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Critical Management Studies: A Critical Review

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ABSTRACT   In this paper, we review the development of critical management studies, point at problems and explore possible developments. We begin by tracing out two previous waves of critical management studies. We then focus on more recent work in critical management studies and identify ten over-arching themes (Academia, alternatives organizations, control and resistance, discourse, Foucauldian studies, gender, identity, Marxism, post-colonialism, and psychoanalysis). We argue that CMS has largely relied on one-dimensional critique which focused on negation. This has made the field increasingly stale, focused on the usual suspects and predictable. We identify a number of problems calling for critique and rethinking. We label these authoritarianism, obscurantism, formulaic radicalism, usual-suspectism and empirical light-touchism.

Keywords: critical management studies, review, critique

INTRODUCTION

There is a widespread assumption that management is necessary for modern organizations to function effectively. Historians have argued that the emergence and increasing professionalization of management has been an important driver of economic development during the 19th and 20th century United States and Europe (Wilson and Thomson, 2006). Economists have claimed that good management drives productivity (Bloom et al., 2016). This assumption in part has led to the spread of the practices of management (e.g., Guillén, 1994; Guler et al., 2002), management-speak (Spicer, 2018) and the ideology and practice of managerialism (Klikauer, 2015) into all aspects of economic and social life.

This spread of management has sparked increasing concern about 'managerialism' (e.g., Parker, 2002). Some have pointed out that while good in moderation, management

can be overdone (Pierce and Aguinis, 2013). The result of too much management is organizations which are over-packed with strategies, policies, structures, systems, HRM initiatives, brand management, leadership improvement projects, quality control processes, and diversity management interventions. In the worst case this can create a great deal of meaningless work (Graeber, 2018; Normark and Jensen, 2018). A glut of management can even lead to anti-productive work: all attention required to address managerial demands means organizational members have less time to be productive (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016a).

Others have questioned the basic principles and practices of management (e.g., Ghoshal, 2005; Locke and Spender, 2011). Criticism of managers and managerialism is a common theme in popular culture (Parker, 2008). A range of social movements – both within the workplace, but also within civil society – have questioned and challenged managerialism (Spicer and Böhm, 2007). These criticisms are often a mixed bag: they question bureaucracy, socio-economic privilege, class differences and the wide wage gap between the managerial elite and the average workers.

Alongside this popular criticism, there has been a scholarly critique of management. A major expression of this is critical management studies (CMS), a field of research which is driven by a 'deep skepticism regarding the moral defensibility and the social and ecological sustainability of prevailing conceptions and forms of management and organization' (Adler et al., 2007, p. 1). It focuses on 'neither the personal failures of individual managers nor the poor management of specific firms, but the social injustice and environmental destructiveness of the broader social and economic systems that these managers and firms serve and reproduce' (Adler et al., 2007, p. 1). Although there are few agreed upon definitions of CMS, a widely cited one argues that CMS is characterized by: non-performativity intent (i.e., it is not aimed at improving the efficiency of organizations), denaturalization (i.e., it does not treat aspects of organizational life as assumed and given) and reflexivity (i.e., it questions the way which we develop knowledge about a particular topic) (Fournier and Grey, 2000; see Spicer et al., 2009).

Although there were important forerunners (e.g., Benson, 1977; Wood and Kelly, 1978), the field of critical management studies emerged during the 1980s from labour process theory. This forerunning work examined processes of control and exploitation within the workplace inspired by Karl Marx (e.g., Braverman, 1974; Edwards, 1979; Thompson, 1983). During the 1990s, a second wave of CMS emerged. This was largely inspired by a mixture of Frankfurt school critical theory and French post-structuralism and focused on issues such as subjectivity, discourse and relations of power (e.g., Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). This approach was more culturally than materially focused. It seems more problematic to talk about a third wave of CMS as work after 2008 showed much continuation of previous work, although it significantly widened the scope of criticism of management. It shifted from a strict focus on management towards wider themes such as colonialism, heterosexism, patriarchy, and autonomism. As we will see, in this more recent work the interest in questions of management and formal organization is often weaker (du Gay, 2020). Instead, management and organizations are often treated as an epiphenomenon created by deeper or broader processes such as

identity politics, grand ideologies (such as 'neo-liberalism'), or structural dynamics (such as 'global capitalism').

At the same time, there has been effort to shift from academic critique to public critique as well (Spicer et al., 2009). The result is that today, CMS is a sprawling field which more or less radically questions practices and identities loosely related with work, management and organization. This begs the questions: what are the dominant themes within CMS today, what strengths does contemporary CMS have, what potential limitations and drawn-backs are there, and how might these be addressed?

To answer these questions, we review work in CMS published between 2008 and 2020. We choose the date 2008 as studies up to that date has been well reviewed by Adler et al. (2007) and Alvesson et al. (2009). We identify ten major themes in this period: academia, alternatives organizations, control and resistance, discourse, Foucauldian studies, gender, identity, Marxism, post-colonialism, and psychoanalysis. Most of these themes are continuations of early themes in CMS, but many of them have been treated in different ways. We note that there is surface level heterodoxy in the field: more recent CMS deals with a wide range of topics or phenomena (many of which are far from formal organizations and workplaces). It also draws on an increasingly wide range of theoretical resources. At the same time, we also notice that the style of reasoning in much CMS is formulaic: it selects a set of usual suspects or stick to the ideas of a leading thinker and follows a fairly fixed way of thinking about targets of critique, which provide very similar patterns and routines of analysis and lead to similar conclusions. This pattern of reasoning means that contemporary CMS is often blinded to a whole series of subjects, lines of reasoning and conclusions. In our view, this means that work in this tradition often ends up repeating the same set of insights over and over again. CMS is in no way alone in this – we see this pattern across organization studies and also in other fields.

CRITICAL MANAGEMENT STUDIES: THE FIRST TWO WAVES

The term CMS was first used to denote a particular type of scholarship in 1992 (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992), but has a much longer history than this. Since the manager appeared as a formal position, there has been some kind of criticism of management. For instance, in histories of North American management, we see that proto-managers (in the form of clerks who often performed many managerial tasks) who proliferate during the 19th century were often targets of widespread criticism by intellectuals of the time (Jacques, 1995; Saval, 2014). They were seen by commentators as cowered, conformist, 'unmanly' figures who were undermining the strong, independent and pioneering American spirit. In the early 20th century in Europe, Simone Weil outlined a critique of management as a form of domination (Grey, 1996). Weil argued that managers drew on forms of technical knowledge to justify systemic patterns of oppression in capitalist and non-capitalist institutions. Indeed, criticisms of management and managerialism have been an endemic and widespread part of both intellectual and popular debate since the rise of industrialism. Parker (2008) argues that these criticisms have come in four forms: nostalgic criticism which longs

for the replacement of management by more traditional forms of authority; modernizing critique which argues that management should be replaced by new forms of co-ordination and authority such as a heady mixture of entrepreneurs, markets and algorithms; popular critiques which appear in novels and TV and frequently poke fun at managers; and anti-authoritarian critiques of management which question management which includes some anarchist, radical feminist and environmentalist approaches. CMS can be seen as coming out of this rich pre-history of criticism of management.

A more systematic, scholarly critique of management began to appear in aligned disciplines such as accounting during the 1970s (see Cooper and Hopper, 1987). There were a few attempts to connect with humanist traditions of critiques with management (e.g., Benson, 1977; Wood and Kelly, 1978). However, the first wave of critical studies of management was inspired by Braverman's (1974) seminal study of how management emerged out of attempts to control the labour process in order to extract surplus value from employees which could then be turned into profit. The central question became how techniques such as scientific management are used to control the labour process and how employees responded to the control (e.g., Burawoy, 1979; Knights and Willmott, 1985; Thompson, 1983).

Alongside labour process theory, a number of scholars draw on 'left Weberian' themes such as rationality and bureaucracy to explain patterns of power within organizations (e.g., Clegg, 1981). For instance, Willmott (1984) brought both these themes together to provide an account of managerial work. He noted that more mainstream accounts of managerial work focused on managers as relatively neutral professionals who draw on a body of technical knowledge to organize workplaces in the most efficient way possible. In contrast, a more critical approach would see organizations more like a 'political economy' in which 'managerial work is thus understood to involve creating and maintaining a structure of relationships in which those who are "in control" act in the interests of capital' (p. 362).

Many of the themes from labour process theory continued to inspire an evolving body of knowledge. However, during the late 1980s and early 1990s labour process theory faced criticism (e.g., Knights and Willmott, 1989). Critics argued that while labour process theory focused on control and exploitation, it had overlooked issues around meaning and subjectivity (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001). They also pointed out that a focus on capitalist exploitation had led to an oversight of other forms of domination such as patriarchy, colonialism and technocratic reason and inclinations of employees themselves to construct, reinforce or accept constraining arrangements (Barker, 1993). To begin to address these shortcomings, a second wave of critical management studies appeared (e.g., Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). This work placed a greater emphasis on culture, subjectivity and meanings. Some researchers explored the cracks, irrationalities and peculiarities in organizations which became evident when management control in action was studied (Knights and Willmott, 1987; Rosen, 1985). Studies explored how corporate cultures could lead to form of control which transforms employees into corporate dopes or slaves (Willmott, 1993).

The second wave of critical management studies broadened the perspective from which research was undertaken. Instead of simply focusing on the 'shop floor',

researchers began to broaden their perspective and look at the work of 'middle level' employees working in managerial or professional roles (Jackall, 1988; Kunda, 1992; Watson, 1994). It also broadened the forms of domination and oppression examined. Instead of being strictly focused on the dynamics of capitalism, it more systematically examined dynamics such as patriarchy (e.g., Alvesson and Billing, 2009; Calás and Smircich, 2006), colonialism (Prasad, 2003), heterosexism (Parker, 2001) and other forms of domination. Finally, the second wave has drawn on different theoretical resources, including post-structural and post-modernist ideas which reached organization studies in the late 1980s (Chia, 1995; Cooper and Burrell, 1988; Hassard, 1994; Linstead and Grafton-Small, 1992). This strand of theory addressed issues such as hyper-reality, fluidity, de-centring of the subject, the importance of difference, the primacy of language and text and processes of writing. During the second part of the 1990s, Postmodernism passed its zenith, and many researchers connected their work with the related or overlapping poststructuralism, but a more interpretivist and less language-centred version of it (Jones, 2009). Foucault was a major reference. This drew attention to issues such as the insecurity of the self, the construction of identity in discourses and how this is linked with the functioning of power (e.g., Collinson, 2003; Deetz, 1992; Grey, 1994; Knights and Clarke, 2014; Knights and Willmott, 1989). Typical research projects within this second wave of CMS would investigate issues such as power, subjectivity and resistance. For instance, Knights and McCabe (2003) investigated how technologies of teamwork were accepted or resisted by employees within the call centre of a British building society.

By the first decade of the 21st century, CMS had become a thriving field. In 2007, a lengthy review by Adler et al. (2007) provided a representation of the state at the peak of the second wave of critical management studies. They argued that critical approaches are characterized by a large diversity of views and it is often difficult to identify common core assumptions or draw the boundaries around what exactly is inside and outside of the field. However, they do identify five broadly shared assumptions of CMS at the time. These are: (1) Challenge structures of domination of domination such as capitalism and patriarchy; (2) Questioning taken for granted assumptions such as hierarchy is necessary for an organization to function effectively; (3) Moving away from instrumentalist concerns such as judging management knowledge on its contribution to corporate profitability; (4) Providing a more reflexive account of management knowledge which considers issues such as struggles around meaning of key concepts like corporate social responsibility; and (5) Addressing the relationship between power and knowledge. Adler and colleagues also identified different strands of intellectual traditions within management studies and beyond (see Table One in Adler et al., 2007 for summary).

One strand builds on mainstream foundational work in management studies such as classical studies of bureaucracy, contingency theory or even resource dependency theory (e.g., Blau, 1956; Fligstein, 2001; Perrow, 2011). A leitmotif running through this work is the dangers of large scale efficiency-oriented organizations.

A second builds on Weberian and Durkheimian tradition of sociology in order to investigate patterns of domination. Issues included 'anomic' forms of social relations

which undermined community (e.g., Adler and Heckscher, 2006), instrumental rationality and the 'iron cage' of bureaucratic structures (e.g., Edwards, 1979).

The third strand of work builds on Marxism and investigates how organizations are fundamental in the reproduction of patterns of capitalist exploitation and growth (e.g., Levy and Egan, 2003a) and how the labour process is organized to control employees and extraction of surplus labour (e.g., Warhurst, 1998).

The fourth strand of CMS builds on the Frankfurt school critical theory (Alvesson and Willmott, 2012; Scherer, 2009). It has examined themes such as the rise of technocratic consciousness in organizations (e.g., Alvesson, 1987), the blocking and creation of spaces for democratic deliberation (e.g., Deetz, 1992; Scherer and Palazzo, 2007), and more recently dynamics of recognition and misrecognition (e.g., Hancock, 2013).

A fifth stream of work which Adler et al. identify as informing CMS builds on the traditions of North American pragmatism. This strand of work pays more attention to the day-to-day practices involved in creating, or in some cases disrupting, social order. One theme is daily lived realities of managers (e.g., Watson, 1994).

A sixth strand of work is inspired by postmodernism and has largely explored diverse ways of knowing about the world and the role played by contingency and uncertainty (e.g., Hassard and Parker, 1993; Kilduff and Mehra, 1997). Studies celebrate multiple narratives, contingency and chance within organizational settings (e.g., Boje, 1994).

A seventh strand of work in CMS during this period is feminist analyses. This diverse body of work have explored how patriarchal power shapes aspects of organizational life (for reviews, see Alvesson and Billing, 2009; Calás and Smircich, 2006).

The final strand of work within this tradition which Adler and colleagues identify is environmentalism. This work examines the role businesses have played in the systematic destruction of the natural environment. One theme was 'greenwashing' through the development of corporate environmentalism (e.g., Forbes and Jermier, 2002; Levy, 1997; Levy and Egan, 2003a; Levy and Newell, 2002).

It is worth noting that these eight strands of work often overlap and come together to produce work using multiple themes at once. For instance, researchers mixed feminist and Marxist ideas or Weberian insights and Frankfurt school critical theory. The critical edge of some strands is fairly moderate.

The second wave of CMS produced an extremely wide and varied field. It provided a body of theoretical and empirical work with insights into a wide range of issues. Yet there were a number of points of contention within the field at the time, including about epistemology, ontology and politics.

The first set of important debates focused on epistemology (see Adler et al., 2007, pp. 29–33). CMS is founded on a 'reflexive epistemology' which seeks to question patterns of knowing and the status of knowledge within debates about organizations (see Fournier and Grey, 2000). For some reflexivity involves a stand-point epistemology assuming that knowledge claims are largely a result of the social and cultural position and historical experiences from which one knows the world and speaks about it (e.g., Harding, 2004; Jermier, 1998). For a second group reflexivity means acknowledging how the world is constructed in language, emphasizing that the world as being constructed by the language which one uses (Contu and Willmott, 2003; Willmott, 2005). A third CMS approach to reflexivity involved seeking to abductively infer underlying

generative structures. Critical realists claimed that social reality is layered and it is the task of the scholar to move from 'observable' to the 'actual' to the 'real' (e.g., Fleetwood, 2005; Reed, 2009). While critical realists hold onto some possibility of knowing organizational processes, standpoint epistemologists assume only partial knowledge is ever possible, and post foundationalists remain profoundly sceptical of the possibility of any firm or foundational knowledge claims. In addition to these three, there are many other views of reflexivity (Alvesson et al., 2008; Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2017).

The second interlinked set of concerns, revolved around ontology. While CMS focused on a 'denaturalizing' ontology which assumes social reality as socially constructed (Fournier and Grey, 2000), there is an ongoing controversy around the extent of these assumptions about social construction. How constructed is social construction, by who and how should it be seen in terms of ongoing/fluid vs more things−/structure like?, are questions answered in different ways. Are some constructions 'better', e.g., more accurate, insightful or socially favourable (generally or a specific group) than others? For critical realists, social reality could be treated as ontologically real and founded upon underlying generative structures (e.g., Reed, 2009). Observations are then explained with reference to underlying 'real' social structures such as capitalism, bureaucracy, patriarchy and so on. Constructions are seen as 'things' or 'thing-like'. In contrast, post-foundationalist scholars saw underlying social reality as a process which is in flux and sometimes comes to be fixed and constrained by hegemonic discourses (e.g., Contu and Willmott, 2005). At the centre of the controversy is the question as to how stable versus processual social reality is assumed to be. To what extent can we 'construct away' something, for instance through switching discourse? Different ontological assumptions led to very different questions being asked. It also led to some scholars who sought to take a middle path by identifying aspects of social reality that are more or less constructed or more or less tied to discourse (e.g., Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011).

The third distinct controversy revolved around the status of political and practical action. Fournier and Grey (2000) characterized CMS as 'non-performative'. Adler et al. (2007) address the limited impact of CMS and discuss its relevance outside academia. They point at three CMS responses. One is militant, arguing for solidarity with victims of corporate power. A second, labelled humanistic, is more ambivalent about 'victimization' and aims to support managers and others in dealing with ambiguities and dilemmas at work. A third approach is to see all managers below the top as occupying a contradictory role and the task of CMS is to illuminate contradictory loyalties and support the reflection upon stances. Adler et al. express optimism about CMS potential for appealing to organizational practice:

CMS often addresses topics and issues in ways that are less remote from the everyday worlds of practitioners than is mainstream work. CMS scores comparatively high on relevance and plausibility insofar as it acknowledges the centrality of conflicts of interest, power struggles, and contradictions – the familiar but often hidden features of contemporary work organizations. (p. 40).

As we will see we are not certain that CMS have moved forward in this respect and do think more work considering what is relevant and plausible for low level employees and managers would be important.

CURRENT CMS

While we can identify two waves of CMS, there is a continued development the intellectual movement – or perhaps an increasingly diverse and fragmented set of orientations – during the first decades of the 21st century, without forming a new 'wave'. There is much continuation of themes and approaches and increased variation. To explore what happened after the last major reviews of CMS (Adler et al., 2007; Alvesson et al., 2009), we conducted an extensive overview of papers published between 2008 and 2020.

Method

We focused on the major journals which publish critical management studies work: *Journal of Management Studies*, *Organization, Organization Studies* and *Human Relations*. We acknowledge that CMS work appears in other journals (such as *Gender, Work and Organization*; *Ephemera*; *Work, Employment and Society*; *Journal of Management Inquiry*) as well as in edited books and monographs. We have selectively included some research from these sources. To develop a manageable data-set we decided to focus on four core journals which are relatively representative of the central debates within the field. In order to search these journals, we began using search terms like 'critical management studies'. This yielded a fairly limited number of articles. We then hand searched through all papers published in these journals to ensure that we had not missed important pieces, at least not too many of these, which could broadly fit within the boundaries of CMS. Once we had done this, we had a much larger set of 314 articles.

  We then read through these articles and categorized them on the basis of type of article (theory, empirical, special issue introduction, commentary), core theory used, methodology, empirical setting, and main findings or insights. After we had done this, we went through all articles again and sorted them into broad over-arching themes which arose from the articles themselves. This led us to identify 69 individual themes within the literature. Many of these themes were only mentioned in a single article. We then looked for themes which were discussed in a number of articles over a period of time. This led us to identify ten major themes which made up the bulk of the discussion about critical management studies during the period. These themes are: academia, alternative organizations, control and resistance, discourse, Foucaudian studies, gender, identity, Marxism, post-colonialism and psychoanalysis. These themes are not mutually exclusive and sometimes overlap. For purposes of analytical clarity we decided to focus on the central insights in each theme.

  Our approach is a narrative review based on our extensive and in-depth experience in the field, supported by the thorough literature search in specific and relevant journals and beyond. We use judgement more than mechanistic sorting and aim more to provide a problematizing review that may help readers think further than an accurate mirroring of a large and messy body of literatures (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2020).

  To illustrate each theme, we have picked one indicative study per theme which we discuss in a little more depth.

Organization of Academic Work

One pronounced theme we identified was a critical exploration of the organization of academic work. Facing changing organizations of their own workplaces, CMS scholars have turned their theoretical and methodological tools back on themselves. They have explored issues such as journal lists and research auditing exercises (e.g., Beverungen et al., 2012; Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Willmott, 2011), the use of PowerPoint in the classroom (Gabriel, 2008), and increasing precarity (Ashcraft, 2017), insecurity of the self (Knights and Clarke, 2014), anglocentricism (Meriläinen et al., 2008), excellence (Butler and Spoelstra, 2012), resistance (Bristow et al., 2017) or lack thereof (Rintamäki and Alvesson, 2022), domineering leadership (Parker, 2014), branding (Alvesson, 2022; Mehrpouya and Willmott, 2018) performance management systems (Kallio et al., 2016) wider managerialism (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016b; Anderson, 2008) and academic middle managers who find themselves sandwiched between faculty and senior managers (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020).

This research concluded that universities have become seized by neoliberalism and are witnessing continued bureaucratisation and domination by management. They point out that this has made academic work increasingly difficult, stressful and detached from scholarly values (e.g., Rintamäki and Alvesson, 2022; Smith and Ulus, 2020). Some have even argued this gives rise to a deep sense of despair and self-alienation (Fleming, 2019, 2020). However, this has created different scope for reactions on the part of academics such as hidden and cautious patterns of micro-resistances (Bristow et al., 2017), shuttling between managerial dominated work and deeper scholarly values (Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012) and exiting troubling academic workplaces (Parker, 2014). These acts of resistance are often marginal or ineffectual (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016b; Alvesson and Szkudlarek, 2021; Clarke and Knights, 2015; Parker, 2014).

A fairly typical CMS study of academia is Knights and Clarke's (2014) analysis of reactions of academics to the demands of a creeping culture of audit, accountability and performance monitoring. Drawing on qualitative interview data with over 50 academics working in different British business schools, they explore how a neo-liberal regime and external managerial demands are effectively internalized by academics in three different ways. For a first group, the performance demands make them feel like imposters whose shortcomings are always about to be discovered. For a second group, performance demands spark a sense of ambition. They coped with pressures of the present by imagining a more idealized future. The third group internalized performance pressures through a struggle to find a deeper sense of meaning within their work. Ultimately this paper points towards how increased managerial control but also wider societal developments can lead to an increasingly insecure sense of professional selves, and how this insecurity can also serve as an important mechanism of discipline and control at work and beyond: people try to secure a sense of stable self through compliance with performance criteria.

Alternative Organizations

A second important theme in CMS during the period we examined was alternative organizations, based on ways of co-ordinating which are not infused with managerialism. Typically, these studies of alternative organizational forms such as employee-owned businesses (Heras-Saizarbitoria, 2014; Storey et al., 2014), anarchist collectives (Sutherland, 2014), co-operatives (Cheney et al., 2014; Kokkinidis, 2015), community currencies (Meyer and Hudon, 2017), social movements (Reedy et al., 2016) and community solidarity networks (Daskalaki et al., 2019). This research documents alternative organization forms which exist outside of market managerialism (Parker et al., 2014).

As well as registering alternatives, this research has identified some of the internal dynamics through which these organizations work. They including sharing leadership (Sutherland, 2014), collective decision-making (Kokkinidis, 2015) and the creation and fostering of shared values (Daskalaki et al., 2019). Although much of this research focuses on the successes of these alternatives, there is an important strand of the work which looks at the potential tensions. One study noted how the democratic impulse behind alternative organizational forms can be undermined by growth which leads to extension of managerial modes of control (Flecha and Ngai, 2014). Another pointed out that democratic ideas often stand in tension with members' interest in stable and secure employment (Heras-Saizarbitoria, 2014). Indeed, employee-owned organizations often tend towards economic failure (due to their inability to operate effectively), or democratic failure (due to their abandonment of their democratic processes in order to manage at a large scale) (Storey et al., 2014). The research focuses on smaller-scale democratic or co-operative structures while overlooking larger scale more planning oriented alternatives which periodically appeared throughout the 20th century (Nishat-Botero, 2021).

One interesting study of alternative organizations looked at four different 'leaderless' collectives which were run on principals of participative or director democracy (Sutherland et al., 2014). The researchers found that each of these groups rejected positions of leadership because they were seen to undermine the group's ideology. Instead, they managed through consensus-based decision-making processes. This meant decision-making was a lengthy process which would get bogged down by what an outsider would consider to be trivial details (such as the music during a rally or whether a bicycle selling sausages was allowed at an event). Despite frustrations, these slow processes were valued as being intrinsically good. Lengthy discussions were seen as a sign that participative democratic principals were working. Yet underneath the surface there were a series of inequalities based around skills and competence. For instance, more educated members of collectives were often involved in writing grant applications and would be seen as perverting the direction and mission of the organization as they tried to pitch projects in a way which would appeal to funding agencies. Efforts were made to bridge these inequalities, but they remained (and many organizational members remained obsessed with them).

Control and Resistance

A third perennial theme in CMS is control and resistance. Most CMS work deals with power (and thus control and often also resistance), but sometimes this theme is more explicit and focused on control. This research builds on early work in labour process theory as well as CMS. A major theme in this body of work has been the appearance of new modes of controlling employees which go beyond normative control. This is what Fleming (2013, 2015) called neo-normative control. This involves attempts to capturing aspects of an employee's everyday life. Research has explored how what is labelled as neo-normative control works through a range of diverse mechanisms such as branding (Kärreman and Rylander, 2008; Müller, 2017), corporate social responsibility (Costas and Kärreman, 2013), flexible project working structures (Peticca-Harris et al., 2015), employee mobility (Costas, 2013), the re-emergence of professional bureaucracy (Brivot, 2011), notions of leadership (Carroll and Nicolson, 2014), attempts to enchant service work by making it appear creative (Endrissat et al., 2015), constructions of images of the ideal work (Jammaers and Zanoni, 2021), and shared fantasies of limitless potential (Ekman, 2013).

Some researchers have focused more directly on resistance. In a review of the literature, Mumby et al. (2017) identifies four ways which these forms of workplace control are resisted at work: individual infrapolitics, collective infrapolitics, insubordination and insurrection. The concept of resistance is often stretched and almost anything that is not happy compliance may, for the researcher using her microscope and has read Foucault, appear as including some 'resistance'. For a more powerful and effective approach to resistance, see Courpasson et al. (2012) illuminating group-organized productive resistance in organizations.

One study of control in the workplace addressed an upmarket North American grocery chain (Endrissat et al., 2015), avoiding the usual extensive standardization and 'McDonaldisation' and worked with what they call 'disneyfication'. The supermarket tried to enchant the experience of working in what would otherwise be a relatively routine service job. The company invited employees to 'bring themselves to work' (for instance by dressing in idiosyncratic ways or displaying tattoos), express their creativity on the job and experience their work as a form of craft. They hired 'store artists' who would make handcrafted signs and set out displays in creative ways. This made many employees describe the supermarket as 'a dream come true', 'magical', a 'community' where work feels like a 'hobby'. However, some employees also saw through the dreamy culture and noticed the techniques of manipulation and hard calculation at play. Employees noted how quarterly meetings were like 'pep rallies', how metrics like 'sales per square foot' ultimately dominated corporate thinking, and how the culture 'drains my spirits'. Nevertheless, employees got to engage in creative labour which they often experienced as an extension of their sense of self outside work. This included holding art displays at work, bringing in musical instruments to play and developing creative product displays. This created a strange situation where 'work can be experienced, in the words of one worker, as 'a magical place' yet not be incompatible with exploitation, *even if* the worker is aware of this exploitation' (Endrissat et al., 2015, p. 1572).

Discourse

Another widely explored theme in CMS is discourse. These studies look at the role of language and other systems of meaning in constructing subjects and objects within

organizational life in a way which embeds power relations. This work builds on earlier extensive work on organizational discourse analysis (Hardy, 2004). It explores how recent discourses have shaped organizations. Some examples include studies of how the rise of new discourse of 'leadership' has effected the UK public sector (O'Reilly and Reed, 2011), diversity discourses in a range of organizations (Jammaers et al., 2016; Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2010; Zanoni and Janssens, 2015), and discourses of professionalism (Thomas and Hewitt, 2011). Some have explored how interactional processes such as how ironic discourses are used to deal with opposition (Sewell et al., 2012) and how senior bankers were able to use particular discursive moves to avoid responsibility for a large scale financial collapse (Tourish and Hargie, 2012).

In addition to exploring new kinds of discourse, there has been an ongoing debate about how discourse should be conceptualized. For instance, Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) questioned inclinations to see everything as discourse and assume that discourse is particularly powerful (See debate between Hardy and Grant, 2012; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2013). Discourse may indicate anything from details in language in use to presumably powerful ways of constructing reality. Often discourse – in the sense of language being used – is relatively weak and may be treated more as 'business bullshit' by people supposed to be affected by it (Spicer, 2018, 2020).

One example of more precise research is a study of how disabled workers used discourses of disability to craft a position for themselves within the workplace (Jammaers et al., 2016). The researchers noted that many existing studies have looked at broader societal discourses of disability and identified how they are discriminatory and often marginalize disabled people. The researchers then shift from these macro-discourses in policy debates to consider how disabled people actually use discourses of disability. They found that many of their respondents rejected a disability discourse and claimed they could be just as productive as their able-bodied counter-parts. A second group gave a new and positive meaning to disability – pointing to how disabled people can actually be more productive. A third group sought to embrace disability discourses as a way of highlighting how they cannot be expected to be as productive as their able-bodied peers in the workplace. This study shows how macro-discourses (in this case discourses of disability) gets used and given different meaning by people who are often targeted by these discourses. It reminds us that far from being one dominant discourse in a particular field, there is often a range of discourses which are used in different ways by the subjects that they are targeted at.

Foucauldian Studies

A related theme in work on critical management studies largely applies the ideas of Michel Foucault. These often overlap with studies of control and resistance, but are sometimes also distinct. Much control can be linked to other forms of power than those highlighted by Foucauldians. One review of how Foucault's ideas have been used in organization studies (Raffnsøe, 2017) identifies four relatively distinct waves: The first mainly looked at forms of disciplinary power, the second looks at discourse, the third looked at governmentality and the most recent work looks at questions like subjectivity, ethics and care of the self. Research has applied well-established Foucauldian themes to novel phenomenon such as the obesity epidemic (Levay, 2014),

questions of transparency in digital technologies (Hansen and Flyverbom, 2015), employee branding (Vallas and Cummins, 2015), strategy (Ezzamel and Willmott, 2008), notions of human capital and lean management (Mackenzie et al., 2021), and corporate social responsibility (Vallentin and Murillo, 2012).

The fourth wave of Foucault-inspired work has pointed out new mechanisms through which well-established processes work. For instance, one study explored how professional service workers pointed out how imaginaries of future selves can act as an important disciplinary mechanism in controlling and explaining their present working circumstances (Costas and Grey, 2014). Other papers have introduced new themes from Foucault's work into the debate, including the concept of bio-power as an alternative to widely discussed 'disciplinary power' (Fleming, 2013). This has enabled the study of how everyday aspects of lives are bought into the workplace and used as a mechanism of control (e.g., Ahonen et al., 2014; Moisander et al., 2018). There is also a stream of papers which have mined Foucault's 'ethical' work to introduce a range of new concepts into the debate such as 'ethical aeskesis' (Munro, 2014), 'pharrhesia' (Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013), and 'imminent critique' (Curtis, 2014). Sometimes the reference to Foucault and his language appears as a way of 'beefing up' results that could be explained and presented in more simple terms.

One study in this tradition looks at patterns of control in large direct sales organization using the concept of bio-power (Moisander et al., 2018). People are encouraged to join as self-employed distributors by 'upline recruiters'. Initially they are attracted by promises of freedom, empowerment and economic improvement. However, new direct sellers quickly discover that they often are spending much more money than they make from the business. Many blame these losses on their own laziness and simply re-double their efforts (spending more on products). However, there are some who become dissatisfied with this arrangement, even finding themselves in debt thanks to all the 'investments' in the direct distribution network they had to make. In order to deal with this there was corporate and individual emphasis on self-development and 'something that money cannot buy!' (p. 386). The business also frames itself as offering a sense of community, seeing themselves as a 'family' who 'develop' and 'grow', maintain a 'positive' outlook and avoid 'negative' people who might be critical of the model the organization is using. This effectively ties one's sense of self as well as one's personal relations directly to the company. Moisander et al. then frame these findings in a contemporary Foucauldian language. They claim it provides insights into how bio-political modes of control such as enterprise culture operate in the context of precarious work.

Gender

A further ever-green theme which has continued to be widely discussed in CMS is gender. Early critical work exploring gender largely pointed out how patriarchy was a central – but often hidden – dynamics of power in organizations (Acker, 2006). Critical research on gender and organization involves many streams (Alvesson and Billing, 2009; Calás and Smircich, 2006). During the period we examined, most work on gender in CMS continued to be heavily influenced by post-structural and

non-essentialist theorists who see gender as 'performative' (e.g., Harding, Ford and Fotaki, 2013). Many highlight the importance of the embodied nature of gender (e.g., Thanem and Wallenberg, 2015; Tyler, 2019). There has been a greater emphasis on issues such as emotions and affect (e.g., Fotaki et al., 2017). Finally, much of the recent gender research has explored issues of intersectionality – that is how gender overlaps with issues such as sexuality, race, class and so on (e.g., Wasserman and Frenkel, 2015). Much of this work emphasizes women, but there are also studies of men and masculinity (Hearn and Collinson, 2017) as well as some work on trans or non-binary people (Moulin de Souza and Parker, 2020).

These themes alongside of others have been explored in a range of empirical settings such as how patriarchal and heteronormative assumptions infuses entrepreneurship (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Lewis, 2014), how ideals of the male body infuse the search practices of corporate head-hunters (Meriläinen et al., 2015), how ideas of masculine domination and control influence the way corporate strategists think about their work (Laine et al., 2016), how gendered notions of 'ambition' trapped both women and men in thinking about their work (Benschop et al., 2013), how women from the third world are targeted and constructed in 'bottom of the pyramid' development initiatives (Chatterjee, 2020), and the gendered dynamics associated with the remuneration of Swedish CEOs (Knights and Tullberg, 2012). One particularly widely researched topic within this stream of CMS is how the masculine norms of academia marginalize and even do 'violence' to women, and how these norms and practices might be resisted (e.g., Bell et al., 2019; Fotaki, 2013; Van den Brink and Benschop, 2012). Some researchers have gone a step further and argued the post feminism itself can be an oppressive and marginalizing discourse for some women within academia (Liu, 2019).

One study in this area investigated gender norms in the world of executive head-hunters (Meriläinen et al., 2015). They studied the way head-hunters assessed candidates for executive positions by interviewing head-hunters directly after they had met candidates. They noticed that they would often compare candidates on the basis of masculine bodily norms. They were looking for 'active' candidates who were sporty and had the characteristics of a 'hunting dog'. They tended to downplay what they perceived as more passive candidates who they saw as large shambling 'Saint Bernards' that did not fit this masculine bodily norm. They also assessed candidates on the basis of their voice – often attributing character traits on the basis of this ('intellectual', 'uptight' etc). Candidates who fitted a very particular masculine bodily norm were preferred and recommended for executive positions. Others were overlooked and disregarded. What is particularly interesting about this study is how it shows the role which gendered bodily norms play in making crucial organizational decisions (such as who will lead a firm).

Identity

One of the most popular themes in critical management studies during the period we investigated is identity. Of course, this overlaps with many of the other themes like discourse, control and gender. Identity research explored how organizations exercise

power over employees and others through shaping their sense of self. It also explores how people seek to liberate themselves from such as constrained sense of self. Studies of identity build on a range of theoretical traditions such as poststructuralism, studies of control and sometimes more interpretive work. Much of this has focused identity work (Brown, 2015; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). It has explored questions such as how older workers cope with identities foisted onto them by enterprise culture (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008), how aspirational identities operate as a disciplinary mechanism among British Paratroopers (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009), how timekeeping and billing systems shape the identities of English lawyers (Brown and Lewis, 2011), the role of leadership development programmes in shaping managers' identities in a large multinational company (Gagnon and Collinson, 2014), how the introduction of English as a working language shaped identities of academics in a French business school (Boussebaa and Brown, 2017), collective attempts to control identity in a New York food co-operative (Huber and Brown, 2017), and the identity work undertaken by people trying to promote environment issues in large corporations (Wright et al., 2012). Many of these studies explore themes such as how identities are regulated, how people engage in active identity work to build a sense of self, and the precarious sense of self which results from this interplay (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Knights and Willmott, 1989).

However, some more novel themes were introduced including paradoxes and tensions between different identities (Gagnon and Collinson, 2014), embodiment of identity (Thomas et al., 2014), self-alienation (Costas and Fleming, 2009), performative speech acts (Donbush and Schoneborn, 2015), intersectional identities (Zanoni, 2011) and self-stagnation (Costas and Kärreman, 2016).

One interesting paper in this tradition is a study of the identity crisis which older workers encounter when they face unemployment. Gabriel et al. (2014) interviewed people over 50 who had been working in white collar managerial or professional roles but had lost their job and were struggling with long-term unemployment. They found that a loss of identity which came with no longer having a job was problematic. All respondents were struggling to reconstruct a sense of self following unemployment. There were three different kinds of processes of 'narrative coping'. The first group saw themselves as being 'temporarily derailed' and were waiting to find a way back into employment. This narrative was often linked with denial but also feverish but often misplaced activities. A second group saw dismissal as an 'end of the line' and realized that they no longer had viable careers in the sector. They often looked back on their career with a sense of profound despair and regret, but struggled to find a meaningful way of dealing with the situation. The final group had come to a moratorium and recognized they may not be able to resume their previous career, but this gave them an opportunity to open a new chapter in their life. Some had accepted their new status and took a 'philosophical' stance towards the past. What is striking in this study is the deeply painful identity work which people continue to engage in with regards to work even after they have left the workplace.

Marxism

Another evergreen theme running throughout CMS is Marxist analysis of organizational processes. This work puts economic processes such as exploitation front and centre of the analysis. Recent work builds on early work in labour process theory which considers how people are controlled in organizations. For instance, one study has used Marxist concepts to explore the changing nature of managerial work over recent decades (McCann, et al., 2008). Other work has broadened the analysis to not only incorporate new phenomenon but also new concepts (Vidal et al., 2015). Recent Marxist studies have explored the role of branding in valorisation processes in organizations (Mumby, 2016; Willmott, 2013), human capital (Fleming, 2017), digital platforms (Beverungen et al., 2015), automation (Fleming, 2019), the gig economy (Gandini, 2019; Peticca-Harris et al., 2020), and carbon markets (Böhm et al., 2012). This research has bought in an introduction of autonomist Marxism (e.g., Hardt and Negri, 2000) and a focus on the study of immaterial and communicative labour (e.g., Fleming, 2019; Mumby, 2016). Some researchers working in this tradition have blended Marxist thinking with other theories based on well-known sociological concepts such as 'community' (Adler, 2015) or 'public sociology' (Delbridge, 2014).

Interestingly, most clearly post-2008 'Marxist' studies were largely conceptual in nature (often with some selective empirical illustrations). However, one study based on relatively extensive empirical work examines Uber drivers working in Toronto (Peticca-Harris et al., 2020). It is based on a convenience sample of 31 drivers which the authors interviewed while taking a ride in their car. The researchers were interested in how workers (i.e., drivers) related to this novel form of platform capitalism. They note that platforms operate on a logic of rent extraction. They find there are three distinct ways which drivers relate to this. Part-time drivers largely saw Uber as an a 'side hustle' or additional source of income which they could use to support their main career or occupation. These people were more likely to frame Uber as being 'fun' and a way of networking and meeting people. Then there were those who drove full time for Uber, but were not professional drivers by background. These people had often suffered a significant negative life event (e.g., health problems, redundancy) and had to end their career. They were now driving Uber to make ends meet and appreciated the flexibility and some certainty of income which they otherwise would not have. The third group were professional drivers who had found themselves forced out of other sectors such as licensed taxis. Now they drove for Uber as a substitute. For them Uber was a source of income, but also a source of great anxiety (due to regulatory uncertainties around issues like insurance). In each case, there appeared to be a different relationship to control and rent extraction system on the Uber platform. What is particularly striking is that none of the drivers saw a long-term future with Uber (it was a temporary measure) and most felt some degree of gratefulness for the security of income it bought – at the very same time as some were aware of the patterns of exploitation it involved. This study highlights how new forms of capitalism – such as the use of platforms – become a new mechanism for controlling and exploiting employees.

Post-Colonialism

Post-colonialism has become an increasingly prominent theme in critical management studies scholarship in recent years. This research explores how theories and practices of organizations and management are largely US- and euro-centric and have played an important role in waves of colonialism (Frenkel and Shenhav, 2006; Mir and Mir, 2013), often associated with global capitalism (e.g., Jack et al., 2011). They also point out the dramatic over-representation of scholarship produced in Anglo-American countries in business and management (Murphy and Zhu, 2012), and how this has marginalized 'southern voices' (Alcadipani et al., 2012). Some have argued that business schools are structured by white supremacy and systematically devalue and marginalize people of colour (Dar et al., 2021).

In recent years, post-colonial theory has examined representations of African leadership in business and management textbooks (Nkomo, 2011), the often unrecognized and invisible experience of race in Indian workplaces (Ulus, 2015), the colonial construction of managerial identities in Indian workplaces (Srinivas, 2013), experiences of a militarized border-crossing in Israel-Palestine (Prasad, 2013), how Tunisian managers adopt American management practices to resist family-based power as well as the French colonial legacy (Yousfi, 2014), how Chinese Australians engage in practices of 'strategic self-orientalism' (Liu, 2017) and 'south–south' knowledge transfer involved in China's presence in African economies (Jackson, 2012). Others have sought to draw on the wider post-colonial literature in order to introduce novel concepts such as 'translocality' (Banerjee, 2011), and 'necrocapitalism' (Banerjee, 2008) into organization theory. Post-colonial theories have also promoted experiments with novel methodologies and communicating what would otherwise be marginalized knowledge (e.g., Dar, 2018). These theories have also been used to extend the theoretical vocabulary of existing fields of research such as international business (Özkazanç-Pan, 2008).

One study within this tradition uses post-colonial theories to understand the dynamics of international branch campuses of universities (Siltaoja et al., 2019). These campuses are often established by well-known Anglo-American universities in rapidly developing economies such as the United Arab Emirates, China or Malaysia. Looking at an international branch campus in the Emirates, the authors find an attempt to signal the superiority of learning and education through using western textbooks, faculty and pedagogical methods. These are sometimes given a degree of superficial localisation through local case-studies. However, the implicit equation of Anglo-American with superior knowledge continued. The symbols of Anglo-American knowledge were often thin (such as pictures of the main campus), irrelevant (such as lengthy lectures on trades unions in countries where unions were illegal), and absurd (such as a mascot that no-one understands showing up at university events). There were also tensions between local staff who were seen as using outdated pedagogical techniques ('yelling' at students who didn't understand), local management and western educators. This meant international branch campuses would often trade on fantasies of superior western knowledge while offering their students something entirely different.

Psychoanalysis

The final major theme in critical management studies during the period we address is psychoanalysis. It builds on earlier work using psychodynamic readings of organizations (for a review see: Fotaki et al., 2012; Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2020). This type of CMS tends to blend psychoanalytic insights with studies of power and domination as well as ideology. In particular, during the last decade or so, critical management studies have been increasingly influenced by work drawing on the ideas of Jacques Lacan and his various followers (see Arnaud and Vidaillet, 2018; Cederström and Hoedemaekers, 2010; Contu et al., 2010). This work has explored a range of issues such as the fantasies underpinning public policies which make them difficult to put into practice (Fotaki, 2010), employability discourse in the UK (Cremin, 2010), the role which enjoyment plays in bolstering commodity fetishism (Böhm and Batta, 2010), narratives of organizational change (Driver, 2009), notions of work-life balance (Bloom, 2016), workplace obedience and attachment (Stavrakakis, 2010), notions of the 'human' in human resource management (Johnsen and Gudmand-Høyer, 2010), authentic leadership (Costas and Taheri, 2012), the way people working a global development agency relate to their funders (Kenny, 2012), practices of performance management (Hoedemaekers and Keegan, 2010), how people working in a factory face the threat of closure (Vidaillet and Gamot, 2015).

This stream of research has introduced a range of novel concepts into the vocabulary of CMS such as Miasma (Gabriel, 2012), jouissance (Böhm and Batta, 2010) and lack (Driver, 2013). It has also extended how we think about emotions and affect (Fotaki et al., 2017). This research has also led to experiments with novel methods such as psychoanalytic discourse analysis (Cederström and Spicer, 2014) and practices of 'feminine writing' (Fotaki et al., 2014).

One interesting study in this tradition draws on some of the ideas of Jacques Lacan to explore 'liberating leadership' (Picard and Islam, 2020). The researchers followed a leader called Paul who was bought in to restructure a department in a Belgian bank. Paul sought to 'clean up' 'the filth' by firing about 30 per cent of staff, many of whom were older. After this he sought to model a different cultural norm by arriving at work on a bicycle (rather than car), dressing in a casual way (rather than in a suit), walking around the office in bare feet (rather than in shoes), and spending time talking about 'passion for philosophy and ethics'. Paul described his management philosophy in the following way: 'Give up controls – No follow-up – Progressively letting go – No HR: lack of formal structure' and 'Disappearing: not showing up at meetings' (p. 402). Paul celebrated his lack of knowledge of processes and progressively gave responsibility over to middle managers and often avoided reading important documents. In place of bureaucratic processes, Paul sought to nurture a sense of 'harmony' and make the department a 'happy place'. He emphasized the department's new found 'visibility' in the wider bank, and encourage his subordinates to develop a sense of 'self-mastery'. Although this was appreciated by many of his team, some found it tiring. One employee pointed out 'We have to be natural all the time and in the end, being natural is tiresome' (p. 406). Some members of the team found themselves violently excluded from this 'natural' culture such as Frank – a middle manager who struggled to adapt to this culture. Eventually this became too much, and Frank had a breakdown during

a meeting and was taken to hospital. Meanwhile Paul moved to another position in the public sector to work his magic there. The authors use Lacanian psychoanalytic notions to examine how the weakening of the traditional bureaucratic order and a strengthening of the imaginary order (which relies on cultural aspects and philosophy) has given rise to a new form of authority (a 'tyrannical super-ego') which many subordinates struggle to cope with.

Other Themes

Often the studies which we reviewed address several of the themes mentioned. There were also some themes which ran through many of the studies which we reviewed. One of these is power, in one sense or another. Like most other commonly used terms, they can mean quite a lot, as the poststructuralists say there is no particular relation between the signifier and the signified. Many concepts have become 'hembigs', hegemonic, ambiguous, big concepts covering a lot and used in a variety of vague ways (Alvesson and Blom, 2022). Almost all the themes and papers we have addressed above cross our categories, in particular if we consider the broader views of power – not excluding much – that are popular among CMS people (Fleming and Spicer, 2014). There is also a stream that is more explicit in terms of focusing on 'power' (e.g., Barley, 2010; Brown et al., 2010; Contu and Girei, 2014; Geppert et al., 2016; McCabe, 2010; Reinecke and Donaghey, 2015).

There were of course also a range of themes present other than those we have highlighted in the literature. These include critical performativity (Cabantous et al., 2016; Fleming and Banerjee, 2016; King and Learmonth, 2015; Spicer et al., 2009, 2016; Wickert and Schaefer, 2015), actor network theory (e.g., Alcadipani and Hassard, 2010; Bruce and Nyland, 2011; Gond and Nyberg, 2017), climate change (Banerjee, 2012; Levy and Spicer, 2013; Nyberg and Wright, 2016; Wittneben et al., 2012), and hegemony (e.g., Girei, 2016; Parker and Parker, 2017; Van Bommel and Spicer, 2011). There is also a substantial amount of critical work on leadership (Alvesson et al., 2017; Alvesson and Spicer, 2014; Collinson, 2006, 2012; Learmonth and Morrell, 2019; Tourish, 2019a, 2019b). Some studies focusing on 'image' or 'fake' issues, including bullshit talk and spectacles can also be mentioned (Alvesson, 2022; Flyverbom and Reinecke, 2017; Prasad et al., 2011; Spicer, 2018). There is also some work on critical methodology (Alvesson and Deetz, 2021). Finally, there is an emergent stream of work on functional stupidity (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012, 2016a; Paulsen, 2017) and wilful ignorance (Alvesson et al., 2022; Essén et al., 2022; Schaefer, 2019).

ASSESSING POST-2008 CMS

Recent critical management studies have extended many well-established themes within the field such as power and control, gender, Marxist studies, discourse, identity and the work of Michel Foucault. It has typically added novel empirical observations and illustrations (for instance applying these ideas to new setting such as digital platforms) as well as introduced new concepts into the debate (such as biopower). In addition, CMS have

strengthened some nascent themes within the field such as post-colonial studies, analysis of academia, examination of alternatives and psychoanalytic theories. By doing this, it has introduced some new theories, phenomena as well as methodological approaches and thus broadened the scope of CMS. It has a more varied theoretical vocabulary for understanding, explaining but also questioning work and management in the contemporary organizations.

CMS is a very diverse body of knowledge with multiple – sometimes contradictory – strands. However, we think there are some common characteristics and trends in much (but by no means all) of the CMS work which was produced during the period we examined. The first wave of CMS tended to draw on Marxist theory to study exploitation in manufacturing workplaces. The second wave of CMS was more inspired by poststructuralist theories to study how people were controlled in service work. Recent CMS is even more diverse and 'multi-paradigmatic'. However, a fairly large part of it draws on a mixture of poststructuralist, political and psychoanalytic theory in order to study professional and precarious workers and understand how they navigate the affective and embodied difficulties of work. Recent research continues to draw on a wide range of theoretical inspirations, but theorists such as Judith Butler, Slavoj Zizek and Ernesto Laclau who mix psychoanalysis and political theory became increasingly influential.

The empirical sites which have been studied have also subtly shifted. There is an increasing emphasis on studying one's own tribe, i.e., universities and academics. The methods used continue to be relatively similar: there is a heavy emphasis on theory which orients the empirical material collected and produces predictable 'insights'. A favoured theorist is imported from outside of business and management studies. Their vocabulary and ideas are then used to interpret an organizational phenomenon (or other phenomenon that somehow could be seen as vaguely related to work, employment or management). In addition, many studies used relatively small-scale interview data, often with less than 30 respondents from the same category and no repeat interviewing or additional data collection. There were few signs of source critique. If respondents claimed something in line with the favoured theory (e.g., oppression, resistance, discrimination or insecurity) this was taken by researchers at face value. There was some use of textual and archival data and a few ethnographic studies – but these seldom demonstrated the close contact with the field traditionally associated with ethnography. There was very little in the way of methods typically found in other areas of management and organization studies such as surveys, in-depth historical work based on primary documents, statistical analysis of existing quantitative datasets, experiments, simulations or observational work.

While there were a wide range of empirical findings within each of the individual studies, many papers identified a novel and increasingly insidious way a particular group of people are oppressed, controlled or marginalized. These projects then identify how the oppressed are often implicated and actively participate in their own oppression. Finally, they highlight resistance – often in moderate ways and through subtle means, sometimes only noticed by themselves or the researcher eager to find signs on resistance (e.g., Bristow et al., 2017). The contributions often boil down to using existing theories to understand a more or less new phenomenon (such as digital platforms, gig workers and

so on) or to use novel theories from outside of organization and management studies to introduce new vocabulary (which may or may not provide additional insights).

We noticed some cross-cutting concepts which were particular to this period. One of these is intersectionality – or the recognition of how different identities and experiences of domination come together. For instance, some researchers have explored how issues such as gender and race come together to create particular structures of domination and power (Contu, 2020; Śliwa et al., 2018). A second cross-cutting theme is embodiment. This involves looking at how organizational processes such as workplace control shape the bodily experiences of people (e.g., Kenny and Fotaki, 2015; Pullen and Rhodes, 2015). For instance, some explored how the development and training of bodies and employee wellbeing have become central mechanisms of control in contemporary organizations (Cederström and Spicer, 2017). Questions of embodiment crop up in critical studies of academia, identity, gender and psychoanalysis. A further cross-cutting theme is the increasing fluidity of organizations and their boundaries. Some examples of such research include the fate of unemployed workers who find themselves outside organizations (e.g., Gabriel et al., 2014), and forms of work such as driving an Uber which are not formally located within an organization (e.g., Peticca-Harris et al., 2020). The final cross-cutting theme which we noticed was increasing research outside of developed and western organizations, e.g., of co-ops in Argentina (Esper et al., 2017), business schools in the United Arab Emirates (Siltaoja et al., 2019) and a government department in China (Zhang and Spicer, 2014).

Alongside cross-cutting themes, there continue to be significant controversies within CMS. One is around epistemological questions. This debate focuses on how researchers know the organizational reality which they set out to study. Many researchers continue to rely on fairly traditional models of representing reality through describing interview transcripts or field observations and then interpreting these results through the prism of some preferred theory. They often treat the reports of their interviews as being relatively transparent reports of the truth (experiences, sentiments) and don't question the reports of their informants. By doing this, CMS is then not dissimilar from other studies (Schaefer and Alvesson, 2020). Some researchers within the CMS tradition claim that radically different ways of knowing and writing about reality is necessary in order to express understandings which are marginalized by standard social scientific techniques. Doing this becomes a matter of achieving epistemic justice. These has led to various experimentations with alternative ways of writing which draw more strongly on literature (e.g., Phillips et al., 2014; Pullen et al., 2020). A key issue here is about knowing and truth: sometimes one has the impression that some CMS researchers are not so interested in 'finding out'. They seem to avoid open exploration driven by curiosity and a strong interest in carefully understanding empirical phenomena. A great deal of CMS work orders the world based on strong theoretical preferences and ideological commitments. Indeed, many critical theorists claim that all research does this and it is impossible to do otherwise. The strong commitments make CMS less interesting as it yields few surprises, unexpected interpretations or counterintuitive findings.

A second continuing controversy in CMS is around ontology. This involves largely irresolvable debates between different scholars about the nature of social reality (e.g., Contu and Willmott, 2005; Fleetwood, 2005). Some take a radically constructivist view

of social reality, seeing it as being created through ongoing processes of enacting social reality on a moment by moment basis (e.g., Hosking, 2011). Others have relied on more realist assumptions, claiming that there is an underlying social reality which structures what can be observed (e.g., Reed, 2009). Still others have sought to find a way between these two positions by blending constructivist and realist assumptions (e.g., Al-Amoudi and Willmott, 2011) and suggesting novel methodological approaches for reasoning from data (Belfrage and Hauf, 2017). Most CMS researchers probably place themselves vaguely between different extreme views, sometimes moving back and forth in their positioning (Wray-Bliss, 2002).

A final continuing controversy we detected during this period is around political questions of how critical management studies should seek to relate to its object of critique. There are various worries around the lack of relevance and impact of CMS work outside the tribe of the like-minded (Spicer et al., 2009, 2016). Some have argued for a progressive position which involves constructive engagement with practices of management with the aim of making them more humane (e.g., Hartmann, 2014; Wickert and Schaefer, 2015). Others have pushed for a much more radical understanding of CMS as involving a complete rejection of managerialism and market mechanisms in favour of more communal and small-scale models of organizing (e.g., Fleming and Banerjee, 2016; Parker, 2021). A central controversy remains as to whether CMS should involve progressive reform or radical rejection of management.

CRITIQUES

Despite the continued growth in the number of articles, complexity of concepts and range of empirical studies, we think that the recent CMS has not been as promising as one might hope. Despite all the work and resources, there is a pattern of predictable work, with modestly interesting studies leading to no major new ideas, empirical results or insights. This may be unfair, but we do think our assessment is broadly shared. We sent the following email to all the editorial board members of a journal with a critical orientation. 'Are there any CMS work that according to you make a really significant contribution that have been published the last five (or ten) years and that you think should be included/highlighted in the review paper?'. We received four responses. One said that 'the honest answer to your question is of course no'. The three others referred to and attached one or several papers of their own.

The absence of really significant contributions is of course not only a problem for CMS – much has been said already and the norm of writing and publishing many papers lead to little bold, ambitious and creative work (Alvesson et al., 2017). Other streams of research such as institutional theory (Alvesson and Spicer, 2019) tend to reproduce dominant implicit or explicit assumptions and deliver surprise-free research. Often there is a strong confirmation bias (McSweeney, 2021).

People often do gap-spotting, incremental work, aiming to add (marginally) to a subfield or address a microtribe of similar-minded people (Alvesson et al., 2017; Tourish, 2019a, 2020). There is, in science in general, a decline in the number of disruptive contributions that clearly make a difference (Park et al., 2023). Increasing

numbers of papers and rapid turnover of papers in scientific fields leads to cognitive overload of researchers and increasing 'ossification of the canon' (whereby a small set of established ideas continue to be cited) (Chu and Evans, 2021). While we don't go into this broader problem, we think it may be worth noting that the expansion or even explosion of work adds texts to and benefits individual researcher's 'human capital' (i.e., their EMP-ability, e.g., employ-, metrics- and promotability) but it may come with collective costs such as creating a glut of papers which actually slows scientific progress. This is not to mention the fact that the production of research is extremely costly. One report estimated that the average top level business school publication costs about $400,000 US to produce (Tersweich and Ulrich, 2014). Most research by CMS scholars is likely to be much cheaper to produce (because of lower salaries and publications in less demanding journals), but the cost is still likely to be significant. It is worth asking whether the students and citizens who pay for all the (costly) research get value for money? Could these resources be better used on other things in the public sector or even within universities? Perhaps less focus on critical research and a greater focus on critical teaching could be a good idea.

CMS, like many other fields, faces a paradoxical situation: as the amount of papers produced in the field has increased, and the relevance of some concerns of CMS has increased, the degree of novel insights produced by CMS seems to be decreasing. Why is this? It is probably more difficult to add something significant today than a couple of decades ago, as so much has been said already. All the low hanging theoretical fruit has been picked. Also mass research, following massification of higher education, has led to specialization and more bureaucratic research assessment by journals which may counteract interesting new ideas from being developed (Alvesson et al., 2017). People work within small boxes and aim for even smaller contributions. Specialization aids publication but undermines broader readings and leads to limited creativity. To add to the understanding of the situation, we would like to dig a little deeper. In particular, we explore five inclinations among CMS authors (and sometimes others) that have led to or cemented this situation.

The first of these inclinations is *Author-itarianism*. This refers to researchers celebrating and rigidly following significant authors (or a distinct theoretical framework). Followers of an author-ity have often made huge investments in understanding their chosen guru. They have gathered a battery of quotations from the guru and often insert these in texts. These sunk-costs make them keen to exploit their hard-won knowledge. There seems to be a lack of critical reflection or independent assessment of the author-ity. Butler, Lacan and Foucault are probably among the favourites. Unpacking and critiquing key ideas and concepts or ideas are rare. For example, Raffnsøe et al. (2019) provide a good overview of Foucault's ideas and their applications in organization studies, but the master and his ideas are celebrated rather uncritically and there are no real suggestions for novel thinking or efforts to pull out insights moving beyond the specific tradition. Moisander et al. (2018) also use Foucauldian vocabulary while Picard and Islam (2020) rely on Lacan faithfully but it is not so clear what the authorities offer to otherwise interesting case studies and add to what more straightforwardly could be described and analysed in more accessible ways. Tourish (2019a) remarks that otherwise interesting texts often become incomprehensible and key insights are

lost when the master thinker is invoked and the researcher aims to 'theorize' findings. Inserted quotations from the author-ity sometimes does not add much, apart from perhaps impressing the (uncritical) reader. For instance, Moisander et al. (2018) cite Foucaut who write; 'as entrepreneurs, their personal qualities, skills … are to be viewed as a form of capital, "a potential source of future income". Do we need the guru here?

According to Moisander et al. (2018) the study shows 'how biopower operates through techniques of government that are productive in the sense that they seek to mobilize the workers as human capital and as a network of enterprise-units: as a community of active economic agents … (who pursue) self-efficacy, autonomy and self-worth as individuals' (p. 392). This is perhaps what management and organization (also combination of self-employed/entrepreneurial direct selling) is often about and is well covered by a huge management and entrepreneurship literature without the term 'bio-power'. When texts are governed by author-itarianism, the case as well as the author's own voice is submerged. Instead, the author-ity occupys the scene. As a consequence, the subject matter is ordered within an existing line of thinking and few unexpected insights or new ideas arise. It all often ends with rather abstract and general reasoning, typically demonstrating that the guru has got it right. Sometimes there is no particular guru, but a strongly favoured concept works in a similar way. 'Discourse', 'postcolonialism', 'intersectionality' and 'institution' are examples.

This is compounded by the fact that CMS often heavily rely on author-ities and concepts from other fields. Drawing inspiration from a variety of areas and sources can be useful, but rather than simply importing and exploiting concepts from elsewhere, a vibrant field should develop contributions which can be exported as well (Oswick et al., 2011). Perhaps CMS should d less importin and become better at innovating. Organizations are often potentially rich and interesting sites of inquiry and well conducted studies could lead to ideas, concepts, theories and empirical studies which are of relevance and interest for other academic fields as well as for practitioners and the wider public. While some publications by CMS academics have appeared in sociology journals (e.g., Alvesson et al., 2022; Dallyn et al., 2015; Fleming and Sewell, 2002; Knights and Willmott, 1989), few CMS scholars make significant contributions outside the field of CMS. Even fewer seem to have made much of an impact outside academia.

A second, related problem with a great deal of work in CMS is *Obscurantism*. The language which is used tends to obscures more than it reveals. This is partly a matter of author-ity – a good authority writes in a difficult to penetrate way. But obscurantism goes beyond this. One way this happens is through the use of abstract academic jargon. The field of CMS has a wealth of concepts with unclear meanings. Journal writing conventions often accept or even support language use that camouflages the author's thinking (or lack thereof). The jargon of critique is often used to create pseudo-contributions. These are ideas which appear impressive but when they are stripped of impressive language, they seem much more mundane. What people mean by 'discourse' is for example often hard to say (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011). 'Governmentality' and 'resistance' are also words favoured by CMS researchers with unclear and broad meanings. They are used as hegemonic ambiguous big concepts (hembigs) which may hide more than they reveal (Alvesson and Blom, 2022).

This is not only a matter of use of overly general concepts. It is also driven by impenetrable language and poorly composed sentences which sound intellectual but are often abstract and very difficult to understand (Tourish, 2019a). Simple observations and propositions are dressed up obtuse phrasing. Extensive batteries of references, long sentences, abstract language and other intellectual status markers scare off those who are not familiar with the genre.

A third problem is *Formulaic radicalism*. This is an attempt to project a veneer of political and intellectual dissidence while ultimately relying on highly established troupes which often lead to unsurprising conclusions. Contemporary research is generally formulaic but CMS adds the critical flavour. It often does so by giving phenomena – no matter how benign – a negative framing. Studying 'resistance' gives a progressive, even heroic flavour to a topic. One way CMS researchers do formulaic radicalism is by using conventional formats but include some markers of radicalism. The author may seek to express radical and critical ideas while complying with 'mainstream' conventions. Such a move can help to indicate that a study is clearly positioned in an academic subfield, guided by an authoritative framework, and informed by a detailed review of the literature. Next the research outlines a planned design, a careful data management strategy (sometimes using data sorting programs and codification), and a minor section of 'safe' reflexivity. The authors summarize findings, outlines how they add to the literature (and sometimes the author-ity) and offers a brief conclusion (not saying too much outside the chosen and mainly predictable path). The form should matter less than the content, but this highly domesticated form tends to weaken the impact of the substantive content. The norm of presenting a number of abstracted, short interview statements does not always help to reveal any particularly novel insights. In the text, there are frequent nods to critical aims such as exploring power, supporting emancipation, recognizing resistance, or generating reflexivity. However, the formulaic presentation of findings often undermines this and leads to modest insights.

Related to formulaic radicalism is a tendency to focus on the *usual suspectism*. CMS researchers are inclined to quickly round up the usual suspects: capitalism, Western domination, managerialism, patriarchy, instrumental rationality, homophobia, racism, new public management, entrepreneurialism, bureaucracy, performance management or neo-liberalism. They also assume many of these factors are tied up together and there is an implicit 'chain of equivalence' between each of these. For instance, managers are assumed to always be seeking to control workers, almost any system of control is seen as an expression of 'neo-liberalism', men are agents of patriarchy while women are victims (or resisters) and capitalism always involves suffering and exploitation. The other side of this is the figure of the worker who is assumed to be suffering, exploited, marginalized and oppressed. These one dimensional characters set the stage for a ready-made moral drama which appeals to CMS adherents. It allows for a kind of pre-packaged critique where there are clear 'goodies' and 'baddies'. It also helps to confirm pre-existing assumptions about power relations and moral dynamics. What this kind of formulaic critique does not do is to reveal the messy and often complicated reality of most organizational settings. It does not recognize – for instance – that in some cases employees can actually dominate their managers (e.g., Ekman, 2014), that lack of work may be more of a problem than work pressure (Graeber, 2018; Paulsen, 2014), that bureaucracy can lead

to fairer outcomes than small scale communal processes with no rules (du Gay, 2004) and that females sometimes receive privileged treatment (Eagly, 2018). Masculinity sounds bad, and toxic masculinity calls for critical study. However, 'male virtues' such as 'toughness' (Brandth, 2019), responsibility (Beglaubter, 2019) and supporting kin (Lomas, 2013) can also have positive effects (Barrett, 1996). The point is that masculinity is not just toxic – it is often a mixture of potentially positive and problematic components. Just relying on formulaic assumptions about negative masculinity misses these more positive virtues which can be found in bravery among firefighters, police officers and rescue workers. Blue collar work culture in occupations like mining, forestry and mechanical work often includes some elements of masculinity. Formulaic radicalism can often treat this in a one dimensional way. Instead of carefully understanding a messy reality, we find radical assumptions which are political and morally appealing but unnuanced and empirically flawed. Although one dimensional accounts dominate, there are many exceptions. For instance there are studies which provide nuanced accounts of 'liberating leadership' (Picard and Islam, 2020) and self-employment under a corporate umbrella (Moisander et al., 2018).

The final problem we have identified in much CMS work is *empirical light-touchism*. This involves avoiding deep engagement with empirical sites. Often studies offer illustrations and confirmation of the researcher's theoretical and ideological position (Fleming and Mandarini, 2009). As a result extensive empirical studies can lead to rather quick and predictable analysis, rather than an open and (self) critical exploration which gives rise to novel ideas which question a preferred and received world view. One would hope for more studies where empirical observations kick back against the researchers' prior assumptions and inspire some degree of rethinking. Empirical light-touchism allows CMS researchers to preserve their politically valued assumptions and theoretical ideas and avoid expending the significant effort required to generate novel insights. While theoretical work within a tradition is important, having a field dominated by it can create a kind of epistemic echo-chamber where common assumptions are repeated and circulated. Confirmation bias prevents doubt. It also avoids the unexpected findings which can come from empirical studies.

Another way empirical work can be avoided is by making theoretical arguments which claim that any interest in reality and truth claims are based on questionable philosophical assumptions and naïvety. Radical approaches to 'constructivism' help to keep what 'goes on' in organizations at some safe distance. It also keeps most people outside the academic CMS subtribe at a safe distance. When some material is bought in, it is often strongly anecdotal or even fictional. For instance, in their discussion of the 'performative' impact of academic ideas, Cabantous et al. (2016) refer to old films rather than any substantive empirical material from contemporary studies.

Finally, some researchers opt for one-off interviews or selective data collection from social media. Many studies are based on a number of 45–70 minute interviews. Interviewees claiming resistance are, for example, accepted at face value (Bristow et al., 2017). Alternatively, various text chunks ('discourse') may offer enough material for empirical work. Researchers may also draw data from social media. Smith and Ulus (2020), for example, use academic reports of their suffering on un-named websites as significant data. While we think this kind of data is relevant, a thicker account of such an important

phenomenon probably requires other data sources. Research illustrating pre-existing assumptions often leads to modestly interesting empirical work which frequently paints a one dimensional picture of a particular phenomenon. There are of course exceptions. Many studies do not only exemplify their assumptions, but subject their ideas to close scrutiny and even question these assumptions. For instance, Ekman (2014) used her thick empirical work to question the assumption that it is generally workers who are oppressed and controlled by managers. She shows that in some particular settings (contexts relying on star employees) it can also be (powerful) workers who are oppressive and controlling towards their (less powerful) managers.

CONCLUSION

CMS has rapidly grown and there is now a large body of research of robust quality on a wide range of topics. The field is difficult to summarize but we have identified ten major themes which made up the bulk of the discussion about CMS: academia, alternative organizations, control and resistance, discourse, Foucaudian studies, gender, identity, Marxism, post-colonialism and psychoanalysis. These themes are, of course, not mutually exclusive. Sometimes they overlap.

We have identified a number of problems calling for critique and rethinking. The field has become a victim of author-itarianism, obscurantism, formulaic radicalism, usual-suspectism and empirical light-touchism. The upshot is that much of the work largely repeats well-known troupes, delivers few novel insights, and has little impact on other scholarly fields or areas of policy and practice. We think this means the field is in decline and in need of rejuvenation - or perhaps more palliative measures.

We think what is needed is more ambitious and imaginative work on worthy themes that an audience may find interesting and helpful. It calls for something unexpected and novel. This is not easy as it requires more time-consuming, open and risky research which is often at odds with the career pattern in contemporary academia. Problematizing author-ity and challenging dominant conceptualizations can also lead to resistance and conflicts with gate-keepers of specific theory who are disinclined to accept deviations from the party line.

Many of the criticisms which we have raised above are not only relevant to CMS, but characterize organization studies and perhaps social science in general (Alvesson et al., 2017). Of course, our characterization is not entirely fair. Not all studies share the problems which we outline. Moreover, we are ourselves not immune to many of the criticisms which we have outlined. Indeed, our own research falls into some of the traps which we have outlined above.

Finally, we should note that some of the problems which we outlined above can at times be a strength. Guru theorists can provide useful insights; jargon can sometimes give us novel ways of describing things; efforts to avoid questioning one's dearly held assumptions is understandable and hard to avoid, they may sometimes also guide us well; formulaic writing may be helpful for effective text production and assessment by people belonging to the same micro-tribe as the authors; a single set of interviews may lead to some revealing findings and aid data management; the usual suspects

may deserve a thrashing; reality is sometimes boring and it may be more interesting to study representations; rejecting 'positivism' can help people avoid time-consuming and messy field work in favour of comfortable armchair work and allow people to be broadly read or have nice gardens; studying esoteric or peripheral phenomenon enables easier access and claims to have added something to what already has been studied many times; revealing fakes is sometimes important. So, the inclinations of many CMS researchers are understandable. Indeed, they may aid publication possibilities – and may increase researchers' careers. Our worry is that there is too much safe and predictable work and a shortage of more ambitious, bold, original work which entails intensive empirical inquiry of important phenomena and careful, imaginative consideration of alternative perspectives.

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