CRITICAL THEORY IN THE MANAGEMENT CLASSROOM: ENGAGING POWER, IDEOLOGY, AND PRAXIS

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In the past decade, both critics and advocates of business schools have become increasingly vociferous in their demand that greater attention be paid to the teaching function within institutions of managerial education. The business press, ivory tower administrators, and business leaders all have called for a reassessment of management education and a restoration of its relevance to the business community. Although this critique is both timely and probably well deserved, it still fails to address questions of what constitutes good teaching, and it continues to imply that somehow good teaching is separate from intellectual pursuits and research activities. In this special segment of the *Journal of Management Education*, we are pleased to present six articles that illustrate how insights from critical theory can energize management education and make it more relevant to the practicing manager.

This first article provides a brief introduction to critical theory and describes four central themes: social constructionism, power and ideology, totality, and praxis. In the four articles that follow, our colleagues describe creative and efficacious efforts to introduce critical theory into their own

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Editor's Note: The editor sincerely thanks Pushkala Prasad and Paula Caproni for conceptualizing and developing this excellent special segment on critical thinking in management education. Requests for reprints of this article should be sent to Pushkala Prasad, Faculty of Management, University of Calgary, 2500 University Drive, N.W., Calgary, Alberta T2N 1N4, Canada.

JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT EDUCATION, Vol. 21 No. 3, August 1997 284-291
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management classrooms. Peter Frost concludes this special segment on critical theory with a commentary on these articles.

Why Critical Theory?

Over the past 20 years, critical theory has significantly influenced our thinking and research on organizations and management. The early theoretical work of Nord (1974), Frost (1980), Benson (1977), and others not only reoriented our thinking about managerial practices but also reshaped some of our research agendas and contributions (e.g., Alvesson, 1987; Jermier, 1985; Prasad & Prasad, 1993; Rosen, 1987). However, judging from the content of managerial textbooks and the literature on managerial pedagogy, it appears that critical theory's influence on management education remains minimal. Two prominent exceptions to this can be found in the efforts of Boje and Dennehy (1994) and Mills and Simmons (1995) to systematically instill insights from postmodern theory and critical theory into the management classroom.

This containment of critical theory within the sphere of intellectual theorizing and research is truly regrettable because critical theory can contribute substantially to our understanding of and engagement with managerial practices in the classroom. Critical theory offers a fundamentally different perspective of management and organizations, one that virtually overturns traditional conceptions of employment relations, managerial goals, and organizational effectiveness. Most important, critical theory is deeply committed to the emancipatory potential of management and organizations. Thus, it also is deeply committed to understanding how the everyday practice of scholars, educators, students, managers, and workers advances and inhibits this potential. Because of this commitment to emancipation, it is particularly unfortunate that for the most part, discussions of critical theory are relegated to esoteric intellectual speculations and remain confined primarily to research efforts. We organized this special segment of *JME* because we are concerned that our scholarly knowledge of critical theory has far eclipsed our willingness and ability to integrate this knowledge with managerial education and practice.

What Is Critical Theory?

The term *critical theory* is commonly used to refer to the collective philosophy/social theory of members of the erstwhile Frankfurt School—mainly Horkheimer and Adorno (1947), Benjamin (1969), Fromm (1955),

and Marcuse (1964, 1966)—as well as the more recent work of Habermas (1971, 1973). Critical theory is not to be confused with critical thinking, which is basically a pedagogic movement to implant systematic reflection within the broad assumptions of liberal humanism. Although critical theory retains this drive toward systematic reflection and empowerment, it does so within a framework of very different assumptions that make asymmetrical power relations, the role of ideology, and an unequivocal commitment to fundamental change central to such reflection. In this special segment of *JME*, we have also defined critical theory somewhat more broadly than is customary to include the newer postmodern and deconstructionist influences of social thinkers such as Derrida (1976, 1981), Foucault (1972, 1979), and Lyotard (1984) as well as recent feminist thinking (Ferguson, 1984; Zimmer, 1988).

Distilling the central tenets of critical theory into a few pages is not easy. We cannot do full justice to the complexity and sophistication of this genre of thinking. Although we touch briefly on the nature of critical theory in this introductory essay, we prefer to allow the articles that follow to speak more fully as to what critical theory is and how it can inspire and inform management education and practice. For interested readers, the references should offer a preliminary overview both of the original theorists and of management writers who have used critical theory effectively. The most we do in this opening essay is to introduce four broad themes that are integral to critical theory: social construction, power relations and ideology, totality, and praxis.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

Critical theory takes as its starting point the position that all reality is socially constructed (Berger & Luckman, 1967). From this perspective, the world is not given to us in some objective and unchanging form. Rather, societal members continually create, reinforce, and revise reality through social negotiation and the collective assignment and reassignment of meanings. At any particular point in time, certain patterns of meaning become more entrenched than others and take on the appearance of objective reality.

Critical theory is deeply committed to examining how we construct everyday realities and to questioning many of our taken-for-granted assumptions about them. An example can be found in the concept of race. A social constructionist perspective suggests that there is no fixed objective reality about race. Rather, race is viewed as a value-laden social classification based on selected physical characteristics that are assumed to be identifiable, socially relevant, and associated with particular enduring personality characteristics. When societal members act as though race is an objective and fixed

reality over time, then it becomes an inescapable social "fact" that has momentous consequences for individuals, organizations, and society. The recent rejection of race as a meaningful scientific concept by the American Association of Physical Anthropologists (Wheeler, 1995) is a powerful attestation to how a particular social construction remained (and continues to remain) fully entrenched as an objective social reality.

POWER AND IDEOLOGY

Critical theory does not regard the social construction of reality to be an arbitrary, benign, and entirely spontaneous activity. Rather, it takes the position that social constructions of reality are influenced significantly by power relations within a particular culture. Therefore, understanding the role that elite agendas play in shaping social and organizational realities and the concomitant resistance to these agendas is central to critical analysis. Furthermore, critical theory holds that many of our collective and established patterns of meaning are shaped by the interaction of powerful vehicles of popular culture such as the media, work organizations, and educational institutions. To operationalize these complex relationships, critical theory uses the concept of ideology.

For our purposes, we can understand ideology as elements of a shared worldview that, although providing order and meaning for societal members, also prevents individuals from living fulfilling lives by masking social contradictions, creating false expectations, and thus limiting societal possibilities and human potential. Dominant ideologies about gender, for instance, powerfully prescribe specific but limited roles for both men and women in public and private spheres. Similarly, dominant ideologies dictate societal members' conceptualizations and expectations of organizations, work relations, standards of managerial effectiveness, measures of personal success, and so on. For the most part, these perspectives are so taken for granted that they are rarely, if ever, questioned. And even when these ideologies are questioned, the challenges and concerns are subjected to a host of rationalizations and institutional defenses that are designed to preserve the status quo and the logic that supports it.

An example might be found in the established institutionalization of the 40-hour "full-time" workweek in most of the industrial world. There is nothing really sacrosanct about the 40-hour workweek. However, it is so pervasively practiced, so tied to the Protestant work ethic, and so entwined with other social institutions that it has become the unquestioned standard of what constitutes an acceptable work effort on the part of individuals in North America. Those who opt to work for fewer hours are considered part-time

workers or nontraditional workers and frequently must devise socially legitimate justifications for doing so (e.g., illness, old age, raising a family) or risk being regarded as losers, shirkers, or merely unambitious by nature.

TOTALITY

Critical theory is committed to understanding any particular social or organizational phenomenon (e.g., management) with respect to its multiple interconnections and its location within holistic, historical contexts. This is referred to as the principle of totality. This principle

> expresses a commitment to study social arrangements as complex, interrelated wholes with partially autonomous parts [and] . . . directs us to see the intricate ties of organizations to the larger society—not only to macro structural features such as economics and political systems but also to the everyday activities of people. (Benson, 1977, pp. 4-9)

The concept of totality also suggests that managerial practices and policies cannot be fully understood without locating them within a broader historical context (Waring, 1991). Such a failure helps to explain the popularity of certain managerial techniques (e.g., job enrichment and total quality management) and the relative failure of other reform attempts (e.g., industrial democracy).

The principle of totality implies an understanding of management as a cultural and social practice, influenced by intraorganizational forces as well as by the broader ideologies and material conditions of a particular society. It calls for sociohistorical analyses of organizational activities such as norms of accounting, chains of command, career development, and performance evaluation methods. In alerting us to the intricate ties among management, organizations, and society, the concept of totality dissolves many taken-for-granted analytic boundaries that customarily have shaped our images of management and organizations.

PRAXIS

Above all, critical theory is committed to praxis, the ongoing construction of social arrangements that are conducive to the flourishing of the human condition. Praxis implies a combination of the awareness gained from ideological critique with reflective strategies for social change, thus transforming critical theory into an inspiring and constructive springboard for action. On account of this commitment to praxis, those who employ critical theory must go beyond challenging particular social realities, identifying various ideological issues, and unmasking systems of domination.

Focusing exclusively on unmasking patterns of oppression and hegemony can leave students, scholars, and managers in a state of cynical pessimism. Critical theory, however, emphatically rejects such a position and tries instead for something that approaches *radical engagement* (Giddens, 1991). This can only be achieved by working consciously and systematically on action plans for rebuilding organizations and work relations while having a realistic appreciation of social and cultural constraints (e.g., the role of elite interests, the power of ideology). A more detailed discussion of academic praxis and management education can be found in Rosen (1987). Although praxis may well be the most difficult element to accomplish within critical theory, it also remains the most important. Without sustained commitment to praxis, critical theory restricts itself to becoming a self-indulgent academic effort and thus risks losing its emancipatory potential.

The principles of social construction, ideology, totality, and praxis provide students and practitioners with useful conceptual lenses for applying critical theory to organizational analysis and practice. As with all scholarly perspectives, critical theory is not without its critics. It has been castigated on grounds of intellectual obscurity, solipsism, and Eurocentrism. Many of these criticisms undoubtedly are justified. The use of critical theory in the management classroom also often meets with institutional resistance in the form of standardized curricula, student hostility, and administrative suspicion. Nevertheless, our personal experience has taught us that critical theory has much to offer the management classroom and therefore may well be worth the effort. More than anything else, it encourages students and practicing managers not to take organizational "realities" at face value, but to consider why and how these realities are created and reinforced, to consider the consequences of these realities, and to create alternative realities that may better serve individuals, organizations, and societies. At its best, critical theory can inspire scholars, students, and managers to be more reflective and therefore more effective contributors to organizations and society (Caproni & Arias, 1997 [this issue]). It is in this spirit that we introduce the five articles that follow. All of these articles reflect the authors' commitment to fundamental change and the emancipatory potential contained within management education and practice.

The first article, by Paula Caproni and Maria Eugenia Arias, presents a critical perspective on management skills training. The authors suggest that managerial skills training is "*the construction, production, and distribution of culturally specific knowledge about how the 'ideal manager' is expected to think, feel, and act—and not think, feel, and act in a given society*" (p. 295, emphasis in original). They describe how they integrate critical skills with more traditional managerial skills training and how, in so doing, they encour-

age their students to broaden their conceptions of themselves, others, management, and organizations.

In the second article, Anshuman Prasad and Michael Cavanaugh describe a classroom exercise that provides students with an opportunity and approach for analyzing the ideological underpinnings of managerial knowledge and practice. After introducing the conceptual foundations of critical ideological practice, they carefully walk readers through a classroom exercise in which they use the well-known Tom Peters management video, *Thriving on Chaos*, to provide students with an opportunity to learn and practice ideological critique.

In the third article, Albert Mills connects critical theory with the insights of feminist theory by providing a compelling case for "teaching gender as a central element of the business curriculum" (p. 325). He proposes a systematic approach for introducing gender as an integral part of management education and presents readers with a classroom design that enables them to do so.

In the fourth article, Debra Summers, David Boje, Robert Dennehy, and Grace Ann Rosile deconstruct Robbins' widely used organizational behavior textbook to expose the inherent conservative and positivistic structure of management education. Their radical critique is intended less as a criticism of Robbins' book per se and more as a demonstration of the ideological prison within which textbook writing invariably takes place.

To close this special segment on critical theory in the management classroom, we asked Peter Frost to comment on all these articles. After all, it was the work of Frost and many of his colleagues that inspired our own thinking and pedagogic practices and that led to the conceptualization of this special segment.

Our intent in bringing these articles together is fivefold. First, we hope to stimulate an interest in critical theory among colleagues who are looking for new ways in which to enrich their classroom experiences. Second, we want to offer readers specific methods for doing so. Third, we want to provide an initial reading list for those who may be interested in critical theory. Fourth, we want to stimulate dialogue on how critical theory and other less traditional perspectives can enrich our pedagogical practices. Fifth, and most important, we hope this special segment of *JME* inspires us all to be champions of the human spirit through management education and practice.

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