Introduction to the special issue: questioning the politics of CMS

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1   Introduction

While the origin and early developments of critical management studies appear to share identical foundations and similar purposes, CMS today clearly cover a wide range of approaches, theories and methodologies, as well as disparate communities of men and women who redraw its boundaries every day. The role of 'critters' in denouncing the failings of the capitalist system and related forms of market and corporate governance is another meeting point between the proponents of critical approaches to management. This community of thinkers is nonetheless experiencing clashes under the pressure of multiple tensions, two of which we feel are of particular concern:

1   The authenticity and commitment – or even struggle – of researchers working in CMS can now be called into question. To some extent, the ideal of emancipation through pluralistic and interdisciplinary management research, tackling issues of power and controversially borrowing methodologies and theories from other disciplines, is being abandoned by today's doctoral researchers, who, in the professional environments in which they find themselves, face the harsh rules of 'publish or perish', or rather 'publish A-ranking articles or teach more', or even 'publish A-ranking articles or get lost'. To another extent, the field of CMS has for many sub-disciplines of management (such as entrepreneurship or innovation) become a publication niche in which researchers work out of opportunism (Fournier and Smith, 2012). Has critical research become stupidly functionalist?

2   In the current climate of scarce public financing, the bodies that govern and fund research are increasingly applying selection and promotional criteria taken from the hard sciences and mainstream fields that have adopted them in social sciences (broad samples, statistical processing to produce universal hard data, commercial implications, capacity to publish quickly, etc.). These changes effectively standardise (and impoverish) the knowledge produced (theses comprising a series of articles rather than a monograph – but is it possible to comprehensively address an issue in a format that better suits lab work or a macroeconomic essay?) and shift funding towards research teams better equipped to respond due to their discipline, methods and/or epistemology.

These observations encouraged us to explore the political dimension of CMS. One of the principles adhered to by the movement is anti-performativity, but how can the agents of CMS act to influence the rules of the game? And should they? Are there forms of engagement more appropriate than others when it comes to implementing this policy? These are the questions we addressed at the fourth edition of the *French-speaking chapter of CMS*, held in Louvain-la-Neuve (Belgium) in 2015. Here, we will attempt to provide responses in two steps: first by considering the fact that the facets and politics of critical management studies are not the same in France, the UK or Scandinavia, and that this justifies the different guises of its political manifestations; secondly, we will explore how CMS is part of a relationship of power and in turn shapes other such relationships,

primarily in reference to the contributions of David Courpasson (EM Lyon Business School) and Hugh Willmott (Cass Business School) at this annual meeting.

2 CMS and territories: different ways of accounting for political facets

The original home of CMS as an institutionalised research field was the UK, which was facing a harsh wave of liberalisation under Thatcher, before it spread to a swathe of Scandinavia and North America. To a large extent, these origins were those of the academic agenda of CMS in the 1900s and 2000s. Although the original protagonists of CMS remain influential, a diverse range of other research streams and directions developed under the banner of CMS (see Grey et al., 2016). One might say that, as a research field, CMS is currently practised on two levels: by exploring topics considered critical in that they relate to issues that are understudied in traditional management research (such as diversity, colonialism, discontent, governance, relationships of domination in companies, etc.), often because they are the consequence of traditional management practices; and by mobilising heterodox theoretical and methodological referents to study management, organisation and work phenomena (labour process theory, feminism, narratives, conventions, micro-emancipation, etc.). In their concluding remarks on the many variants of CMS in the world today, Grey et al. (2016) suggest that some institutional approaches seem to justify different ways of engaging with CMS, whether by topic (Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Canada) or by theory and methodology (France, the UK).

One might therefore describe CMS as territorial. The way in which this discipline is practised and the agenda it is made to serve vary from one territory to another. In France and in Belgium, a community of critical academics has been formed from the management schools in the universities of Louvain, Lyon, Montpellier and Paris-Dauphine. Their territory is that of the French and Belgian management schools, operating in a globalised environment and subject to the associated pressures, but still rooted in university-style governance structures (peer-based management and staff evaluations based on multiple criteria – not only publications, which ultimately have little influence on the salaries of lecturers). In short, well-established institutions fulfilling university missions, i.e. missions of emancipation and humanism, but also compelled or eager to compete with the best business schools in the world. This territory is also that of intellectual proximity which brings these European protagonists together in the way they reflect on solidarity rather than individuality – and therefore advocate a multidisciplinary management approach that draws more on sociology and philosophy than on psychology and behavioural economics –, in the way they promote and practice field research, working closely with the real and living world, and, finally, in their proud use of *Francophonie* as a value and as a specificity that is to be protected from today's globalisation of ideas and critical thought. No doubt among other reasons, this is what justifies the existence and vitality of a cosmopolitan and multilingual Francophone community, the 'French-speaking chapter' of CMS; multilingual because at each annual

event half of the delegates and half of the sessions are Francophone and the other half Anglophone.

3   Towards emancipation from the academic trappings of CMS

But as the community that nurtures these research perspectives expands and diversifies, and as the issues they tackle depart from the framework of management research and management schools, can the CMS agenda remain exclusively academic and relate only to the content of research programs? This is most unlikely, which raises questions about the political dimension of CMS: how is CMS part of a relationship of power? Two different but complementary responses were provided.

First, David Courpasson spoke of his determination to be political in order to legitimise critical approaches in management schools. Taking on decision-making roles in management schools and universities, and serving on the boards of academic journals and evaluation committees in research institutes are practices of power in which CMS can encourage us to engage. In other words, any critical researcher who wants to influence the system has no choice but to exploit these political levers. Hugh Willmott's view is that the changing focuses and perspectives advocated in CMS overtime point to the need for this research field to develop into a civic community. Critical researchers are stakeholders in the *polis* and in this regard must use their knowledge and work methods (research) to address the decision-makers in the world and bring them face-to-face with the reality of their practices.

Both men implicitly or explicitly believe that critical researchers are engaged researchers, which seems also to make them engaged citizens. The reverse is of course true but has long been observed independently of the development of this critical field in management schools. To put it differently, offering a critical and reasoned perspective on how our society works (and in particular on financial capitalism) is something that can only be done with sincerity. Under these conditions, critical research makes us engaged citizens. One cannot be critical by day, in one's research, and by night take an Uber car to go eat a Big Mac while reading a book ordered on Amazon.

These two perspectives also offer a pragmatism that should temper our desire for authenticity in the proponents of critical thought and in their engagement. Both positions use CMS as a community whose diverse thoughts and actions are considered to be *good* for the institutions that govern us. From an institutionalist perspective, this authorises a certain form of distance from daily commitment, in one's acts as citizen and consumer. It puts resistance in the frame of institutional governance rather than that of 'doing research'. But this capacity for political influence continues to depend on the expertise that underpins the formation of CMS: academic research. Ultimately, the challenge today seems to be more about organising a dialogue between the different research carried out, its findings and its capacity to document critiques of the capitalist system, and then to document the feasibility of alternatives.

4   Presentation of the articles of the special issue

The two research articles presented in this special issue are the result of the vitality and openness of this academic and civic community, and feed into a political critique that seeks to extend beyond critical thought alone by opening up other possible avenues. Interestingly, and not intendedly, both contributions investigate 'practice-based' approaches. In the first article, Nancy Aumais considers the 'gender-as-practice' perspective in de-constructing what traditionally is associated to 'practice-based' approaches. By proposing to consider the doing and undoing of gender, she re-introduces 'sexual bodies' and gendered relations as integral parts of organisations, far from the common abstract and theoretical 'gender' considerations. Her research proposal lays the foundation for a stimulating research agenda on gender-as-practice. In the second contribution, Alexandra Gaidos explores the more practical forms that social innovation can take. She starts her essay by taking note of the vitality of debates on social innovation for economic actors (like OECD, European union, etc.), as well as in the scientific community (in association to social entrepreneurship and social enterprises). But she also observes the inability to the scientific community to agree on what social innovation refers to. This is the starting point of her proposal to consider social innovation as practice, and to start studying them from the field in promoting a grounded theory approach in the specific context of incubators.

References

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