephart, 1993) is only the most prominent example. Once institutionalised, academic authority in these new fields becomes consolidated through the mechanisms of censorship and self-censorship already described. Thus insulated from criticism, the standing of the authority-figures within particular academic regimes becomes both self-confirming and self-perpetuating. Their standing as academics is attested to by a mass of publications certified by a refereeing process which simultaneously refracts their own authority and insulates it from criticism. These tendencies to stifle dissent are reinforced by a general norm within academic culture which insists that if it is to be expressed at all, it must be in moderate tones and depersonalised forms. To use 'inappropriate language' in this culture is to forfeit the right to a hearing at the outset. Appropriate language, on the other hand, requires a series of verbal genuflections to the effect that one is more than likely to be mistaken in one's objections and so need not be taken seriously. And nor, by the determined and unscrupulous, is one.

No doubt a carry-over from the preponderantly middle class origins of most academics, this Bowdlerization of the language of criticism is also a consequence of the manner in which academic work is organized. Since rewards and prestige at the individual and departmental levels are co-dependent, academics have a strong interest in the scholarly standing of their colleagues, in co-operating in a collective endeavour to enhance that standing and, conversely, in suppressing any reservations one might harbour as to the value of their work. The consequence, even in those schools which think of themselves as 'critical', is that little of the available critical intelligence is brought to bear on their own productions. For all of the current talk of reflexivity (Alvesson, Hardy and Harley, 2008), there is little of it in evidence.

The result of this dialectic of differentiation and conformity is a deformation and attenuation of the critical process which is particularly evident in the social sciences of management. Between the quasi-independent fiefdoms into which the field has fragmented, there is criticism a-plenty but little of it within them. Either way the matter of quality tends to be passed over. Within a field, there is every incentive to avoid the questioning of supposedly canonical works either on the point of their arguments or on their use of evidence (if any). Between academic regimes, meanwhile, criticism takes on the peculiarly abstract and ritualized form of anti-position statements. Rival approaches are denounced as incapable *in principle* of yielding knowledge which is meaningful, useful or valid. Arguments of this kind miss the issue of quality because they are pitched at a level which renders it irrelevant.

The contrast with the field of literary production is marked, and all the more telling because some variants of managerial social science are in the process of abandoning truth-claims and falling back on the defence that they *are* literary production. But they are not so in all (contextual) respects. A cursory glance at the literary reviews will confirm that the language therein is far more robust than that which is typical of critical exchanges in the social sciences and nor is criticism displaced from the particular work onto the genre of which it is representative. For all the supposed obsolescence of the 'intentional fallacy' (Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1954), writers are held personally to account for the quality of their work.

There is every reason why this should also be the situation within the social sciences. The quality of argument and evidential support is fundamental to academic production because what stands in the literature can legitimately be cited in the process of adding to it. That quality cannot be taken for granted unless it is permanently open to criticism. As the readings in this special issue amply demonstrate, the one-time processes of editorship and refereeing (including those presently in process) cannot be relied upon to guarantee even a basic competence in quite influential publications (McDonald and Kam, 2007). As well as the distorting pressures discussed earlier, referees are often called upon to pronounce on work which lies at the periphery of their competence and to do so in whatever time they can find between other deadlines. Against this justification for an expectation of competence it may be objected that it posits a cumulative social science which is not a realistic prospect; that such a science is a positivist fantasy and certainly not one which can be realized by legislating for a standardized methodology (Pfeffer, 1993; Van Maanen, 1995).

That, however, is to mistake the point. What is at issue here is not cumulation in a strict arithmetical sense but something closer to the idea of a body of knowledge or an integrity of a tradition: an expectation that what has the social standing of a contribution to the literature will not self-destruct when read with the attention which is the due of that standing. If there is an argument against a cumulative social science in this broader sense, it contradicts itself every time it cites an authority. Pfeffer's mistake – and the ensuing controversy demonstrates that what *was* a mistake – was to try to impose standards by limiting argument. In a methodologically pluralistic field and in the absence of prior agreement on how to proceed, the only realistic alternative is to encourage as wide an argument as possible and to allow critical standards to emerge as community norms from that discussion.

Since established authority is at the core of the problem, the critical process should focus more particularly upon those published works which stand as icons of authority. And since the issue is quality (conceptions of which can also be expected to emerge as community norms), rather than the merits of rival paradigms, the dialogue needs to concern particular pieces of work, the obvious choice being those accepted as influential in their field. If discussion is to be genuine, the participants will be entitled to ask for justification of what is said of these works and that implies detailed reference to the text. The social conditions for such a dialogue will need to approximate to those of Habermas' ideal speech situation. If the 'better argument' is to prevail, judgments will need to be sincere, unsparing and expressed with due force. On the other hand professorial power and the bluster with which it typically announces itself will need to

be recognized for what it is and discounted. It is not easy to get this right and there may be transgressions both in the critical pieces included in this special issue and in the replies to them.

For all this there is a model to be found in the history of literary criticism, albeit one which is flawed and which needs to be adapted with discrimination. It is that of I.A. Richards' Practical Criticism as fashioned by F.R. Leavis into the critical movement which came to be known as 'Cambridge English'. As a preliminary to drawing the implications for the social sciences of management the trajectory of this movement will be sketched out.

Leavisite Literary Criticism: A Brief Sketch

From the outset, Leavis was decisively influenced by a T.S. Eliot essay of 1919, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. According to Eliot, the writer-artist stood in a dialectic relationship with the tradition of English letters. On the one hand the artist was the medium through which the tradition spoke to the contemporary world and on the other hand, the work was the means by which the tradition itself was extended so as to renew its relevance. For Leavis, this 'impersonal' process of creative renewal took place not in a separate realm of 'culture', understood in the popular and narrow sense, but at the heart of the very medium – that of language – through which the thought and feeling of an epoch might reach its fullest and most human expression. In the words of Paul Ricoeur, he believed that "self understanding passes through the detour of understanding the cultural signs in which the self documents and forms itself" (Ricoeur, 1981: 158).

Though anticipating the 'linguistic turn' in the social sciences in some respects, Leavis' conception of language was at once more specific, richer and more evaluative. For him the 'cultural signs' in question were those freighted by the canon of English literature – language as realised rather than language as a horizon of possibility: in Saussurian terms, parole rather than langue, and a rather specific parole at that. That English literature consisted of, or should consist of, texts which "propose a mode of being in the world" (Ricoeur, 1981: 192) implied that its study should not be thought of as a specialism on a level with other disciplines. Rather it should be a 'meeting-place' within which all disciplines might converse (Leavis, 1969). In the light of subsequent retreat of literary theory into a technical specialism, these claims for the centrality of the University English Department might sound extravagant, but they have a more recent counterpart in Gadamer's insistence that the province of hermeneutics is co-extensive with language itself (Gadamer, 1975: 397 ff.)

In this view of tradition the teacher-critic was not the slightly contemptible writer manqué depicted by Steiner (1967: 21)² but nothing less than the custodian of all that was vital in the culture itself. As Leavis put it in *Towards Standards in Criticism* (1976), "[l]iterary criticism provides the test for life and concreteness; where it

2 "When he looks back the critic sees a eunuch's shadow. Who would be a critic if he could be a writer?"

degenerates, the instruments of thought degenerate too, and thinking, released from the testing and energizing contact with the full living consciousness, is debilitated, and betrayed to the academic, the abstract and the verbal” (Quoted in Greenwood, 1978: 11). The critic’s task was vital and twofold. On the one hand, new works were to be ‘placed’ in relation to the tradition, assuming, that is, that they qualified as sufficiently significant expressions of it. On the other hand, there was the task of re-appraising the canon itself, of re-interpreting and re-positioning the works within it as they spoke to the contemporary world. Here again, the parallel with Gadamer’s hermeneutics is striking. All this was how things ought to be. How they actually were was another matter.

Both Eliot and Leavis held that there had occurred a corrupting discontinuity in the tradition of English letters. Whereas “[a] thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility” (Eliot, 1921: 287), Eliot believed that there had subsequently occurred a ‘dissociation of sensibility’, a kind of mental division of labour in which thought had become identified with instrumental rationality, whilst literature in general and poetry in particular had been relegated to an intellectually attenuated realm of the ‘purely poetic’. That, indeed, is a view which persists today. It is still widely held, especially by school teachers, that poetry is first and foremost a matter of ‘expressing one’s feelings’ and that its appreciation, accordingly, requires a suspension of the inquisitions of intellect. For Leavis, that was decadence, and it was a decadence which roughly correlated with, and related to, a break-up of the ‘organic’ society of Tudor England with its dense repertoire of common symbolic meanings and its robust physicality of language rooted in the experience of manual tasks.

This cohesive and coherent society, the literature of which spoke of ‘life’, had been replaced by a ‘mechanical’ civilization, one characterised not just by mechanized production, but also by a mechanistic (‘Benthamite’) view of human beings themselves.³ Latterly, according to Queenie Leavis’ doctoral dissertation, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), there had also occurred the advent of ‘mass society’ – a large reading public cut off from the tradition of English literature by the seductions of commercialized publishing which prospered on the basis of a ‘levelled down’ pseudo-culture wherein clichéd writing catered for what Richards (1926) called the ‘stock response’. Any resuscitation of the real tradition of English literature, it followed, would need to engage on two fronts. On the one hand, there was the domination of high culture by the anti-life doctrine of the ‘pure aesthetic response’, epitomised and institutionally anchored for Leavis in the Bloomsbury Set (Virginia and Leonard Woolf, Lytton Strachey, Clive Bell, John Maynard Keynes, Bertrand Russell etc. etc.). On the other hand, there was the intellectual and emotional wasteland created by ‘Technologico-Benthamite Civilization’. Fulminations against both, but more particularly the second featured heavily in Leavis and Thompson’s *Culture and Environment* (1933), a workbook for the teaching of English in schools.

With hindsight, the dead-end contradictions at the heart of Leavis’ project of cultural regression were already discernible in this massively influential text. If the validity of a

3 Confusingly for the sociologist, Durkheim’s distinction between ‘organic’ and ‘mechanical’ solidarity is more-or-less reversed in Leavis.

literature depended on its interpenetration with 'life', what sense did it make to promulgate a literary canon which dismissed everything around it as anti-life? Relatedly, what could be the possible prognosis for a cultural enclave dedicated to the perpetuation of such a literature (c.f. Eagleton, 1983: 34)?⁴ Noticeably, the contemporary poetry advocated by Leavis himself – Eliot's *Waste Land* and Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* – was that of terminal despair, a poetry whose organizing theme was its own impossibility. If these misgivings struck any of the Leavisite critics at the time, they certainly kept quiet about them. On the surface there was only a missionary zeal to awaken the nation's schoolchildren to the riches of the English literary tradition, to which end generations of them were taught that everything mechanical, popular or calculative was somehow spiritually impoverished. The result, for many, ironically enough, was to reproduce the facile gestures of disengagement which Leavis so disparaged in Edwardian romanticism.

Unlike most prophets of doom, however, Leavis was an activist and a fighter. The problem in asserting critical standards against the corruptions of the common culture lay in the fact that, for Leavis, critical standards only existed as an *expression* of a culture. He recognised there was nothing in a critical judgment, however justified by argument and reference to the text, which could command assent from a reader who simply refused the cultural presuppositions on which they were based. His was an essentially Wittgensteinian notion of literary criticism – one which saw critical practice as internal to a 'form of life'. In fact Leavis seems to have arrived independently at this view of the matter; though he and Wittgenstein were contemporaries at Cambridge, there was never much of an exchange of ideas between them.

Leavis' solution to the problem of the embedded nature of critical standards was, in effect, to *create* a culture, a social movement around the critical values through which continuities with the Pre-Lapsarian English tradition could be re-established. His method was to be teaching and his raw material, undergraduates, specifically the undergraduates of Cambridge University. Later in his career, Leavis became notorious for a narrow-minded authoritarianism which asserted that the English Novel died with D.H. Lawrence and Poetry with Eliot's *Four Quartets* (Shapiro, 1990).

He didn't start out like that; or at least he didn't represent himself that way. As an undergraduate he had attended I. A. Richards' classes in Practical Criticism. These seminars seem to have been Richards' response to the belief of Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (he of the *Oxford Book of English Verse* and then head of English at Cambridge) that a course in English literature should equip the students to turn out a passable book review. Richards' approach was direct in the extreme. The students were to learn the craft of interpreting and appraising a text by doing it. They were asked to prepare critical appraisals of anonymised passages of poetry ('protocols') and these were then subjected to a searching examination by group discussion (Richards, 1929). The ground rules of these discussions laid down that all judgments were to be justified by reference

4 As Eagleton puts it, "[t]he whole Scrutiny project was at once hair-raisingly radical and really rather absurd". The absurdity, of course, was specific to the element of moral crusade in Leavis' project and there is no suggestion that the introduction of the techniques of practical criticism to the social sciences should carry any such baggage.

to the text itself, a procedure which disbarred interpretations based on extra-textual intuitions of the author's intent. For Richards himself this prohibition was an expression of his belief that the poem itself *was* a sufficient revelation of the writer's intent. For later critics, it was a critical practice which implied more-or-less the opposite: that the writer's intentions were *irrelevant* to the meaning of a poem and to believe otherwise was to commit the 'intentional fallacy' (Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1954). This view of the meaning of a text has its parallels in the hermeneutics of Gadamer and Ricoeur (Ricoeur, 1981: 149; Gadamer, 1975) and the semiotics of Barthes (1977).

Ground-breaking at the time, Richards' close-reading, argumentative approach also tended to undercut any pretensions to critical authority based on claims of a superior sensibility, the 'pure aesthetic response' which was so much the stock-in-trade of the Bloomsbury Group and their like. Against this, critical argument in such a setting virtually demanded the kind of fusion of thought and feeling which Leavis sought to reinstate at the centre of the English canon. In miniature, these sessions also offered a model of how it might be done. In effect, group discussion of the 'protocols' worked towards a consensus on critical standards, somewhat on the model which Habermas was later to theorise as the 'ideal speech situation'. In fairness it must be pointed out that Leavis never explicitly claimed (or admitted) that these practical criticism classes played a part in the formation of his conception of critical practice. Nevertheless the form of words through which he repeatedly explicated the argumentative character of critical judgments ('This is so, isn't it?', 'Yes, but', e.g. Leavis, 1974) had significant echoes of the exchanges in Richard's classes.

Creating a group of undergraduates which could serve as an ongoing medium of critical exchanges, meanwhile, presented problems for a man so adept at making enemies. Refused a teaching post at the University, Leavis was nevertheless adamant that it was Cambridge undergraduates he wanted to teach (recruit?). Living by now in the family home and having married one of his most talented students, Queenie Roth (herself a critic and considered by some at least the equal of Leavis himself), he managed to hang on as a part-time tutor at Downing College. On the basis of this slender connection, the Leavis' home became the regular meeting-place of a growing group of talented scholars convinced by Leavis' belief that there existed a widespread cultural malaise which could only be arrested by a resuscitation of the true tradition of English literature and that literary criticism was fundamental to this task.

In understanding the success of the social movement which Leavis set in motion, it is necessary to appreciate the role played by this hugely inflated view of literary criticism. Given Leavis' antagonistic stance towards the literary establishment of the day, the young scholars who formed the nucleus of the Scrutiny group were committing their futures to a cultural vanguard which had no existing base in the world of letters. This was psychologically possible because, like Mathew Arnold's 'guardians' (another profound influence on both Richards and Leavis), they saw themselves as nothing less than the embattled custodians of a civilization under siege. As such they positioned themselves in declared opposition to the corrupting influence of the mass media on the one hand and the 'flank-rubbing' critical standards of metropolitan London on the other. Such was the sense of mission which fired-up the contributors to Leavis' aptly-named critical magazine, *Scrutiny*. For some of Leavis' students, this sense of mission was

amplified by a sense that they were engaged in a struggle of cultural emancipation as well as preservation. In a memoir of Cambridge English in the 1960s, Roberts (1995: 265-266) speaks of the

impression [Leavis] gave to a student without a received background of literary culture, that English culture belonged to you. That was very fortifying when you were an obscure scholar from a lower middle class London suburb about to enter Cambridge. It meant that my ideal Cambridge centred on a man whose culture heroes were the tinker's son who wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the clerk's son who wrote *Great Expectations*, the steward's daughter who wrote *Middlemarch* and above all the miner's son who wrote *The Rainbow*.

Propelled by these powerful motives, *Scrutiny* became the vehicle of Leavisite ideas on cultural decline as well as on what was of value in the English tradition. Taken as a whole, its critical essays aimed to re-shape the readers' notion of what that tradition was, reviving neglected writers of the past (notably John Donne, Gerard Manley Hopkins) and advocating new writing which exhibited the required combination of muscular language and intellectual engagement (above all, Eliot in poetry and Lawrence in the novel). On the offensive side, and possibly catering to the guilty pleasures of literary mayhem, *Scrutiny* became notorious for its scathing reviews of whatever was simultaneously fashionable and insufficiently attentive to 'life'. Of this genre Queenie Leavis' essay on Virginia Woolf, *Caterpillars of the Commonwealth Unite!* is an acerbic classic. Never selling more than 1,400 copies even at its peak, *Scrutiny* nevertheless became famous throughout the world as the house organ of 'Cambridge English'. As such it became something of an embarrassment to a University which never gave Leavis a full-time post until he was in his fifties and never gave him a chair at all.

At a time when most critical writing was the province of the gentleman of letters (Gross, 1991), *Scrutiny* could reasonably be regarded as the crucible of a new professionalism. To resurrect the somewhat outmoded trait theory for a moment, the Scrutineers certainly regarded literary criticism as a calling, and one of which it was not inappropriate to speak of 'qualification'. Certainly Leavis himself did so, more particularly when accusing his antagonists of lacking it. The young critics of *Scrutiny* were talented; their stock-in-trade was relentless argument coupled with concrete demonstration and, above all, they believed absolutely in what they were doing. This being the case, it was not surprising that, as the years went by, more and more of them attained positions of influence in English departments throughout the world, a Diaspora only hastened by the certainty that they were not going to be offered posts at Cambridge itself. If we fast-forward to 1962 an *Observer* article could speak of the "hidden network of the Leavisites" (Samson, 1992: 2), as if some sort of conspiracy was involved. And despite the disclaimers, there probably was.

The early 1960s, in fact, corresponded roughly to the apogee of the Leavisite dominance. After that time it became increasingly difficult to maintain its founding ideal of English literature as the product and expression of a single unitary culture. Besides the increasing globalization of English writing, or rather an increasing consciousness of a globalization which had already occurred, there were the cultural consequences of large-scale immigration into the UK itself. Bauman's transition from

legislators to interpreters (1987) came late to the study of English literature, but it came nevertheless.

The end of the story is one of decline, death and transfiguration. The qualities of combative obstinacy which had enabled Leavis to persist in his course throughout the vicissitudes of his middle years, soured into a narrow-minded authoritarianism which eventually found fault with both his critical allies and the writers he had sponsored earlier in his career. He died isolated and embittered, refusing even a late reconciliation with Richards, with whom he had broken many years earlier. At the same time the element of cultural critique in Leavisite criticism began to take on a life of its own in the hands of writers like Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams – the so-called ‘Left Leavisites’. Unconvinced and repelled by the atomised and passive characterisation of the working class implicit in Leavis’ own concept of mass civilization, they began to interrogate the notion that

beneath all history, silently spanning past, present and future, runs a unifying essence called ‘tradition’. (Eagleton, 1983: 72, writing of Gadamer)

Possibly they were encouraged in this heresy by the performative contradiction involved in Leavis’ own earlier challenge to ‘the’ culture as he encountered it. From the beginnings established by the Left Leavisites, the story then moves to the Centre of Cultural Studies at Birmingham University (Easthope, 1991) and out of the remit of this essay.

The Prospects for Practical Criticism in the Social Sciences

As will by now be apparent, Leavisite literary criticism was an uneasy combination of a democratising practice in the service of an authoritatively-defined programme of cultural regression. These elements need to be disentangled if it is to serve as a model for disrupting authority in the social sciences.

On the democratising side, the ground rule of practical criticism – that critical judgments must be justified by reference to the text – entailed a denial that great literature constituted an ineffable mystery, only to be approached in a spirit of reverential awe and preferably under the tutelage of an aristocratic priesthood. Against this, practical criticism insisted that the greatness of literature, if any, consisted precisely in its workings and the detailed and even forensic analysis of these were integral to its full appreciation. In a similar spirit, Loic Wacquant has insisted that a detailed and comprehensive reading of Pierre Bourdieu is essential if the synergistic force of his conceptual apparatus is to be realised (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 3 ff.). Those concepts, on the other hand, are not to be applied ritualistically; they are invitations to think about the issues to which they are applied, not formulae which substitute for thought (Wacquant, 2008).

If practical criticism was the means of apprehending greatness in literature, it was also a means of unmasking its counterfeit twin; that meretricious afflatus which announces nothing but its own genius, but which, because of that very fixation, can do so only in derivation and cliché. That this has its parallels in recent writings in the social sciences

of management will not, we think, be disputed, though there may be disagreement on where they are to be found.

Closely related to the analytic stance of practical criticism was the anti-authoritarian practice built into Richards' classes: that all were entitled to make their interpretations and assessments and to lodge them in the common debate. It was the translation of this pedagogic practice into the arena of public criticism which provided Leavis with his answers to two key problems: that of the source of standards in criticism and the creation of a cultural enclave within which the tradition of English literature could be perpetuated. Critical standards were to emerge through the communal discussion of particular critical judgments and the community would cohere around a literary tradition ordered according to these standards. In its usurpatory aspect, this was a direct challenge to the idea that the formation of literary taste should be the province of the aesthetic wing of a leisured rentier class. And it was from this appeal to those who felt themselves to be culturally excluded that the *Scrutiny* movement drew much of its energy.

Some of these ideas have their parallels in social science, though not, as yet, in those relating to management. Gouldner (1975: 78-80) has proposed a model of theory-making as reflexive debate and even of sociology as a Leavis-like 'meeting-place of the disciplines' rather than one specialism amongst others (Leavis, 1969). These proposals, however, have received little subsequent attention, probably because of the threat which they represent to sociological professionalism. What has clearly not happened is the emergence of common critical standards through the exchange of judgments on particular pieces of work, and it is worthwhile speculating for a moment on why this is so. There are certainly critical symposia on the work of particular sociologists but it could be that the debates within them simply stop short of the point at which differences in critical standards might surface. Since disagreement of this character implies different standards of competence: it could be that professorial power, in combination with the academic gentility principle (Alvarez, 1962),⁵ operates to exclude any suggestion that this might be an issue.

The notion that all critical appraisals of particular works are entitled to a hearing might be expected to have as much democratising appeal in the social sciences as they had in English literature. One has only to observe the silent majority at our massed conferences, as they are first softened up by the plenary speakers and then finished off as functioning intelligences by those of the great and good who feel it incumbent on themselves to make their contributions, to wonder how far the act of saying something truly reflects the condition of having something to say. One is struck too by the analogy between the oligopolization of knowledge-making in the social sciences and that of the formation of literary taste. The sceptical will object that this concentration of the act of creation merely reflects the distribution of ability, but the even more sceptical will look at the products of that ability and take a note of reservation.

5 'Beyond the Gentility Principle' was the title of Alvarez's introduction to his edited collection *The New Poetry*, in which he savaged the emotional reticence of the poets of the 'The Movement' (most prominent Philip Larkin), and sought to promote a poetry of extremity and crisis, notably the work of Sylvia Plath.

All that said, the trajectory of Leavisite criticism also reads as a cautionary tale. From the beginning its democratizing moments existed in tension with, and in the service of, a dogmatic view of literary tradition. What was not subject to critical examination within Cambridge English, and never could be, was its articles of faith, the belief that the true tradition of English literature was defined by a commitment to 'life', in opposition to the barbarism of 'Technologico-Benthamite Civilization'. Eventually, as related, the element of revealed truth prevailed and textual criticism was reduced to a matter of finding 'life' where one was supposed to find it and excoriating its absence where one was not (Wain, 1962: 176).

The condition of avoiding this slide into dogmatism with practical criticism in the social sciences is that it cannot be tied to one particular view of what constitutes good research or theory, and this requires that ritualized denunciations of entire genres of social research – such as 'positivist' on the one hand or 'impressionistic' on the other – are either disbarred or disregarded as meaningless expletives. If it is to generate standards in terms of which a conversation can be carried on within a presently-fragmented discipline, the sole organizing principle of practical criticism in the social sciences will have to be the interrogation of academic authority. Standards in themselves do not imply authority any more than do norms, in which connection it needs to be remembered that the alternative to some intersubjectively agreed means by which the Habermasian 'better argument' can be recognised is not individual freedom of expression, but a regime in which there are other means by which particular approaches, orthodoxies and points of view will come to prevail. Some of these have been discussed in the first part of this introduction.

Practical criticism has implications for the manner in which papers in the social sciences are read as well as produced. Recall that Richards' classes were originally intended to develop the craft skills of the literary critic: the production of interpretations and evaluations which could be asserted and defended with reference to the text itself. How many of us read the texts of social science with a similar degree of attention? And without that, how can we claim that ours is a field of knowledge in which assertion is tempered by criticism? What came to light in the course of Richards' classes was how necessary they were. It turned out that the highly educated students of Cambridge University were often incapable even of correctly reading the words on the page, especially when those closely resembled a clichéd alternative (another manifestation of Richards' 'stock response').⁶ The same is almost certainly true of the typical manner in which the texts of social science are read.

Relevant here is a study of citations of a well-known paper in the field of organizational studies (Granovetter, 1973) which the present writers carried out in collaboration with Steve Conway. Of 63 citations we examined in detail, 45 were substantial in the sense of adding something to the argument of the citing paper. Of this 45, 11 were mis-readings by any standard, 16 were flawed in the sense of inappropriate application to the case in hand, leaving only 18 which were simultaneously substantial, applicable and

6 An example was the students' reading of D H Lawrence's poem *Piano*. In place of Lawrence's evocatively tactile 'boom of the tingling strings', virtually all of the students read the nonsensical 'boom of the tinkling strings'.

defensible as readings of Granovetter's text (Armstrong, Conway and Lilley, 2004). Assuming that this does not simply reflect a widespread failure to read the cited texts at all, it points towards an inability to produce a reasonable interpretation of them on a massive scale. And if that is true of citations, to what extent is it also true of interview and ethnographic data, to say nothing of our interpretations of the less pellucid of current theorists? Critical reading is fundamental to any science, however 'science' is conceived, and practical criticism, at bottom, is nothing more than that.

The First Conference of Practical Criticism in the Social Sciences of Management

As a pilot-test of the ideas outlined above, the University of Leicester School of Management hosted a small conference in January 2008. Concurring with Alvesson, Hardy and Harley's (2008) contention that 'destabilizing practices' are a desirable feature of debate within management studies, it was felt that the immediate priority was to begin the work of disrupting the established pattern of authority within the field. Accordingly, contributors were invited to provide a close-reading critique of a prominent paper which they considered to exert an undesirable influence. One contribution, however (that of Monin and Bathurst, included in this volume) chose to practice close reading in its positive aspect: that of providing a detailed case for the reinstatement of a writer who they believe to be unjustly neglected.⁷

In literary criticism there is no general presumption of a right to reply, though editors may find space for disgruntled authors on a case-by-case basis. The counterpart of this norm in academic life is the lack of a right to appeal referee's decisions, or rather, the general futility of doing so. Otherwise academics tend to treat criticism of their work as an outrage which ought never to have been permitted. In deference to this latter feeling, though not the former, the authors whose work is criticised in this volume were invited to provide a reply of up to 2,000 words. The authors of two of the papers subject to practical criticism declined, on the grounds either that they had moved on from a position that made (more) sense at the time it was first ventured or that the critique did not seem to be of a nature to invite further engagement. The three substantive replies that were emerged are reproduced here as they were received and in full, despite one author feeling that 6,000 words were required needed to express himself adequately.

Though they differ considerably in their own tones, all three of the replies register an objection to the tone of the comments on their work and two of them additionally suggested that their publication in *ephemera* would damage the journal's reputation. In fact the language used in the critical readings we publish here is anodyne indeed compared to that which is commonplace in literary reviewing, and the protests may tell

⁷ Sixteen papers were presented at the conference, six of which are included in this special issue. Further details of this conference and five of the papers are available at http://www.le.ac.uk/ulmc/research/conf_jan08/index.html. The papers are also in the Leicester Research Archive at <https://lra.le.ac.uk/handle/2381/3591>. Roughly coinciding with the publication of this special issue, a second conference is being held on January 8th-9th 2009, also hosted by the University of Leicester School of Management. Details of this event can be found at http://www.le.ac.uk/ulmc/research/conf_jan09/index.html.

us something about the qualitative tendency in the European Sociology of Management. As mentioned earlier, this has seen a long-run and general retreat from overt truth-claims towards a position which holds that ethnography and its associated theorising are to be understood only as forms of 'writing'.

If the objections registered here are typical, however, they suggest that social scientists still expect more in the way of *ab initio* respect for their writings than do those who work in other genres. What, then, is the basis of this expectation? Is it that the fictions of theory and ethnography are a bit *more* true than out-and-proud imaginative writing and so should be taken a bit *more* seriously, whilst, at the same time, they are a bit *less* true than would require them to be accountable for the statements they make? Or, to put the matter in terms of occupational posture, is it that social scientists want to be writers of fiction when asked to justify what they say, but want to claim the respect due to serious attempts to understand the world when it comes to debate? Put either way, it sounds a bit like having one's cake and eating it.

Lightfoot's discussion of Ritzer's *The Globalization of Nothing* (2004) is animated by a sense that the book itself is an example of the worldwide marketing of standardised nullity. To Lightfoot, Ritzer's two-by-two matrix (which is reproduced in his critique) is itself 'nothing': a derivative and hopelessly flabby expression of Ritzer's personal (and somewhat snobbish) tastes tricked out as an academic thesis by dubious appeals to a selection of heavyweight thinkers. In his reply Ritzer alleges that Lightfoot has failed to understand his central concept. If 'nothing' is defined as "a social form that is centrally conceived, centrally controlled and lacking in distinctive content", it follows for Ritzer that his own work cannot be nothing because it is "indigenously (in this case, personally) conceived, controlled and rich in the distinctive content that informs all of my work". On this readers will have to make up their own minds. Whilst they are doing so, they might also like to ponder Ritzer's simultaneous denial that his concepts have any evaluative content alongside his claim that his literature review "builds on the shoulders of giants".

Both Maltby's critique of Power's *The Audit Society* (1994) and Power's response raise some interesting issues of rhetorical method. Maltby's fundamental objection is to the dependence of the audit society thesis on a terminology which represents a range of monitoring and reporting practices as variants of a unitary 'audit' and on a foreshortened and simplified history which depicts this generic 'audit' as diffused outwards from a private sector model. Almost as an afterthought – but it is an important one – she detects a partiality in Power's overwhelmingly negative portrayal of the consequences of audit for the auditee – an over-sensitivity to the point of view of middle-class professionals and a corresponding neglect of the public interest which they nominally serve.

Power's response on the methodological issue appeals to a model of the interdependence of practice and language which applies not only to the various forms of stocktaking, appraisal etc. which are now, as he rightly says, routinely described as 'audit', but also to the construction of his own thesis. In this latter sense, he might be said to agree with Maltby, though without the negative connotations. Would it then follow that the defining features of the 'audit society' could, with equal legitimacy, be

disaggregated in Maltby's preferred language of difference and complexity? If it is to be more than the expression of a tendency to similarity where others might see difference, then, the 'audit society' thesis depends crucially on the supposition that practices substantively change – and presumably converge – once they are commonly described as audit. On this point there seems to be little evidence either way, but if it is so, it could be that the wide currency of Power's thesis is on the way to constructing the reality which it purports to describe. On the point of public interest, Maltby is surely correct in pointing out that Power has more to say about the woes of those subject to audit than the perils of trusting those who are not, but that may be a consequence of the manner in which he has defined his subject matter.

Jackson and Carter's examination of McKelvey's 'From field to science: can Organization Studies make the transition?' (2003) is wide-ranging but their primary concerns are with his claim that the notion of paradigm incommensurability is self-refuting and with his suggestion that organization studies can and should be reconstructed as a unified field on the basis of a 'contra-science' ontology and 'normal science' epistemology. On the alleged self-negation of paradigm incommensurability, McKelvey argues that if we know enough about another paradigm to state that it is incommensurate with our own, that knowledge is sufficient to make it commensurate. Jackson and Carter point out that what is established by this argument is not the self-refuting nature of paradigm incommensurability but that of McKelvey's own argument. It is self-refuting, in other words, to suppose that the establishment of the incommensurability of another paradigm requires the extent and kind of knowledge which would establish its commensurability. The sentence in which it is expressed, they say, is syntactically correct but semantically false. McKelvey's response is to repeat his original argument and assert with some force that a sentence which contains meaningful words cannot be semantically false – from which it presumably follows that colourless green ideas do indeed sleep uneasily.

Quite what is meant by the opposition between 'normal science' and 'contra-science' in McKelvey's two-by-two matrix is not very clear, nor is the manner in which he understands 'science'. His biographical note, however, suggests that his models are physics and biology, but that still leaves much for conjecture. Is 'normal science' to be understood in the Kuhnian sense in which it is differentiated from 'revolutionary science', and if so, why is it only normal science that is opposed to 'contra-science'? What, come to that, *is* 'contra-science'? Given these uncertainties, Jackson and Carter do their best to make sense of McKelvey's proposed reconstruction of organization studies, interpreting 'contra science' ontology as an articulation in which the world is "socially constructed, observer-dependent and of dubious transcendence". On that basis, they ask how it is possible to produce a science-like knowledge of a world which has no objective existence. McKelvey's reply does not much clarify the issue, since his chosen illustration – 'Campbellian Realism' – appears to combine a realist ontology and relativist epistemology rather than the contra science ontology and normal science epistemology which he advocates. In fact 'Campbellian Realism' as McKelvey describes it, lies in a quadrant of his matrix which he says is inhabited by no-one but the odd 'nut'.

Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (2000) has been the subject of a great deal of debate, but Toms concentrates his attention on the concept of 'immaterial labour'. To Hardt and Negri, the essential characteristic of immaterial labour is its immeasurability. They contend that this arises because labour is now diffused throughout the entirety of life itself and also throughout the interlocking networks which constitute the 'social whole'. If labour really is becoming immeasurable in this sense, Toms points out, it follows there can be no analysis of the dynamics of capital accumulation because the key concept of socially necessary labour time loses its meaning – and Negri has indeed argued that the Marxian theory of value needs to be abandoned. This leaves Hardt and Negri with no theory of the origin of surplus value and hence no concept of exploitation beyond the blanket assertion that capital now subsumes the 'social whole'.

Hardt and Negri thus assimilate the brute inequalities of a globalized system of production and exchange into a single category of labour, which appears to be modelled on the creative and affective occupations in the advanced capitalist economies. So it is that third world debt-bondage farming, the sweatshops of South East Asia and the administration of corporate capitalism are all hoovered up into an indiscriminate celebration of 'multitude' which ignores all differentiations of function and all conflicts of interest within. Instead of recognising explicitly that some of this 'immaterial labour' consists of the very processes through which capital perpetuates its domination, for Hardt and Negri the latter is delivered by a transhuman agency called 'biopower' which is supposed to pervade human existence to the point where it coincides with subjectivity itself. It is on this basis that Hardt and Negri believe that the materials of autonomy are already to hand. Meanwhile, as Toms point out, the labour markets of global capitalism, internal and external, routinely accomplish what Hardt and Negri declare to be impossible: the measurement of immaterial labour.

In the midst of so much ill humour, it is a relief to recall that there was a constructive aspect to Leavis' project: that of rehabilitating reputations which had been crowded out by more strident voices. Perhaps as a corrective to the testosterone-impregnated tendency of much writing on managerial leadership, Monin and Bathurst argue for a resuscitation of the work of May Parker Follett. An attentive reading of *The Essentials of Leadership* (1987), they argue, will challenge the dominant tendency to view the 'god-word' leadership in terms of will, aggression and assertion. Leadership to Follett begins with a quasi-hermeneutic openness to the group situation, an exercise in which Monin and Bathurst finds a parallel to Keats' 'negative capability'. To Follett, the challenge of leadership is not one of problem-solving but that of following the situation, of making sense of it in ways which will reveal the group's common purpose. Situational leadership of this kind is inherently anti-formulaic; it is inherently dynamic, transformative, and as much a matter of tone as substance. In this last connection, Monin and Bathurst suggest that Follett offers as much inspiration through the manner of her writing as its substance. Relying as she does on anecdote and metaphor, she does not force her interpretations on the reader, but invites a response in a quiet, conversational manner, which contrasts markedly with the sledgehammer use of metaphor in most managerial writings.

Whatever the merits of Monin and Bathurst's proposed return to Follett – and for us the notion that there is always a single group purpose to be discovered looks like a benign

variant of unitarism – their contribution raises a more general point about the role of tradition in social scientific understandings. As was argued for English literature by T.S. Eliot (1919) and philosophy by Hans Georg Gadamer (1975), the process of theory-making in the social sciences is informed by a “collective scientific unconscious” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 40) – including an inherited language – which is the product of a history. Unlike the case of the natural sciences and that of postmodern social science in its messianic youth, this history is not relegated to the archive with each new advance, or change in fashion. Rather it is a living subculture, the relevance of which changes according to the circumstances in which it is drawn upon. This being the case, it needs to be revisited and reinterpreted from time-to-time. Leavis’ attempt to do this for English poetry was called *Revaluation* (1936) and that is what Monin and Bathurst propose in the case of May Parker Follett.

The target of Armstrong’s essay is Knights and Morgan’s Foucaultian take on strategic management, in which the latter is deemed to originate in the post-war business schools of the USA and in response to a communications gap between corporate management and other stakeholders. Knights and Morgan also contend that the main *raison d’être* and consequence of strategic management is its ‘power effects’, most of which have to do with pumping up the gendered egos (‘subjectivities’) of senior management. Armstrong finds nothing in the way of evidence to substantiate any of these contentions, and much to contradict them. An earlier version of the paper was rejected by a member of the editorial board of *Organization Studies*, Cynthia Hardy, as a ‘vicious personal attack’, and so, by the flank-rubbing standards of the dominant cabal of Critical Management Studies, it is. What seems to have jerked Armstrong’s chain is not so much his perception of Knights and Morgan’s intellectual pretension and ignorance of their subject matter but the fact that their paper is now taken at their own valuation in its chosen constituency: as seminal even. In this outsider view of the grooming behaviour of an academic huddle, there may well be a whiff of sour grapes.

Armstrong goes on to examine some more recent contributions to the literature of strategic management which have positioned themselves as validations and extensions of Knights and Morgan’s work. He finds that this has been achieved by authorial interpretations which translate field data into confirmation of Knights and Morgan’s speculations more-or-less irrespective of their actual substance. This is an allegation which raises some interesting questions of method on which Armstrong fails to elaborate. Does he perhaps think that there are ‘natural’ interpretations of field data or that there is some test by which the validity of interpretation can be determined? If so, he does not tell us what they are or why, correlatively, researchers should not be free to shape their field notes into any pattern they wish. All-in-all, this is a sour and irascible performance to which Knights and Morgan have declined to respond on the grounds that they have moved on to other things. And so they have. And so shall we.

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