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## Introducing Critical Management Studies : Key dimensions<sup>1</sup>

*Critical Management Studies (CMS) offers a range of alternatives to mainstream management theory with a view to radically transforming management practice. Limited principally to the field of organization studies, and especially labor process analysis, prior to the 1990s, CMS disrupts and aspires to change diverse aspects of conventional, managerialist practice as it develops an alternative body of knowledge and related contents and methods of teaching curricula. CMS identifies and questions taken-for-granted assumptions in management research, and challenges the orthodox view that regards management as a technical activity and organisation as a neutral instrument for achieving shared goals.*

As an embryonic institution, CMS incorporates a number of features, and indeed ambiguities, that facilitate its appeal and expansion. First, it is not directed at any particular management specialism. It can therefore include accounting, marketing, etc. rather than be limited to generalist areas, such as organizational behaviour or strategy. Second, it is concerned with *studies*, not study, which suggests that there is room for considerable diversity and fluidity. Third, the 'critical' in manage-

ment studies may be directed at current manifestations of 'management' or it may be directed at its 'study'. Of course, the two targets are linked, for if the critique of the (mainstream) study of management is successful, then a new, critical form of studying management develops, one which engages in the critique of management.

This article first positions CMS in regard to its own history and legitimacy. Then, in a second section, we develop the specificity of CMS's approach by characterising its posture and main research themes.

<sup>1</sup> In assembling this paper, we have drawn upon a number of sources that include Adler, Forbes and Willmott (2007), Grey and Willmott (2002, 2005). See also Alvesson and Willmott (1992; 2003); Alvesson (2008); Grey (2007); Willmott (2007).

## ■ Critical Management Studies : Genesis and legitimacy

The first use of the capitalized phrase *Critical Management Studies* was in the title of a collection of the same name that appeared in 1992 edited by Mats Alvesson and Hugh Willmott. The contributions had formed the core of a small conference organized by the editors to bring together a number of contributors to critical studies of management specialisms and topics.

A substantially revised edition of this book titled *Studying Management Critically*, appeared in 2003. During the 1990s, the identity, badge or brand CMS was widely and perhaps rather indiscriminately embraced to signal a broad genre of studies that exhibited a skepticism to mainstream theory and practice. Trying to explain this infatuation among the research community, Fournier and Grey (2000) attribute the rise of CMS to three contextual factors : (a) the crisis of positivism in management research and the development of epistemological and methodological alternatives; (b) the crisis of western (and especially North American) management in the face of globalised capitalism.

Post 9/11 and post Enron there is an emergent awareness of the relativity and contingent viability of dominant, Western values and forms of knowl-

edge; and (c) the rise of managerialism associated with the hegemony of Right Wing values and priorities in the sense of being implicitly or explicitly supportive of the institutions and values of corporate capitalism. This also implies a (re)focus on people and not only on managers, and urges business and management schools to produce knowledge of management and not only for management. For example, CMS encourages critical studies of the ambivalent or detrimental consequences and/or of the appropriating effects of management practices.

The recent history of management as a focus of research as well as undergraduate and postgraduate teaching can be traced to the influential Ford and Carnegie reports of the 1950s which placed business schools squarely within universities. The rationale for this was explicitly technocratic, not educational : business expertise and education should be set upon an analytical, scientific foundation equivalent to that then being developed in the social sciences and in the teaching of the engineering disciplines.

A positivist, value-free model of scientific knowledge was enthroned;<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Adler, Forbes and Willmott (2007 : 5) present positivism as an approach which assumes that : (a) there is an objective external reality awaiting discovery and dissection by science; (b) Scientific Method gives privileged access to reality; (c) language provides a transparent medium for categorization, measurement and representation; (d) the observer scientist occupies a position outside and above reality from which he (rarely she) develops and validates robust theories about reality.

marginalizing other approaches. It promised the production of impartial, rigorous, and reliable knowledge capable of replacing the contestability of custom-and-practice with the authority of management's own science.

Once installed in universities, business schools came into closer contact with the social sciences which were themselves evolving. The broader liberalization of advanced capitalist societies and their universities, combined with the growing disillusionment amongst policy makers with the relevance of the dry, abstract knowledge emerging from the social sciences, led to some relaxation of the grip of positivism in late 1960s and 1970s.

Across the social sciences, the established positivist hegemony began to be pluralized (but not displaced) by alternative research traditions, including varieties of Marxism, hermeneutics, and pragmatism that promised to draw researchers closer to the complexities and contradictions of the social world.

In this context, a number of the more established and prestigious management journals began to accommodate some 'heterodox' research. Notably, the *Journal of Management Studies* and *Human Relations* occasionally published an article that departed from the orthodox conception of management as a politically neutral terrain in which the exclusive purpose of studies was to

enhance its legitimacy and technical capability. Subsequently, equivalent journals, such as *Journal of Management Inquiry* and *Organization Science* emerged in North America [see e.g. Daft & Lewin, 1990].

These developments have facilitated the recruitment and promotion of some more critically-oriented faculty although they are excluded from, or remain marginal within, most business schools. Nonetheless, they are perhaps the most visible sign of a patchy broadening of undergraduate curricula, some relaxation of narrow methodological protocols, and the recruitment of critically oriented doctoral students. The development of CMS has even spawned a number of management departments and business schools whose philosophy and/or faculty are explicitly "critical" in orientation (e.g. the business schools at the University of Leicester (UK) and Queen Mary's, University of London).

CMS has been strongest in the UK. The existence of sizable numbers of UK academics disaffected with established management theory and practice became evident with the first Labour Process Conference in 1983 which drew most of its participants from schools of management and business.

A second wave of growth in the UK became visible in 1999, when an unexpectedly large number of aca-

demics – over 400, drawn from over 20 countries – participated in the first Critical Management Studies Conference. This conference and the bi-annual series it inaugurated differentiates itself from the Labour Process Conference by extending to a broader range of themes and by engaging more intensively with a range of critical social scientific traditions, notably varieties of post-structuralism. The term “critical” is not reserved for any particular school of thought, such as the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996).

The US side of the CMS movement first became visible as a Workshop at the 1998 Academy of Management meetings, although specialist conference, such as the Critical Perspectives on Accounting Conference, supported by a journal of the same name, had been held in the US since the mid-1990. The ensuing series of CMS annual workshops eventually became a formally recognized Interest Group of the Academy in 2002.

At the time of writing, the CMS Interest Group has 857 members, which is more than many of the older divisions. Of all the Academy groups, it has the highest proportion of non-US members. Apart from the growing openness of established journals, the international development of CMS has been supported by the emergence of a number of critically oriented journals, most notably

*Organization, Organization and Environment, Accounting, Organizations and Society, Critical Perspectives on Accounting, Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal, Accounting Forum, Gender, Work and Organizations, Management and Organizational History, and Critical Perspectives on International Business.*

CMS has also benefited from CMS members' creation and/or close involvement in several non-subscription electronic journals that have actively promoted and disseminated critical work: *Ephemera, Electronic Journal of Radical Organization Theory, M@n@gement, and Tamara.*

We have stressed how CMS's genesis cannot be dissociated from the institutional context of business and management schools from which it has emerged. This embeddedness has contributed to the legitimacy of critical studies but can also constrain and compromise their development. In contrast to many social scientists and pundits who have also criticized management, proponents of CMS teach and/or conduct research in the traditional fields of management and have frequently had managerial experience.

What brings them together is a critical posture rather than a single discipline or function. At the very least, it is plausible to suggest that “if the same kinds of

ideas had been developed within, say, the fields of sociology or economics, then they would have a different, and we would argue lesser, potential for influence” (Grey & Willmott, 2005).

## ■ CMS's posture

The tradition of critical management studies has precursors and roots in humanistic critiques of bureaucracy and corporate capitalism (see Grey & Willmott, 2005; Smircich & Calás, 1995; Wood & Kelly, 1978) as well as to the tradition of research inspired by labour process theory which relates forms of management control to the systemic, ostensibly rational exploitation of workers by employers (Braverman, 1974).

These important strands of critical analysis have been elaborated, challenged, and complemented in recent years by several other streams of thought, including Critical Theory, critical realism, feminism, postcolonialism, queer theory as well as poststructuralism, etc. The diversity of CMS implies that it is a mistake to attribute too much commonality to its constituent elements and associated demands. With this important proviso, it is nonetheless possible a widely accepted sense of purpose that extends across the terrain of CMS and is distilled in the official “domain statement” of the CMS Interest Group (<http://aom.pace.edu/cms>) :

“Our shared belief is that management of the modern firm (and often of other types of organizations too) is guided by a narrow goal — profits — rather than by the interests of society as a whole, and that other goals — justice, community, human development, ecological balance — should be brought to bear on the governance of economic activity.”

This concern is one CMS shares to a limited degree with more mainstream (e.g. “stakeholder”) approaches to the study of management and corporate governance. CMS proponents argue that so long as the market is the dominant mechanism for allocating resources, other - community and government as well as employee and customer - priorities are forced into a subordinate or instrumental role. This subordination has been reinforced by the “financialization” of contemporary capitalism which further intensifies pressures on management to prioritize the interests of stockholders (including the executives holding stock options, of course) over other interested parties. A more specific focus of CMS, then, is :

“the development of critical interpretations of management — interpretations that are critical not of poor management nor of individual managers, but of the system of business and management that reproduces this one-sidedness” (ibid)

Note the emphasis upon interpretations in the plural (see Parker, 2002) : to repeat, CMS accommodates diverse theoretical traditions, ranging from varieties of Marxism through pragmatism to poststructuralism. CMS proponents are broadly motivated by a concern to disclose and question the role of management in the perpetuation and legitimation of needless suffering, divisiveness and destruction, especially in the spheres of work and consumption. It is believed that much of this suffering and destruction is unnecessary and therefore remediable, and the desire to radical change it is a central motivating factor in their work. More specifically, Fournier and Grey (2000) have argued that CMS is organized around three interrelated core propositions which we now elaborate and then extend.

### De-naturalisation

Challenging the taken-for-granted is central to the CMS mission, as it is to all oppositional activity. Denaturalization demands a problematization of what has become taken-for-granted or naturalized and frequently legitimized by reference to nature and necessity. Whether based on evolution or social function, the answer is the same : there is no alternative. In the field of management, naturalization is affirmed in the common mainstream assumption that, for example, that hierarchy

and/or markets are natural; the need for flexibility at work is also unquestioned and remains outside any negotiation or decision process (Taskin & Schots, 2005); etc.

Of course, innovations in mainstream thinking and practice also question the necessity of established patterns of behaviour but the proposed changes are justified by reference to broader logics and arrangements which remain naturalized.

Since patterns of behaviour are neither natural nor eternal, CMS questions assumptions, assertions and endeavours that deny their contingency and aims to develop and reactivate an awareness of their formation and reproduction. CMS research understands current management practices to be institutionalized, yet also to be fundamentally precarious, outcomes of (continuing) struggles between those who have mobilised resources to establish these practices and others who to date have lacked the material and symbolic resources and/or the political will to mount an effective challenge and thereby establish an alternative.

### Anti-performativity

CMS proponents challenge the view, so deeply embedded in many mainstream studies of management, that

social relations should (naturally) be thought as exclusively instrumental : in terms of maximizing output from a given input, or what has been termed 'performativity'. On the mainstream view, the task of management is to organize the factors of production, including human labor power, in a way that ensures their efficient and profitable application. Accordingly, people (increasingly reclassified as "human resources") and organizational arrangements are studied in terms of their effectiveness in maximising outputs.

Goals such as improving working conditions or extending the scope for collective self-development and self-determination are not, therefore, justifiable as ends in themselves, but only if and insofar as they provide a calculable and demonstrable (e.g. auditable) cost-effective improvement to business performance or at least bestow legitimacy upon established practices. Ethical and political questions concerning the value of such ends are excluded, suppressed, or assumed to be resolved or to be beyond resolution as they are, for example, attributed to 'human nature' (see Jones, Parker & Ten Bos, 2005).

The term 'anti-performativity' emphatically does not imply an antagonistic attitude towards any kind of performing. The challenge of CMS is to the mainstream's monocular focus on per-

formativity in which, for example, espoused concerns with 'corporate social responsibility' are so often inspired by, and tied into, preoccupations with corporate image and ultimately with an instrumental preoccupation with protecting the bottom line.. As the result of proliferating business scandals, mainstream scholarship has become more sensitive recently to issues of 'ethics' and 'confidence' in corporate management. CMS scholars are, however, deeply sceptical of the mainstream contention that governance failures result from weak personal or organizational ethics. Critical research is more likely to point to the broader institutional pressures that invite and incentivise managers to marginalize and instrumentalized the ethical in pursuit of business priorities (e.g., Knights & Willmott, 1986; Adler, 2002; Kochan, 2002)

Managerial instrumentalism also infiltrates the mainstream understanding of the purpose and value of research. Implicit in such thinking is the idea that research should be assessed by its contribution to a narrow conception of effectiveness. Scholarship and research is likewise inhibited and compromised by a parallel, instrumentalist demand made by the editors of many mainstream academic journals who expect articles to be oriented to, and thus to reach conclusions that address implications for raising, the performance of managers.



This requirement tethers research to a management point of view so that the concerns of other stakeholders are therefore only addressed from this narrow vantage point. There is a conflation of research *on management* with research *for managers*.

Finally, instrumentalism dominates the mainstream understanding of the role of business education. On the mainstream view, the study of management simply prepares people to accept business values and work to improve a corporation's competitive performance. Its instrumentalism assumes the virtue of a predominantly technical training. CMS proponents, in contrast, argue that business education should, at the very least, encourage a broader, more questioning approach that aims to provide a range of ways of understanding and evaluating the nature, significance and effects of doing business and managing people (French & Grey, 1996; Zald, 2002).

### Reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to the capacity to recognize that accounts of organization and management are mediated by the producers of these accounts who are themselves embedded in particular conditions, including the use of power-invested language and the conventions followed in constructing and conveying the objects of their research. CMS

aims to raise awareness of the conditions under which both mainstream and critical accounts are generated, and how these conditions influence the types of accounts produced.

In this way, CMS presents a methodological and epistemological challenge to the objectivism and scientism of mainstream research where there is an assumption and/or masquerade of neutrality and universality, and thereby links to denaturalization. This stance contrasts markedly with mainstream research training and practice where little encouragement is given to students, or other research users, to interrogate the assumptions and routines upon which conventional knowledge production is founded, or to question the commonsense thinking (about what counts as 'scientific') and disciplinary paraphernalia (tenure, control of journals) that safeguard their authority.

For example, with regard to research on "corporate social responsibility" or "corporate citizenship", and claims by corporations about their performance on these dimensions, Adler et al. (2007) ask what meanings can be attributed to such key terms as "trust," "responsibility," or "citizenship" (see Knights, Noble, Vurdubakis & Willmott, 2001).

How is it that certain meanings become dominant and taken-for-granted? This takes us into the domain of

"hegemony" where attention is focused upon how knowledge is imbued with power to render it authoritative.

Having selectively outlined three dimensions of CMS reviewed by Fournier and Grey (2000), we now elaborate upon an issue that underpins and supports these dimensions. This concerns the de-construction of structures of domination.

### Challenging Structures of Domination : (re)considering power issues

We have noted that CMS is distinctive in the radical nature of its critique of contemporary society. However, this radicalism would be naïve if CMS proponents did not also believe that a better, qualitatively superior form of society were possible.

Diverse strands of CMS research and teaching aim to highlight the sources, mechanisms, and effects of the various forms of contemporary domination institutionalized in capitalism, patriarchy, etc. This focus both resonates with and radicalizes, an established tradition of humanistic critique of the depersonalized and alienating nature of work in modern bureaucracies and corporations, of the passivity and infantilism of mass consumption, of the

unequal life-opportunities afforded poor and working-class people, women, and minorities.

It also brings CMS work into contact with, and similarly radicalizes, research on how market relations serve as tools for exploitation, domination, and rent-extraction.

The theme of challenging structures of domination assumes and explores the intimate connection between power and knowledge. Much CMS analysis is concerned with showing that forms of knowledge which appear to be well founded and incontrovertibly neutral reflect and reinforce asymmetrical relations of power. Such forms of power/knowledge serve to prop up practices that are potentially vulnerable to challenge and transformation.

CMS takes issue with research that effectively acts as a 'servant of power' (Baritz, 1974; Brief, 2000) as it assumes the necessity of existing realities instead of appreciating how their reproduction, and potential transformation, is a product of continuing struggles

To the extent to which a Foucauldian understanding of power/knowledge is mobilized, power is not a zero-sum contest between groups who accumulate or wield more or less of it. For Foucault, as for Gramsci, power is much more pervasive; and it is also a

positive, and not merely a negative, force : power is that which enables certain possibilities to become actualities in a way that excludes other possibilities.

It is, for example, what enables management scholars to assume and sustain certain (e.g., mainstream) contents and identities rather than alternative (e.g., critical) ones. And inherent in the exercise of power is the unintended constitution of the Other (e.g., critiques of managerialism upon which forms of analysis within CMS have built) that resists efforts to exclude or suppress its pursuit of alternative possibilities.

Within HRM research, for example, the problem-framings, categories, and models reflect asymmetries of power between managers and workers (as noted by Nord, 1977); the Foucauldians add that HRM theory is also a way of constituting and naturalizing these asymmetries (see, e.g., Townley, 1994).

Absenteeism, for instance, is the object of a huge knowledge-power apparatus comprised of a sizable academic literature, a complex set of HRM practices, and a massive system of statistical capture and reporting. This apparatus defines absenteeism as a problem, an impediment to organizational performance. The oppressive nature of this framing has become more evident as concerns about "work-life balance"

take a more prominent place in public debate. In this perspective, HRM has been considered as an institution of the regulation of work which contributes to confirm the existing conventions (Taskin, 2007).

CMS brings to bear a series of perspectives which pose a challenge to this view by identifying and deconstructing the ostensibly necessary and sound foundations of those conventions. For example, an emerging social movement, to which contributions to CMS can provide some theoretical illumination, is challenging the needless morbidity, mortality, and corrosive quality-of-life consequences of overwork and "presenteeism" (e.g., Simpson, 1998).

## Conclusion

We have stressed the diversity of analyses that comprise CMS whilst attempting to highlight a number of its distinctive dimensions. The differences may themselves be characterized in various ways – for example, in relation to realist or constructivist ontologies, in relation to the degree of affinity with the concerns of social movements, in relation to the accommodation or exclusion of divergent theoretical approaches and political commitments, and so on. It is therefore difficult, and potentially misleading to say, or claim what CMS is 'for'.

The domain statement of the CMS Interest Group of the Academy of Management, quoted earlier, offers a possible, rather broad indication of its purpose. But it is important to appreciate that the meaning of CMS is open to conflicting interpretations, ranging from the unequivocally radical to the more modestly reformist.

CMS is very much a movement-in-the-making whose prospects, with regard to scope as well as focus, will depend upon its dynamic relationship to a number of key institutions – which include business schools but extend to corporations and governments as well as radical social movements – that further enhance its credibility and impact or undermine and erode it. If the crises of global capitalism deepen, mainstream business education will seem increasingly out of touch; and, conversely, the critiques of received wisdom may increasingly be perceived as less remote and fanciful and much more incisive and relevant.

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