ephemera
theory & politics in organization

volume 4, number 2 (may 2004)

editorial

articles

note

interview

reviews

No Critique

Steffen Böhm and Sverre Spoelstra

Kant

In many parts of the contemporary, post-modernised social sciences Kant is often seen as the enemy: part of the 'axis of evil' of Enlightenment philosophers that also comprises fundamentalists such as Descartes and Hegel. Just like his fellow Enlightenment totalitarians, Kant is usually represented as a philosopher of the Universal and Transcendental, and his work is often associated with terms such as Homogeneity, Reason, Rationality and Modernity – words that have attained a truly evil status in our post-modern era that is said to be characterised by difference, emotions and smoothness. Did Kant not aim to establish the Universal form of Knowledge? Is he not the philosopher of Pure Reason? And was his project not geared towards Universal ethical rules that would regulate – once and for all – our moral activities? Many of us can instantly recognise such readings of Kant – well trained as we have been by anti-Modern and anti-Enlightenment sentiments that have taken hold in various corners of organisation theory.

Within precisely these corners Foucault is often seen as a philosopher who opens up the world of the post-modern – a daringly *new* world which marks the *break* with the modern past and firmly goes *beyond* the Enlightenment tradition. Regardless of the contradictions this language poses (aren't the post-modern attempts to break with and go beyond the modern based on precisely modern concepts?), it is very doubtful whether Foucault – and, in fact, many other so-called post-modern philosophers, such as Derrida and Deleuze – can be placed *in opposition* to Enlightenment and its thinkers. Foucault's essays 'What is Enlightenment?'[1] and 'What is Critique?'[2] suggest otherwise. In both essays Foucault outs himself as an interested reader of Kant. Rather than opposing himself to Kant, Foucault refuses to join in the tradition of what he calls

_____

1   Foucault, M. (2000) 'What is Enlightenment?', in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 1*, ed. P. Rabinow, trans. R. Hurley and others. London: Penguin.

2   Foucault, M. (1996) 'What is critique?', trans. K.P. Geiman, in J. Schmidt (ed.) *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

the 'black-mail' of the Enlightenment.[3] Foucault does not break with Kant. In fact, shortly before his death Foucault wrote an entry about himself in a French dictionary saying: "if Foucault is indeed perfectly at home in the philosophical tradition, it is within the critical tradition of Kant".[4] Why, then, did Foucault understand himself as a Kantian?

Enlightenment

According to Foucault, today Enlightenment is often approached as if it contained an 'essential kernel of rationality'.[5] One is therefore often driven to be either for or against Enlightenment: "you either accept the Enlightenment and remain within the tradition of rationalism…, or else you criticize the Enlightenment and then try to escape from its principles of rationality".[6] Being the philosopher of governmentality, Foucault finds such a spurious decisionism problematic, precisely because it relies on a questionable inside/outside dichotomy. For him, Enlightenment is a complex historical and social process of governmentality, which "includes elements of social transformation, types of political institution, forms of knowledge, projects of rationalization of knowledge and practices, technological mutations"[7] many of which remain important and constitutive today. One can thus not simply be against Enlightenment or stand outside it. Governmentality means that subjectivity and life itself is governed and determined by a complex set of relations of power and knowledge that one cannot simply escape, reject or get rid of.

But, according to Foucault, one also has to be careful not to equate Enlightenment with Modernity, which is often seen as a historical epoch that is "preceded by a more or less naïve or archaic premodernity, and followed by an enigmatic and troubling 'postmodernity'".[8] While Foucault connects Enlightenment to a complex set of processes of modern governmentality, what he senses in Kant is the idea of Enlightenment not being so much a historical period, but an attitude or ethos. For Foucault, this attitude is not so much about being faithful to a set of 'doctrinal elements.'[9] Instead, Enlightenment attitude is characterised by a continuous process of 'becoming-mature', as it were: for Kant, Enlightenment is a kind of an exit, a response to self-imposed immaturity.[10] By 'immaturity' Kant "means a certain state of our will which makes us accept someone else's authority to lead us in areas where the use of

---

3   'What is Enlightenment?', 312.

4   Foucault, M. ["Maurice Flaubert"] (1994) 'Foucault, Michel, 1926-', in Gary Cutting (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 315.

5   'What is Enlightenment?', 313.

6   *ibid.*

7   *ibid.*

8   *ibid.*, 309.

9   *ibid.*, 312.

10 Kant, I. (1784/1991) 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?', in I. Kant, *Political Writings*, trans. & eds. Reiss and Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 54-60.

reason is called for."[11] That is, Kant describes Enlightenment as the event when humanity puts its own reason to use in order to question an existing authority. For Foucault, Enlightenment is therefore not only a historical event of governmentality, but also an attitude, a decisive will, *not* to be governed like this or that.[12] This is not to be understood as a will to simply get rid of any form of governmentality, but as a contestation of *how* to be governed: governed "in the name of these principles, in view of such objectives and by the means of such methods, not like that, not for that, not by them."[13] Enlightenment, as ethos, then becomes the art of intervening in the processes of subjectification and objectification which decide the possible and the impossible of our being – saying 'no' to a particular form of governmentalisation and 'yes' to new forms of life which were deemed to be impossible or illegal.

In Foucault's view, this is precisely what characterises the event of Kant's three critiques. They don't simply define Enlightenment as Universal regime of Reason that sets out concrete rules that everyone has to follow. Instead, Kant's project is one of defining "the conditions under which the use of reason is legitimate in order to determine what can be known, what must be done, and what maybe hoped."[14] This process, this attitude, cannot be a finite project;[15] rather, it is a contested process, a constant struggle. This is precisely why Žižek talks about 'cracks' in the Kantian Universal. Žižek sees the Kantian Universal not as all-encompassing. Rather, for him, "every universal is potentially suspended"; "every universal implies a point of exception at which its validity, its hold, is cancelled."[16] Žižek therefore maintains that "each of Kant's three critiques 'stumbles' against universalization",[17] rather than ever fully achieving it. What this stumbling amounts to is nothing other than Kant's ongoing process of becoming-mature: "the permanent reactivation of an attitude – that is, of a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era."[18] Enlightenment is thus characterised by a certain ethos of critique.

Critique

Foucault, the Kantian, sees Enlightenment as a critical attitude that constantly analyses and reflects upon – or stumbles against – the limits of the Universal, the modern regimes of governmentality that limit humanity's freedom. Enlightenment is thus not only a regime of governmentality and subjectification, but also a process of critique –

---

11 'What is Enlightenment?', 312.

12 What is Critique?', 398.

13 *ibid.*, 384.

14 'What is Enlightenment?', 308.

15 See also Deleuze, G. (1995) *Kant's Critical Philosophy: The Doctrine of the Faculties*, trans. H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam. London: Athlone.

16 Žižek, S. (1993) *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 45.

17 *ibid.*

18 'What is Enlightenment?', 312.

refusing, challenging and resisting – that very regime.[19] One could say: there is always a 'crack' in the Enlightenment regime; governmentality is always de-governmentality, and subjectification is always de-subjectification. Critique, for Foucault, is about the continuous questioning of historical concepts and orders, exemplified by Kant's famous definition of Enlightenment as 'dare to know' (*aude sapere*) – having the courage to think beyond authoritative regimes, and especially having the courage to question the rules governing one's own actions and beliefs. For Foucault, it is not Kant's Universalist Reason for which he deserves to be named the greatest critical philosopher of modernity, but because of his unwillingness to retreat in given forms and structures. Foucault is not attracted by Kant's appeal to a Reason (his attempt to situate Reason partly outside the domain of critique). Instead, Foucault is Kantian in the sense of Kant's enlightened appeal to courage[20] – a courage to critique and a courage to know.

For Foucault, this critical courage cannot simply appeal to an empty dream of freedom but must "put itself to the test of reality, of contemporary reality, both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take."[21] In this sense, critique has to be practical. According to Foucault, the practice of Enlightenment's ethos of critique should be understood as "work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings."[22] Critique is thus an ontological practice, a work that is testing the limits of life itself. Again, this testing of the limits of life should not be confused with projects that try to escape contemporary existence or invent programmes for new societies, cultures or worlds. For him, a transformation can always just be partial and micro-political, as it were. In contrast to some readers of Foucault in organisation theory and elsewhere,[23] however, he is quite clear in 'What is Enlightenment' that this does not have to mean "that no work can be done except in disorder and contingency."[24] That is, by saying that critique can only ever be partial does not have to imply that one cannot work on the limits of the Universal. On the contrary, critique has to reveal the 'cracks' of the Universal, and thus "the work in question has", according to Foucault, "its generality, its systematicity, its homogeneity, and its stakes".[25]

Critical Management Studies

As most of our readers will know, there has been a kind of 'empire-building' going on over the past decade or so, that has tried to institutionalise critique within the field of organisation and management studies. For us, the event of Critical Management Studies, or CMS, has been an important one. The emergence of CMS has provided us and many

---

19 'What is Critique?', 385.

20 *ibid.*, 386.

21 'What is Enlightenment?', 316.

22 *ibid.*

23 See, for example, Chan, A. (2000) 'Redirecting critique in postmodern organization studies: The perspective of Foucault', *Organization Studies*, 21(6): 1059-1075.

24 'What is Enlightenment?', 317.

25 *ibid.*

other scholars with a public space to critically reason (to stay with a Kantian language) about the realms of work, organisation and management. This public space has created a certain legitimacy without which this journal, for example, would have been impossible to establish. In fact, *ephemera*'s subtitle, 'critical dialogues on organization', was informed by, and targeted at, exactly this public space. There can thus be no doubt: the event of CMS has been important and productive, as it has helped to open up new possibilities for the transformation of academic discourses in the field of organisation and management studies.

So, what exactly *is* CMS? Well, numerous writers have tried to provide definitions of the signifier 'critical' that is supposed to enable a clear and distinct characterisation of CMS as opposed to established and perhaps mainstream management discourses. Others have emphasised that CMS is really a 'broad church' that does not aim to normalise the meaning of critique (cf. Ackroyd in this issue). We are certainly not in the business here of wanting to define CMS or critique in any way. However, what we have tried in this editorial so far is to remind ourselves of the Enlightenment tradition of critique that is all too often forgotten or denied – especially in the popular post-modern corners of our field. As Foucault – the darling of many anti-Modernists – clearly shows in the two essays we discussed, today's understandings and practices of critique cannot be artificially separated from Kant and the Enlightenment. We have all been shaped – that is governed – by this tradition and we cannot simply decide to operate outside of it. However, this does not mean that we cannot critique this tradition, that we cannot be critical of critique. One of the most fundamental points of Foucault's essays is that this critique of critique is precisely what Kant and the tradition of Enlightenment demand from us. Enlightenment is not so much about transcendental and rational rules of engagement; instead, what is at its heart is an ethos or attitude of critique.

This critical attitude to itself is of clear evidence in CMS. If critique is all about being critical about oneself and *fearlessly* speaking out to established authorities (see Jack in this issue), and if it is about putting yourself at stake against governmentalisation, as Foucault argues, CMS must surely talk about itself in order to recreate and revitalise itself (see also Reed in this issue). The contributions to this issue – particularly the two articles (Wray-Bliss and Jack) and the three reviews (Ackroyd, Reed and Parker) – bear clear witness to this need to talk about CMS in a critical fashion. We see this critique of CMS as an ongoing project, and our hope is that this issue of *ephemera* can contribute to a productive ethos of critique within organisation and management studies.

No critique

Having been as affirmative as we can about CMS, let's have a glimpse of our critique. Yes, CMS has been an important event. Yes, CMS has enabled a partial transformation of discourses in organisation and management studies. But has it achieved enough? Has the CMS project even come close to starting to have a real impact in the academy and wider spheres of society? Our answer is a clear No – and the contributions to this issue, by articulating the limits of CMS in various ways, show why such an answer is justified.

Wray-Bliss and Ackroyd, for example, show how CMS is not so much a 'broad church', as it is often claimed. Instead, CMS authors often use critique in a strategic way in order to exclude and include certain discourses. This is not necessarily a problem though. In our view, critique should be a strategic project that aims to question established demarcation lines between inside and outside. What Wray-Bliss and Ackroyd successfully do is exactly that: they critique the lines CMS has drawn and the way these lines have tended to exclude certain other critical voices. Rather than simply saying, CMS is a 'broad church' that includes everything and everybody, we think that it is important to show how exactly this discourse of inclusivity works – also ideologically – and how it is responsible for excluding others.

Having mainly emerged out of academic discourses, CMS has always faced one specific demarcation line: that which separates theory and practice. There are various contributions in this issue which revisit this problem. For example, in their dialogue, Byers (a manager and practitioner) and Rhodes (an academic) explore the ways theory and philosophy inform and transform the world of management and practice. One of the things that we find interesting in this dialogue is the fact that it actually takes place. Sometimes we hear voices that call for a more practical relevance of CMS and a less Theoretical and abstract language. While we, of course, understand and even have some sympathy with these sentiments, what is interesting in Rhodes' interview of Byers is the fact that their exchange is itself highly theoretical and abstract, which does not mean that it cannot also be oriented towards practice. So, rather than claiming that CMS is not practical enough – and therefore reproducing the theory/practice dichotomy – one should perhaps accept that discourse is always already theoretical as well as practical. What is needed, in our view, is not a constant reproduction of the theory/practice bind, but an *involvement* in the powers and limits of discourse; that is, changing the target of critique (which includes ourselves) as we go along – thus, in a sense, reducing 'critical distance' to zero. A very Kantian and Foucauldian project of critique, as we have seen above.

Precisely such a critique is delivered by Mueller's paper, which is clearly not articulated from within the specific boundaries of the CMS discourse. But this is exactly its point. It challenges the very positioning of the boundaries of CMS. By engaging with the political – and sometimes violent – critiques that have been articulated by alter-globalisation movements, his notes on the Gothenburg riots of 2001 can be read as a challenge to the often comfortable lives of CMS academics and their versions of critique, which often operates from a safe distance. His paper is not necessarily a call for all of us to start engaging in street-fighting, rioting or marching against the excesses of global capitalism – although one would hope that academics would involve themselves with these practices more often. Rather, this is a general call for CMS to get its 'hands dirty' by engaging with those discourses that articulate a clear challenge to the identity of the CMS project. Where exactly do we draw the lines of CMS? How far do we want to go with our critique? Can we simply exclude some of the most profound challenges to the world of organisation and management that have been articulated by a variety of alter-globalisation movements in recent years? As Jack argues in this issue, perhaps we ought to be less interested in protecting our safe academic lives or the CMS space we have created for ourselves, and, instead, work towards a more *fearless* critical

speech. And we agree with Jack; this fearlessness and courage is sometimes missing within the realms of CMS.

Too often critique simply works as a safety valve; too often it becomes a logo. Indeed, we have seen an explosion of this logo in recent years: there are Critical Management Studies conferences and critical journals appearing everywhere. It seems as if there is a critical bandwagon that everybody feels they need to jump onto. But how much has the 'critical' logo really changed; how critical has our critique really been? We feel that too often the 'critical' signifier simply stands in for any real critique to be practiced. It is before this background that the editorial collective of *ephemera* has decided to change the subtitle of the journal. A minor gesture, perhaps. But also significant in the sense that through this gesture we are not simply getting rid of critique but, instead, affirming the tradition of critique. A Kantian move perhaps.

So, there you go: an issue of *ephemera* on critique which marks the journal's departure from its logo 'critique'. We are removing the label in order to learn the thing itself.

the editors   Steffen Böhm is the editor-in-chief of *ephemera*.
                   E-mail: sgbohm@essex.ac.uk

                   Sverre Spoelstra is member of the editorial collective of *ephemera*.
                   E-mail: sss21@le.ac.uk