Hard lessons: (Critical) Management Studies and (Critical) Work and Organizational Psychology

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ABSTRACT

This short paper explores what lessons Critical Work and Organizational Psychology (CWOP) might learn from the rise of Critical Management Studies (CMS) thirty years ago. I begin by exploring the conditions of possibility for CMS, before providing a history of how it grew and institutionalized. Despite its 'success', I describe how partial, parochial and positional it was, and open a gap between its achievements within some Business Schools and its relative invisibility outside them. I conclude with some challenges for CWOP, in the spirit of learning from CMS.

Keywords

Critical Management Studies – institutionalization – business schools – critique – impact – incorporation

Positioning

I have been interested in the rise and fall of critical movements in academic disciplines for quite a few years. I suppose this is because of my experience of being part of 'Critical Management Studies' (CMS) since its inception in the early 1990s. It struck me then that CMS seemed to be rather behind the wave, since my background in sociology had suggested that the apex of 'critical' social science had passed some time previously. From the 1960s onwards, currents of Marxism, feminism and, later, poststructuralism, queer theory and postcolonialism had reshaped parts of sociology, anthropology, education studies, geography, history and even given birth to a new critical discipline – cultural studies (Fay, 1987). The word 'critical' was often attached to social sciences, arts and humanities disciplines as a shouty prefix, naming and demanding a new form of thought and (implicitly) describing such thought as itself a form of political action. The claim was that these disciplines had been dominated by old conservatives, inattentive to gender, ethnicity, class and so on, and that younger radicals needed to inaugurate a more political epistemology. The white hetero fathers, and some mothers, needed to be elbowed out of the way in order to make a new world. At the time, I loved that stuff, and happily participated in the toppling of statues.

In this paper I want to move beyond this Oedipal drama, and think a bit harder about what CMS has achieved and not achieved in its thirty years, hopefully in order to stimulate a bit of thought about how 'critical moments' might do something more than merely providing labels for academics. I hope that people who are interested in Critical Work and Organizational Psychology (CWOP) might learn something from these reflections, though if they are also invested in the toppling of statues, I might be part of the problem too. After all, as soon as someone proposes that I should learn lessons from my elders I begin to bristle.

This is a short paper, so I intend to move rapidly. I'll spend a few pages outlining the conditions of possibility for CMS, before a short history of how it grew and institutionalized. The point of this is to note how partial, parochial and positional it was, and to open a gap between its success within some parts of the academy and its invisibility outside it. I conclude with some challenges for CWOP, in the spirit of learning from what CMS did and didn't do.

Before I begin, the usual caveats about my history and location. I have spent my career in the UK, and consequently think I know most about the history of CMS in that small wet island. I am also a heterosexual cis man who has just become 60, so my view is of the last thirty years or so, and a fairly smug view at that, since I have been a professor for many years now. In other words, there are places to read CMS from, other locations and identities, other stories to be told. As I said, you should always be suspicious when old white men start to speak.

Past

Beginnings, as many people have remarked, are rarely neat. Though CMS is usually dated to the publication of Mats Alvesson and Hugh Willmott's (1992) edited collection, with its importation of Habermasian critical theory into English speaking schools of business and management, it's not as if there was no 'critical' work on management and organization prior to 1992. Marxist and feminist sociologists had written much about capitalism and patriarchy at work, industrial relations academics had long been exploring the inequalities of the wage-effort bargain, and political economy documented the hegemonic effects of corporations on labour markets and the state. CMS pulled some of these threads together, particularly with reference to the popularity of Frankfurt School Critical Theory across the social sciences, but it did not signal a radical departure, a historical break with what had come before. This is important to remember, because it provides us with an account that embeds CMS in history, in a longer story, and allows us to think about its pre-history as well as its legacy.

Outside North America, where business schools had been well-established for decades, the growth of the business school in the global north really takes place from the 1980s onwards. In the UK, where I work, there was a huge expansion of students and staff, with almost every university establishing a school of business or management by the 21st century (Parker, 2018). This was driven by the expansion of UK Higher Education, but also the search for income in a context of dwindling state support. It meant that students from China, Nigeria, India and so on were tasked with paying the bills for new buildings and new professors, usually by paying large fees for English language postgraduate courses. The fact that English had become a global language was a result of US influence, which in turn reflected the history of British imperialism and its establishment of colonies in North America from the beginning of the 17th century onwards. The growth of the Northern European Business School was the precondition for the growth of CMS, and the precondition for the growth of the Northern European Business School was Northern European imperialism.

This is a genealogy that indicates the conditions of possibility of CMS, but it also reminds us about the torrent of money that flooded into Business Schools, particularly in the UK. Just as the new buildings were going up on the edge of campus, so were careers being made, journals founded, chairs appointed and so on. Departments of philosophy, sociology and language were shrinking, starved of students and staff, but the Business Schools were going up like circus tents, ringing with the glistening sound of money and carnival barkers selling tickets. With all this noise going on, it was easy enough for CMS to sneak in and find a place within the big top.

The institutionalization of CMS happened pretty quickly and easily throughout the 1990s, and despite protestations to the contrary, certain schools, superstar professors, journals, conferences, textbooks and so on made what once seemed 'outsider' into something rather insider. The inaugural 1992 volume was followed by a second version a decade later, there was a reader, a handbook, a companion, a key concepts book, a four volume set of readings and even a (rather premature) 'classics' collection (Alvesson & Willmott, 2003; Grey & Willmott, 2005; Alvesson, Bridgman & Willmott, 2009; Tadajewski, Maclaran, Parsons & Parker, 2011; Alvesson & Willmott 2011; Alvesson, 2011; Prasad, Prasad, Mills & Mills, 2016). In addition there were an increasing number of textbooks with the word 'critical' in their titles, a CMS division of the US Academy of Management, a bi-annual conference and even a 'CMS around the world' edited volume (Grey, Huault, Perret & Taskin, 2016).

It might have looked like CMS had become a fixture, an established part of any self-respecting business school, and perhaps its very existence was proof of a certain sort of tolerance and pluralism. The fact that CMS professors were 'out', publishing in high quality journals and selling books, supervising CMS PhDs, and that certain schools were identified with CMS seemed to indicate that the Northern European Business School was developing into a hospitable location for dissent. A place for academics with a diverse range of espoused radical commitments to launch their critiques of capitalism, patriarchy, hetero-normativity, hegemonic whiteness, imperialism, identity thinking, positivism, hierarchy and authority. What bliss it was in that dawn to be alive.

Present

It seems to me that there are two problems with any version of the 'success' of CMS. The first is that it fixes 'critique' (whatever its target, and however understood) as something that could be finished with once the message had been sent. The second is that the institutionalization of CMS over thirty years may have been rapid and spectacular, but it was also very patchy, endlessly contested and very often co-opted.

First, CMS was never adopted evenly. Its heartlands were in English speaking business schools in North Western Europe – the UK, Netherlands and Scandinavia in particular – and Australasia. Though there are notable exceptions, there were never a substantial number of self-identified CMS scholars in North America, Germany, France, Central Europe,

Africa, Asia, South America and so on. It might have seemed like a significant movement to the 500 or so people who turned up to the bi-annual conferences – almost all held in the UK – but it was really quite a small group. It was also a group that tended, like most social groups, to be connected via specific workplaces, PhD supervisions and examinations, editorial boards, publishing in edited collections and so on. In other words, it tended to be a group of people that knew each other already, or were connected through social networks that allowed them to bond over shared acquaintances and experiences.

Further, the adoption of CMS was even patchy within the Business Schools. Most of the people turning up to the conferences worked within the 'organization studies' departments. Though again there are exceptions, there were far fewer people from strategy, marketing and international business, and almost none from operations and project management, or occupational psychology. Accounting and finance did have critical work, but it tended to occur separately from CMS, with different journals (such as *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*) and conferences (such as Critical Finance Studies). This was also true of industrial relations, which for many years had a tense relationship with CMS, particularly in terms of different orientations to Marxism and poststructuralism (Parker, 2016). Particular parts of Business Schools were influenced by CMS, but most sub-disciplines were fairly untouched. This disciplinary concentration of course intensified the bonding elements of the social network, largely because it provided a shared context for discussing authors and issues from sociology and social theory.

Finally, CMS was most intensely associated with certain business schools, with those places becoming identified (at least for a time) as having a distinctive focus on supporting critical teaching and research. In the UK, these have included (at different periods of time) City, Essex, Cardiff, Keele, Leicester, Manchester, Queen Mary, York and Warwick, and elsewhere, Copenhagen, Lund, Massachusetts, Radboud, St Mary's Halifax, UT Sydney. As we will see shortly, the CMS arc of some of these schools was a short one, but the fact remains that the vast majority of Business Schools in the UK and the rest of the world were never hospitable contexts for CMS academics. There may have been a few people, but concentrations were rare.

Now it follows from all those observations, about geography, discipline and employer, that the CMS social network was actually rather an inward looking one. This was acutely skewered by Jones, Sharifi and Conway in 2006 when they accused UK CMS of being an 'invisible college' of back scratching, a exclusionary network of people who worked at the same institutions and published in each other's journals. The implication

was that what might be optimistically described as a supportive network of colleagues collectively pushing a critical agenda was actually a self-congratulatory clique engaged in nepotism. Whatever the accuracy of such a characterization, it was certainly the case that the shakers and movers in CMS were mostly white men of a similar age and education. This meant that women, queer people, people of colour, people educated outside north western Europe, were not as well represented in the journals and conferences. Though all the actors concerned would have been defensively horrified to think that they were engaged in producing a homophilic network, that is what was happening, and as with all social networks, it can be exclusionary in personal and epistemological terms (Ashcraft, 2016; Vijay, 2021). The narcissistic reproduction of organization was happening in CMS, just as it was in the patriarchal, imperialist and capitalist companies it was criticizing.

I suppose a generous reader might forgive CMS for its partiality and insularity if it could be claimed that it had clearly demonstrated its effectiveness in changing management research, education and practice. Perhaps the ends justified the means? However, there is precious little evidence of the 'impact' of CMS because it appears to have been largely ignored or co-opted by business schools. There are very few examples of Business Schools which explicitly advertised a critical mission, and those that did usually reserved that message for research, not in their marketing for recruiting students. If anything, CMS was simply absorbed into the publication machinery of the schools. As long as an article was published in what was deemed to be a highly ranked journal it didn't really matter what it said, because the impact factor of the journal, or citations of the article, were enough to feed into the ranking algorithms which pushed schools up league tables and helped to recruit students.

CMS was a practice which was almost entirely internal to the Business Schools, in which well-paid professors wrote articles for each other in densely professional language and published them in places which were inaccessible to those on the other side of the paywall. Most were very effective at doing this, and they followed scholarly rules assiduously, celebrating and critiquing key thinkers and concepts, constructing literatures which required reviewing, and insisting that future research needed to address this, that or The Other. In career terms, this was also a lucrative activity, one that was supported by a very active labour market with expanding schools, many jobs and promotions, and salaries which were higher than other social science and humanities subjects. Despite its constant criticism of the Business School, CMS was very rarely engaged in practices which questioned the logic of

academic labour which underpinned it, as if writing a 'critique' of something, adorned with high theory, was the same as engaging in political action to address a particular state of affairs or social problem. One might almost say that it was an identity claim, rather than a statement about a different relation to practice.

In some ways it was quite odd that such a compliant, though complaining, group of academics didn't simply thrive. They did not appear to be challenging much about the organization of scholarly practice, academic labour or the management of business schools. Yet, over a period of 20 years or so, there were a series of purges by university managers which were attempts to reconfigure schools which were deemed (by local managers) to have become too critical. In the UK, starting at Keele in 2001, then Queen Mary, Warwick, Manchester and most notably Leicester in 2021, Business Schools which had a substantial number of CMS identified academics were 'mainstreamed'. This involved a variety of strategies, but all resulting in the replacement of CMS staff with the Business School orthodoxy. The most remarkable example was Leicester, possibly the place where CMS had become most institutionalized from 2003-16, and the decision by university management to sack 16 staff on the basis that they published in CMS and 'political economy' (Parker, 2021). The evidence provided was publication in particular journals – such as *Organization* or other journals with the word 'critical' in their title – as well as co-authorship with known CMS authors, or citation of CMS literature.

There is no evidence that a high proportion of CMS identified employees damaged the financial out-turn for any of these Business Schools, even at Leicester, but it was enough that senior management believed that it did. In the UK, the assumption then and now was that Business Schools are the primary cash machines for an increasingly privatized university system and that any hint of heterodoxy was hence dangerous in marketing terms. The league tables measured conventional metrics, and the marketing stressed personal career benefit. This produced a set of parallel mimetic strategies, with all schools claiming to be 'distinctive' and 'different' just as what they actually did was pretty much the same. Whilst words like diversity, responsibility and sustainability were used liberally, they did not seem to prevent schools from engaging in research and teaching in financial derivatives, marketing for unnecessary products and services, international business relying on carbon emitting supply chains and so on.

I have painted a depressing picture here, suggesting not only that CMS was much more parochial than many might want to believe, but also that it was (in terms of its practice) much less radical. At its core, it began with a small number of academics

in the people and organization departments of some Business Schools in North Western Europe. What they did was to claim an identity as dissenters whilst doing relatively little to challenge the dominant practices of university scholarship, publishing obscure articles in highly ranked journals and being handsomely rewarded with pay and promotion. Despite this, in many schools over two decades, they have been regarded as a threat to the profitability of the schools themselves. In summary, CMS has done very little of importance, but has been punished anyway.

What can CWOP learn from such a dismal and depressing history?

Future

Well, let me begin this last section by being a little kinder to CMS. Many people would argue that CMS has opened up the intellectual landscape of Business Schools, and provided legitimation and company for many academics with heterodox views. In that sense, it has succeeded in making Business Schools in North Western Europe rather more pluralist places than they might otherwise have been. What we have also seen over the last decade is an increasing interest in CMS beyond its heartlands, particularly in Central and South America, as decolonial ideas become more central to the critical project, including criticism of the insularity and positionality of 'Manchester School' CMS (Prasad et al., 2016; Vijay, 2021). In that sense, the institutionalisation of CMS continues, but perhaps in more places than I have presented above.

Neither is the picture that I have painted about the orthodox nature of academic labour entirely fair, because over the last decade there have been many calls for CMS to become more relevant to radical practice, with ideas about 'critical performativity' being used to publish articles which criticise the mere publishing of articles (Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman, 2009, 2016), as well as louder and louder calls for active and practical support of alternative organizations and a new economy at the other (Parker, Cheney, Fournier & Land, 2014). In this sense, it seems to me that CMS is now needed more than ever, not as an identity claim for some academics within some Business Schools, but a political practice which attempts to help co-produce a low carbon, high inclusion, high democracy economy.

Of course this rather begs the question that lies behind this special issue, and this paper. What is the purpose of a critical moment? Is it, as some might argue, an intellectual movement *within* the academy which is intended to change the way that some people in the academy think about their discipline? In this sense CMS, or CWOP, are (by the addition of the C) movements inside MS and WOP in the same way that

critical sociology is a form of sociology, and critical legal studies a form of legal studies. This is a perfectly defensible position, and one that is precise about the restrictions and ambitions of these critical moments. In other words, if they have some impact on teaching and research, they are successful. If we take this 'restricted' version of the addition of the C, then CMS has been a success, even if rather a parochial one so far.

Of course the specification of a 'restricted' ambition implies an opposition with something rather more ambitious. I will call this a 'general' ambition[1]. It is based on the idea that the addition of the C is meant to signify that intellectual argument within the academy and practice outside should it be somehow related. This is to say that the critical work being done within the university is also critical of the university itself, and of the institutionalized epistemologies that sequester 'intellectuals' within the ivory tower and restrict their conversations to professional journals. If this is the ambition, then CMS has been an unqualified failure, since it is barely known outside Business School academic circles, and has no discernible influence on managerial practice, activist organization or public policy.

I think this invites some parallel reflection on what CWOP is for. What are its collective aims? What would success look like? It seems clear enough that a 'restricted' version of CWOP will open up new academic spaces for considering questions about the role of work and occupational psychology concerning the production of neoliberal subjects who are framed as individual bundles of skills, competencies, attitudes and so on. It will also encourage discussion about power, whether structural or discursive; as well about gender, ethnicity, sexuality, identity and identification. This would mean that over-work, stress and anxiety would be considered part of the 'normal' functioning of capitalist work organizations, and not pathologies that can somehow be managed away or managed out. To imagine organizations without such symptoms, work psychologists would need to explore different forms of work organization, particularly those with worker ownership and control. In wider terms, CWOP would doubtless be producing forms of thought aimed at addressing the climate and ecological crisis, consumer capitalism and the epistemological and material imperialism of the Global North.

Building this restricted CWOP would be an achievement, and it that sense it might well echo (and perhaps amplify) the work done in CMS over the past 30 years. However, the key issue, I think, is whether CWOP can travel beyond the academy, whether it can build alliances with practitioners, disseminate in professional contexts, influence regulatory bodies and ultimately employment practices. A 'general' CWOP would have to build a political strategy that connects outside the university, that translates academic work into practical action by the careful (and probably academically unrewarded) business of building networks and coalitions that press a wide variety of related institutions into making changes.

The question that lies behind this paper, and reflects my obvious impatience with what CMS has done over 30 years, concerns the relation between a restricted and a general critique. Is there a link between academic institutionalisation and political action that makes change in the world? To me, it seems that part of the problem is that most CMS academics behaved as if uttering statements of the restricted type impacted on practices and understandings outside the academy, and they simply didn't. There is, to my knowledge, no evidence that any of the core work within CMS has made any substantial difference to the wider world. It isn't helpful for policy makers, practically relevant for managers or activists, or even intelligible for most ordinary readers.

Simply stating that the world should be different, that patriarchy, imperialism and capitalism must end, that neo-liberalism is a historical mistake, is not the same as actually strategizing for change. So, imagined CWOP curious reader, what do you want CWOP to be and to do? Do you want it to produce journals, chairs, conferences, companions, handbooks, key concepts volumes, and classics sets? To be academically legitimate, in the sense of having a corridor within the institution where people like you can do the things that people like you do? CMS achieved this quite quickly in North Western Europe, partly because the business school expanded so rapidly from the 1980s onwards and because of an importation of social scientists who were to be its labour force. It's probably too early to say whether this was 'entryist' politics in the Gramscian sense, 'the long march through the institutions' suggested by the German radical student and academic Rudi Dutschke in 1967, but there doesn't seem much evidence that business schools have collectively become more 'critical' in the last thirty years. Indeed, the example of Leicester seems to suggest that they might become more hostile, perhaps because of the financial centrality of Business School income to institutions that have effectively become privatized.

It seems to me that CMS has been a success at institutionalising itself but a failure at doing much else. Its success has been the way that it has opened up space for 'critical' forms of research, writing and teaching within some Business Schools, but its failure has been its inability to organize and be heard beyond

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[1]   Apologies to Georges Bataille.

the academy. It would be a shame if someone ended up saying the same thing about CWOP in thirty years.

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