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Citation: Parker, S. & Cluley, R. (2026). How to not change the world: Actionism and pseudo-praxis in organization and management theory. *Human Relations*, doi: 10.1177/00187267261434771

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Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00187267261434771>

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How to not change the world: Actionism and pseudo-praxis in organization and management theory

human relations

1–22

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DOI: 10.1177/00187267261434771

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Abstract

Critical research is facing calls for practical relevance through academic activism, affirmation of alternatives, collaboration with practitioners and critical performativity, with earlier traditions of critique dismissed as being negative, detached, and ineffective. This paper challenges this framing by returning to debates within Frankfurt School critical theory, particularly Theodor Adorno's analysis of 'thinking actionism' – that is, a form of self-defeating critique based on a prioritization of practice, naïve optimism, faith in collectivity, and academic self-aggrandizement. Using this theoretical lens, we problematize trends within recent practice-oriented and impact-focused critical scholarship and offer three provocations. First, we caution against equating critique with practice and impact and dismissing critical theory. Second, we highlight the indirect and often unintended influence of critical theory on practice and revisit Frankfurt School approaches – such as immanent critique and negative dialectics – as theoretical resources that advance the relation between theory and practice. Finally, we evaluate examples of intellectual engagements that illustrate the potential for this more dialectical approach to politics and organizing.

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Keywords

Adorno, CMS, critical performativity, critical theory, dialectics, Frankfurt, school, third wave

Introduction

Critical organization and management theory is increasingly concerned with having ‘a practical effect’ on wider social relations (Alvesson, 2022: 357). This is reflected in calls for meaningful management research (Tourish, 2020), academic activism (Contu, 2018), alternative organizations (Cheney et al., 2014; King and Land, 2018; Parker et al., 2014a, 2014b), prefiguration (Reinecke, 2018), critical practice (King and Learmonth, 2015) and critical performativity (Spicer et al., 2009, 2016). These new forms of critique are positioned as an ‘alternative paradigm for “other” critical research, from which we can start becoming “other” critical scholars’ (Zanoni et al., 2017: 582–583). They are commonly referred to as a ‘third wave’ of critical management and organization studies (King and Griffin, 2023; Spicer et al., 2009, 2016; Spicer and Alvesson, 2024).

Despite their differences, these ideas are united by a rejection of ‘armchair criticism’. They tend to characterize previous critical work as having failed to make an impact because of its antagonistic perspective on the mundane world of organizing and distance from practice. Instead, this new wave of critical scholarship aims to go ‘beyond’ such ‘self-referential, strictly intellectual discussions to have an impact and change the world’ (Contu, 2020: 738). It is about changing management practices, finding ways of being practically relevant alongside practitioners, not remaining ‘[l]ocked in an ivory tower’ (King and Griffin, 2023: 1194). Or, as Parker et al. (2014b: 625) put it, ‘We are trying to say what we are “for” and not just endlessly moan about what we are “against”’.

The framing of critical scholarship as ‘moaning’ is a reactionary trope that earlier critical theorists took very seriously. They saw it as a way to silence critique in emerging totalitarian societies, for instance. In this paper, we re-engage with these earlier debates and, in a way, try to redeem moaning. Specifically, we turn to discussions in Frankfurt School critical theory about the relationship between critical theory and political practice to contextualize and problematize current critical thinking (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013). We contend that the rhetoric in critical contemporary writing comes dangerously close to what Theodor Adorno, a leading intellectual figure in the history of critical theory, terms ‘thinking actionism’. Thinking actionism occurs when the desire to enact change means we forget to ask if change is possible. It involves a *rejection of critical theory as grumbling, naïve political positivity, blind faith in collectivity and academic narcissism*. For Adorno, it is a self-defeating way of thinking in which our hope for change means we turn, prematurely, to practice and fail to do the theoretical work necessary to bring change about. Accordingly, he calls for us to analyse ‘the anatomy of actionism’ when it occurs (1969c: 19). This is our aim.

To be clear from the outset, we think that academics should be politically engaged, progressive and positively impact society. We also agree that sometimes moaning is unproductive. However, this does not mean we should not criticize attempts at political engagement or leave this task only to reactionary forces. Indeed, in an age where impact

is an increasingly important criteria for academic success, often defined uncritically through formal mechanisms such as the UK's Research Excellence Framework, we believe critical scholars have a duty to unpack turns towards practice. Thinking with Adorno, we highlight the dangers in limiting our understanding of political engagement to concrete impact in organizations and direct participation with managers, activists, and grassroots struggle in the here and now. Not only does the practice of the critical scholar inevitably involve thinking but, we argue, it is primarily through theory that critical scholarship has and can influence practice. As Adorno puts it, 'theory that is not conceived as an instruction for its realization' has 'the most hope for realization' (1984/2005: 277). Society asks the critical theorist to do the moaning needed for political struggle.

So, this paper offers a warning for the 'third wave' of CMS and a reminder of the importance of critique. Focusing too much on practice, we argue, encourages a technical, undialectical and short-term focus on 'what works' not genuine progress. Instead, we highlight the success of the Frankfurt School's approaches to critique, such as immanent critique and negative dialectics. These have a longer-term focus and encourage movement between theory, practice and praxis. In particular, we demonstrate the importance of the social division of labour between critical theory (and theorists) and practice (and more practically oriented researchers). Finally, we provide a response to what should (not) be done when we recognize thinking actionism and, drawing on the political activity of the Frankfurt School, evaluate public intellectuals from critical organization theory and elsewhere who have influenced political, organizational, and managerial practice through critique. We suggest that focusing too much on practice can leave a theoretical vacuum that can be filled by regressive voices.

Repressing critical theory

To begin, let us explain why we turn to Theodor Adorno. For the more practice-oriented critical researcher, Frankfurt School theory associated with the likes of Adorno represents the archetype for disengaged, cynical and overly theoretical work. Spicer et al write that thinking inspired by Frankfurt School scholars such as Adorno is 'increasingly moribund, offering increasingly little in the way of claims that are academically rigorous, intellectually interesting and practically relevant' (Spicer et al., 2016: 226). Indeed, although some have recently championed his approach (Cluley and Parker, 2023; Granter, 2014; McCann et al., 2020), there is no getting around the fact that Adorno's obtuse writing style, background in avant-garde music and espoused disdain for popular culture makes his thinking difficult to relate to management and organizational practice (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992b). It might seem odd to turn, then, to the Frankfurt School and Adorno. What do they know about political action or organizations?

Critical researchers have not always had this dim view of the Frankfurt School. The Frankfurt School inspired and distinguished early critical organization theory (Alvesson, 1985) and critical management studies (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992a) precisely because it unlocked discussions about the role of organizations and organizing in social progress. Indeed, early attempts to define critical organization and management theory highlighted the Frankfurt School's focus on the *methodologies of social change* as a resource for critical organizational thinking (Alvesson and Willmott, 1990). In fact, the Frankfurt

School inspired many of the organizations and forms of organizing that are foregrounded in contemporary critical scholarship. Frankfurt School thinkers, such as Marcuse and Fromm, are key intellectual references for left-wing political, counterculture and social movements, especially in America (Jeffries, 2017). Their thinking helped to define the values Parker et al. (2013) argue that we now need to focus on when looking for and researching alternative organizations: autonomy and self-determination; solidarity, equality and democracy; and sustainability and responsibility. Some Frankfurt School thinkers were directly involved in the social movements that third wave scholars champion, such as the 1960s 'New Left' (Reinecke, 2018; Reedy and Learmonth, 2009). Members of the Frankfurt School were not ensconced in their ivory tower; they were public intellectuals who influenced student movements and social protests. According to his translator, in Germany, Adorno was 'virtually a popular author' by the 1950s (Pickford, 2005: viii). He participated in over 160 radio programs between 1950 and 1969. Not only were Frankfurt School thinkers more involved in political action than their characterisation in recent discussions but Frankfurt School thinking fertilized and motivated many of the organizations and actions that now animate these discussions.

It turns out, then, that the Frankfurt School might know a thing or two about political action. However, for many, the image of the Frankfurt School will always be tainted by a now famous incident in 1969 at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt where a group of activists occupied one of Adorno's lectures. These students, frustrated by Adorno's detachment from revolutionary action demanded that Frankfurt School scholars support their political objectives or, in Adorno's words, 'shut our traps' (Adorno and Marcuse, 1999: 124). At a similar protest in the same year where he simply walked out – having first been showered with flowers by topless activist – Adorno, again, refused to join in but called the police to have the protestors removed. These events entered the folklore of critical theory and were taken by many to show that, when confronted with radical political action, critical theorists sided with the forces of repression. Contemporaries called Adorno 'a reactionary pig' who 'should be castrated' (Cook 2004: 48) and someone 'incapable of transforming his private compassion towards the "damned of the earth"' into an organized partisanship of theory engaged in the liberation of the oppressed' (Freyenhagen, 2014: 867).

Herbert Marcuse, Adorno's long-time colleague at the Frankfurt School, initially challenged Adorno's quietism. At that point, Marcuse believed that the route to social change meant strengthening 'the oppressed against the oppressors' (Marcuse 1968 in Wolff et al, 1969: 121). Defending his actions to Marcuse, Adorno wrote: 'You think that praxis – in its emphatic sense – is not blocked today; I think differently' (Adorno and Marcuse, 1999: 131). According to Della Torre and Altheman, the ensuing debate between 'Adorno and Marcuse about the tactics of the student movements remains one of the most important and controversial episodes in the history of the Frankfurt School' (2022: 64). It forced Frankfurt School scholars, who to that point, had resisted attempts to define a political agenda for critical theory, to reflect on the unity and separation of theory and praxis in critical theory (Višić, 2019).

Adorno developed his perspective in texts including 'Critique' (1969a), 'Resignation' (1969b), 'Who's Afraid of the Ivory Tower?' (1969c), and 'Marginalia to Theory and Praxis' (1984). In these writings, and key to understanding Adorno's perspective on

political action, Adorno develops a neologism, actionism [actionismus] (sometimes expanded as thinking actionism). With a nod to Viennese actionism, a contemporaneous art movement that promoted transgressive acts and images as a radical practice capable of sparking social change, Adorno defines actionism as a self-defeating and exhibitionist commitment to political practice. He argues that it is the duty of the critical theorist to critique such gestures. His conclusion, and the viewpoint that came to dominate Frankfurt School theorists, including Marcuse, is that the social responsibility of the critical theorist is to evaluate the dialectic of our consciousness and our conditions – not to think our actions can do this work for us. It is this sentiment that inspires us to problematize contemporary contributions to critical organization theory.

Thinking actionism in critical organization theory

There are four interrelated components to thinking actionism. First, it dismisses previous versions of critical theory as moaning. Second, it prioritizes affirmation above critique. Third, it champions the collective over the individual. Finally, thinking actionism overestimates academics' relevance in political struggle. In this section, we tease out Adorno's thoughts about each of these components and use thinking actionism as a theoretical lens to critique recent critical research. In so doing, we offer illustrations from individual texts and point to an emerging tendency of thought amongst critical scholars.

No more 'blah blah blah'

The foundational premise of thinking actionism is that critical theory undermines political action. To support this proposition, thinking actionism first splits theory from practice. It then characterizes critical theory in negative terms. It is described as something detached, self-indulgent and cynical. The critical theorist is, in turn, described as someone who has withdrawn from the material world into the ivory tower. They only want to interpret the world and not change it. This framing runs as follows:

The person who at this hour doubts the possibility of radical change in society . . . has resigned. What he has in mind he thinks cannot be realized; actually, he doesn't even want to realize it. By leaving the conditions untouched, he condones them without admitting it. Distance from praxis is disreputable to everyone. Whoever doesn't want to really knuckle down and get his hands dirty, is suspect (Adorno, 1969b: 289)

For Adorno, this interpretation can be 'effortlessly rattled off' because it draws a regressive stereotype: the image of critical theory as moaning (1969b: 289). On this, Adorno recalls his experiences of emerging totalitarianism in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s. At that point, there was a general reframing of the social critic as 'the grumbler' (Adorno, 1969a: 284). The grumbler was someone who critiqued existing social relations but was unwilling and incapable of offering practical solutions. In a totalitarian society, where dissent and reflection were dangerous, the grumbler was shamed. They were singled out and ridiculed for their lack of action. In Adorno's words, 'the question "what is to be done?"' is 'an automatic reflex to every critical thought before it is fully

expressed, let alone comprehended' demonstrated by those who do not really want things to change (1984: 276).

There are some texts within critical organizational scholarship that dismiss critical theory in this way. A common complaint, penned by many an iconic critter in the pages of critical outlets, is that there has been too much moaning about what we are "against" (Parker et al, 2014b: 625) and too much 'theory for theory's' sake' (Prasad, 2023: 1260). As Spicer et al put it:

The practitioner of CMS is always able to tell us what is wrong with the organizations we have (they are capitalist, managerialist, patriarchal, imperialist, technocratic, dualist and so on) but when the question comes of what they would actually want, their rapid attack turns into a vague set of platitudes, pauses and vacillations . . . This makes the critic into a world-weary character who consistently tries to escape from a universe that they can see so many flaws in (2009: 542).

We read that the critical theorist, as moaner and world-weary critic, is too scared to venture out of their ivory towers. They do 'self-indulgent and meaningless work, good for career enhancement, but with little wider value' (King and Griffin, 2023: 1194). They are, in Parker's words, 'a bunch of woke snowflakes' who want a big salary and trips to international conferences but refuse 'the tricky job of actually doing anything useful' (2023: 410). Their theories do 'violence' to the 'richness and complexity' of practice (Zanoni et al, 2017: 583). For Spicer et al., they follow 'an intellectual recipe' that has 'passed its use-by date' as they 'select an esoteric issue that is of greater concern to small groups of scholars but rather limited relevance to the wider public' (2016: 630).

In making these claims, theory and practice are often presented as mutually exclusive and irreconcilable concepts. For example, King and Griffin write that there is 'a divide between critical scholars and practitioners that cannot be bridged' (2023: 1194). Instead of building a bridge between theory and practice, there is an insistence on the 'primacy' of practice (Reinicke, 2018: 1032). Parker and Parker (2017) refer to this move as being against the against. We are told that the time has come to 'stop criticizing' (Christian) and stop 'theorizing change' (Reinecke, 2018: 1300). Instead, we must start 'concretely' putting our theories into practice (Contu, 2020: 742). For King and Land, this means we must move from 'negative critique as distal judgement to an affirmative engagement with "alternative" practices of organization' (2018: 1536).

In making these statements, theory is both split from practice and denounced in a manner that has striking similarities to the tendencies of thinking actionism. Critical theory is framed as cynical and unproductive. The regressive thrust of such claims is revealed when we read them closely. The language of repression is adopted to describe critical theory (e.g. snowflakes, moaning and useless). It draws on technocratic metaphors of users, recipes and products. Contrast, for example, the metaphor used above by Alvesson (in Spicer et al, 2016) when claiming that critical theory has passed its 'use-by date' with his earlier concerns for scholarship that treats critical theory as 'just another intellectual product to be taken off the shelf in the library and consumed without any recognition of the health warnings contained within the text' (Alvesson writing with Willmott 1990: 42). It seems as if recent discussions embrace the kinds of language and framing which were previously considered restrictive and regressive.

Positive thinking

A second feature of thinking actionism, which builds on the framing of theory as moaning, is its positive disposition. The logic runs as follows: if critical theory is bad and is defined by moaning, moaning must be bad too. Just as practice is the antidote to theory, enthusiasm cures grumbling. Summarizing the sunny disposition of the actionist, Adorno writes that ‘a tone of fresh and cheerful conviction reigns supreme: If only you change little things here and there, then perhaps everything will be better’ (1969c: 15). Ironically, Adorno notes, this positive tone of thinking actionism is presented as a response to the objective hopelessness of the current moment. Things are so bad, the logic of actionism says, they can only get better. Adorno observes:

Among the arguments available to actionism, there is one that indeed is quite removed from the political strategy it boasts of but that possesses a much greater suggestive power: it argues that one must opt for the protest movement precisely because one recognizes that it is objectively hopeless . . . those who despair of any possibility should support pointless action. The ineluctable defeat offers solidarity in the form of moral authority even to those who could have foreseen the catastrophe (1984: 274).

But, for Adorno, the desperate nature of the current moment is not sufficient ground on which to abandon critical theory. He explains in an interview with *Die Spiegel*:

I cannot fault someone living in our world today for feeling despairing, pessimistic, and negative. Those who compulsively shout down their objective despair with the noisy optimism of immediate action in order to lighten their psychological burden are much more deluded than the grumblers they attack (1969c: 17).

This desire for positivity – presented as a response to the desperation of the current moment – underpins the political approach in much contemporary writing. Critical researchers want to affirm things. Parker and Parker describe this approach as critical organization theory ‘putting its arms around our friends’ (2017: 1384). Christensen, for example, writes that it is time to ‘affirm and elevate the alternatives that you find admirable’ (2021: 154). The attractions of solidarity, activism, alternative organizations and grassroots politics make critically-engaged scholars ‘suspiciously positive’ about the practices they affirm – as Kociatkiewicz et al. (2020: 949) describe their own relation to their ethnographic sites at two worker cooperatives.

The aim set out in contemporary writing is to create a ‘library of alternative case studies’ (Mondon-Navazo et al., 2022: 738) and ‘empirical investigations of “actually existing” alternatives’ (Just et al, 2021: 89) that will inspire practitioners with ‘suggestions, resources, and models’ (Parker et al, 2014a: 31). Like Spicer et al (2016) with their out-of-date product metaphor, Parker et al use the metaphor of a recipe book to make this point:

Browsing through a recipe book, you are not told what to make, when to make it, and how to eat it, but are encouraged to think that you don’t need to keep on eating Chicken McNuggets if you desire something else. Other theories of organization are available (2014b: 636).

The general sentiment expressed here is that the organized world is waiting to be changed, we only need to break through the limited imagination imposed by capitalist realism to see the already existing alternatives and prefiguration of progress (Reinecke, 2018). A better world is not only possible but already exists in cooperatives, alternatives and counter cultures. We just need to affirm these organizations and others will realize they, too, do not want the organizations they have.

Adorno describes this outlook as a 'bureaucratic way of thinking' (1973: 32). It occurs when we judge action according to values defined in the current moment. It involves what psychoanalysts call splitting, as it permits only two responses: accept or reject. Things are either good or bad, positive or negative, for or against, theory or practice – each defined in the here-and-now. As such, for all its espoused embracing of the new, the bureaucratic logic of thinking actionism means it gets stuck in the present. So, it is in critical organizational scholarship. It imposes binaries, it does not overcome them. The desire to affirm some organizations and organizing practices means that critical scholars not only split theory and practice but also split organizations and organizational practices into those which are bad and can be ignored, and those which are good and should be affirmed, documented and supported. To mark this split, critical scholars separate the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic (Parker and Parker, 2017), the capitalist and anti-capitalist (Zanoni, 2020), the market managerial and alternative (Parker et al., 2014a). In so doing, reflecting thinking actionism, critical organization theory draws lines between friends and enemies, us and them, often leading self-indulgent to discussions around purity and who or what is worthy of being held up as an exemplar (Shanahan, 2024).

Altogether now

The third characteristic of thinking actionism is a preference for the collective, which, as with other splits, is positioned in a binary against the individual. This split also follows from the framing of critical theory as grumbling. The moaning theorist is imagined as someone isolated, narcissistically pondering and ignoring the world around them. In response, within thinking actionism, it is essential to join in. Adorno explains:

Contemporary practicality is based on . . . the opiate of collectivity, it becomes in its turn ideology . . . Nowhere is the obscurantism of the latest hostility to theory so flagrant. It recalls the gesture of someone demanding your papers. More implicit and therefore all the more powerful is the commandment: you must sign. The individual must cede himself to the collective; as recompense for his jumping into the melting pot, he is promised the grace of being chosen, of belonging. Weak and fearful people feel strong when they hold hands while running (1974: 276).

We have already seen the dismissal of the critical theorist as an individual pursuing their own intellectual interests in critical organizational scholarship. The critical theorist working alone is suspicious. They are characterized as cynical, careerist and cowardly. The grumbling theorist is 'self-referential' (Contu, 2020: 738), 'self-indulgent' (King and Griffin, 2023: 1194) and a 'snowflake' (Parker, 2023: 410). Indeed, for Zanoni et al, the idea of critique 'as an individual scholar's intellectual exercise in dialogue with specific

bodies of theory' is primarily driven by 'a desire to prove one's ability to engage with a master theory for intellectual recognition' (2017: 583). It is, therefore, not only bad enough that the critical organization theorist is a grumbler, what makes matters worse is their refusal to engage with 'collective practices and processes, which scholars witness or in which they partake' (Zanoni et al., 2017: 583).

In an organized world that seeks to individualize, thinking actionists find strength in numbers. Alakavuklar (2023), for example, contrasts the loneliness and isolation of the neo-liberal university against the joy of joining with activist and alternative organizations. This preference for the collective is displayed in the organizations, practices and theories that are affirmed in third wave thinking. This is most clearly demonstrated in the alternative organizations field where there is a growth in studies looking at workers-owned cooperatives, community currencies, local exchange trading systems and open-source communities (Barros and Michaud, 2020; Bousalham and Vidaillet, 2018; Daskalaki et al, 2015). These are often positioned as radical and progressive simply because of their emphasis on collective action, with analysts surprised to find that these are also sites of exclusion and exploitation.

Again, then, a core element of thinking actionism seems present in contemporary critical research. As with the characterization of critical theory as grumbling and privileging of affirmation, the collective and the individual are contrasted in a binary. They are split into irreconcilable concepts, one of which is good, the other bad. Quite why the collective is good, other than its opposition to the individual is rarely spelt out in detail. It appears that the collective is good because the collective agrees it is. If you do not agree, or refuse to join in, you are a grumbler, and grumbling is bad.

Similar to the other components of thinking actionism, there are hints at a regressive nature of such claims as they manifest in critical organization theory. Just as critical theory is treated as a product and organizing treated as a choice of recipes, the growing number of publications linked to alternative organizations, activism and critical performativity is presented as validation for third wave approaches. Zanoni et al., for instance, highlight that their special issue on alternative economies in the journal *Organization* received a record number of submissions (2017: 576). Implied here is a claim that the marketplace of ideas has spoken. It is enough to be popular.

Main character syndrome

The final element of thinking actionism is Adorno's most provocative claim. It is a tendency for those engaging in thinking actionism to overestimate their own relevance and importance. Thinking actionism, Adorno writes, is particularly prevalent amongst people who suffer from the 'fear' of being forgotten (1969c: 18). This leads thinking actionists to present themselves as the agents of social change and loudly tell others about it as well. They not only want to change the world but want publicity for it too.

For Adorno, this reveals a rotten core to thinking actionism. It is a collective fantasy that sustains individuals' narcissism. Thinking actionists do not change the world and secretly know they cannot. Instead of acknowledging this, they turn to others to convince them they are making a difference. The collective is valued in thinking actionism not because it is the route to social change but because it protects the individual thinking actionist's narcissism.

For all the claims that they are practical, thinking actionists are prisoners in their own ivory tower. The reality constructed by the collective protects thinking actionists from their repressed awareness of their own powerlessness. Their accusations against grumblers are unconsciously aimed at themselves (see Freud, 1914; Lacan, 2007).

Some of the more extreme statements in contemporary organizational critique hint at an over-estimation of the influence of critical organizational theorists and could be read as an example of the kind of fantastic thinking that Adorno writes about. Zandoni et al., for illustration, write that critical organization theorists have ‘a radical historical responsibility of identifying as agents who participate in making the social anew, by self-reflexively investing ourselves in novel desires, scholarly praxis, and a language of potentiality, next to one of critique’ (2017: 576). Similarly, writings on alternative organizations, critical performativity and academic activism tell us that it is critical organization theorists who are drivers of social change (see Ul-Haq et al., 2022 for an elaborate critique). Through their practices and the organizations they affirm, critical academics are meant to be able to break through the limits of capitalist realism (Parker et al, 2014a, 2014b). What could be more narcissistic than thinking the world needs you to change it?

Indeed, it is telling here that Spicer et al. (2016) present press attention as a measure of success for their strategy of critical performativity. They highlight ‘the publication by one of us of an opinion piece in one of the major national newspapers in Sweden’ and ‘a paper about ethics in media organizations . . . that was picked up by mass media’ which resulted in ‘a series of articles about media ethics in one of the major national papers in Sweden’ as examples of critical research in the public interest (2016: 234). Perhaps coincidentally, such measurable engagement reflects changes in the academic landscape. Earlier critical organization theory focused on journal articles – something Fournier and Grey (2000) link institutionally to the UK’s Research Assessment Exercise (later Research Excellence Framework). The institutional mechanisms of higher education have since shifted towards ‘impact’ as a measure of academic success. In the UK context at least, directly engaging with practitioners within an ‘impact case study’ carries more financial and esteem value to an academic institution than a top-tier journal publication. Indeed, submission of journal publications for evaluation within these assessments is dependent on a department having sufficient impact cases. Impact, more broadly, has become an important issue for academics across the world, whether it be for tenure applications in the USA or promotions processes and funding bids across the world. Yet, as far as we can see, impact, in all these cases, is likely to involve a pre-planned, technical form of engagement which can only improve what is done in the here and now with documentation and evidence collected to prove that one’s ideas have engaged ‘executives, policy-makers, regulators’ (Spicer et al, 2016: 234).

While few critically engaged scholars would admit that they are motivated by such things, the demands for research funding, consultancy and co-produced research means that critical scholars can benefit materially, and individually, by shifting the domain of critical scholarship away from theory toward practice. These benefits do manifest themselves – perhaps unconsciously – in recent discussions. Contu, for example, in her advocacy for academic activism notes, somewhat out of context, that: ‘Calls (e.g. from grant-funding agencies/bodies) have multiplied to generate ‘impact’ moving away from research as an arms-length, intellectual exercise to an actual engagement with multiple

stakeholders (to use management-speak), changing the world for the better' (2020: 741). In other words, there are resources, esteem, power, and cultural capital on offer to critical scholars who engage with practice and practitioners. The self-aware use of 'management-speak' here is telling.

So, despite contemporary critical scholars frequently accusing previous critical organization and management scholars of careerism and self-indulgence, they also highlight the benefits to one's career of an impact case study, newspaper article or a large grant. Of course, we do not want to claim that all individual scholars are motivated by a pathological delusion nor suggest that they are anything other than authentic in their desires to have a practical impact. However, we are concerned that some of the statements made in support of a more engaged scholarship do position 'old-fashioned' critical scholars as deluded narcissists moaning away about big words, without reflection. Indeed, while much engaged and practice-oriented critical research is presented as being impactful, it is relatively silent on exactly how it will achieve change through these engagements – affirming certain organizations, building a library of case studies, engaging with disgruntled employees, press articles, the number of submissions for a special issue and the possibility of grant funding are held up as indicators of success. Are these progressive? Are they really methods for social change? If there is such a pressing need to focus on practice and the real world, why is there such little evidence of its effects?

On this point, again, it is instructive to compare these positions with reference to earlier critical organization theory. Alvesson (1987) critiques the claim that some kinds of management knowledge are better than others due to their supposed 'practical relevance'. Alvesson points out that those who espouse the value of practical relevance to dismiss critical theory rarely question their own impact, or lack of it. If they did, they would see their own impotence. At the time, he was writing (1987) about gatekeepers of traditional management knowledge who used practical relevance as a stick to marginalize critical theory and fledgling critical management studies. This same stick is now used, potentially with the same lack of self-reflection, by critical management and organization scholars themselves. For Alvesson, writing before the third wave, this 'indicates that there are also other motives behind the popularity than the practical value and influence of theories' (1987: 143). Could collective narcissism be one such hidden motive?

The problem with thinking actionism: Going beyond the here and now

Up to this point, we have outlined four components of Adorno's conception of thinking actionism and highlighted how they undermine the political ambitions espoused by critical researchers emphasizing practice. Despite claiming to be focused on doing things, changing the world for the better, encouraging collective actions, thinking actionism is a mode of thinking that struggles to acknowledge its own reality. We have also suggested that thinking actionism is manifest in contemporary critical organizational theory and management studies.

In making this assessment, we do not want to claim that these texts suffer from thinking actionism tout court, nor that individual critical scholars are thinking actionists. Rather, we believe that, taken as a discourse, the mode of thinking displayed in

practice-oriented critical research across a range of topics has an affinity with elements of thinking actionism that Adorno warns us against. We are concerned that practically minded organizational critique can shift into the kinds of technical knowledge that early critical organization theory and management studies were defined against. Scholarship affirming practice, with light or weak theory, risks devolving into a naive pragmatism that is only concerned with ‘what works’ in the here and now and discovering ‘efficient means of reaching pre-specified ends’ (Mingers, 1992: 93). Yes, the ‘ends’ for some critical scholars might be solidarity, autonomy, and sustainability, but the technical rationality remains (Alvesson, 1985).

But what if the possible is ‘hidden by that what is already apparent’ (Sohn-Rethel 2020: 146)? What if the predefined ends forestall progress rather than prefiguring it? History shows that following practice can nullify radical critiques. For example, corporate social responsibility, grand challenges, meaningful work and even organizational culture are concepts that emerged from industry. Heralded as having an influence on practice, academics subsequently adopted these terms, stunting the possibility of bringing about real change in business and society. The terms and concepts were already co-opted.

Reflecting this concern, after the initial split between Marcuse and Adorno, Frankfurt School critical theorists unanimously rejected the idea that critical theory should follow practice or offer instructions for how to act. The injunction to be practical, they felt, was a way of being ‘tied down’ to ‘effectiveness here and now’ (Adorno, 1984: 260). It pushes us to overvalue what Adorno (1969b) calls pseudo-activities – that is, fleeting moments of resistance and small-scale interactions that have little chance of affecting real social change. Adorno writes that they ‘are rationalized by saying that the small change is one step in the long path toward the transformation of the whole’ but really their only effect is to ‘inspire in the unfree individuals, paralyzed in their spontaneity, the assurance that everything depends on them’ (1969b: 291–292).

To maintain this delusion, thinking actionism tends towards anti-intellectualism. The dismissal of critical theory as moaning and accusations of obscurantism prejudice thoughts before they have even been expressed. We see evidence of this in contemporary critical organization theory, where there are attacks against ‘theory for theory’s sake’ (Prasad, 2023: 1260) and ‘an unhealthy obsession’ for ‘long words’ (Tourish, 2020: 110). Such sentiments imply there are thoughts which are not worth thinking and some words which should not be used. They are too complex, boring, or difficult for practitioners, even other academics, to digest. What is needed is simple, straightforward instructions, like case studies, models, recipes and neatly packaged, in-date, intellectual products.

The regressive nature of thinking actionism is, therefore, not due to the practices it promotes but the mode of thinking it necessitates. It is undialectical. It separates theory and practice, denouncing theory to privilege practice. It separates critique and affirmation, as if one cannot critique something one also wishes to affirm and vice versa. It separates the individual from the collective, raising suspicion against those who refuse to join in. It calls for things to be rejected or accepted, to be friend or foe, to be good or bad. This is not a critical mode of thinking. It is bureaucratic one. The antidote to actionism is, then, to reject the split between theory and practice. It is to ask: what is not to be done?

What is not to be done? The division of critical labour

The ‘methodology of change’ (Alvesson and Willmott, 1990: 41) implicit in Frankfurt School critical theory is far less certain about its ends but far more certain about its means than thinking actionism. It tells us that genuine change emerges through an unplanned dialectic between theory and practice. On this point, Adorno conceptualizes theory and practice as bringing something unique to their dialectic. They are not interchangeable but serve specific functions. For its part, theory is an organized practice – as even the isolated critic, ensconced in an ivory tower, thinks within an organizational and institutional setting (Cluley and Parker, 2023). In contrast, practice can be unthinking. The dialectic of theory and practice occurs, then, not when unthinking practice drives theory but when there is a ‘qualitative reversal’ from theory into practice in which theory ‘ignites a practical impulse’ for new actions, values, and relations (Adorno, 1984: 264–277).

Adorno is crystal clear on this point. He writes that it is ‘of incalculable relevance for the relationship of theory to praxis’ that through ‘its difference from immediate, situation-specific action. . . theory becomes a transformative and a practical productive force’ (Adorno, 1984: 264). Theory, unlike practice, has a timeless quality to it. It can be rethought, interpreted, translated and applied. For practice to have a similar effect, it must be theorized into a concept, image, story, and so forth (see Benjamin, 1931/2014). For illustration, Adorno (1969c) points to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944). He notes that the chapter on the culture industry, which argues that capitalism tends to reduce culture to an industrial product that can manipulate public opinion and limit the critical imagination, became almost common knowledge and inspired alternative forms of cultural production neither foreseen nor intended when he and Horkheimer conceived their ideas. Adorno also points to Marx for an illustration. While Marx claimed, in a quote popular with critically engaged scholars, that the point is not to interpret the world but to change it, Adorno notes that Marx’s most lasting impact came through his critique of existing concepts of political economy. He achieved a lot more by interpreting the world than he did by his academic activism. His thought could travel in time and space, inspire, frustrate, and ignite action in a way that his actions did not.

Such a dialectic approach to progress involves immanent critique, which exposes ideologies and discursive closures that impede progress and, by bringing them to conscious awareness, can spark emancipatory strategies and organizational action. This is not simply moaning; it has productive potential. These do not have to be planned in advance nor motivate the original theorizations. Likewise, through reparative critique, critical theory can ‘do more than just show problems but also seek to improve upon these problems through showing what might be better in a particular setting’ (Alvesson and Spicer, 2025: 4). Rosen (1987) illustrates how these methods apply in organization theory. The dialectical view we inherit through the Frankfurt School directs us to explicate ‘instances and processes of organizing and its components . . . in which the researcher explores the limitations and potentials of the organizational system being investigated’ (Rosen, 1987: 576). This ‘knowledge generation and contextualization’ opens the possibility for imaginative problem-solving and restorative dialectics. Rather than describing, affirming, and holding hands with organizations we support, through such theory,

we challenge organizations to transcend their limits and contradictions. We critique what we are for ‘and our own opposing position at the same time’ (Rosen, 1987: 576).

This dialectic understanding of progress sees it as messy and uncertain. It produces new practices with their own limits and contradictions. Something liberatory in one moment may reverse into domination and vice versa. As such, the dialectic of critical theory and practice might involve a negative dialectic in which theory prompts regression rather than progress (Adorno, 1973). This is the risk of radical thought. In Adorno’s terms, the reversal of theory into practice is spontaneous. It cannot be planned – this would tie it down to the present. It occurs when theory, autonomously, fulfils its purpose. This is not dependent on the will of a thinker nor their commitment to social progress. In fact, these reversals are restricted when thought is ‘taken in hand by praxis and tailored to fit the results it enjoins’ (Adorno, 1984: 261–265).

Recently, Cluley and Parker (2023) argue that this view of critical theory manifested in the organizational practices within the Frankfurt School. Observing that the Frankfurt School operated through bureaucratic and hierarchical actions that some might think contradict their political agenda, Cluley and Parker (2023) suggest that the Frankfurt School worked through critical theory-in-use. Here, the Frankfurt School embraced the limitations of mechanistic organizing, pushing them to a point where they might reverse qualitatively into autonomous practices. Indeed, it is noteworthy that after his initial siding with political activists, against Adorno, following the student protests in the 1960s, Marcuse came to side with Adorno. While he maintained connections with radical groups, and continued to inspire them, Marcuse became sceptical of critical theory that provided instructions for immediate actions and saw, instead, the need for a critical analysis of the current moment, of opposition and of the place of the critical theorist.

Recognizing the importance of theory in its dialectic with practice is, to be clear, not a call to diminish practice nor is it a call to return to our ivory tower and lock the doors. This would be just as undialectical as thinking actionism. Engaging with practice, activists, sympathetic managers or exploring and advocating for alternative and more critical organizations is not wrong nor unproductive but prefigurative alternative practices cannot imagine the future for us. Similarly, recognizing the role of theory does not mean we should ignore our own academic practices. It means that we must not assume that academic activism or critical performativity are sufficient to drive social change. Rather, recognizing the dialectical basis of praxis should encourage us to ask if social change is possible in the current moment – whether this is inside organizations, through organizations or by organizing. It should alert us to the risk that our desires, values and practices might make things worse.

With this in mind, we strongly oppose Prasad’s (2023) denouncing of theory for theory’s sake and Tourish’s (2020) attack on complex language. Of course, not all work which aims to make a theoretical contribution succeeds, and there are undoubtedly cynical uses of theory where authors adopt an abstract vocabulary and moan because they have nothing else to offer. But, if the university is not a place to write theory for theory’s sake or use long words, where is? If scholars in esteemed research institutions cannot discuss complex issues in esoteric terms, insisting on the highest standards of scholarship, who can?

We also reject Parker et al.’s (2014b) disgust for moaning and the assumption that we can only critique that which we are against. We must recognize the value and potential of

that we want to change (Fromm, 1947). Instead of affirming what we are attracted to, we need to think about why we are attracted to it in the first place and consider if this limits progress. Likewise, we think that critical scholars should resist the imperative for narrowly defined impact as a replacement for the spontaneous dialectic of theory and practice. The drive for impact in contemporary academia is a motivating factor for many critically engaged researchers. But this is usually articulated as part of a pre-planned, technical form of knowledge, which looks to improve what is done in the here and now. Returning to the UK example of impact case studies for the REF, the typical temporal horizon of what is considered an impact case study is no more than 10 years and often much shorter; the impact must be demonstrable, ideally measurable; and must be traced back through impact activities to research publications.

Instead of allowing this technicist logic to restrict theory, critical scholars must embrace the uncertainty and spontaneity that the qualitative reversal of theory into practice demands. This, again, involves being less certain about who our friends are and what progressive organizing looks like. It would allow us to be open to genuinely radical practices. Long-term changes caused by indirect consequences and slow-burning ideas that swim against the hegemonic tide will be considered by many to have no impact – but what they mean by this is no ‘measurable impact’ according to the restrictive criteria.

The idea that social progress will come about through impact case studies, by dumbing down our thinking or ignoring what has been written before must be rejected. The university should not be treated as a start-up that has to bring intellectual products to market if it is to keep going. The idea that the university is a supermarket or a recipe book limits the emancipatory potential of education and neglects the timeless nature of a poignant theory. What happened to teaching people how to think rather than what to do? Sociological imagination may be the best cure for capitalist realism (Mills, 1959).

Defending critical theory: Popular thinkers and impact

Following the occupation of his lectures, Adorno became more resolute about the need for critical theorists to defend critical theory. He did not shy away from public life but he never allowed himself to be swayed towards practice and direct activism. Rather, he continued to argue for questioning, critique and thinking for its own sake. As Adorno puts it, ‘in a society based on the division of labor’ the task of critique falls to ‘theoretical thinkers, who are relatively sensitive and by no means shockproof instruments’ (1969b: 289). Put simply, society did not create the critical theorist because it needed them to be practical.

Placing critical theory in a social division of labour in this way opens up a practical question for individual theorists to think about. Can we separate our theory, practice and praxis? Can we write theory in the working week and protest at the weekend? Adorno’s own practices as a public intellectual and theorist of contemporary culture highlight the importance of being in the world, theorizing it from within. But we must be aware of the attraction of practice and the risks of pseudo-praxis. That is, we must be aware that our engagement with political practice might be a form of consumption that allows us to delude ourselves into thinking we are changing the world. We might be adding the ‘carnavalesque background noise to capitalist realism’ (Fisher, 2009: 18).

Thinking dialectically, we must maintain the tension between theory and praxis. As researchers, we bring something to, as well as take something away from, research

contexts and losing sight of critique or losing yourself within a context is problematic. Returning to our own identities as ethnographers and researchers, we have both been brought up within critical theory and critical approaches to organizations and we are only too aware of how seductive practice can be. 'Going native' has always been the risk of engaging in practice and with people over a prolonged period of time. However, losing yourself and analytical distance is not just a methodological issue, but a political one. It is far more likely when studying and working with people with whom you share similar political ideas.

One of the early manuscripts on alternative organizations in this journal, Parker and Parker (2017), highlights the tensions and excitement involved in studying an organization that is trying to challenge the status quo. The theoretical underpinnings held tightly by one of the authors were challenged by a context within which they spent a considerable amount of time and with which they were suitably impressed. In many ways, then, this manuscript was an attempt to reflexively theorize what CMS and critical theory allow us to see in an 'alternative' organization. In other empirical and theoretical work, we have, similarly, spent time with managers and studied activists and radicals. We have suspected that many of the contradictions, exploitations and complications evidenced in third wave research is a result of practice lacking theory – not having too much of it. Society has delegated the job of supplying this to critical theorists and we have an obligation (and privilege) to deliver.

On this, if we look at political reality, we can counter thinking actionism on its own terms. We live in a world where many of the world's top business schools, and businesses, promote ethics, responsibility, sustainability and inclusion. We can question the authenticity of these claims, but they would not have come into being without the victories of critical theory. More broadly, there are numerous examples of popular thinkers who have inspired political action through their critiques, not their practice. On the left of the political spectrum popular thinkers such as Stuart Hall (Hall et al., 1978, Hall and Gieben, 1992) Paul Gilroy (1987, 2004), David Graeber (2015, 2018), Michael Hardt and Toni Negri (Hardt and Negri, 2000, 2004, 2009), Naomi Klein (2000), Judith Butler (1990, 1993) and Mark Fisher (2009, 2013) have developed powerful critiques of contemporary organizational practices. Yes, some of these thinkers attended political rallies, demonstrations and gave speeches to activists, but they also engaged in some of the most abstract and esoteric theories and discussions imaginable. It was David Graeber's announcement that 'we are the 99%' and not his participation in Occupy that shaped a movement and became cited in mainstream newspapers (and a highly rated REF impact case study, for those who like that sort of thing). It was Stuart Hall who cultivated and shaped the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in the 1960s advancing the critical analysis of race, gender, and culture. Drawing on feminist, structuralist, and Marxist theory, the Centre revolutionized analysis of culture, producing books, articles and studies that contributed to the New Left and were a constant thorn in the side of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party. It was Judith Butler's scholarly efforts in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993) that changed thought within social movements and amongst activists. Often described as elitist due to their writing style, Butler influenced queer theory, philosophy, psychoanalysis, film, acting, the practices of gay parenting and mobilized various activists through their theory

and unrelentless availability to speak at events and be interviewed. Butler was involved in Occupy, has organized teach-ins, speaks out regularly against war, but predominantly engages in politics through their writing and theory.

We are conscious that drawing on the Frankfurt School and highlighting such prominent thinkers risks of reproducing power structures and inequalities that praxis should overcome. The Frankfurt School was not particularly diverse, nor did they focus too much on theoretical ideas like post-colonialism, feminism or race, despite providing theoretical concepts for many to borrow later down the line. We do not seek to replicate this particular element of critical theory. Here, we also note our positions as European scholars and note that this may limit the theorists to whom we are exposed. But we do think it is worthwhile to highlight the success of critical theory and foreground the practices of critical theorists as theorists who wrote theory for theory's sake, used long words, and valiantly moaned.

Regrettably, many on this list of popular thinkers are no longer with us, which underlines the need for more critical and theoretically engaged popular thinkers from around the world. This is especially the case as, while there are progressive thinkers engaging with organizational matters, we are also witnessing the growth of right-wing 'critical' organization theory. Within organizational theory, for instance, we are seeing a growth in critiques of progressive organizational practices such as social justice and environmental sustainability (e.g. Foss and Klein, 2023). These sentiments are also reflected in popular culture through right-wing thinkers such as Jordan Peterson, Bret Weinstein, and Ben Shapiro, who rally against woke ideology on campus and claim it has marched into organizations. Ironically, on this point, the political right highlights the success of critical theory in effecting organizational practice (e.g. Pluckrose and Lindsay, 2020) – success that iconic critics deny. Moreover, those on the political right have translated this critique into political action aimed at 'draining the swamp' or 'destroying the blob' – to offer examples from the USA and UK.

This is a topic that Frankfurt School writers thought about. They believed that a focus on immediate political action on the progressive side would create a theoretical vacuum that the forces of repression would move into. The founding member of the Frankfurt School, Wittfogel (1957: 10) warns against letting 'totalitarian strategists parade their contrived doctrines on the ground that is legitimately ours'. He continues, there 'is no excuse for letting them win the battle of ideas by default'. Ignoring these warnings because they are obtuse or use long words is a dangerous mistake. So, we call on critical organization theorists to recognize their usefulness in the social division of labour and to build on its successes. Do not let the forces of repression use them against us. Society needs critique. Organization and management theory needs critical organization and management theory. Academics should think, write, and teach. They should write about big ideas, small ideas, seemingly esoteric ideas that can be connected to practice in an obvious way, and in a less obvious way, and should find ways to connect with a variety of audiences – not just practitioners. This means writing interesting things academics, activists and the broader public will want to read, but also writing in interesting ways that can ignite a practical impulse. As friend of the Frankfurt School, playwright Bertolt Brecht explains, inspiring others to act in the belief that they can think and write better than you is the most powerful route to action (see Cluley, 2023).

In contrast to their depiction in much recent critical management and organization studies, this practical impulse is a hallmark of Critical Theory. While their writing might not engage everyone, Frankfurt School scholars were popular thinkers who inspired practice. Indeed, many thinkers who are now held up as the epitome of meaningless and esoteric writing in management and organizational scholarship, such as Derrida, Lacan, Žižek and Deleuze are read far more widely those who attack them now in organizational scholarship. We would do well to remember this. We must not reject critique and only use theory to affirm practice. We need to be brave enough to stand up for critical theory and honour its achievements, rather than use the lazy stereotype of the grumbler.

We end this paper, therefore, with a call for practice-oriented critical researchers to put their hopeful dialectic into conversation with a hopeless dialectic. We must not limit ourselves to current understandings of what is alternative, prefigurative, good or better. We must challenge these concepts. We must think and act and not become thinking actionists.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank participants at the stream 'For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing: Organizational Contradictions, Social Struggle and Immanent Critique in CMS' (stream 15) at the International Critical Management Studies conference, Manchester 2025; the open stream at the International Critical Management Studies conference, Nottingham 2023; and Sub-theme 20: 'Alternative Organization at a Crossroads: Which Routes Forward?' at the European Group for Organizational Studies (EGOS) Colloquium, Milan 2024, for their valuable feedback and discussion. We are especially grateful to Hugh Willmott for his generous engagement with an earlier draft of this paper.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

AI usage declaration

The authors acknowledge that they have followed *Human Relations'* AI policy. No AI was used for preparing the manuscript.

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