

Critical in the Name of Whom and What?

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Mayer Zald's article poses an important challenge to the field of Critical Management Studies. It is based on a presentation to the Critical Management Studies Workshop (CMSW) at the 2001 Academy of Management meeting. I respond to it as someone who has helped organize the Critical Management Studies Workshop within the Academy of Management. I write here, however, not to represent the group's views but to advance the debate about its future.

When we decided to call our group the 'Critical Management Studies Workshop', the meaning of the term 'critical' was left rather vague. Our 'mission statement' (<http://aom.pace.edu/cms/>) reads:

Our shared belief is that management of the modern firm (and often of other types of organizations too) is guided by a narrow goal—profits—rather than by the interests of society as a whole, and that other goals—justice, community, human development, ecological balance—should be brought to bear on the governance of economic activity. We are fundamentally critical of the notion that the pursuit of profit will automatically satisfy these broader goals. We believe that such a one-sided system extracts an unacceptably high social cost for whatever progress it offers. Guided by such narrow goals, the firm is a structure of domination; our shared commitment is to helping people free themselves from that domination. The CMS workshop's objective is therefore the development of critical interpretations of management—interpretations that are critical not of poor management nor of individual managers, but of the system of business and management that reproduces this one-sidedness...

Our workshop is open to a broad range of critical views. We aim to foster critiques coming from labor, feminist, anti-racist, ecological, and other perspectives. We are open to critiques formulated from a broad range of theoretical standpoints. In particular, our use of the term 'critical' is not meant to signal a specific commitment to any particular school of thought such as Frankfurt School critical theory. Rather we include proponents of all the various theoretical traditions that can help us understand the



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oppressive character of the current management and business system. To use some of the labels ready at hand, these traditions include, but are not restricted to: marxist, post-marxist, post-modernist, feminist, ecological, irreductionist, critical-realist, post-colonial.

Mayer captures the spirit of this statement well: it reflects a combination of left values and post-positivist methodology. I would add, however, that while it kept the door open to people whose primary commitments were more philosophical—critical for example of a reductionist prison-house of modernist epistemology—the statement included a lengthy enough list of more substantive, left value commitments that it was clear that if you did not also share these latter, you were not going to feel at home.¹

Within that span, the CMSW organizers adopted a ‘big tent’ strategy. We did not at the outset specify too clearly what we were for or whom we were speaking on behalf of. Over the last couple of years, however, we have begun tackling these issues more explicitly, and as part of this effort, we invited Mayer Zald to address our 2001 meeting in Washington, DC. His talk, presented here in essay form, first situates Critical Management Studies in the broader intellectual and academic history, and then confronts us with a choice: should we aspire to play a marginal or a more central role in management education?

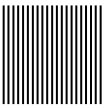
In the paragraphs that follow, I offer some thoughts on this choice. My reflections can be organized under the three central terms of the title—critical, whom, what—taken in reverse order. This will lead us to the choice Mayer poses for us. In addressing it, I will argue for a third alternative.

In the Name of What?

Our mission statement, while broad, was radical, arguing for ‘critical interpretations of management—interpretations that are critical not of poor management nor of individual managers, but of the system of business and management that reproduces this one-sidedness’. A concern with exploitation and domination does not justify the radicalism implied by this statement unless we also believe that a better, qualitatively superior form of society is possible. This premise raises two issues.

First, quite a few people who share at least some of the CMSW mission statement’s sentiments felt that the statement was too ‘negative’—that we should be defining CMSW by what we stand for, not just by what we stand against. They argued that our critique should be in the name of some specifiable alternative.

Among the CMSW organizers, some resisted this specification. I, for one, felt that either such a statement would end up entirely banal, watered down to the lowest common denominator, or the effort to write something more substantive would destroy CMSW before it got off the ground because too few of us would ever be able to agree on anything much. Moreover, I share the view—a traditional one on some parts of the



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left—that this demand for blueprints was a red herring, that it represents a kind of petty-bourgeois-intellectual effort to assert control over a process of struggle and change that is necessarily somewhat chaotic.

Second, what rationale do we offer for this belief in the possibility of a superior form of society? After all, active involvement in and compassion with worthy struggles are quite compatible with a strong conviction that capitalism with all its faults is the best history will have to offer. Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis does not commit its proponents to militant defense of the status quo. His theory only excludes any struggles that threaten the basic capitalist matrix of society, since they encourage a 'dangerous illusion'.

'Critters' (as we call ourselves in the CMSW) differ in the motivation of their radical critique of the current socio-economic system. Some find that this commitment is only partly rational in origin. Speaking personally, my own stance is partly a function of values inherited from my parents and their community. To the extent that my commitments are theoretically grounded, it is by a kind of paleo-marxist *reductio ad absurdum*: if the current capitalist form of society is but the latest in the sequence that humankind has witnessed, then it defies reason that this should be the last and the best humanity can do for itself. A better form of society must surely be possible.

I don't think we know much about what this more advanced form of society would look like, and, as I explained earlier, nor do I think that in forming CMSW we need to. But, as I see it, the premise of CMSW is that an alternative is possible. CMSW supporters are indeed purveyors of what friends of Fukuyama might think of as a dangerous illusion.

Concretely, this conviction drives critical management research in the direction recommended by Mayer at the end of his essay—toward a greater focus on the role of macro, socio-economic context in shaping action for meso- and micro-level action by and within firms. Mayer is surely right in arguing that this theme should figure prominently in Critical Management Studies.

In the Name of Whom?

I have used Fukuyama to help define one boundary of CMSW, but, in doing so, I have surreptitiously pulled the blanket to my side of the bed when it comes to the 'Whom' question. My own view is that the key target of CMSW's critique should be the capitalist, market-based form of society, and our critique should be primarily but not exclusively in the name of working people.

This view is probably not shared by all current self-identified critters. I'll mention just two of several possible alternatives. Some critters probably see gender oppression as their major concern and come to CMSW looking for people who share a more radical and less managerialist position in that struggle. Patriarchy might be the defining category for them. And some critters might see ecological destruction as their



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major concern, and come to CMSW looking for ecologists who share a deeper and less managerialist critique of productivism.

The debates here (the contemporary pertinence of class, the relationship between these various lines of division, the autonomy of social movements, etc.) are long-standing and difficult. But, as I see it, such discussions are an important part of CMSW's *raison d'être*. I would like to see CMSW become a forum in which critters can explore these various 'dangerous illusions', and in the process of this exploration find more common ground and basis for common action.

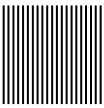
Concretely, this raises a set of issues that Mayer does not address but which seem crucial to understanding the possibilities facing Critical Management Studies—the role of various stakeholders in the business school.² If Critical Management Studies is more popular in Europe, it is surely due not only to more hospitable intellectual traditions. Surely it has something to do with the strength of unions and their power as stakeholders in these societies—and in their business schools. Part of the agenda of CMSW therefore needs to be an effort to build bridges between business schools and unions and other progressive social forces, so that business schools no longer serve merely as a corporate-controlled breeding pond. This would, in turn, further legitimate research in the name of the subaltern.

What Kind of Critique?

At the heart of the question 'Critical in the name of whom and what?' is the key issue posed for us by Mayer's essay—the nature of the critique we try to advance. This is surely an issue for critters whatever their professional roles, but, following Mayer, I will concentrate my comments on business school academics. I see a number of possible answers. I will frame them as if we agreed that the 'whom' is workers, but I think the reasoning probably also applies to other 'subjects'.

A first possible answer is a 'militant' one. It is one premised on a commitment to the victims of corporate power. This answer is consonant with—and happy with, or at least resigned to—Charles Perrow's oxymoron quip and with Mayer's marginality scenario. Indeed, we can use our academic positions as a pulpit from which to engage campaigns in words and deeds against the corporate world's malfeasance. In this approach, our teaching role is harder to justify (one might ask: 'Why bother with these people?!'), but our research role can take the form of consciousness-raising, or at least hellraising and muckraking. Business schools are, after all, usually at least nominally part of universities, and those of us with tenure in such institutions have a broad margin of academic freedom we can leverage. Even those of us without tenure can usually create some margin for action.

As I will explain shortly, I don't think this is the strongest possible position, but it is nevertheless a powerful one. We certainly need a lot more muckraking. And, after all, why not use our pulpits to encourage



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our students—even MBA students—to renounce shareholder wealth and devote themselves to worthier causes?

Mayer proposes a second possible answer. I think of it as ‘humanist’ in nature. As I understand him, it is premised on the idea that managers are people too (if you will forgive the flippancy). As people—as humans endowed with empathy and with notions of justice, and as citizens—managers may feel profoundly ambivalent about their managerial roles. We can help students who are or want to become managers deal productively with that ambivalence—productively, that is, not from the point of view of maximizing shareholder wealth, but from the point of view of the students’ personal development—helping them make more reflective choices.

This position seems to be easier to envisage for those of us teaching in schools of public administration rather than business administration and for those of us teaching undergraduates rather than (more vocationally oriented) MBA students. In the MBA classroom, the profit imperative of the corporation and students’ own professional focus make this position harder to sustain. Nevertheless, even in the MBA programs, I agree with Mayer that we could engage a more serious battle for the heart and soul of the curriculum in the name of what Mayer calls an enlightenment/reflexive model.

This humanist position has much to recommend it. It would surely be a huge step forward were it to be adopted to guide management education. And, whereas the militant position offers little guidance on how we should relate to our students, the humanist position encourages a promising, respectful engagement. On the other hand, whereas it is easy to see how the militant position can help orient us in our research roles, the humanist view offers less guidance here. Moreover, while the humanist view specifies a pedagogy (akin to Dewey’s) that can support students’ personal development, it says little about the content of our teaching.

The humanist position has a crucial limitation, one that Mayer mentions then passes over quickly. It is that ‘such an epistemology need not be “critical” in the sense of left criticism’ (p.??). Indeed, while this humanist position reflects our post-positivist commitments, it leaves out our left commitments. While critical management scholars can and should support humanist pedagogies, I think that we should develop a distinctively critical content—critical in the sense discussed in the previous sections, namely a leftist one.

I see a third possibility that might satisfy this criterion—I’ll call it ‘progressive’. I believe that it preserves our left values (even if post-modernists will balk at its philosophy). It incorporates some aspects of both the humanist and the militant positions. In the balance of this essay, I will try to articulate one form this progressive position could take.

On the progressive view, managers at pretty much all levels in a capitalist corporation play a contradictory role. On the one hand, they are part of what Marx called the ‘collective worker’, contributing expertise



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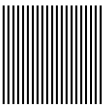
and assuring coordination. On the other hand, they are the agents of the intrinsically exploitative wage relation and of the coercive domination of the market. In our teaching role, I think we can help would-be managers to become aware of this contradiction that they will be living, and help them reflect on how it shapes the practice of business management. (This point honors the humanist position.) In our research role, such a vision of an internally contradictory social structure seems like a critical resource for studies of management that aspire to show that the present social structure is not immutable and that the social could be structured otherwise.

Many people, especially among proponents of the militant view discussed earlier, criticize this progressive position. Some argue that managers play no productive role, by definition. Others accept that it is meaningful to distinguish these two roles, but argue that the productive one is only 'notional' because in a capitalist society it manifests itself only in the form of the latter, exploitative role.

I think these criticisms are wrong in theory and in practice. In theory, the contradiction between the two roles played by managers—just like the contradictions between other basic pairs in marxist theory, most fundamentally, use value/exchange value and forces of production/relations of production—is real, not just notional. It is not just a contrast between what should be and what is. It is a real contradiction between two objective forces whose interaction shapes the dynamics of change.³

As I see it, one of the main sources of hope for the eventual emergence of a superior form of society is, as the Communist Manifesto argues (a bit ambiguously, to be sure), the real and growing contradiction between the development of the forces of production (productive capabilities) and the maintenance of basically capitalist relations of production (property rights). Under conditions of advanced capitalism, the cumulative development of the forces of production tends over time to render increasingly obsolete the existing relations of production. More specifically: workers' cognitive and social capabilities are elements of the forces of production, and, over the long term and in broad aggregate, the pressure of competition forces firms and societies to upgrade those capabilities. The development of capitalism thus tends to create a working class that is increasingly sophisticated and increasingly capable of undertaking successfully the kind of social transformation we hope for. (An Appendix elaborates on this idea.)

This developmental effect is, of course, only found in the broad aggregate. Individual firms often have other ('low road') ways of assuring profitability. And, in their exploitative roles, managers end up hurting lots of workers in the struggle for profit-by-any-means. (This point honors the militant position.) But, in their productive role, some managers (particularly, lower-level ones) might become potential allies, insofar as their productive role is salient in their self-concept. And, whatever their subjective self-concept, they often also (consciously or not) help to



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upgrade workers' capabilities. Workers' capabilities, of course, are only one prerequisite for radical social transformation—people will also need motivation (to evoke the old distinction between the class-in-itself and the class-for-itself). But assuring this motivation is, I think, primarily the responsibility of the ideological and political spheres, as distinct from the sphere of production. As lords of the realm of production, managers often help develop, inadvertently or deliberately, working-class capabilities.

The implication of this way of putting things is worth pondering. On this premise, critters can embrace a role helping managers to be more effective—in their productive role—and to be more lucid about the tensions between their productive and exploitative roles. The latter implies that our position as critters in business schools will still be somewhat uncomfortable (as suggested by the militant position). After all, if we believe this story, there are surely more urgent tasks than the education of managers. But it does promise to get us further towards our goals than either the militant or humanist positions by themselves. Managers often experience as personally painful and ethically repugnant the tension between the imperatives of profit and those of productive upgrading. Giving voice to these concerns and making them intelligible in the form of a critique of the existing order—that is the progressive program for Critical Management Studies I would propose in response to Mayer's essay.

Appendix

The progressive view I advocate runs counter to thinking dominant on the left today. When Marx writes that capitalism develops its own 'gravediggers', the dominant interpretation takes him to mean that capitalist development creates a class with so little left to lose that it has no alternative but to revolt. As I see it, however, the strongest of the various, and not entirely consistent, storylines articulated by Marx is very different.

I think Marx is more fruitfully interpreted as arguing that the development of capitalism implies the development of an increasingly sophisticated working class, characterized by progressively higher education levels, broader world-views, more powerful cognitive capabilities, and more advanced ethical values. (I take 'working class' to include skilled and unskilled, blue- and white-collar employees who are excluded from real ownership of the means of production and forced to sell their labor-power. Even by Wright's restrictive standards, this class of 'non-owners without organizational assets' constitutes a majority (Wright, 1985: 195).) On this view, the motivation for fundamental social change is not growing misery but growing anger at capitalism as a system—at the destructiveness of its ongoing economic cycles, its persistent inequalities, its environmental irresponsibility, and its government subservience to corporate interests. It is precisely because the working class becomes



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more sophisticated that it is increasingly likely—over the long run, in secular tendency—to take on successfully the task of radically transforming society.

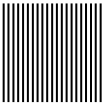
This reading of Marx was standard until World War I, but was subsequently eclipsed. That's why I called it 'paleo-marxist' in my essay. Ideologically, it went hand in hand with a sense of the historical inevitability of socialism and a great self-confidence on the part of the major working-class parties. 'Socialism or barbarism' was both a prediction about the long-term prospects and a slogan for action.

Since then, the more radical parts of the left, starting with Lenin, have argued that the progressive view concedes too much continuing legitimacy to capitalism. After all, these folks argue, if capitalism continued to foster the development of working-class capabilities, then why should we be so radically hostile to it? Instead of locating the source of historical change in the contradiction between forces and relations of production, much twentieth-century marxism (particularly the versions found on the revolutionary left) increasingly located it in the conflict between classes.

This thinking led the revolutionary left to endorse the 'absolute immiseration' thesis in various guises. In assertions and by the implication of its polemic, we were asked to believe that the development of the forces of production had already peaked by the early 20th century—a proposition that is difficult to sustain given the subsequent waves of innovation. That society's productivity could increase only if socialism replaced capitalism—disconfirmed by subsequent rates of productivity growth. That the future of the working class under capitalism was one of worsening living and working conditions—notwithstanding the considerable improvement in both for most workers over the 20th century. And that imperialist expansion of capitalism could only worsen the lot of people in less developed countries—against the evidence of considerable widespread, albeit far from universal, improvements in morbidity, mortality, standards of living, and education.

To be sure, the reasons for the waxing and waning of support for the idea of a socialist alternative (rather than for a humanized capitalism) have more to do with politics than with theory. But theory as silly as immiseration is surely also a contributing factor. It is hardly surprising that so many critically minded people turned against the very idea of a form of society beyond capitalism when its key justifications were based on such empirically untenable propositions.

I call my own views paleo-marxist because I think there is a very cogent story we can tell about the fundamental limitations of capitalism, about how they coexist with a continuing upgrading of worker capabilities and technological infrastructure, and about how this combination spells an increasing probability of radical change in the form of society. I think this standpoint affords us a fruitful angle of approach to our research, teaching, and political tasks.



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Notes

This is an edited version of an essay that originally appeared on the CMSW listserver. The original essay was written in preparation for the 2000 meeting of the Critical Management Studies Workshop at the Academy of Management meeting in Toronto.

- 1 Mayer portrays us as embracing the union of two partially overlapping sets, left values and postmodern epistemology, ontology, and methodology. However a recent survey of our members suggests that, while almost all the people involved in CMSW share some variant of left values, commitment to post-modernist ideas is much less widespread. Postmodernist-type ontologies and epistemologies compete for popularity with forms of materialism and realism. 'Post-positivist methodology' is perhaps a term that would characterize the more widely shared philosophy.
- 2 CMSW includes some people who teach in other schools (notably, industrial relations) as well as some people who work in consulting and industry. Some 60 percent are located in the US. Most teach in management and organization departments. Other departmental affiliations are more common among non-US critters. A recent survey of our listserver subscribers showed that the most common fields are OT (22 percent), OB (20 percent), IR (13 percent), and Strategy (9 percent).
- 3 Following Marx, this position sees contradictions as real (out there, in objective, independent reality), rather than purely notional as (in the mind of the observer). Contradiction, therefore, is a relation between two real forces, not merely a logical relation between two propositions. The T-shirt reads 'a materialist friend of the Hegelian dialectic'. See Marx, Rubin, Ilyenkov.

References

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