



Less Bourgeois Than Thou? A Critical Review of *Studying Management Critically*

Stephen Ackroyd

review of: M. Alvesson and H. Willmott (eds.) (2003) *Studying Management Critically*. London: Sage. (HB: pp.256, £70, ISBN: 0761967362; PB: pp.256, £21.99, ISBN: 0761967370)

Without too much effort, this reviewer could think of the names of half a dozen academics whose output in recent decades has been voluminous, as well as being both critical and well-respected, but who have not been invited to contribute to this volume. In addition, and in some ways more sinister, their work has either not been mentioned at all in this book, or is given only oblique or slighting recognition. If we are to judge by the extent of the citations of their work here, which is in a volume apparently setting out for new readers the character of the field to which these colleagues have been contributing for some time, they might just as well not have bothered. Now the censorship of so much work (all of which aims to be critical) from an introduction to critical management clearly is no accident. This work has been excluded on some basis, and to consider the reasons will be the point around which the assessment in this review turns.

It seems that these critics of management do not like certain types of criticalness, and to consider why this is, and how it reflects on the nature of the book (and the wider movement it is supposed to represent), is something that merits consideration. In view of this sort of exclusion, it is the more surprising to find that it is claimed in the book that critical management studies (CMS) is a broad institution, a church, you might say, as opposed to a denomination or a sect. In the introductory essay, written ten years after the first edition of this book, it is stated as follows: CMS “continues to be an inclusive, pluralistic ‘movement’” (p.3). However, it is clear that some things are specifically excluded from the movement: some kinds of alleged heterodoxy are so far beyond the pale as to be regarded as heretical. What might these be? Close scrutiny in search of named heresies is not very revealing.

There are, however, a few direct statements which claim that there are ideas and perspectives that are unacceptable. In the introduction, for example, when describing the supposed breadth and inclusiveness of the 'CMS movement', the editors suggest it reaches "from non-orthodox forms of labour process analysis, through varieties of Critical Theory to deconstructionism" (p.3). By implication, then, orthodox labour process theory is specifically excluded. On the previous page of the same chapter, 'orthodox Marxism' is identified as lacking cultural sensitivity, and being very unsatisfactory because of it. Similarly, Martin Parker, who contributes the most carefully constructed essay in the book, identifies a similar target for exclusion, which he calls, 'transcendental Marxism'. Here, in the last few pages of the article, exponents of transcendental Marxism are accused of being interested in collecting 'better facts' and of adopting the 'moral high ground' and of exemplifying, by implication at least, the wrong kind of Marxism.

It is, of course, a crass calumny to suggest that there are many recognisably Marxist labour process analysts in the critical management studies community today. (The extent to which the labour process movement was ever Marxist in the kind of mechanical sense Parker implies, can easily be exaggerated). So, to suggest that the adoption of this sort of position is the main offence for which excommunication is indicated, is disingenuous and implausible. It is, however, a convenient fiction that this is the reason that some approaches have been excluded. The fact is that much more than doctrinaire Marxism is beyond the pale. Much traditional critical scholarship has also been set aside. But there is little more in the way of explicit reason given for the exclusions.

So, if we are to find out what is going on here, we must be a little more interpretive and work out, from a hermeneutical consideration of these texts, what is the preferred meta-theory and mode of analysis, and why this excludes so much. Of particular concern is why the particular approach to management exemplified in this book, defines itself so sharply in opposition to some traditional ways of studying management – and of being critical of it. The methods in use in the essays in this book, and the subjects to which they are applied, are remarkably consistent, so it is not as difficult to work out what are the approved (and the disapproved) modes of analysis.

In the last paragraph, I used the term 'essays', to describe the work in this book. This choice was no accident, as this is an appropriate description of what is being undertaken in this type of cultural production. The general approach seems to have more in common with literary criticism and even literature itself, than with the traditional forms of social science writing. There is no explicit claim here that what is being undertaken is a species of creative writing, and that artistic standards of excellence are what is being appealed to; only implicit ones. On the other hand, there is explicit assertion that being critical is inimical to both claims to scientific objectivity (and especially) technically neutral applications of knowledge. Such claims are repudiated as inherently spurious.

However, it is, of course, possible, either to define the meaning of science narrowly (as is done by positivists) or more broadly, as is done by realists and others. This broad meaning of the term science is captured by the German word *wissenschaft*. Defining the term broadly was common in Europe in the last century. An interesting example of this

is contained in the work of ethnomethodological scholars and exponents of hermeneutics in the Anglo-Saxon scholarly world, who, drawing on the work of Alfred Schutz, used the term 'human science' to describe what they were doing with little sense of incongruity. In the book we are examining, however, any claim to objectivity, and even of superior understanding, is rejected as a point of principle. But to write at all is to make some claim that what you write is worth the effort of reading; and the question arises what is the basis of this claim in this instance? I argue that for Willmott, Parker and their school, the basis of their implicit claim to value is actually literary (and therefore, at bottom, aesthetic). By standing for this, their appraisal (dare we say their gaze?) is therefore evaluative and, indeed in a certain obvious sense, moralising.

There are certainly points of similar doctrinal commitment made by many of the contributors to this volume which are deeper than simply that they share stylistic similarities. Here there are points about basic beliefs and points about method to be made. To take the methodological points first, then, the essays in this book use two kinds of approach to the things they discuss and evidence they feature. On the one hand, there is the characterisation of the ideas (typically as used by particular groups of managers / professionals) and the deconstruction of these. On the other hand, a whole range of things and events are cited as exemplifying a particular mode of thinking because they supposedly feature organisational aspects deemed to be important from this particular point of view. We may call this constructive signification. Turning from method to points of doctrine, it is clear that standing behind and informing the use of both these methods, is some idea of totalising power, in which all groups are implicated and from which none can really expect to escape. Deetz's essay, the first substantive chapter of the book, Chapter Two, offers a good illustration of these tendencies. According to this essay, it is in the nature of contemporary social relations that there is diffused 'disciplinary power'. Now this idea has a useful ambiguity: it can mean power that effectively disciplines, but it can also mean that it emanates from the systematic concepts and ideas in institutions / occupations. In Deetz's essay, the second sense of discipline is developed in the later stages through the consideration of human resource management

Many of these essays also approach disciplinary power in the occupational / knowledge area sense. In the majority of the chapters in this book, the principal subject matter is the ideas and assumptions of some discipline and usually also some middle class expert group which claims associated knowledge and expertise. Thus, the following examples are considered: city planning (in Chapter Three by Forrester), strategic management (in Chapter Five, by Levy, Alvesson and Willmott), marketing (in Chapter Six by Morgan), accounting (Chapter Seven by Power, Laughlin and Cooper) architecture (in Chapter Seven by Burrell and Dale). Even Parker's concluding chapter, which is supposedly about business ethics, is as much about the small group of academics teaching and developing business ethics as a subject, as it is about the doctrines and ideas in use in the subject area of business ethics. What strikes one forcibly about this, of course, is the combination of a very limited purview, and the totalising claims that are made off the back of them. The powers often attributed to what are, after all, very limited sections of the professional and managerial class (to say nothing of the total working population), are extraordinary indeed. Just take a look at the powers claimed for the human resource

manager by Deetz, the accountant by Powell *et al.* or the accomplishments of the architect by Burrell and Dale.

Clearly, from the point of view of the orthodoxy I am criticising, it is heresy to count (it is obvious, isn't it, that we should not waste any time grubbing for 'facts'; good, bad or indifferent), but nonetheless, consider for a moment how massively biased this sample of management thinking is. There are no examples here of general managerial ideologies and still less of general managerial practices. There is clearly a preference for considering specialist managerial functions, or groups on the periphery of management and whose ideas might be made useful to managers, or which, somehow, may be taken as exemplifying managerial thinking. But, even taking all of the occupations considered in this book for the UK, it is doubtful if there would be more than a million people in the resulting sample. That is to say, the ideas of less than 5% of the working population of the country are considered. Given that there are perhaps as many as seven million people that consider themselves to be managers of some sort, and who have the title of administrator or manager, this is a arguably a very poor sample even of the managerial cadre.

When the studies of occupations covered in this book are examined, it is often true that the author chooses not to discuss what actual practitioners believe and think and do, but to consider instead the pronouncements of the academic exponents of the discipline. Examples abound. The result is that it is often hard to know what the subject under discussion actually is: is it the practice of strategic management or the academic thinking about strategic management? Is it the practice of accountancy that is important or the ideas of academics about accountants, and so on? And it seems it is coming yet closer to home. In recent months I have been propositioned by two research students (one of them from the Judge Institute for Management Studies), wishing to interview me, not to find out my views on professional topics, but to consider my experience as an employee; to consider the way I think and behave at work. This is perfectly consistent with the view taken in the book under review. What is to be studied by students of management, if this book is a reliable guide, is not management per se, so much as academic reflections on management. We have arrived at the ultimate stage of this introverted musing, in which our students can find nothing better to do than to study the very academic cadre they aspire to join. The suspicion is, of course, that these authors are simply much more comfortable talking about occupations and practices that are close to their own, with which they have some familiarity and even experience. Part of the game is, clearly, being seen to be seriously more self-reflective and sensitive (in a word, less *petite-bourgeois*) than one's fellow professionals.

With the possible exception of strategic management, the studies undertaken in this book do not undertake the consideration of groups with significant power in the economy; what power the groups have is by proxy, in virtue of working for powerful groups, or having them as their clients. To conceive the subject matter like this (and to sample it in this sort of way) is effectively to avoid studying any group which actually holds significant power in the economy. With this sort of sample of managers, and by focussing too often on what academics think about it rather than the thing itself, it is easy to sustain the fiction that power is 'everywhere and nowhere'. We may call this sampling by subjective significance: what is closest to me, and the way I conceive of

things, is the best basis on which to study them. As an alternative to this sampling by personal significance, there is what might be called sampling by impact. This was pioneered especially by Foucault, and is used by some writers here. In this procedure, you take the most dramatic example you can find and argue from that as the tendency of a whole occupation or epoch. Thus, the panopticon is the pattern for surveillance in organisations, and the passageway over the Ponte Vecchio is clearly symptomatic of the power of architecture (Burrell and Dale).

This approach to CMS can hardly claim any breath in terms of the way it defines its empirical subject matter. Even the claim to conceptual breath is doubtful, as it turns out that it is not Marxism that is the only problem, but actually any approach to the subject which rejects the kind of subjectivism embodied in the particular notion of literary / aesthetic insight that is implicitly invoked by most of these writers. In the event it is any approach to management that employs a realist ontology that is a problem for this kind of analysis. But critical social realism, as opposed to the relativism these writers espouse, has been the dominant ontology and general viewpoint of social science during much of the last century. Until recently, therefore, almost all empirically grounded study of management and organisations exemplified a different metaphysics from the views implicit here; and this is true of most scholarship and research that took a critical stance as well. Thus, it is not only orthodox labour process approaches to management that are, in fact, excluded by this understanding of CMS, but much interactionist, all neo-Weberian and institutionalist writing as well. In short, what we have in this version of CMS is a sect (albeit one with widespread popular appeal) puffing itself up in order to persuade itself that it is actually a church. To change the metaphor, it is not so much the tail wagging the dog, as the dog's tail having become so obese that it is taken as the most important feature of the animal. Perhaps, in the circumstances, one should be pleased to find key figures of our discipline, and for that matter oneself, identified as dog's body / dogsbody.

It was impossible to put this book down. Now there is a hostage to fortune: an unscrupulous marketer could cut that sentence off, stick on my name (and/or this Journal's name) and so come by a fulsome endorsement. But the reason I say this is not what might be presumed. The compulsion to read on was induced by a similar kind of morbid fascination to that which keeps one turning the pages of a Mills and Boon novel or watching an episode of 'Friends'. It is a compulsion that is fed, in good part, by the amazed recognition that there are people in the world who think this kind of thing is worth considering as literature or entertainment. The question is: just how superficial will this novel or episode actually turn out to be? Surely such stuff cannot be thought valuable by grown up and educated people? By extension, while such accounts of management as are contained in this book are represented as the best that scholarship amounts to and the most that reason can achieve (whilst also effectively excluding other points of view), we will truly have the critical management studies we deserve.

the author

Stephen Ackroyd is Professor of Organizational Analysis at Lancaster University Management School (LUMS) and Head of the Department of Organization, Work and Technology. His current research is into contemporary organizational change and particularly the re-organization of the largest British firms retaining some manufacturing capacity. Among his recent books are: *Organizational Misbehaviour* (with

P. Thompson, Sage, 2000) *Realist Perspectives on Management and Organizations* and *Critical Realist Applications in Organization and Management Studies* (both edited with Steve Fleetwood, and published by Routledge, 2000 and 2004), *The Organization of Business* (Oxford, 2002) and *The New Managerialism and the Public Service Professions* (with Ian Kirkpatrick, Palgrave, 2004).

Address: Department of Organization, Work and Technology, Lancaster University Management School, Bailrigg, Lancaster, LA1 4YX.

E-mail: s.ackroyd@lancaster.ac.uk