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# The possibilities and perils of critical performativity: Learning from four case studies



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## KEYWORDS

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**Summary** Despite the regular calls for Critical Management Studies (CMS) scholars to actively intervene in organizational practice, there have been few published examples. This paper provides an illustrate example of intervention by offering four case studies which examine the tensions and contradictions of the academic at work in the world.

Based on these examples it calls into question some of the assumptions of the recent performative turn by arguing that direct engagement in practice is complicated and messy. However, these challenges should not be prohibitive for engaged action. Rather, following Gibson-Graham (2006b), they provide an integral feature of direct engagement and transformation which requires a new sensibility for theorizing that enhances possibilities for action.

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## Introduction

The relevance of academic research to organizational practice is increasingly a concern for management scholars (Currie, Knights, & Starkey, 2010; Starkey & Madan, 2001), and wider social scientists (Chatterton, Hodkinson, & Pickerill, 2010). In particular there have been calls for “engaged scholarship” (Van de Ven, 2007) to “bridge the relevance gap” (Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001) and create meaningful knowledge that is relevant and useful for practice (for a debate see Boyer, 1997; Deetz, 2008; Learmonth, Lockett, & Dowd, 2012; Van de Ven, 2007; Zundel & Kokkalis, 2010).

Such concerns about relevance have also become prevalent within Critical Management Studies (CMS), with regular calls for critical academics to intervene in organizational

practice (see for instance Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Clegg, Kornberger, Carter, & Rhodes, 2006; Koss Hartmann, 2014; Voronov, 2008; Walsh & Weber, 2002; Willmott, 2008; Wolfram Cox, Voronov, LeTrent-Jones, & Weir, 2009). Recently this has been labelled the “performative turn” (Spicer, Alvesson, & Kärreman, 2009) in which critical scholars seek make their work more relevant to organizations (Wickert & Schaefer, 2014, p. 19).

Yet, despite the regularity of these calls for intervention, there have been few actual examples of engagement by critical scholars directly into management practice. Without such examples, our understanding of the possibilities of engagement by critical scholars into practice is thus limited, and CMS is left susceptible to the criticism that it is more comfortable discussing radicalism than actually intervening (Koss Hartmann, 2014).

To think through some of these dilemmas this paper therefore offers four case studies which attempted to use

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critical perspectives to challenge, rethink and transform organizational practice. In doing so, they examine what *actually happens* when one seeks to use critical perspectives to rethink practice, exploring the opportunities and difficulties that are encountered when doing so. They thus provide illustrative examples of what happens when one intervenes into practice, enabling us to learn from these experiences. In other words it examines some of the tensions and contradictions of the academic at work in the world.

The paper argues that rather than simply applying critical perspectives to management practice, as is implied within “critical performativity” literature (Spicer et al., 2009), direct attempts at engagement, are messy and complex. Moreover, critical theories of management, as they are currently conceived, whilst useful for diagnosing problems, are less effective at helping practitioners transform them (Koss Hartmann, 2014). Therefore if critical scholars are to impact practice, then engagement needs to be accompanied by a move from negative critique towards affirmative critique, which privileges possibilities for action (Gibson-Graham, 2006b). Such a move cannot only produce new a manner of theorizing but new subjectivities for engagement and transformation (Gibson-Graham, 2008). In doing so this article thus seeks to explore not only the challenges of intervention, but also to raise wider questions about what it means to think *and act* critically.

The article proceeds as follows. Firstly it examines the reason behind the current calls for engagement and the challenges it faces. It then presents four case studies, in which I actively engage with organizational practice. The paper concludes through examining the common challenges presented in these cases and the lessons learned for an engaged Critical Management Studies.

## Critical Management Studies calls for engagement with practice

Over the last twenty years (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992a) Critical Management Studies has made significant contribution in academic theory (Alvesson, Bridgman, & Willmott, 2009), education (see Dehler, 2009; Grey, 2007), and policy-making (Fotaki, 2011) and has thus established itself as a significant, institutionalized, academic discipline within the Business School (Koss Hartmann, 2014). However, despite, or even due to this institutional success (Adler, Forbes, & Willmott, 2007), critical scholars are increasingly questioning their impact on wider mainstream management theory and practice, with many claiming it has been, at best, modest (Grey & Willmott, 2005; Parker, 2002; Phillips, 2006; Walsh & Weber, 2002; Zald, 2002). Indeed for Bristow there are “signs [that] radically critical organisation studies [is] in tidal retreat” as critical perspectives are becoming increasingly domesticated (Bristow, 2012, p. 235).

For critical scholars, engagement with practice is particularly important as following Fournier and Grey (2000, p. 16) “to be engaged in Critical Management Studies means, at the most basic level, to say that there is something wrong with management, as a practice and as a body of knowledge, and that it should be changed”. Consequently increasingly there have been calls for academics to reach “beyond the self-referential sphere of scholarship” (Alvesson et al., 2009, p. 17) and engage directly with organizational practice (Voronov, 2008;

Walsh & Weber, 2002). Thus, as Parker, Cheney, Fournier, and Land (2014, p. 31), state “At some point, being critical of other people, economic ideas and institutions must turn into a strategy of providing suggestions, resources, and models, but these themselves must be criticized”.

However calls for greater engagement are contested. CMS is far from a unified field and the extent to which CMS can, or indeed should (cf. Burrell, 2009), intervene in organizational practice is subject to a long-standing debate (see for instance Alvesson & Willmott, 1992b; Alvesson & Willmott, 1996; Critical Management Studies Workshop, 2001; Fournier & Grey, 2000; Rothschild-Whitt, 1979; Styhre, 2009; Voronov, 2008; Walsh & Weber, 2002; Willmott, 2013; Wolfram Cox et al., 2009). These debates are produced by the various intellectual traditions that constitute CMS and can be summarized by these three issues:

Firstly, is there a normative basis for critique (Adler et al., 2007)? This contrast is most clearly seen between neo-Marxists, who widely contend that there should be a normative basis and post-structuralists who have a suspicion of “grand narratives” (Lyotard, 1984) that provide ‘Blueprints’ telling others how to act, arguing blueprints merely recreate another form of hierarchical power-relationship and thus oppression (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996). Consequently these post-structuralists call on CMS academics to focus on more modest micro-emancipation rooted in local struggles around specific practices (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992b; Barros, 2010).

Secondly, should critical knowledge tell people what to do? CMS knowledge has been criticized for being relentlessly negative and like other critical traditions has “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” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p. 20; also see Fay, 1987; Fenwick, 2005). However for Burrell, being more prescriptive could lead to co-optation resulting in the critical perspective becoming commodified, solely focusing on pragmatic issues and losing the external questioning role of theory (Burrell, 2009; Fournier & Grey, 2000).

Thirdly, is the institutionalization and location within the business school a strength or limitation (Rowlinson & Hassard, 2011)? Whilst CMS location within the Business School certainly offers opportunities for expansion as an academic discipline, its isolation from organizational practice, means its locked within an ‘ivory tower’ (Parker, 2002; Voronov & Coleman, 2003; Wolfram Cox et al., 2009), unable, or possibly even unwilling (Reedy, 2008) to transform organizational practice.

As a way of responding to these dilemmas there have been many calls to shift from a detached critique to greater engagement with practice (Grey & Willmott, 2005). For some this involves working directly with groups including ‘activists’ (Willmott, 2008), trade unions and women’s groups (Fournier & Grey, 2000), marginalized (Adler, 2002; Adler et al., 2007) and ‘sweatshop’ workers (Boje, 1998), students (Grey, 2007) and managers (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012), particularly middle-managers (Wickert & Schaefer, 2014). Furthermore it involves introducing alternative organizations into teaching to demonstrate “the possibility that the world *could be* different and, crucially, will have provided examples of *how* it could be different” (Reedy & Learmonth, 2009, p. 254 italics in original).

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