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## **When performativity fails: Implications for Critical Management Studies**

*Peter Fleming and Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee*

### **Abstract**

This paper argues that the recent call in this journal and elsewhere for Critical Management Studies (CMS) scholars to embrace rather than chide performativity presents an overly optimistic view of (a) the power of language to achieve emancipatory organizational change and (b) the capability of lone CMS researchers to resignify management discourses. We introduce the notion of *failed performatives* (Bulter, 1993, 2010) to extend this argument and discuss its implications for critical organizational inquiry. If CMS seeks to make a practical difference in business and society, and realize its ideals of emancipation, we suggest alternative methods of impact must be explored.

### **Keywords**

Critical Management Studies, Emancipation, Performativity

## Introduction

In their influential analysis of Critical Management Studies (CMS), Fournier and Grey (2000) argue that CMS scholarship is driven by three basic principles: denaturalization, reflectivity and non-performativity. *Denaturalization* deconstructs the seemingly immutable ‘realities’ and ‘rationalities’ of managerialism while exposing the wealth of alternatives that reside in the shadows of organizational life. *Reflectivity* challenges the dominance of positivism in the methodologies of mainstream management research, revealing how all social scientific investigation is underpinned by political assumptions. And drawing on Lyotard’s (1984) notion of instrumental performativity, the principle of *non-performativity* rejects the means-ends rationality that governs many organizational situations, especially under neoliberal capitalism characterized by a cost-minimization/profit-maximization logic (Fournier and Grey, 2000).

The principle of non-performativity has recently been questioned in a number of articles published in this journal and elsewhere. These authors suggest that by critically distancing themselves from the concrete activities of managers, researchers may miss opportunities to intervene and make a difference for the better. For example, in their influential article, Spicer, Alvesson and Karreman (2009: 538) argue that the principle of non-performativity needlessly isolates CMS from organizational practitioners. This in turn fosters a corrosive ‘cynicism and negativism’ whereby scholars ply grand critical theories that have little relevance to everyday organizational challenges. Others similarly maintain that the principle of non-performativity fails to offer ‘practical’ guidelines for managers (King and Learmonth, 2014); misses crucial opportunities to ‘collaborate’ with middle-managers and stubbornly objects to becoming ‘more relevant to practice’ (Wickert and Schaefer, 2014: 7); is elitist in how it ignores practitioner management texts in favour of

‘canonical perspectives’ associated with Marx, Foucault and the Frankfurt School (Hartmann, 2014: 619, also see Clegg, Kornberger, Carter and Rhodes, 2006).

These scholars recommend a renewed commitment to performativity so that critical knowledge can have an impact on the practices of managers and lead to emancipatory change. Most assertive in this regard are Spicer et al. (2009) and Wickert and Schaefer (2014) and their respective notions of *critical performativity* and *progressive performativity*. Both papers draw upon wider philosophical studies of performativity to discern its potential for CMS researchers hoping to make meaningful interventions. In particular, they apply Austin (1963) and Butler’s (1990; 1993) influential insight about the way language creates reality (rather than just describe it). Armed with this insight, it is claimed that CMS researchers can change organizational practice (for the better) by altering how language is used by managers. Modified speech may lead to modified and thus emancipatory behaviour. Such critical performativity ‘involves active and subversive intervention into managerial discourses and practices’ (Spicer et al., 2009: 538). Instead of worrying about emancipation on a grand scale, more modest microemancipatory practices might ‘stimulate the performative effects of language in order to induce incremental, rather than radical, changes in managerial behaviour’ (Wickert and Schaefer, 2014: 1). This means getting closer to managers rather than critiquing them from afar.

We agree that CMS scholars should be reflecting on how their critical findings might translate into concrete change. Otherwise why bother being critical in the first place? Moreover, we applaud recent efforts – including the advocates of critical and progressive performativity – to rethink how CMS research might make a difference to organizational practices. Our motivation for entering this discussion, however, derives from a nagging doubt. We are concerned that the emphasis on discursive performativity as a change mechanism risks presenting an overly optimistic view of (a) the power of language to alter

institutionalized organizational practices associated with neoliberal capitalism and (b) the capability of CMS scholars alone to reorder *in situ* how managers make sense of governing imperatives like profit-maximization, shareholder value, consumer responsiveness and so forth. While there may be situations in which critical and/or progressive performativity may ‘talk into existence new (counterbalancing) behaviours and practices’ (Wickert and Schaefer, 2014: 3), we also propose that, realistically speaking, such attempts would just as likely *fail* given the preponderant pressures of economic rationality in many business contexts. Missing in the aforementioned calls for a wider appreciation of (discursive) performativity, therefore, are the strict boundary conditions that Austin (1963) and Butler (1990; 1993; 2010) themselves place around the notion.

Our paper contributes to the ongoing discussion about the challenge of making CMS performative by addressing two central questions. First, rather than automatically assume their success, how might discursive performative approaches (such as critical and progressive performativity) fail to enact desired material changes and for what reasons? Answering this question will provide a better understanding of the practical contingencies that can determine whether these new performativities are the best method for endeavouring to influence organizations. And second, in light of the constraints on the performative potential of language, what other possible avenues are available to the CMS community for having an impact (however modest) on organizational practices and routines?

The paper is structured in four parts. First, we provide an overview of the founding CMS principle of non-performativity and analyse recent calls for critical research to become more performative, giving particular attention to the two papers that have recently appeared in this journal. Second, we identify the circumstances under which it is more realistic to expect discursive performativity to *fail* rather than succeed. Corporate Social Responsibility (or CSR) is here highlighted as a failed performative in managerial and mainstream

discourses. Third, the paper posits alternative methods that the CMS community might use to help make organizations less exploitative and more equitable. And fourth, we conclude by discussing the broader role of critique in management studies at this juncture. Our overall aim is to continue the ongoing dialogue about performativity in the CMS community and hopefully inform new avenues to achieve its stated objectives in business and society.

### **CMS and the question of performativity**

We will not provide a detailed overview of CMS as that has been done extensively elsewhere (see for example Adler et al., 2007; Alvesson et al., 2009; Banerjee, 2011a; Fournier and Grey, 2000; Spicer et al., 2009). CMS is characterized by a diversity of theoretical and philosophical perspectives. For instance, the 2013 Critical Management Studies conference held in Manchester comprised of twenty-five streams involving a wide range of topics such as critical perspectives on strategy, globalization, international business, diversity, feminism, race theory, human resource management, marketing, accounting, postcolonialism, sexuality, gender, postmodernism and environmentalism. CMS was established as a division in the Academy of Management in 2008. The domain statement of the CMS division describes its mission:

CMS serves as a forum within the Academy for the expression of views critical of established management practices and the established social order. Our premise is that structural features of contemporary society, such as the profit imperative, patriarchy, racial inequality, and ecological irresponsibility often turn organizations into instruments of domination and exploitation. Driven by a shared desire to change this situation, we aim in our research, teaching, and practice to develop critical interpretations of management and society and to generate radical

alternatives. Our critique seeks to connect the practical shortcomings in management and individual managers to the demands of a socially divisive and ecologically destructive system within which managers work (CMS 2014).

Thus, CMS challenges the fundamental normative assumption that managerial notions of efficiency are universally desirable, and that pursuing profit motives can only lead to positive outcomes for the workforce and society. Moreover, CMS is driven by the desire (even if it does not always articulate the means) to *transform* existing power relations in organizations with a view to encouraging less oppressive practices that do not harm social and environmental welfare. As Fournier and Grey (2000: 16) argue, ‘to be engaged in critical management studies means, at the most basic level, to say that something is wrong with management, as a practice and body of knowledge, and that it should be changed’ (Fournier and Grey, 2000: 16).

Along with de-naturalization and reflexivity, Fournier and Grey (2000) suggest that the principle of *non-performativity* is crucial to the CMS project: What exactly do Fournier and Grey (2000) mean by non-performativity? Let us imagine a CMS researcher studying changing employment practices in the United Kingdom. S/he gains access to a subsidiary of a multinational enterprise that has started to use zero-hours employment contracts to maximize profits for its parent company. These contracts have been widely condemned as exploitative and unjust since they insist employees always be on call but guarantee zero-hours of paid work (see *Guardian*, 2013). Our non-performative orientated CMS researcher would not be interested in generating knowledge that enables the efficiency and instrumentalization of this new employment system. Nor would s/he be overly sympathetic to the operational manager’s ‘point of view’ because employees are so obviously disadvantaged and suffering as a result. So what is our CMS scholar seeking to achieve in undertaking this research? Generally

speaking, change hopefully. But here is the nub of the problem. How can critical researchers make an effective intervention while tenaciously remaining aloof (both ideologically and practically) of the concrete activities being described? What aspects of performativity, whether critical or progressive, can engage with this clearly exploitative practice to create a fairer outcome? If zero-hours contracts are practices created by the language of neoliberal capitalism, what other utterances have the power and agency to counter these practices?

### *Towards a performative Critical Management Studies?*

Recent commentators have addressed questions like these by suggesting that CMS scholars must stop being so negative about the idea of working with managers to help bring about practical change. In their strident critique of Fournier and Grey (2000), Spicer et al. (2009) maintain that ‘... a potential consequence of holding strong to the credo of anti-performativity is that CMS withdraws from attempts to engage with practitioners and mainstream management theorists who are at least partially concerned with issues of performativity ... an anti-performative CMS satisfies itself with attempts to shock the mainstream out of its ideological slumber though intellectually “pissing in the street”’ (Spicer, et al., 2009: 542). Critical scholars should instead become actively involved with everyday practitioners and engage with the language they use in an attempt to construct new realities and opportunities.

Following Spicer et al. (2009), Wickert and Schaefer (2014: 20) also implore the CMS community to have ‘greater impact on what managers actually do’. They are concerned that critical scholars fail to provide ‘knowledge for dealing with those aspects of managerial life that have been identified as problematic ... and overlooks potential points of engagement with managers ...’ (Wickert and Schaefer, 2014: 5). Middle-managers in particular ought to be enlisted by CMS researchers because they are likely to be less aligned with organizational



elites and potentially more sympathetic with frustrated subordinates to trigger progressive social change. For this reason too, Hartmann (2014: 626) argues the CMS community could also engage with managerial texts that are often dismissed in favour of critical theory, Marxism and feminism, in an attempt to subvert mainstream approaches and shift the discourse towards more emancipatory objectives instead. At least managerial texts provide a non-alienating ‘vocabulary to think progressively about alternatives without setting itself against the goals of organizations (i.e., it is not directly opposed to performative ends).’

### *Critical and progressive performativity*

To rectify the pitfalls of non-performativity, Spicer et al. (2009) posit ‘critical performativity’ as a practical alternative for CMS scholars. This model of impact can be achieved through an *affirmative stance* (getting close to the object of critique to reveal points of revision), an *ethic of care* (providing space for management’s viewpoint and collaborating with them to achieve emancipatory ends), *pragmatism* (being realistic about what can be achieved given structural constraints), *engaging potentialities* (leveraging points of possibility for changing managerial practices in an incremental rather than radical ‘revolutionary’ manner) and asserting a *normative orientation* (ideals for ‘good’ organizational practice).

Three implications of this approach are noteworthy. First, Spicer et al. (2009) move beyond Fournier and Grey’s (2000) Lyotardian conceptualization of performativity (i.e., input/output maximization) by drawing on other philosophical traditions that highlight how language/speech might count as social action (see Gond and Cabantous [2015] for an extended overview of this literature in the social sciences and philosophy). Austin (1963) and Butler’s (1990; 1993) notion of performative utterances (i.e., words that are also deeds) is considered especially important in this regard. Rather than functioning only as a secondary

descriptor, language can also perform reality, as when a judge utters “I sentence you to ...” CMS researchers might thus create equitable organizational practices by intervening in management discourse and experimenting ‘with metaphors that might be floating around in the organization’ (Spicer et al., 2009: 547). Second, an ethic of affirmation and care implies that CMS ought to listen to management’s side of the story and engage in a ‘loving struggle’ (p. 548) with their language rather than simply criticize: ‘CMS needs to appreciate the contexts and constraints of management ... from this follows some degree of respect and care’ (Spicer et al., 2009: 545). And third, CMS must be less ‘utopian’ in its emancipatory ambitions. Incremental and piecemeal change is more doable given the economic pressures managers confront in their daily routines and practices.

A similar set of reforms are outlined by Wickert and Schaefer (2014) in their notion of ‘progressive performativity’. The weakness of CMS for them is that it ‘provides only limited guidance on how (counterbalancing) values could be embedded into organizational practices and procedures in *collaboration with*, rather than in *opposition to*, managers’ (Wickert and Schaefer, 2014: 7, emphasis original). They too advance a broader understanding of performativity related to language: ‘The performative element, we suggest, requires researchers to “activate” the language that managers use ... In that way, CMS scholars may support managers to “talk into existence” new (counterbalancing) behaviours and practices’ (Wickert and Schaefer, 2014: 3). Two elements of progressive performativity follow from this proposition. First, through *micro-level engagement* CMS researchers can actively ally themselves with selected managers (preferably middle-managers) to raise awareness and identify alternative speech acts. And second, this may lead to *reflexive conscientization*, whereby scholars help create discursive spaces ‘in which managers are gently “nudged” to reflect on their actions and the organizational processes to which their

actions relate ... [it seeks to] raise the critical consciousness of managers' (Wickert and Schaefer, 2014: 3).

This can only be credibly achieved, according to Wickert and Schaefer, if scholars put aside the classical emancipatory ideals of CMS since they discourage micro-collaborations with managers, introduce concepts that alienate practitioners and ultimately make progressive change seemingly impossible. Utopianism in particular, according to Wickert and Schaefer, introduces 'complex problems [that] fill people with anxiety and limit their capacity to think and act creatively' (Wickert and Schaefer, 2014: 14). They recommend non-utopian and 'small-win' initiatives instead, 'moving forward by actively working towards incremental, rather than radical transformation of unfavourable social conditions' (Wickert and Schaefer, 2014: 9-10).

### **Limitations of the new performative turn in Critical Management Studies**

Space does not permit a full elaboration of the critical and progressive models of performativity being recommended to CMS researchers. But it is no exaggeration to suggest that the argumentation involved presents a rather caricatured image of the CMS community when exhorted to 'overcome its often hypocritical and unproductive claims that its output has no performative intent whatsoever' (Spicer et al. 2009: 554). As Alvesson et al. (2009: 10, emphasis original) argue, non-performativity 'emphatically does not mean an antagonistic attitude to *any* type of performing'. CMS only refrains from instrumentally contributing to the mean-ends rationality of corporate managerialism. It is not against *all* impact, since that would render its criticism something of a self-serving exercise that rightly ought to be admonished. Having said that, advocates of a new performativity do have a good point when they highlight the vagueness and ambiguity around what mechanisms of impact CMS

actually does favour. How can the community help make a practical difference to organizational life so that they are less exploitative and more equitable?

Critical and progressive performativity may hold promise in this regard. However, we feel these models of influence hold overtly optimistic assumptions about the power of language to change certain structural realities as well as the capabilities of CMS scholars to perform emancipatory change through discourse and micro-level engagement. There may certainly be some cases where getting close to managers, empathizing with their constraints and manipulating their language may indeed yield the (micro) fulfilment of aspects of the CMS mission. For example, scholars have engaged with managers in developing critical perspectives on leadership (Cunliffe, 2009; Cunliffe & Erikson, 2011) and promoting reflexivity in managerial practice (Barge, 2004). However, we are concerned that the conceptualizations of performativity proposed lack a realistic appreciation of the accumulated social forces guiding organizational behaviour in these institutionalized contexts, including the profit motive, shareholder value, cost externalization, means-ends efficiency and so-forth. While these forces are no doubt social and linguistically constructed too (for example, see Callon [2010] in relation to the economy), they have also been politically and institutionally embedded over time and cannot simply be talked away. It is these conditions, we argue, that need to be taken into consideration when assessing the impact of CMS scholarship. Without a wider political analysis of organizations, institutions and markets, the capacity to perform economic rationality differently will be limited, which in turn restricts the scope for politics, political subjectivity and dialogue (see Cochoy, Giraudeau, and Mcfall, 2010). Hence, we would expect the mechanisms recommended by critical and progressive performativities to frequently *fail* rather than succeed.

### *Successful and failed performativities*

Critical and progressive performativity is inspired by a broader notion of performativity derived from philosophy and social theory that demonstrates how discourse not only describes reality but shapes, moulds and sometimes determines it in the form of speech acts. The work of J. L. Austin and his book *How to do Things With Words* (1963) and Judith Butler (1990, 1993), who theorizes gender/sexuality in this way, are cited as the main inspiration for this new approach to performativity. According to Austin, utterances like ‘I name this ship the Cutty Sark’ or ‘I sentence you to death’ are acts in and of themselves and therefore make reality. And for Butler (1993), gender and sexuality are neither essences nor constructions but ‘contingent outcomes of the manner in which they are performed and reiterated’ (Cochoy et al., 2010: 139). Thus, ‘performative acts are forms of authoritative speech; most performatives are statements that, in uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power (Butler, 1993: 225, cited in Spicer et al. 2009: 544). Spicer et al. (2009) interpret this insight to mean that ‘discourses create spaces where we are able to rework them ... in the context of CMS, this would make performativity an attempt to actively intervene in discourses such as project management techniques, leadership, entrepreneurship ...’ Wickert and Schaefer (2014: 4) similarly draw on Austin and Butler to propose that the ‘effects of language provide opportunities to transform the prevailing organizational reality by gradually talking new practices into existence’ (Wickert and Schaefer, 2014: 4).

Missing here, of course, are the strict precautions that both Austin and Butler highlight regarding the institutional and political circumstances necessary for rendering words into actions. Butler’s notion of performativity can be loosely described as the ability of language to not only refer to but also produce what it names. However, while language may have performative effects, Butler stresses the importance of not closing the gap between the performative and the referential. The agency of language is not the same as the agency of the

subject because there are obvious conditional limitations for the speaking subject. Indeed, Butler recently (2010) lamented the immense amount of scholarship on discursive performativity that has unfortunately ignored this important point:

Let us remember that Austin distinguishes between illocutionary and perlocutionary performatives: the first characterize speech acts that bring about certain realities, as when judgements are pronounced by a court ... the second characterizes those utterances from which effects follow only when certain other kinds of conditions are in place. A politician may claim that a 'new day has arrived' but that new day only has a chance of arriving if people take up the utterance and endeavour to make it happen. The utterance alone does not bring about the day (Butler, 2010: 147-148).

Similarly, a middle manager charged with introducing zero-hours contracts, to continue with the example introduced earlier, achieves a successful or illocutionary speech act when she utters to an employee 'in the name of profit maximization your employment is now based on this new arrangement'. The words do something and carry a reality shaping authority, to the chagrin of the affected worker. Moreover, the speech also satisfies perlocutionary conditions because the utterance can only be performative on the basis of a broader institutional setting, in this case, neoliberal capitalism. But what if the manager instead declared, 'this firm is no longer about profit-maximization but communal wellbeing and employee ownership?' Following Butler, these words only have a chance of becoming a successful (perlocutionary) speech act if, as with the politician above, the firm's shareholders and board of directors 'take up the utterance and endeavour to make it happen' (Butler, 2010: 148) because these actors shape the purpose of the institution. This could possibly happen. But realistically speaking, failure might also be likely since it would indicate a serious

misreading of the perlocutionary conditions in play, not only rendering the speech act unsuccessful but also prompting shareholders to reconsider the *middle manager's* employment as an agent of their economic interests. Wickert and Schaefer (2014) are therefore entering problematic territory when they state:

Our overall proposition is that if negatively loaded language – for instance, circling around transaction cost economics ... can lead to corresponding negatively perceived consequences, then it may equally work the other way around and create more reflexive and ethically informed managerial behaviour (Wickert and Schaefer, 2014: 9)

In light of Butler's warning, transaction cost economics is (negatively) performative because of the perlocutionary support it has. Without similar supports, speech acts aiming for reflective and ethically informed practice will fail. This is why Butler argues that many speech acts are *failed performatives* (Butler, 1993: 16). The authority for speech to become action is contingent on the accumulation of *a priori* or reiterated practices. Austin is also clear on this point. Not *anyone* (say, the local plumber) can authoritatively state 'I now pronounce you man and wife'. There are structural preconditions that must be satisfied. Otherwise, attempts at illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts merely 'misfire' (Austin, 1963: 238). Moreover, for perlocutionary performativity in particular, such misfires then become the 'rules of the game', as Callon (2010: 165) suggests when describing how corporate capitalism constrains any meaningful action on climate change discourses.

*The 'perlocutionary bound' Critical Management Studies researcher*

We can now propose that underlying institutional and political conditions formed by past and reiterated speech acts will determine whether a CMS initiated performative utterance is illocutionary (immediately talking reality into existence), perlocutionary (creating reality on the basis of its felicity with the broader contextual setting) or a *failure*. This has a number of important implications when assessing the tenability of critical and progressive performativity for achieving meaningful change. Three stand out for us.

Firstly, if CMS researchers are to gently nudge practitioners by resignifying the discourses and metaphors they use, then a certain degree of *compromise* will be inevitable in order for the utterance to avoid failing from the outset. Perhaps this is why Hartmann (2014: 619) suggests that the CMS community can only become performative if we 'accept management and the corporation as legitimate starting points'. The question of compromise is important. As soon as the researcher observes the perlocutionary conditions governing the contextual situation they are intervening in (that includes managers, shareholders, the wider marketplace, etc.), it is not so much what can be said that is decisive. It is what *cannot* be said that worries us. One may presume that 'big issues' or macro-level topics concerning growing economic inequality, climate change, the managerial prerogative and so-forth would be ruled out from the start. As Callon (2010) observes in relation to climate change, there is a dividing line between market and political based solutions. While both have their own language, the dominance of market approaches (like carbon trading as opposed to a ban on coal-based power plants) reflects long standing and deeply rooted political systems that cannot simply be overcome by inserting the language of climate politics in managerial parlance.

But this silencing would not only apply to big issues like climate change. Certain speech restrictions would be expected at the micro-level too. For example, what could a CMS researcher legitimately broach *apropos* the aforementioned manager charged with



introducing zero-hour contracts? Spicer et al. (2009) and Wickert and Schaefer (2014), for example, recommend we collaborate and appreciate the pressures s/he is experiencing. We have no problems with this. Unfortunately, however, this would almost certainly mean avoiding language that might question the desirability of profit-maximization, efficiency and so forth. How could it not given the context? Therefore, the emphasis that critical and progressive performativity place on anti-utopian discourse or linguistic ‘small-steps’ (Spicer et al., 2009: 552) and ‘incremental rather than radical transformation’ (Wickert and Schaefer, 2014: 9) must invariably advance a rather watered down version of CMS, which runs the risk of subordinating its mission to the institutional demands of the more powerful party.

Secondly, given the above observations, CMS researchers would need to construct or help others facilitate a perlocutionary environment that would allow micro-emancipatory speech acts to become meaningful deeds rather than failed performatives. We doubt they could do this alone or even with the assistance of middle managers, as the critical and progressive performativity model recommends. For sure, the suggestion that ‘(middle) managers *could* act as allies to critical researchers and agents of intra-organizational change’ (Wickert and Schaefer, 2014: 14, emphasis added) is conditional on these middle managers being (a) *willing* to defy their superiors and do things differently (presumably with encouragement from a performative-orientated CMS researcher) and (b) *able* to reorder the discursive environment so that, drawing on the earlier example, zero-hours contracts are deemed unethical and unacceptable business practice. But would this middle manager really be prepared to put their job on the line after being encouraged by a junior university lecturer to ‘counterbalance their quest for efficiency’ (Wickert and Schaefer, 2014: 9)?

Realistically then, in collaborating with practitioners to help them ‘unleash their potential role as internal activists’ (Wickert and Schaefer, 2014: 3) CMS researchers would have to turn their attention to powerful governing parties who have the ability to realize

meaningful change – in the zero-hours contract example, this would include shareholders, the board of directors, banking institutions who have provided loans to the firm, and senior managing directors. CMS would have to persuade these parties to do things differently. While the idea is refreshingly optimistic, we find it difficult to envisage in reality, especially concerning contentious issues such as animal rights, climate change, tax avoidance, etc. We are not sure, for example, that critical researchers are able to enter into dialogue with the managing director of a large enterprise employing exploitative contracts and ‘provide spaces in which managers are “nudged” gently to reflect upon their actions .... [whereby] new practices can be ‘talked into existence’” (Wickert and Schaefer, 2014: 14). Changes of this sort require more than a nudge and are probably beyond the power of the lone CMS researcher. Whistle blowing and direct action from external forces (e.g., governmental regulation, civil society groups, etc.) are more likely to enable such change. Moreover, the establishment of a favourable reiterative (or what Butler [2010: 148] calls ‘ritualized’) perlocutionary context typically takes a good deal of time and resources. Do CMS scholars have them at their disposal given the institutional pressures and demands of their own work environments (i.e., the university)?

This brings us to the third worrying implication arising from the new performativity being recommended to the CMS community. If a speech act is neither illocutionary nor enjoys sympathetic perlocutionary conditions, then a major disconnect will emerge between the speaker/speech and practical organizational reality. As Butler (2010: 150) puts it:

Although the speech act conventionally works as a model for understanding performativity, the model of the speaking subject fails to provide an adequate way of understanding how performativity works. After all, there does not have to be a speaking subject or discrete act of enunciation for a discursive operation to wield its

effects ... if the analysis takes for granted that the speaking subject is the necessary grounds for performative agency ... then the uses of performative analysis remain quite limited.

This insight is important for a number of reasons. Merely encouraging middle-managers to speak of social justice or environmental responsibility is not enough if the ancillary preconditions are not first met, as we argued above. Moreover, one might suspect that firms actively *exploit* this disconnect or ‘misfire’ between words and deeds so that certain utterances (e.g., ‘we are for labour rights’) become active excuses or alibis for *not* committing to the deed, as Callon (2010) points out in relation to inaction on climate change. This is likely in the case of corporate social responsibility (CSR) campaigns, which have been celebrated as a prime opportunity for CMS scholars to nudge corporate managers towards more progressive behaviour. However, CSR perhaps exemplifies what Butler (2010: 159) means when discussing how dominant economic institutions talk about themselves: ‘performativity not only fails, but it *depends* on failure’. What is espoused is not meant to become action. But Wickert and Schaefer (2014) still see a good deal of performative potential in CSR because researchers can employ its promises to convince managers to resignify their activities. With some gentle discursive nudging, managers who were once ‘antagonists of CSR may begin to identify with the language of their internal and external critics and translate it selectively into a version that they eventually apply in the form of new managerial practices’ (Wickert and Schaefer, 2014: 15). Unfortunately we are not told what these new managerial practices are or whether social and environmental welfare is actually enhanced as a result. But apparently that is not the point. Following Christensen, Morsing and Tyssen (2013), Wickert and Schaefer (2014: 10) believe that ‘even when the ambitions of becoming more social responsible do not match managerial action, talking about these

ambitions nonetheless helps articulate ideals, beliefs, values and frameworks' that may (or may not) become performative over time.

Yet the *systematic* divide between CSR talk and the actual reality of business firms has consistently been noted in critical organization studies (see Banerjee, 2008; 2011b; Fleming and Jones, 2013). The central finding of the European Union's largest ever CSR project, with a budget of € 2.6 million involving more than 5000 companies was this: 'The aggregate CSR activities of European companies have not made a measurable positive contribution to achieving the economic, social and environmental goals of the European Union' (CSR Impact, 2013). Unfortunately, this probably means incremental 'nudging' of middle managers will not be enough to counter the environmental impacts of big business. Indeed, the CSR examples that Wickert and Schaefer (2014: 3) describe as 'transformational change' might better be described as a performative misfire. For instance, they cite Wright and Nyberg's (2012) study of corporate responses to climate change as evidence that managers use their influence to 'promote a progressive agenda'. Wright and Nyberg (2012) found that the climate change agenda evoked both positive and negative emotions among sustainability managers. A variety of coping mechanisms were used to manage ensuing tensions. While the managers studied were influential in creating a 'positive emotionology of climate change' there was no real impact on reducing the organization's carbon footprint: instead the emotionality actually reinforced the business case of 'brand health, brand strength, resource efficiency and energy efficiency' (Wright and Nyberg, 2012: 1575). It is our contention that many corporate responses to climate change are an example of a failed performativity rather than a progressive performativity.

## **Can Critical Management Studies make a performative difference?**

There may certainly be cases in which the model of performativity being recommended recently in this journal (and elsewhere) may change managerial practice. However, we feel there is a degree of misplaced optimism in the recommendations, especially concerning discursive speech acts. Our pessimism about the universal applicability of these new performativities is not inspired by some sort of purism or negativity towards managers *per se*. For example, Spicer et al. (2009) suspect that ‘for proponents of ‘purist’ CMS [critical performativity] may be unacceptably compromising. Any sympathy for managers and other elites may be interpreted as a loss of nerve that renders CMS needlessly vulnerable to absorption within the progressive mainstream and thus disable its critical edge’. But we see the issue in a more pragmatic light; less about being ‘for’ or ‘against’ managers and more to do with the *efficacy* of the interventions being recommended.

However, if CMS is motivated by the desire to generate emancipatory alternatives and practical change, then the onus is now on us to suggest alternative avenues in light of the limitations argued above. How might critical research make a difference in the real world and (at least partially) fulfil some of the objectives in the CMS mission? The aforementioned recommendations concerning discursive performativity provide a useful counterpoint for us to make some tentative suggestions. We certainly do not claim to have all the answers but suggest four approaches that may help render CMS more performative.

### *Activism within the business school and university*

It is curious that arguments about how CMS should ‘get closer’ to managers do not extend to CMS scholars’ own institutions, namely the university. This silence about CMS’s relationship to its own institutional conditions is a significant oversight given the degradation of university employment over the last ten years. According to Collini (2012), higher

education establishments in the UK have been colonized by a ‘business analogy’ in which research and teaching careers are increasingly indexed to the functional needs of business (often defined in purposefully vague terms such as ‘impact’). In the US context, Martin (2011) observes the ‘technocratic takeover’ of universities, systematically restricting academic freedoms and generating a massive retinue of precarious instructors, leading some to re-label the university an ‘edufactory’ (see The Edu-factory Collective, 2009). But resisting such technocracy is no easy task as Parker (2014) emphasizes in his analysis of the restructuring of a European business school populated by a significant number of CMS scholars, who posed little resistance to a vastly unpopular, top-down and disempowering policy:

Given that this workplace was a university populated by responsibly autonomous professionals, and a particular group of these people were invested in these critical [i.e., CMS] traditions as well as being members of the relevant trade union, one might have assumed that this was a place in which resistance was more, not less, likely. Yet this does not seem to have been the case (Parker, 2014: 290).

In light of these institutional conditions, there are a number of ways CMS scholars might ‘practice what it preaches’ in their own institutions. For example, there has been growing discontent with ‘journal rankings’ and its restrictive influence on scholarship (see Willmott, 2011; Willmott and Mingers, 2013; Dunne, Harney and Parker, 2008; Hussain, 2014). Moves to counter this managerialization of academic labour include calls for open access publication platforms and ‘REF boycotts’. In addition, business schools and universities have become exploitative employers in their own right. The increased reliance on zero-hours contracts and insecure part-time employment practices among faculty,

administrative support and maintenance workers is now rife (Chomsky, 2014). Would not a truly performative CMS focus on the employment context with which it is most closely connected?

### *Critical pedagogy*

It is also interesting that the proponents of new performativity have little to say about management education as an emancipatory opportunity, especially when evoking pedagogy theorists like Freire (1970) to expound their ideas. Spicer et al. (2009) and Hartmann (2014) do not address the topic. And Wickert and Schaefer (2014) mention it only in passing towards the end of their paper. However, CMS has conducted an extended debate on the role of management education (see Grey, 2002; Grey, 2004; Grey and Willmott, 2005). As Grey and Willmott (2005) observe, ‘since CMS departs from the mainstream’s scientific conception of knowledge, it can offer a different approach to students of management ... encouraging and enabling them to examine critically their established beliefs and practices’ (Grey and Willmott, 2005: 11). The rebuff that such knowledge is useless to the potential practitioner (e.g., Hartmann, 2014) risks belittling the aspirations of students. In an era of what appears to be endless economic crises, business students are increasingly interested in new ideas instead of those found in mainstream management tracts that are often considered ‘out of touch’ with real world business problems (Datar, Garvin and Cullen, 2010).

Is it feasible, however, to somehow imbue students with a more poignant ethical awareness of the business world, including the ‘dark side’ of managerialism? And how might this translate into appreciably altered managerial practices in the future? This is an immensely complex question, but one that must inherently remain *non-performative*, indeterminate and marked by the expectation of *failure*. As Weber (1946) presciently noted, the task of raising political awareness in the classroom cannot simply be an instrumental

moment of indoctrination, whereby potentially ‘bad’ future managers are remoulded into ‘good’ future ones. Critical pedagogy instead seeks to engender spaces of intellectual openness and inquiry, demonstrating how certain management practices we take for granted are neither natural nor inevitable. It presents both negative and positive cases in a mutually informative exchange between students and instructors. For Grey (2002), this entails giving ‘voice to some of the messiness and suffering that characterizes management practices, even if this offends against the ideological missions of business schools ... the notion of voice does not imply simply presenting students a litany of or tirade against the defects of global capitalism. Critical management education entails a shift both in what is taught and how it is taught’ (Grey, 2002: 505-506). And with respect to the ‘how’ component, political questions concerning the conditions of learning (including student debt, the political economy of higher education and democratic participation) would undoubtedly be part of the pedagogical process (Ross, 2014).

*For a ‘public Critical Management Studies’*

We are surprised that new calls for performativity inordinately privilege managers as agents of change, rather than, say, social and environmental activists, the unemployed and precarious workforce, democratically elected union officials, etc. Rather than ‘lovingly struggle’ (Spicer et al., 2009: 548) with managers and treat them as the exclusive audience of CMS, we suggest that research ought to engage wider public forums. As we have argued, practitioners are often too enmeshed in the means-ends rationalities of their organizations to be effective change agents in the way new performativity advocates envisage. In many cases, some kind of external catalyst or pressure is required to enact reforms and progressive changes in organizations. For example, Nike did not clampdown on the use of child labour within its supply chains because its senior staff had an ethical epiphany. Instead, they reacted



to public pressure, social movements and investigative research that placed the issue firmly on the political agenda among interested groups, especially consumers (Carty, 2002). Similarly, tobacco firms did not voluntarily include graphic health warnings on its packaging, which they aggressively contested. Anti-tobacco lobby groups pressured the state to act, backed by scientists with a strong concern for public health (Derthick, 2011).

We suggest that a potentially effective way to enact change in organizations is by developing a 'public CMS'. Systematic research and its findings – which will often reveal an injustice and a possible alternative – could be disseminated to raise awareness and reflexive dialogue within the public imagination, policy makers and think tanks to enforce change upon organizations. For example, CMS might make an impact on policy issues through the use of research centres and institutes that collectively petition legislative and political power holders. This could involve entering ongoing debates (e.g., the financial crisis and banking behaviour) and interconnecting with social movements (e.g., the no-dash-for-gas anti-fracking movement). The establishment of university funded centres are useful in this respect because the knowledge they create is officially funded by the taxpayer. So, unlike privately financed think tanks and lobbying groups, there is, technically at least, an obligation to the voting public to make some use of this knowledge. CMS could leverage this tension between the 'impact-obsessed' neoliberal state and its frequently anti-public stance.

We foresee a 'public CMS' also engaged in awareness raising initiatives by seeking to place important issues on the political agenda. In this respect, the broadcasting media is especially useful. As Burawoy (2005) argues concerning what he calls 'public sociology' and Aronowitz (2011) the 'public intellectual', right-wing conservatives have long utilized the public media to prompt change (think here of Milton Friedman's incredibly effective media roadshow in the late 1970s and early 1980s). But critics of the status quo are also acknowledging this potential. For example, in the US, the Marxist economist Richard Wolff

hosts a weekly radio programme called Economic Update, which has a large following. Of course, there is no guarantee that such public engagement will actually make a difference. Often it will not. But it may at least challenge dominant discourses and help open up new spaces for activist groups to pursue more radical alternatives.

*Study and why we should not 'down our books'*

In their concluding statement concerning critical performativity, Spicer et al. (2009: 554-555) remind the reader that the concept does not mean 'laying down our books and throwing ourselves in radical political struggle or "enlightened consultancy"'. But they do appear to be apprehensive that critical intellectuality (such as a Marxist reading of organizations) might foster an overly negative worldview. Instead, they exhort researchers to 'shake off some of the weighty intellectual baggage that tends to make the critical project overdetermined, predictable and ungainly' (Spicer et al., 2009: 549). In Alvesson and Spicer's (2012) adaptation of critical performativity to leadership, they also suggest that too much critical theory casts organizations in an unhelpfully negative light. We are asked to temper that critical intellectuality so that leaders are no longer 'associated with mainly "bad" things such as elitism, legitimation, domination and asymmetrical relations and constructions that privilege white, male, middle-class people' (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: 376). And Hartmann goes further by arguing CMS should forget critical texts since they 'pay little heed to the conditions faced by practitioners or students, who either are or will be based in an organization where what might seem like normative arguments are unlikely to be accepted if isolated from instrumental concerns' (Hartmann, 2014: 619).

In contrast, we suggest that if CMS is to make an impact, it needs to be highly committed to what ostensibly appears to be a non-performative activity. Namely, a prolonged engagement with abstract, often difficult ideas and phenomenon: *study*. Without an informed

and critical understanding of power, capitalism, gender, environmental issues, post-colonialism and other areas, when called upon to speak (by students, the media, the state, activists, etc.) we will have little ‘useful’ to say. Indeed, it is fascinating that precisely when we are being told to read airport management books rather than Foucault, economic elites are pouring substantial amounts of funding into think tanks to do just the opposite (but in the favour of the powerful): secluded, abstract and painstaking study of modern society (Medvetz, 2012).

There is nothing elitist or ivory tower-like in our recommendation, since knowledge, argumentation and conceptual sophistication is an important facet of basic everyday politics. It is imperative that we strive (even if perpetually failing) to gain a complex grasp of what is happening in the global political economy of organizations and what alternatives may be possible. Such knowledge does not come easy. It requires time, reading, revision, critical reflection, non-standard texts, debate; activities that from a technocratic perspective seem ‘useless’ and ‘irrelevant’ to real world managers. This is why today ‘the university is a kind of factory line’ (Harney and Moten, 2013: 114) that often seeks to close down the time and resources required for study since it appears to be without direct instrumental applicability. This is exacerbated by the relentless injunction in neoliberal societies to act and do something. But as Žižek (2009: 6) points out, ‘there are some situations where the only truly ‘practical’ thing to do is to resist the temptation to engage immediately and to ‘wait and see’ by means of patient, critical analysis’.

Moreover, patient and meticulous study of this kind can sometimes have a significant impact in the ‘real world’ under propitious circumstances. For example, the French economist Thomas Piketty (2014) and colleagues spent years collating statistics and developing arguments about economic inequality in Western economies. What might look like negative, abstract and irrelevant (to practitioners) knowledge has sparked a major debate on the topic of

equality in the US, the UK and elsewhere, according to Piketty access into the halls of power (e.g., the US government) to expound his views. It is hard to believe that performativity strategies of becoming ‘respectfully intimate’ with hedge-fund managers, policy makers and bankers, and softly nudging them to ‘do the right thing’ in relation to their wealth management strategies would have the kind of impact that Piketty’s book did. Similarly, Rachel Carson (1962) meticulous study of the devastating effects of deadly pesticides like DDT on the natural environment in the 1950s, was at the time condemned as being irrelevant given the tremendous economic advances of the US in agricultural production. The attention her book received was a significant factor in the creation of the environmental movement in the West, which lobbied hard to ban such pesticides. According to the champions of critical and progressive performativity, Carson should have instead ‘collaborated’ with chemical company managers, cultivating an ethic of mutual preservation and care. If that had happened, perhaps we would still be living in a world inundated with DDT.

## **Conclusion**

We are in favour of CMS being performative. And there certainly may be cases in which CMS scholars working or collaborating closely with managers may engender new discursive practices and emancipating outcomes. Our paper simply alerts readers to the potential weaknesses that might confound these proposed approaches to performativity, and especially its emphasis on the role of language. Apart from being ineffective, they also risk depoliticizing management and becoming what we might term after Contu (2008) ‘decaf performativities’, whereby resistance to oppressive practices are co-opted to serve the status quo while disallowing emancipatory systemic change. If performative CMS researchers can only serve as allies and not threats to management, then CMS marks yet another victory of corporate hegemony. Performative CMS becomes a technology of governmentality where

managers and employees (and perhaps CMS researchers) are ruled ‘through their freedoms, their choices, and their solidarities rather than despite these. It means turning subjects, their motivations and interrelationships from potential sites of resistance to rule into allies of rule’ (Rose, 1998: 117).

Perhaps part of the problem stems from the complaint inherent in the new models of performativity that the CMS community is *too* critical of the present organizational order. It is suggested that such pessimism is not warranted and mars our ability to engage at a practical level with managers:

For CMS, the world of management is a violent and unending catastrophe of repression, dependence, humiliation and pain. CMS also presupposes an idealized world where this incessant catastrophe can be resolved or mitigated. In this sense, CMS is utopian because it envisages a ‘no place’ (Spicer et al. 2009: 551).

But it depends on whose perspective is being represented. For example, a struggling worker on a precarious zero-hours contract will interpret their situation (and neoliberal managerialism) very differently to a well off elite benefiting from the extreme inequities in wealth distribution blighting Western economies today. We are bothered by the lack of intellectual urgency expressed here concerning some alarming trends in the global economy (e.g., social inequality, climate change, the corporate capture of public goods, etc.). This is why CMS scholarship often attempts to take the standpoint of those affected most detrimentally (which is increasingly the majority or 99% [Dorling, 2014]) when developing its analyses.

However, this scepticism about utopian thinking is understandable. Such thinking may be useful for inspiring outrage but somewhat unwieldy for prescribing everyday

interventions in a conventional business firm. But by the same token, utopianism has been fundamental to social progress in Western societies and beyond. Without it, we would have not had the civil rights movement in the US (recall that Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' sentiment was widely dismissed as hopelessly utopian by Southern-state racists), the radical feminist successes of the 1960s and 70s, the environmental protection campaign, the human rights movement and many other instances of progress. Utopian thinking does not only represent a 'no place'. It is also an important *method* (Levitas, 2013) for articulating an unacceptable present and identifying alternatives, even if not fully realizable (also see Parker, Cheney, Fournier and Land, 2014). Indeed, amidst the current global crisis, political scientists and economists are presently engaged in developing major alternatives that some might call utopian. For example, Admati and Hellwig (2013) recommend breaking up the large banks and entirely restructuring the financial investment sector that has wreaked havoc on so many during the global financial crisis. Piketty (2014) suggests a massive overhaul of the world's taxation system. Whereas the CMS community is now cautioned to be less utopian and work closer with corporate managers? Perhaps more utopian thinking is required in CMS, not less.

On a related point, CMS is also problematized for being too *radical* (see Spicer et al., 2009: 540; Wickert and Schaefer, 2014: 12; Hartmann, 2014: 2). It is argued that radical ideas and theory are too removed from everyday managerial constraints and thus impractical for engaging with practitioners. The meanings and connotations of the term 'radical', however, ought to be handled with care. Once again, what it implies depends on the standpoint from which one judges. For corporate think tanks, for example, calls for wealth redistribution and carbon emission controls may indeed appear radical. However, for an increasing number of scholars/scientists (including many in the CMS community) more aligned with the standpoint of the dominated, the general trajectory of neoliberal capitalism looks almost suicidal in its radicalism. The recent 'Intergovernmental Panel on Climate

Change' (2014) report conveys how radical the neoliberal 'norm' is. It warns that if carbon emissions are not cut significantly very soon, widespread and irreversible social and environmental destruction will follow. As a result, 'we cannot rely on incremental paths or a soft transition to a more sustainable model' (Adler, 2015). Therefore, and to paraphrase the German philosopher Walter Benjamin, it is not CMS that is radical in this respect. It merely seeks to help pull the emergency brake on a runaway locomotive called late capitalism.

And finally, to make a meaningful contribution, the CMS community needs to fight for spaces that enable scholars to 'uselessly' reflect, imagine inconceivable utopias, take their good time to read and reread the canons, lose themselves in lofty theorizing and patiently study minute empirical details and texts in order to ask 'big' questions, even those without obvious practical answers. The overwhelming pressure to be 'useful' and 'perform' that many of us are currently experiencing in the university must be resisted. On this note, we cannot state the point any better than Piketty (2014: 3) as he clarifies his vision of a critical social science: 'by patiently searching for facts and patterns and calmly analyzing the social, economic and political mechanisms that might explain them, it can inform democratic debate and focus attention on the right questions. It can help to redefine the terms of the debate, unmask certain preconceived or fraudulent notions, and subject all positions to constant critical scrutiny. In my view this is the role that intellectuals should play, as citizens like any other but with the good fortune to have more time than others to devote themselves to study'.

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