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commentaries

## The Prospects for Critical Management Studies in the American Academy of Management

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### *'This Thing Loosely Called Critical Management Studies'*

Over the past four years a very diverse group of scholars have gathered at the 'Critical Management Studies Workshops' at the National Academy of Management meetings. While attending the sessions and participating in doctoral student and junior faculty consortia, we noticed that many people seemed surprised by the mix of delegates attending these events. Participants seemed to wonder just what they had in common with each other. This kind of sentiment lies behind Mayer Zald's off-handed reference to 'this thing loosely called Critical Management Studies' (p.383). The gathering of people across the theoretical and methodological spectra, as well as across elite and not-so-elite institutions, is both invigorating and a little unnerving. Invigorating and unnerving, the phenomenon is gathering momentum. Indeed, it is poised to be formally welcomed into the Academy of Management this year as an Interest Group.

Zald has done us a great service by identifying who defines this group, where it comes from, and how it fits into the wider 'university of disciplines'. CMS is a home to people from the left who challenge the dominant authorities and the distribution of power, status, and material claims surrounding the field of play (p.374) and a home to those who embrace the 'methodologies derived from hermeneutics and deconstruction' (p.376). He points out that this is not your typical homogeneous scholarly community and, so, he alerts us to inevitable growing pains within this group of schizoid mavericks (p.380). Grounded in a fine analysis of general change dynamics in academic disciplines and the history of Critical approaches in professional schools, he muses about the future of the CMS enterprise.

We would like to add a few words to his vision for the future for CMS, focusing on CMS's prospects in North America. First, we will comment on the two trajectories that Zald identifies for CMS, more clearly drawing



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out the implications of his own arguments. Our conclusion is that without a better articulation of problem and solution, the CMS group will remain marginal. Taking a historical look at the Academy of Management, the central institutional home for management scholarship in North America, we will then revisit this prognosis. The potential for the CMS movement right now is greater than Zald and most people in the CMS community imagine. We encourage those on the margin to step up, seize an incredible opportunity, and make a core contribution.

### ***A Nascent Social Movement?***

True to his own research history (McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Zald and Berger, 1978), Mayer Zald situates the emerging CMS community in its historical context and treats it very much like a social movement. Without coming right out and saying it, he all but affirms that CMS is a very marginal enterprise right now. Indeed, he uses the words 'marginal', 'peripheral', and 'less core/central' 10 times to describe CMS. What are the odds that CMS can move from the periphery to the core? Of course, framing the emergence of CMS as a struggle for influence has implications for subsequent analyses. The social movement analogy evokes an assumption that moving toward the core is a desirable state of affairs. We will employ this frame, all the while recognizing that some 'critters' may prefer to celebrate, not escape, such a peripheral position.

According to Zald, we will know that CMS has reached the core when its proponents define what is taught in business schools' core curriculum, emerge as executive education professors, and assume the reigns of power in elite graduate schools of business (pp.366, 378). What is the likelihood of this happening anytime soon? We need to take a closer look at what CMS contributes if we are to answer this question. Zald identifies two emblematic CMS activities. Seemingly relying more on the deconstructionist side of the CMS movement, he sees promise in the Critical Management Theorists' (CMT) ability to 'critique the hypocrisy of real practice' (p.379). Hence, this work will deconstruct and culturally analyze the ruling concepts and procedures (p.382) and debunk and demystify received institutions and procedures (p.375).

The question for CMS is whether this focus on deconstruction, debunking and demystification will bring their marginal activities to the core. Ask yourself why business leaders and students (the main resource-supplying constituents of business education) look to the university for help. Is this what they want to know to help them manage their firms and careers amid intense competition? Do the recruiters and the business students who fill out the biennial *Business Week* survey of business schools celebrate these insights and those who hold them? By and large, they do not. As Zald points out on p.369, the political and institutional context of management studies matters.

In the end, Zald argues that 'the more we can move management education toward an enlightenment/reflexive model and *away from just a*



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*problem-solving/engineering model*, the more room there is for Critical Management Theory' (p.380, emphasis added). This idea will strike many as reasonable. Yet, earlier in the essay (p.368), he approvingly quotes Abbott's (1988) discussion about what decides domination contests between disciplines, 'The winning profession offered concepts and methods that *promised to solve the underlying problems* of work and management in the domain that two or more occupations or professions claimed to address' (emphasis added). If Abbott is right, CMS scholars who turn their backs on problem solving will doom their quest for influence.

We cannot imagine that business leaders will beat a path to the CMT's door, absent a very clear articulation of business problems and their solutions (rooted in a scholarship of demystification or not). CMS can neither escape management education's institutional dependence on a managerial audience, nor that audience's preference for problem-solving approaches. That does not mean that key problems and solutions cannot be discursively redefined or that alternative audiences cannot be found or existing ones influenced. It does mean, however, that the path to a more central position in management is to supplement critique with constructive framings. CMS scholars must engage in serious dialogue with managerial audiences. This call for a critical and constructive engagement with management is a call for effective social movement tactics; it is not an oxymoron.

Zald ends his paper by identifying a host of specific problems that he believes CMS can frame and solve, problems usually identified with those CMTs who hold a leftist view of the world. He writes, 'We have ignored the dark side of globalization, the massive poverty, the cultural and personal costs of displacement, the conflicts and reactions to the spread of global capitalism' (pp.383-4). If the CMS community can identify specific problems on the dark side of globalization and articulate tractable roles that business can play in ameliorating these ills, then there is great potential for the CMTs' work. Whether CMS will ultimately trump others' contesting views about how to solve the problems of world poverty and the like remains to be seen. Still, their solutions, if grounded in an appreciation for business practice, will not be dismissed as the musings of a group of schizoid mavericks. Zald's essay tells us that CMS stands a better chance of becoming core if the 'critters' both articulate problems in management practice, instead of (or in addition to) problematizing them, and offer solutions to these problems of practice. Providing solutions helps to shape problem definition, just as taking action refines the nature of solutions.

***CMS and Changes in the Academy of Management***

Fine as Zald's essay is, we were left with the impression that CMS is beginning to thrive in the United States not because of the dynamics of contesting disciplines, but because people have somehow come to see the leftist light or come to appreciate the power of hermeneutic circles and



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the value of humanistic education. We are not at all sure that this is so. The question of why a 'pragmatist-reflexive turn' (p.382) in management scholarship should presently come about is left unaddressed. We will pick up the argument where Zald left off and share our own sense of why CMS is now welcomed by those at the center of the Academy of Management.

Zald provides a useful checklist to assess the prospects of a new academic perspective within a larger social context (p.370). What matters are the general currents of intellectual life, transforming events and processes in larger society, the institutional context of scholarly environments, and the internal development of the academic discipline. Taken together, the prospect for CMS in the United States is rather bright. Consider today's intellectual currents. There are signs that the most radical forms of neoliberal economic orthodoxy are losing ground, both in the policy arena as well as in departments of economics. 'Cultural', 'cognitive' and 'historical' turns in sociology and psychology bring the disciplinary mainstream closer to humanistic approaches. And the renewed interest in pragmatism across intellectual areas can provide a bridge between 'American positivism' and such European-born perspectives as the post-war versions of Critical Theory or Practice Theory. Notice how Zald himself slowly drifts from an 'enlightenment/reflexive' (p.381) to a 'reflexive/pragmatist' (p.382) and then to a 'pragmatist-reflexive' (p.382) stance in his positive vision for a management curriculum. Beyond Zeitgeist, the transformative events of 11 September 2001 and its aftermath will no doubt unsettle the agenda of management scholarship (as Zald hints in his closing paragraph). The ground for CMS is fertile.

Much of the institutional context of management education and research, however, is unchanged. Unlike their many European counterparts, elite US universities are often funded by the private sector; unlike law, social work and education, business administration is not constructed as part of a 'public' societal enterprise and therefore is perhaps less susceptible to critique on grounds of political justice; and, unlike other professional schools, business schools have no state-sanctioned monopoly in certifying professional qualifications and thus compete for resources with 'corporate universities' and other education providers. Still, CMS has just acquired an institutional presence in the Academy of Management. Why? The answer lies as much in the changing internal makeup of the Academy of Management mainstream as it does in the emerging strength of the CMS movement itself.

Zald situates the growth of the CMS movement in the history of management education. He rightly points out that, as professional training was incorporated into the American university, it became subject to its certification and legitimation criteria (p.366). Management research and education thus took on an increasing 'social science' focus, along with its positivistic view of science and its empirical methodologies



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(p.367). Yet, this move to a social science model was not just prompted by the universities themselves. Tiring and skeptical of inferences drawn from idiosyncratic organizational experiences, management practitioners, too, asked for a more dispassionate and agnostic (social science) rendering of their work (Gordon and Howell, 1959; Pierson, 1959). The Academy of Management was born into this environment in the late 1950s. It began by sponsoring a research journal called *The Journal of the Academy of Management (JAM)* in 1958. The journal's name was changed to the *Academy of Management Journal (AMJ)* in 1964; the *Academy of Management Review (AMR)* was created in 1976. When it comes to management research, the Academy of Management and its journals are as 'core' as it gets. It is instructive to see how this research evolved over time, and how it reveals varying degrees of openness to CMS-like projects.

Posted on its current website ([www.aom.pace.edu/cms/](http://www.aom.pace.edu/cms/)), the mission statement for the CMS Workshop asserts, 'We believe that other goals—justice, community, human development, ecological balance—should be brought to bear on the governance of economic activity'. Note that this sentiment is rather similar to the 1958 mission statement of the Academy of Management and its journal, the *JAM*:

The general objectives of the Academy shall be to foster: a) a philosophy of management that will make possible an accomplishment of the economic and social objectives of an industrial society with increasing economy and effectiveness: the public interest must be paramount in any such philosophy, but adequate consideration must be given to legitimate interests of capital and labor.

Noting this confluence of early purpose, we decided to analyze the research published in Academy journals to determine if they considered human welfare concerns. If so, they certainly provide an opening for critique based on justice and distributional grounds. We focused on the articles' dependent variables because they typically capture the researcher's abiding passion. By human welfare, we refer to constructs that link organizational activity to values related to human well-being (e.g. happiness, satisfaction, social responsibility, justice, and environmental stewardship). For comparison, we also tracked the extent to which this work implicated performance. By performance, we refer to constructs concerned with the technical and economic performance of organizational activity (e.g. job performance, productivity, profit, and efficiency). Given CMTs' critique of the positivist and empirical nature of much of this research, we narrowed our examination to empirical studies. We coded every empirical article published in *JAM* and *AMJ* between 1958 and 2000. Overall, we read and analyzed 1754 articles, equivalent to 54 percent of all research published by the Academy of Management.

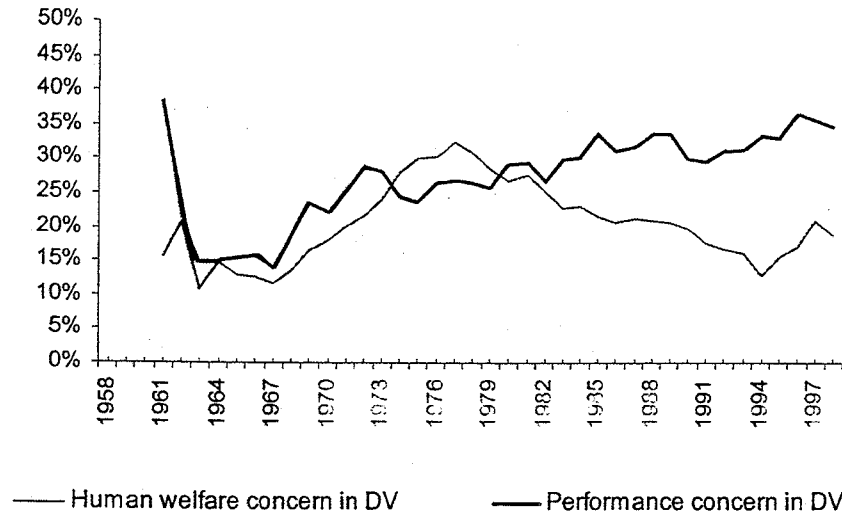
Figure 1 pictures the attention management researchers have paid to these two constructs (using five-year moving averages). We see that Zald (p.380) is correct when he argues that there has always been room



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**Figure 1.** Human Welfare and Performance Concerns in Dependent Variables (DVs) of the Empirical Studies Published in the *Journal of the Academy of Management* and the *Academy of Management Journal* between 1958 and 2000\*



\*Omitted category = neither human welfare nor performance concerns.

within the Academy for research on topics that reach beyond profits and performance. Given that *AMJ* is an 'A-level' journal, there certainly is a prestigious publication outlet open to 'leftist' concerns framed in terms of human welfare. The first years of publication were marked by a balanced focus on human welfare and performance. Interestingly, more articles in the mid-1970s focused on human welfare than they did on performance. However, this pattern reversed itself dramatically in the 1980s. It was not that interest in performance suddenly surged; it just continued to draw more and more research attention. Rather, the interest in human welfare simply faded away. When we pick up a copy of *AMJ* today, we are almost twice as likely to read an empirical study about organization and performance than we are about organization and human welfare. What happened?

We also tracked the social science disciplines that researchers have relied upon to conduct empirical studies. We looked at the reference list in each article to see if the authors cited work from what might plausibly be considered to be the four parent disciplines for organization and management research. We looked to see if there was at least one citation in the published work to an article from the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* or *Psychological Bulletin*. If we found one, we said that the research drew upon the field of Psychology. Similarly, if we saw a reference to work in either the *American Journal of Sociology* or the *American Sociological Review*, we noted that the work drew upon



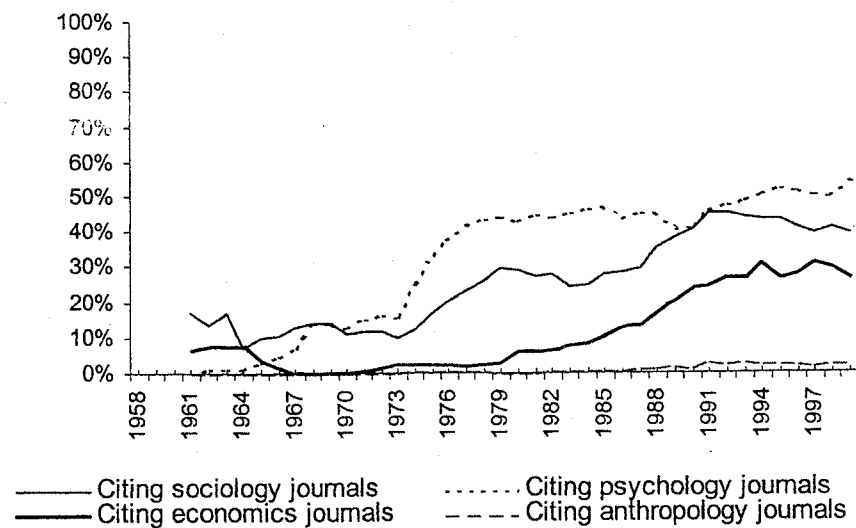
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Sociology. If the research cited a paper from the *American Economic Review*, *The RAND (Bell) Journal of Economics* or the *Journal of Political Economy*, we said that the work drew upon Economics. And finally, if the research cited a paper from either the *American Anthropologist* or *Contemporary Anthropology*, we said that the work was built upon an Anthropology foundation.

Figure 2 summarizes the results of this analysis (again using five-year moving averages). We would like to focus on the post-1980 period that saw the increasing gap between welfare and performance concerns. Note that this period marks the growing influence of economics in our profession. When psychology and sociology oriented management research, we found a way to look at performance and human welfare in equal measure. Once we turned to economics for guidance, however, research concerns turned away from human welfare. It may very well be that these coincident trends reflect the orthodox economic doctrine, which states that, so long as business focuses on performance efficiency, the invisible hand of the market will automatically take care of human welfare and allocation concerns. Thus, agency and responsibility for social concerns shifted away from business and was seemingly delegitimized as an appropriate subject for management research. At the same time, the ascent of economics in the Academy extended the hold of the positivist science model on management studies. Seen in this light, CMS embodies a protest movement.

**Figure 2.** Citations of Disciplinary Journals in the Empirical Studies Published in the *Journal of the Academy of Management* and the *Academy of Management Journal* between 1958 and 2000





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The rise of CMS reflects an uneasiness about this turn in management scholarship, a scholarship with deep roots in a balanced concern for welfare and performance. The Academy of Management has begun to recognize this change. It may even know that it is in some trouble. On the theory front, the now famous Pfeffer vs. Van Maanen debate (Pfeffer, 1993, 1995; Van Maanen, 1995a, 1995b) can be seen as a symptomatic of our concern about the reach of the economic paradigm.<sup>1</sup> Pfeffer might be accused of paradigm envy. As economics has slowly framed a larger part of what we do, it is no surprise to see us wonder if we should not look more like economics itself. On the practice front, we have heard Academy Presidents worry out loud about how inconsequential our work seems to be (see Don Hambrick's [1994] Presidential Address entitled 'What if the Academy Actually Mattered?'). Business schools have been called to account for their contribution to our understanding of the practice of business administration (Porter and McKibbin, 1988). Evaluators and consumers of our contemporary research may soon begin to wonder what makes management research so different from that produced by economists. The answer must not be that we do bad economics.

The Academy of Management is poised to undergo some soul searching about its mission and what makes it distinctive from others who supply insight and wisdom to business. The Academy's embrace of CMS tells us that this day is drawing near. The CMS group has an enormous opportunity here. It can lead that self-assessment and help to shape the Academy's new institutional agenda. 'Critters' are not the only contestants for influence, though. Note the rise of such new interest groups as 'Organizations and the Natural Environment' and 'Management, Spirituality and Religion'. If CM scholars believe that a new agenda is to be rooted in an antagonistic stance toward business practice, then the chances are slim that they will have much influence in setting this new agenda. CMS will remain at the periphery, sensitizing rather than shaping the mainstream. If 'critters' can put forward a positive research and teaching agenda, however, they just might emerge as leaders of the Academy of Management (and management education more broadly). A move to the core is quite possible. But this move requires a departure. CMS must add construction to deconstruction, problem-solving to problematizing, and prescription to reflexivity.

### Notes

The authors would like to thank Lloyd E. Sandelands for his comments on an earlier version of this paper.

- 1 The field of Economics is avowedly imperialistic (Radnitsky and Bernholtz, 1987). It may be destabilizing the Academy of Management. Indeed, Donaldson (1990: 400) warned us more than 10 years ago of a 'tendency to colonize management journals as vassal states of economics'. We have been cautioned to embrace economic thinking only with great care (Hirsch et al., 1990).





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