



City Research Online

City St George's, University of London

Citation: Willmott, H. (2019). Can It? On Expanding Institutional Theory by Disarming Critique. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 28(3), pp. 350-353. doi: 10.1177/1056492617744893

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version. To cite this item please consult the publisher's version.

Permanent repository link: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/19195/>

Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492617744893>

Copyright and Reuse: Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, unless otherwise indicated, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way. For full details of reuse please refer to [City Research Online policy](#).

Journal of Management Inquiry

Can it? On Expanding Institutional Theory by Disarming Critique

Journal:	<i>Journal of Management Inquiry</i>
Manuscript ID	Draft
Manuscript Type:	Dialog
Keyword:	Institutional Theory, Organization Theory, Commitment
Abstract:	No abstract. This is an invited response to a piece authored by Jaco Lok that has been accepted for publication. Nelson Phillips has accepted this response and asked me to upload it.

SCHOLARONE™
Manuscripts

Review

Can it? On Expanding Institutional Theory by Disarming Critique

A long silence. Suddenly: a flash, a rumble, a deluge. Does the Lok downpour revive institutional theory or swamp it?

I am grateful to Professor Lok for his thoughtful, careful response to my intervention. (Actually, my debt is less to “Professor Lok” than to “Jaco” [trans. ‘he who supplants’], my erstwhile PhD student who I count as a friend – up until now, at least!). I immediately apologize for this indiscrete deviation from the scholarly mystique of dispassionate impersonality. In a gesture of entente, requiring the loose talk of critical analysis to be restrained by the buttoned-up norms of institutional theory, I will avoid any further improper, overly transparent declarations.

In many ways, Professor Lok’s ‘Why (And How) Institutional Theory Can Be Critical’ expresses my core argument more cogently and forcefully than I did. He also gently chides me for claiming and perpetuating the distinctive, emancipatory monopoly of critical analysis that he associates with its ‘continued marginalization’ (*all single quotes are taken from Lok, 2017 in press*). I

I am urged to ‘resist’ and ‘traverse’ the fantasy of ‘wholeness’ by contributing to ‘creat[ing] the conditions of possibility for a more productive symbiotic relationship between (small ‘c’) critical institutional theory and (big ‘C’) Critical [T]heory’. My initial response is to say that I eagerly await the development of this ‘symbiotic relationship’ as I strain to discern signs of such a mutation and,

1
2
3 relatedly, struggle to detect evidence of such 'productiveness' amongst
4
5 exponents of the (North American) Hydra-like variant of institutional theory (IT)
6
7 that is the focus of our exchange. In what follows, I offer a response to Professor
8
9 Lok's counter-proposition - that Institutional Theory (IT) *can* be critical. I
10
11 broadly follow the sequence of his essay but adopt a streamlined format, and
12
13 keeping references to a bare minimum, in order to make the most of the
14
15 available space.
16
17

- 21 1. *Grand Challenges*. Institutional theorists have indeed widened their range
22
23 of concerns to address "grand challenges" - such as income inequality and
24
25 poverty alleviation. However, many approaches, conservative as well as
26
27 radical, examine such "grand" issues. Attentiveness is not a persuasive
28
29 indicator of a commitment to critique and/or to facilitate a
30
31 transformation of relations of domination, oppression, exploitation, etc.
32
33 Recent interest in "grand challenges" by exponents of IT might be more
34
35 plausibly attributed to other concerns - such as a desire to make IT less
36
37 irrelevant and/or (even) more all-conquering.
38
39
- 41 2. *Conservative Pedigree*. In common with critical forms of analysis (e.g.
42
43 radical Weberian, neo-Marxist, post-structuralist, etc.), IT has diverse
44
45 intellectual debts. That said, it is difficult, to identify any roots of IT that
46
47 are nourished by anything other than a conservative or liberal intellectual
48
49 tradition. To re-cycle Professor Lok's well-chosen epithet, IT has a
50
51 '*conservative pedigree*' (my emphasis) that, I suggest, frustrates or
52
53 compromises any aspiration by well-intentioned efforts to make IT
54
55 critical. To argue that the 'onto-epistemological assumptions [of IT] are
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 not necessarily an impediment' to this venture, or that 'a primary interest
4 in the operation and effects of power itself is not a necessary
5 precondition' of IT becoming critical, is to underestimate the most
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

not necessarily an impediment' to this venture, or that 'a primary interest in the operation and effects of power itself is not a necessary precondition' of IT becoming critical, is to underestimate the most daunting obstacle to such a development: the ethico-political commitment inscribed within IT's 'conservative pedigree'. Urging a leopard to change its spots is unlikely to yield the desired mutation.

3. *Reflection.* The tradition of IT places limited value upon reflection, including reflection upon its own development and limits. IT may show how 'institutional processes constrain and naturalize the ways in which people come to know themselves in relation to organizational or societal practices'. But exponents of IT rarely turn this attention on their own practices. Consequently, there is little recognition of how, by sparing IT from such critique, its self-satisfaction and pervasiveness operates to maintain the established order. This conservative effect is both underpinned and justified, as Professor Lok notes, by a subscription - whether naive or cynical - to 'a neo-positivist myth of impartial, detached, politically neutral science' - a myth that IT 'uncritically reproduces in its journals of choice'. Perpetuating this myth may bestow some spurious, legitimacy upon IT. But it inhibits, if it does not entirely 'preclude', 'institutional theorists from becoming more critical in their work'.
4. *From Denaturalization to Domination.* Denaturalization, which recalls the socially constructed nature of taken-for-granted realities, is a necessary yet insufficient condition of critical engagement. Where IT facilitates denaturalization, it may potentially enable 'people in society [to] realize how they can unwittingly contribute to their own domination and

1
2
3 oppression'. However, *this* (radical) interpretation of the significance of
4
5 widely institutionalized (common)sense-making practices requires an
6
7 additional element: the engagement of an alternative, critical form of
8
9 analysis. As Professor Lok acknowledges, the notion of "domination" or
10
11 "oppression" is largely absent from the prospectus and vocabulary of IT,
12
13 an absence that is not, I wager, accidental.
14
15

- 16
17 5. *Scientific Objectivity and Neutrality*. IT's investment in the neo-positivist
18
19 myth of impartiality and detachment does not make it 'well equipped' to
20
21 foster critical self-reflection on the scientific ceremonial of its
22
23 scholarship (ironically enough, given the focus on ceremony in a seminal
24
25 text of IT). On occasion, there may be some 'acknowledgement of the role
26
27 of the researchers in the interpretation of the data, and the resulting
28
29 historical, partial, and/or fallible nature of qualitative analysis'. But it
30
31 seems to make little difference to how IT research is undertaken and
32
33 presented. Where do we find the implications of the recognition of
34
35 partiality or fallibility drawn out with regard to their ethico-political
36
37 significance? There is, it seems, great resistance to confronting how 'the
38
39 authority...and the related academic status [of IT] appear to rest primarily
40
41 on the legitimacy of the myth of scientific objectivity and neutrality'. A
42
43 plausible reason for such resistance is the risk of critical reflection
44
45 'nullifying the positive social impact institutional theorists increasingly
46
47 desire to make though their work, because it could undermine its
48
49 authority in, for example, the public policy realm by exposing how
50
51 institutional theory is itself politically constructed'. Here Professor Lok
52
53 valuably debunks IT's 'neutrality' or, better, points to how its ostensible
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 'objectivity' is '*politically constructed*' (emphasis added) but he stops
4
5 short of explicating the features and implications of IT's political
6
7 construction. Instead, he seems to retreat into the IT closet from where he
8
9 entertains the fantasy of 'facilitate[ing] effective emancipatory
10
11 interventions in society based on the authority and legitimacy [the]
12
13 dominance [of IT] lends' to such 'emancipatory interventions'. What
14
15 conceivable kind of 'emancipatory intervention' can derive legitimacy
16
17 from an association with IT?
18
19

20
21 6. *Smoke and Mirrors*. It is argued that the Goffmanesque presentation of the
22
23 IT-self as 'value free' and 'politically neutral' is a 'stylistic choice' that does
24
25 not convey the personal preferences or political views of IT exponents
26
27 but, rather, reflects the 'dominance of the top American journals'.
28
29 Somehow, there is a forgetting of how the sadomasochistic discipline
30
31 imposed by 'top journals' is self-inflicted and enforced through
32
33 labyrinthine processes of *peer* review. Since it is the practitioners of IT
34
35 that evaluate and regulate each other's work, the enemy of transparency
36
37 about values and politics lies within. More specifically, disingenuousness
38
39 is embedded in 'institutionalized academic careerism...[that] is
40
41 responsible for the systemic effect of crowding out, and thus rendering
42
43 mute, alternative approaches as soon as any particular theoretical
44
45 approach becomes dominant'. By jumping onto the capacious IT
46
47 bandwagon, a comfortable career protected from any de-stabilizing
48
49 contact with critical analysis.
50
51

52
53
54
55 7. *A Question of Commitment*. My cursory and occasionally waspish
56
57 responses (1-6) to Professor Lok's essay may perhaps be read as a
58
59
60

1
2
3 confirmation of the desire 'to affirm the superiority of...more "genuine"
4 and/or "radical" and/or "pure" critical commitments over those of
5 institutional theorists'. I accept that my initial provocation (Willmott,
6 2015) and my responses here are intended to highlight the difficulty, and
7 indeed the improbability, of IT becoming critical. The scare quotes placed
8 by Professor Lok around the terms "genuine" and "pure" in relation to
9 'critical commitments' indicate, plausible enough, that all forms of
10 theorizing are an impure amalgam (see point 2 above); and also that they
11 invariably affirm their "other"(s), even as the "other" is found wanting. In
12 the case of critical analysis, "superiority" (the elevation of this/self over
13 that/other) is, I suggest, associated with the depth of commitment to
14 being critically self-reflective - such that critical analysis becomes "other"
15 to itself, albeit in an incomplete and imperfect form. As Professor Lok
16 notes, being 'open' to the 'other(s)' requires the harboring of sufficient
17 doubt and humility about one's own standpoint - by, for example, giving
18 'the benefit of the doubt' to others' espoused interest in facilitating
19 emancipatory change. The difficulty, however, resides less in the
20 intention, or interest, of the scholar, or even in the receptivity of "the
21 target audience". Instead, at issue is the fitness of the chosen analytical
22 vehicle for undertaking critique and enabling emancipatory change. IT
23 can apparently be made "critical" simply by equating an attentiveness to
24 "grand challenges" with being critical. That is to evade what, for me, is the
25 central question which is: how can the (conservative) pedigree of IT make
26 it 'well equipped' to *become* critical in a form that is congruent with the
27 ethico-political commitment of critical analysis to emancipatory change.
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 8. *Critical v. critical approaches*. Professor Lok relies heavily upon a
4
5 distinction between Critical and critical approaches. Critical approaches
6
7 are held to refer to ‘the post-Marxist tradition including post-
8
9 structuralism’ whereas critical approaches are ‘aimed, possibly implicitly,
10
11 at exposing, disrupting, or changing institutional arrangements in society
12
13 for the betterment of humanity by engaging with issues of domination,
14
15 oppression and/or inequality without necessarily following in the Critical
16
17 tradition’. I have a number of difficulties with this distinction. First, I
18
19 disagree with Professor Lok that the C/c distinction is ‘similar’ to the one
20
21 that I deploy between traditional and critical theory. I distinguish critical
22
23 theory from traditional theory by its rejection of the assumption of
24
25 separation between the subjects and objects of research and the
26
27 subscription of traditional theory to “value free” science. Second, and
28
29 relatedly, the C/c distinction is confusing as a common and perhaps
30
31 defining thread of diverse forms of critical analysis is a commitment to
32
33 the generation of scientific knowledge that is guided by an emancipatory
34
35 intent, irrespective of whether it is “post-Marxist”, “post-structuralist” or
36
37 whatever. Finally, and as a prickly aside, I note that Professor Lok
38
39 ascribes the fantasy of ‘wholeness’, or fullness, to what I have termed
40
41 critical analysis, but he employs the unitary and totalizing notion of
42
43 ‘Critical’ to characterize such analysis.
44
45

46
47
48 9. “*Radical Constructivism*”. I question the ascription of a ‘radically
49
50 constructivist epistemology’ to my position (and, perhaps, to Critical
51
52 theory). I do not subscribe to the understanding that ‘[W]hat we call
53
54 reality(...) is wholly our construct’. Yes, I am doubtful that our knowledge
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 is likely to 'reflect or represent what philosophers would call an
4
5 "objective" reality ' because I believe all knowledge to be conditioned by,
6
7 as well as constitutive of, the (particular and contested) interpretive
8
9 frames deployed by communities of researchers when generating and
10
11 evaluating their propositions, including their claims about ontology.
12
13 However, that does not mean, or imply, that reality is equivalent, or
14
15 reducible, to our accounts of it. To the contrary, the partiality of our
16
17 accounts is recurrently dis-closed by the "constitutive lack" – the Real, in
18
19 Lacanian terms - that unsettles or "queers" claims to objectivity – notably,
20
21 by the (often unwelcome) recognition that scientific knowledge is, as
22
23 Professor Lok puts it, 'politically constructed'. I therefor find it
24
25 implausible to ascribe to me the view that "'Reality" may be real enough,
26
27 but this is of little relevance to Critical analysis; the nature and effects of
28
29 our knowledge construction about "it" is what is important'. Nor,
30
31 relatedly, do I consider analyses based upon a realist ontology or, for that
32
33 matter, the uses of quantitative methods in research, to be necessarily
34
35 "uncritical" or conservative. As noted above (Point 2), I define critical
36
37 analysis by reference to its emancipatory interest and effects, and not by
38
39 its ontological or epistemological assumptions, whilst also recognizing
40
41 that the existence of this interest is contested, and that its enactment can
42
43 have contradictory consequences. I do believe, nonetheless, that ethico-
44
45 political commitments are key – because it is they, rather than Reality or
46
47 Method, that inform and justify such assumptions about reality and
48
49 knowledge. Critical analysis is self-consciously political in the sense that
50
51 *inter alia* it advances and/or critiques the performative nature and effects
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 of knowledge, including IT and critical analysis, in reporting and
4
5 reproducing, or challenging and transforming, the status quo. Such critical
6
7 analysis is exemplified by, but not limited to, the disruptive and
8
9 transformative effects of, say, radical feminist thinking/activism.
10
11

12
13
14 In conclusion, I fully concur with Professor Lok that my intervention/
15
16 provocation/ polemic has 'fallen on deaf ears', are at least has not prompted any
17
18 noticeable response prior to Professor Lok's extended commentary – perhaps
19
20 because, politically, it is considered astute to deprive critical analysis of the
21
22 "oxygene of publicity". Muteness is also an adroit form of passive-aggressive
23
24 non-affirmation. Lack of engagement with the tradition of critical/emancipatory
25
26 scholarship is perhaps the most eloquent indicator of disinterest in making IT
27
28 critical, at least in a form that is recognizable as critical analysis. More charitably,
29
30 the reticence to speak up may be symptomatic of the difficulty of realizing a
31
32 latent, closeted interest by "coming out" as critical.
33
34
35
36
37
38

39 So, on a more optimistic note, perhaps my intervention is a "slow burn", with
40
41 Professor Lok's response facilitating some sustained reflection on the purpose of
42
43 IT, fostering disenchantment with perpetuating a conservative form of analysis,
44
45 and anticipating an embrace of emancipatory, radical change-oriented
46
47 scholarship. Well, perhaps.
48
49
50

51 52 53 References

54
55 Lok, J. (2017), Why (and how) institutional theory *can* be critical:
56 Addressing the Challenge to Institutional Theory's Critical Turn. *Journal of*
57 *Management Inquiry*, in press
58
59
60

Willmott, H. (2015). Why institutional theory cannot be critical. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 24(1), 105-111.

For Peer Review

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60