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Review

Jonathan Murphy

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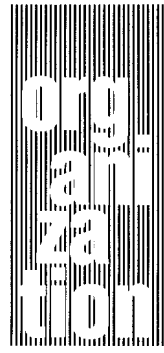
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Review



Managerialism Meets Its Nemesis

Against Management, Martin Parker. Cambridge: Polity, 2002.

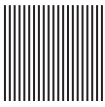
Three hundred participants attended Critical Management Studies' recent third international conference, while critical theory-grounded articles regularly appear in European management journals. It seems CMS has established itself as an enduring management subdiscipline, only a dozen years after the publication of Alvesson and Willmott's (1992) eponymous edited collection. This achievement reflects the determination of a small band of academics, of whom Martin Parker is a prominent representative.

Parker's capacity to combine solid scholarship with the publicist's flair is invaluable in a field often trapped in hyper-intellectualism. *Against Management* is his latest missive against business school quietism. Borrowing from Marx, he tells us 'the point of books like this is not merely to come to a different understanding of the world, but an attempt to try and change it'.

Quixotically for a business professor, Parker says 'management' has become a negative phenomenon, inextricable from market managerialism; a dogmatic ideology insisting that only markets run by professional managers can efficiently organize human interaction.

Constitutionally unpredictable, Parker begins by defending the Yellow Arches against Ritzer's McDonaldization theory (Ritzer, 1993). Although McDonald's might trash the environment and treat its employees poorly, it provides steady work for many, and cheap, quick, child-friendly nosh for everyone else. What's more, it's pretty tasty (though only Parker's most powerful discourse could clear the clogged arteries). Ritzer's snobbishness towards McDonald's, tabloids, and prepackaged funerals is nostalgia for an unlamented world of bourgeois privilege. It all comes down to taste, which Ritzer forgets is inherently contestable.

The corporate citizenship school turns McDonaldization into philosophy, claiming people would be better off as organizational rather than national citizens. Despite the shudderingly Orwellian implications, Parker takes the notion seriously, exploring the construction of states, societies, organizations,



and communities. As ever, his intentions are subversive; if mission statements are organizational constitutions, then their expansive claims to cherish employees should be enforceable. But he wonders whether organizations *could* act as genuine holistic communities, 'orgunities'—places of spiritual belonging and productive enterprise. Ultimately, he turns back at the outskirts of this New Age company town, calling instead for multiple decentred community memberships, situating us within the human matrix, while respecting our multifaceted identity.

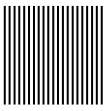
Business ethics is increasingly popular in academe, and in the wake of the Enron et al. scandals, a lucrative consulting line. Parker casts a sceptical post-structuralist eye over this new field: can any ethical stance be privileged over another? Anyway, arguing about rights and wrongs is a discourse that belongs in the political arena, not in business ethics where domestication is inevitable.

Against Management's pivotal chapter explores CMS itself. Despite academic appeal, Parker doubts it can significantly impact on organizational lives. Perhaps because of post-structuralism's dominance, CMS has turned away from other 'critical' fields that retain Marxism's insistence on intellectuals' activism. Having fought for the right to be 'non-performative', he wonders if CMS hasn't become anti-performative, rejecting any and all calls to the political barricades. CMS should reject such ambivalence and reincorporate the moral goal of ending exploitation. He rejects Alvesson and Willmott's (1996) suggestion that CMS should limit itself to micro-emancipations within management learning, while acknowledging that universities are 'often smugly conservative places' where radical thinking is unlikely to change embedded practices.

After exploring popular culture's 'fair degree of ambivalence and hostility' towards management and organizations, Parker discusses the anti-globalization movement. Using Klein's *No Logo* (2000) as a central text, he details the movement's weaknesses and strengths. Klein and other populist critics of corporate globalization prefer explicit partisanship—the literary equivalent of the protestor's brick through the corporate HQ's window—to academically correct theoretical reasoning. Parker acknowledges that it is easier to demolish than to rebuild, but admires the movement's courage in daring to imagine a management-free world.

Who can end managerialism, and with what should it be replaced? Managers are unlikely to overturn their full dinner-pail, despite occasionally toying with self-regulation. Academics are too constrained within the iron cage of institutional expectations to achieve much. Individuals can challenge the system as 'free radicals' or in voluntary collectivities, but however anti-hierarchical their rhetoric, they need the state; it is the only institution capable of disciplining corporations. As for managerialism's replacements, Parker's menu mixes small-is-beautiful localism and organizational re-imagining. Continuing his Utopias theme (2002), he challenges critical management thinkers to imagine 'alternative politics built into alternative structures'.

Against Management demonstrates how to be critical and provocative while remaining good-tempered; a salutary example to those who prefer to hector than persuade. Nevertheless, in attempting to cover such a wide terrain, Parker sometimes skates quickly over thin ice.



His claim to be 'against management' seems partly theatrical hyperbole. He is actually only against 'market managerialism', admitting that elements of what we call management would be needed to make the trains run on time even in Utopia. But changing labels is a tactical rather than fundamental question, bringing with it the risk of hiding the same old practices under cute brand names and logos, a manoeuvre that has enriched many a corporate image consultant. The anti-management standpoint also undermines critical management teachers' potential role of helping progressive activists think about the management skills needed to make real change.

Parker might also be barking up the wrong tree in asserting that CMS academics spend too much time in theoretical hair-splitting and not enough making the world a better place. It is hard to make the world a better place if we don't know what is wrong with it and what we might do to correct those wrongs. Theory, whether explicit or implicit, is the machinery with which we individually and collectively sift the plethora of sensations that make up human life. Heterodox thinkers in business schools are routinely victim to unspoken, embedded ideology, and our space to breathe is contingent on unpacking this ideology and presenting alternative ways of seeing. A further reason for theory's importance to radicals is that people who seek change have the burden of demonstrating through theory (and otherwise) that their proposals for change are a risk worth taking.

Certainly, the theoretical debate in CMS is unsatisfying, but perhaps this is because the debate is largely restricted to a narrow range of postmodernism/post-structuralism. CMS was founded partly in reaction to dogmatic Marxist interpretations of labour process theory, its birth also coinciding with the nadir of disillusionment about liberating projects. This experience seems to have caused an aversion to even the mildest forms of foundationalist social theory, an aversion which has become so strong that some CMS founders even deny Marxism's parenthood of critical theory (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000). Parker acknowledges the importance of the Marxist heritage, but his summary of the debate between labour process theorists and CMS post-structuralists is disappointing, assuming rather than arguing the incommensurability of the two positions.

Parker's choice of postmodernism as theoretical cornerstone is a turnabout from his earlier insistence that 'postmodernism is a dangerous and potentially disabling "perspective" for critical theorists to adopt and that any emancipatory project is not well served by giving up on notions of "truth" and "progress"' (Parker, 1995: 553). What is disappointing is not that he has changed his mind, but that he ignores the expanse of theoretical space existing *between* Marxism and postmodernism, which could respond to both his 1995 concern that postmodernism precludes the emancipatory project, and his 2002 rejection of Marxism's class-based dualism. Strangely, Parker does not mention critical realism, which has a following in CMS circles. Nor does he even hint of less dogmatic frameworks CMS could explore, ranging from Karl Polanyi's accounting of the struggle between human meaning and the technological society, to Bourdieu's schematization of the different forms of capital and Unger's anti-necessitarian social theory.

Against Management is also sometimes inconsistent, for example vigorously defending McDonald's while later asserting 'even fast food can be high quality, but only if it stays small and local', 'organizations are getting too big



to be human', and large corporations are providing an 'increasingly homogenized set of choices for consumers'.

Against Management is built from a number of Parker's recent papers and presentations, and these different pieces are not always adequately integrated. Nevertheless the book touches on the key critiques of managerialism, is engagingly written, and, tragically for its stated goal, is sure to persuade more than one student that management is a field worth exploring.

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Jonathan Murphy

University of Cambridge, UK