

Against management: Auto-critique

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Abstract

In this review I consider the 20 years that have passed since the publication of my book *Against Management*. I begin by locating it in the context of the expanding business schools of the UK in the 1990s, and the growth of CMS in north western Europe. After positioning the book within its time, and noting that the book is now simultaneously highly cited and irrelevant, I then explore the arguments I made in the final chapter. If the book is of interest for the next two decades, it because it gestures towards the importance of alternative forms of organization, which I continue to maintain are not reducible to ‘management’. Given the intensifying crises of climate, ecology, inequality and democracy, developing alternatives must be understood as the historical task of CMS within the business school and I propose a ten-point manifesto in support of that commitment.

Keywords

Alternative organization, business school, critical management studies, history, manifesto

Twenty years ago, according to its preface, I was starting to write the book which become *Against Management: Organization in the Age of Managerialism* (2002). In this essay, published 20 years after the book was published, I have been given some space to reflect backwards and forwards, to a book that has had some recognition within the field of critical management studies, but none beyond it. I assume this this is not just because of the qualities of the book, but rather of the broader problems of CMS in the context of a marketized university system which encourages the overproduction of unread words. As my family often remind me, I’ve written a lot of books, but no-one ever reads them.

I will begin with a gentle evisceration of *Against Management*, and its historical and national context, which includes the journal *Organization* of course. I then rehearse and expand on the

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arguments made in the last chapter of the book – ‘For Organization’ – in order to explain why I think most of the book is a historical document, but that final chapter points to the future. Finally I explain why, in the context of climate crisis, massive inequality and systemic exclusion, the only important thing that critical work on organizations can and should do is to research and teach about alternative organization, business and the economy. In the UK, the last few years has seen a push back against this sort of work, most notably at the University of Leicester Business School in the UK in 2021, but any business school Deans who wish to reproduce the orthodoxy are on the wrong side of history. Its that simple. I conclude with the beginnings of a manifesto for the Business School of Tomorrow, and a plea to not let me do this again in 20 years time. Because by then, it will be too late.

Against Against Management

At the time I was writing, I worked in a small management school at the University of Keele, in the middle of nowhere, England. It was an extraordinary place, with a research centre¹ that joined sociology, management, geography and literature and where we had been discussing actor network theory, process philosophy, art and interdisciplinarity since I joined in 1995. I wrote the book before I become Head of Department, in late 2001. Within a few months, the university hit a financial crisis, and I was asked to sack two members of staff, grow the MBA, and save money. There were lots of meetings, and a lot of shouting, and in 2003 I left to go to Leicester University instead.

Its odd reading the preface now, because I am kind about Keele, a place which I left in impotent fury, frustrated by my inability to do anything to influence the direction of the place. Over the following 20 years, it turned out to be a pattern. I had left Staffordshire University in 1995 complaining about the construction of the ‘McUniversity’, only to gradually discover that there was no escape, and everywhere that I went – Keele, Warwick, Leicester – the same thing eventually happened. Each episode became a published article, a coolly hysterical document of failure (Parker, 2004, 2014, 2020; Parker and Jary 1995). I have turned my experiences into anonymised ‘case studies’, with some theoretical decoration or other, but also lines on my CV which allowed me to get jobs elsewhere. *Against Management* got me promoted to a chair at Keele, 6 months before I left. The ironies multiplied, as I become more senior and well paid as a reward for achieving so little but for making such a fuss about it. My current position, at a university which is itself now in the process of constructing a business school, was gained in part because I wrote a book called *Shut Down the Business School* (2018). If my work was in the least bit threatening, they wouldn’t even have shortlisted me. ‘Irony’ would be one word for it.

This is one of the symptoms of my time, that people like me were encouraged to write so much, and then imagined that this meant that this meant that they were doing something important. Academic journal articles are generally read by very few people, and most academic books (apart from textbooks) suffer a similar fate. They are really not written to be read, but published (and the distinction is important) in order to signify a particular form of status game. It’s a game that I have been quite successful at, because I do enjoy writing very much, but I don’t think it should be mistaken for having some sort of impact on the world. Most ‘critical’ social science is no more than being critical of the social or of science, but very rarely moving beyond a strident call of ‘something ought to be done!’ Or ‘someone ought to do something!’ Writing which simply claims to be ‘political’ is not necessarily the same as doing politics. Indeed, the endless elaborations of ‘critique’ is a game which is largely internal to the academic world, and one that doesn’t matter very much outside it. The very fact that the majority of our knowledge is hidden behind paywalls, and most people don’t care about that in the slightest, is great evidence that it is really meant for internal consumption, for us and our frenemies.

Because this is the really odd thing about *Against Management*. According to google scholar, its been cited over 1100 times, but its influence on the world seems negligible. I may be missing something, but I can't remember a single example of someone who did something, inside or outside a university, who claimed that they were inspired to do this by the book. (Unless we count citing a book with a provocative title as 'doing something') Indeed, there was a scathing review of the book in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, by Sadler (2003), the then Vice President of Ashridge Business School who was 'at a loss in suggesting what readership it is intended for' (p. 29).² At the time I remember feeling a bit hurt, and cross that they had asked a reviewer who didn't know about critical management studies, but he may have been rather prescient. If you aren't part of that extended family, why would you read this stuff?

Looking at the book now, its an odd mish mash of things. About half of it is a cannibalised version of articles that I had published in other places, the rest is grumpy swiping at an ill-defined target, 'market managerialism'. I suggested that management was a problem in three ways – as a supposed cadre of expert organizers who get paid more than mere workers, as a claimed form of expertise which underpins the claims of these expert organizers, and as the academic discipline that legitimises these claims. I wasn't the first person to complain about managerialism, and I wasn't the last, but my claims were strongly tied to the idea that management was a claim about expertise over markets. Given that I was brought up by Margaret Thatcher, and then Tony Blair, and that under both Prime Ministers UK universities were being inexorably put out to market, my hostility to 'markets' was pretty instinctive, though almost entirely assumed rather than demonstrated.

The book is perhaps more interesting in its rather shambolic interdisciplinarity, with chapters which borrow bits of sociology, political theory, philosophy, cultural studies and so on. Ideas about bureaucracy, community and citizenship are jammed together with big chunky swipes at business ethics and (rather ungratefully) critical management studies itself. There's also a chapter on films, and I'm not at all sure if that belongs in there at all, but it does make odd sense when contrasted with a chapter on anti-corporate protest. I had just read, and been hugely impressed by, Klein's (2000) *No Logo*, and was echoing her complaints about global institutions, branding and the fakeries of corporate social responsibility. I also liked the way that she wrote, and that she had a wide audience, so I think I was trying to do something like that. Instead, I ended up writing what Wiley now describe as 'essential reading for second-year undergraduates and above in business and management studies (including MBA), sociology and cultural studies'. That's a pretty optimistic target market, and I'm not even sure I reached them.

Looking at the book, at something written by a much younger me, it seems that it was written by someone who had read lightly across a whole range of areas and was happy enough to waft rhetoric in the general direction of things he didn't like very much. Bear in mind that I had begun my academic career as a sociologist, with undergraduate and postgraduate training in philosophy, anthropology and cultural studies, and when I moved to a management department I felt a considerable shame, since it felt like I was selling out. For a few years, in bios, I described myself as a member of the Centre for Social Theory and Technology at Keele and didn't even mention the Department of Management. I, and lots of my colleagues, hadn't done their PhDs in management, and were very keen to use authors and concepts from philosophy, cultural geography, literary theory, social psychology and so on. This disciplinary promiscuity was, I suppose, a way to claim a particular sort of distinction, an intellectual capital that allowed us to feel better about what we were doing, and hang around at conferences where we talked about the Frankfurt School, Michel Serres and Judith Butler.

One of the general features of Critical Management Studies has been the idea that it imports theory in order to use it as ammunition in its attack on the mainstream. As Oswick et al. (2011) have suggested, the management disciplines are rarely generating concepts that are used by other

parts of the humanities and social sciences but tend to be parasitic on ideas developed elsewhere. It seems to me that CMS has been a particularly intense example of this, with a parade of names being used as our ‘gurus’ (Lilley, 1997) to insist on the importance of queer theory, postcolonialism, feminism, post-Marxism, autonomism, anarchism and all the other positions I have missed out in making a short list of critical positions which is itself subject to critique.

Though *Against Management* is critical of CMS, largely by complaining that it doesn’t actually do enough because it is too ‘academic’, it is a creature of CMS nonetheless. It was published a decade after the Alvesson and Willmott collection (1992) which I had reviewed for *Sociological Review*. The first issue of *Organization*, which I was on the board of, had been published in 1994 and the first CMS conference in Manchester, which I sat on a closing panel for, took place in 1999. I was up to my neck in it, so claiming some sort of distance from the over-intellectual ambitions of this bunch of academics who were narcissistically biting the hands that fed them really doesn’t convince. My little red book was made possible by CMS, by Keele’s Management Department and a set of colleagues who talked and thought and wrote in particular ways, and by a labour market for business and management teaching and research that was buoyant across the global north. I was very lucky, and I rode the wave.

Because this is the bigger picture. That CMS grew because of the huge expansion of business schools across the global north from the late 1980s onwards. My grumpy pimple on the back of a behemoth was really only possible because of the fact that the inflating business schools, usually expanding their taught masters provision with students from outside the global north, needed people to teach the ‘organizational behaviour’ modules. I was one of those people, one element in probably the most rapid global expansion of any academic discipline in human history. In the UK, a lot of that growth was required by universities that were becoming creatures of the market, rather than fully funded by the state. Universities needed postgraduate masters fees to balance the books and pay for marketing spend, and the construction of signature buildings which could be featured on the website. *Against Management* was enabled by neoliberalism, by the historical accident that I happen to speak the same language that they do in the USA, by China’s one child policy which meant that middle class Chinese parents could fund an overseas degree.

In summary, the book is a symptom, not a cause. It could be used as a historical source to show the hypocrisy of a bunch of woke snowflakes who were happy to claim the salaries, the international conferences, the status, but refused the tricky job of actually doing anything useful. In a gilded cage high up in an ivy clad ivory tower, they fluttered and preened, cheeping and tweeting at each other and then demanded more corn. *Against Management* is some sort of document of that era, a *Great Gatsby* for the bored children of a gilded age. Diverting enough, if you like that sort of thing.

For Against Management

The most interesting chapter to me on my re-read was the last one, ‘For organization’. I haven’t looked at that for two decades, but it does say something quite important. Perhaps my mistake was to put that chapter at the end, because I have a strong feeling that most of the book’s citations were based on its archly provocative title, not reading the book all the way through. In one of the early responses to the book, ‘For Management?’ Clegg et al. (2006) entirely ignored that part of the argument, seemingly assuming that being against management was the same as being against all forms of organization. This, it seems to me, is a really crucial slippage, and I want to reiterate and refresh that argument here. For me, it’s why *Against Management* might be worth reading, because it ends well by giving us something to do.

‘Management’ and ‘organization’ are not the same. The former refers to a particular practice that emerged in Northern Europe at the start of the 19th century, and that relies on the assumption that

a trained cadre of ‘overseers’ or ‘supervisors’ are necessary to make organization happen. Management is predicated on hierarchy, on information asymmetry, and the assumption that most workers cannot organise themselves. Management assumes that certain people can read the accounts, organize the scheduling and see into the future, and those people deserve bigger offices and better pay. ‘Organization’ is a much wider concept, and one that doesn’t assume that we already know the ‘one best way’ to organize. There are lots of different ways to organize (Parker et al., 2007, 2014), and ‘management’ is just one of them, one that relies on some very particular assumptions about human beings and their capacities, a form of hierarchical politics made durable.

The problem for us now is the way that ‘management’ has become a way of looking at organization, such that we barely notice it anymore. We talk of managing our careers, our work/life balance, or our diet such that the distinction between these everyday coping practices and the activities of chief executives in global corporations is easily erased. There is a linguistic history here that is worth a bit of archaeology. The word ‘managery’ or ‘management’ was used in English in the 16th century in the sense of a practical cunning or planning which allowed people to deal with complex situations (Parker, 2018: 100). It was not referring to a particular class of people, or a body of knowledge, but a capacity, a skill in arranging the world. ‘Handling’ and ‘dealing with’ have similar contemporary meanings, though with an added sense of resilience or personal strength. In other words, ordinary people engaged in managery, in the same sense that you might talk of someone who was wise, or cunning, or determined.

Over the intervening 400 years, the word has gained an additional set of meanings. Words have a tendency to do that. In this case its as if the word has become institutionalised, attached to locations with power and status. Rather than being a personal skill or capacity, it has become an occupational position in almost all organizations, with a particular language and a global infrastructure of consultants, websites, awards, institutes and so on. And 13,000 business schools, all busily selling management for money. Everyday forms of organizing, managery, are so easily forgotten in this barrage of big people, big ideas and billions of dollars of fees. Jameson (1994) wrote that someone else said, ‘it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism’. (p. xii). He seems to have been thinking of JG Ballard, an author whose work is a document of the seemingly inevitable destruction and decay which follows from the will to order. We might just as well say, its now harder to imagine the end of the world than the end of management. But being against management is not the same as being against managery.

This is a point of crucial importance and – I would argue – one that has been at least partly recognised across CMS and cognate areas over the last 20 years. In economic geography, sociology, politics and public policy there is a huge amount of interest in the social and solidarity economy, postcapitalism, the new municipalism and community wealth building, social movements demanding system change, localism, regenerative and circular practices. This is relevant to the business school because there are many, many forms of organization across the world that deny the core elements of market managerialism. They range from co-operatives of many different kinds, to employee trusts, mutuals, community ownership companies, B-corps and social enterprises. These organizational forms are embedded in wider ideas about impact investing, fair trade, slow food, localism, social value, the commons, universal basic income, participatory economics and governance, credit unions, complementary currencies and so on. There are plenty of animated debates about the merits of different forms,³ and I am not at all suggesting that this is a coherent alternative with one strategy. It is really a terrain of experimental enquiry, an investigation of the possibilities of rethinking conventional economics, including the assumptions about growth, profit, externalities and organization that seem to be built into the very architecture of the global business school.

Theoretically, there are plenty of resources to draw on too, with extensive writings in Marxist, socialist and communist traditions, 200 years of writing about anarchism and a huge outpouring of

work on green economics over the past 50 years. If we add to this contemporary concerns about the representation of gender, ethnicity and sexuality; movements for decolonisation, inclusion, queering; and doughnut economics, economy for a common good, the wellbeing economy and so on, we have an enormous range of ideas to help construct an alternative curriculum. These might be disparate ideas, located in different disciplines and traditions, aimed at different objects of concern, but they do not place ‘management’ (in its institutionalised sense) at the heart of any enquiry into organizing. Perhaps it would be better to say that management is the general area of concern, and management is one of the strategies that people have used to address it.

Management is just one of them though. Not the only one, or the most important one, but one amongst many, many others (Parker et al., 2007). I suppose the title of my book is not quite right. Twenty years later, I do think that hierarchy is sometimes useful, that markets can often be used to address problems, that some forms of organizing should be encouraged to grow, and that ‘schools for organizing’ could have an important role to play in disseminating expertise about these sorts of matters. So perhaps not ‘Against Management’, because that is too definitive, but ‘Putting Management in its Place’, or ‘In Search of Managery’, or something like that. But then sometimes it is good to be clear about what you are against, but only in order to then move forwards to explore what you are for, which is why chapter nine was the most important one of all.

Synthesis

So what is to be done? Well, from where I am right now, the sheer scale of global business education makes it strategically important for intervention. It is probably the most significant product being sold by the global university system, providing fee income of at least \$400 billion dollars in around 13,000 schools globally (Parker, 2018: 12). In 2018, UNESCO statistics indicate that the global national average percentage of students studying ‘business, administration or law’ was 28.4% (<http://data.uis.unesco.org/>, accessed March 2021). According to Eurostat, in the same year, over one in five European students were studying the same combination (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Tertiary_education_statistics&oldid=507549#Fields_of_education, accessed March 2021). In the UK, one in seven students are studying ‘business or administrative studies’ (<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/17-01-2019/sb252-higher-education-student-statistics/subjects>, accessed April 2021). There are two important consequences to this extraordinary subject dominance. One is that, in 95% of these business schools, 95% of the time, future citizens of our warming planet are being taught about digital marketing, data analytics, capital markets, brand strategy, strategic HRM and innovation with no reference to political economy or the planetary boundaries of global capitalism. The second is that the gravitational force of this pile of cash and people means that the business school is now in lockstep with a set of ‘partners’ who occupy powerful positions within the orthodoxy and benefit from this arrangement of power and knowledge. Publishers that sell academic journals, textbooks, citation data and journal publication software; media companies that sell ranking data and advertising; financial institutions that lend career development money to students; professional associations that sell membership and conferences; and a host of conventional businesses that sponsor lecture theatres and harvest graduates. The pressure is to reproduce the existing set-up, combined with a fear that anything too radical will not sell, so the pitch is that reform might be needed to make capitalism work better and be kinder – corporate purpose and responsibility, diversity and sustainability – but real change is not on the curriculum. Changing the system is not one of the learning outcomes. Don’t rock the boat, because a lot of people earn their dinners from the way that things are right now.⁴

In the late 1960s, the German student activist Rudi Dutchske coined the phrase ‘long march through the institutions’. It seems to be based on a Gramscian understanding of the importance of

establishing cultural hegemony, an entryist strategy of working within and through the organizations that reproduce the existing social order. What better site for such a strategy than a business school? If you had a disciplined cadre of crack academics who share an interest in system change, wishing to tilt organization and exchange towards a low carbon, high inclusion, high democracy economy, what better place could there be to work? Consider the millions of graduates who leave b-schools every year. These are not stupid people. They understand that climate change is a looming global disaster; that in 2020 the richest 1% owned 44% of the world's wealth; that globally women earn 68% of men's wages, and there are no countries in the world with gender parity; that every year around 9 million people die of starvation; that planetary diversity is being lost at an increasing rate (<https://inequality.org/facts/global-inequality/>, <https://www.weforum.org/reports/gender-gap-2020-report-100-years-pay-equality>, <https://www.mercycorps.org/blog/quick-facts-global-hunger>, all consulted in March 2021), and so on, and so on, and so on.

Our students know this, but they don't know what to do about it, and we have a global business school system that mostly ignores the problems and sells them comforting fairy tales instead. That's why chapter nine really does matter, even if you ignore the rest of the book. The historic task of CMS, if I may be so bold, is not to rehearse the debates between Marxists and Foucauldians, or add more unread words to journals behind paywalls, or even to publish books that get lots of citations from people who find the title mildly provocative. That's why the business school must become something different, a School for Organizing which teaches about solutions rather than being part of the problem.

Twenty years after 'Against Management', I feel clearer about what I want the book to mean. Insofar as any author can demand a particular reading of their text, I want this book to be the beginning of a story that leads to a clear demand for thought and work that supports the transformation of the Business School, as one small part of contributing to transforming the economy. This means teaching and researching an experimental approach towards a low carbon, high inclusion and high democracy economy. The new Schools for Organizing must contain plural epistemologies and methodologies for thinking about the shape of the future, because we simply don't know which forms of organizing will work best in particular places, confronted by certain sorts of problems. The one thing that we do know is that if we keep applying market managerialism to every problem that we meet, we will fail, and produce an ever more lively planet.

So here's my provisional manifesto for the School for Organizing. (Provisional, because if there's one thing the School for Organizing stands for, it's revising our strategies if something better comes along.)

1. Business produces carbon, so every single module in the school must teach about carbon reduction, without exception.
2. Ideas about globalisation and growth should be counterbalanced with an emphasis on localisation and steady state business practice.
3. Ninety-nine percent of organizations are not corporations, so teaching case studies on corporations must not make up more than 10% of the cases used on a given degree.
4. Most organizations are based outside the global north, so no more than 50% of the teaching cases used in courses should be about business practices based in the global north.
5. All programmes should contain credit bearing programmes of work with local third sector organizations and alternative businesses.
6. Programmes that connect the School's teaching and research with other academic disciplines, whether science, social science or arts subjects, will be actively encouraged.
7. Every single qualification the School offers should have at least one module that reflects on the ethics and politics of business practice.

8. Large companies make large profits, so funded research should be skewed towards third sector, social economy and public sector organizations that can't afford to pay for it.
9. In order to ensure that teaching and research reflect the interests of local citizens, third sector organizations and businesses, all will sit on the governing body of the School.
10. In the case of Schools located within universities, no university should expect this part of the university to be hyperprofitable, so it should be treated like any other social science department.

In order to ensure that at least the first nine of these points can be achieved, the School will need to be organized in a way that reflects its ambitions. That means no heroic leaders, no professors who think their job is only to publish words, and a composition of staff that – in gender, ethnicity and social background – attempts to reflect the population of the city region it is located in. The School for Organizing must be organized experimentally in order to achieve what it aims to do, it must practice what it preaches, not just encourage people to write books for academics like me and hope for citations. It must produce connections, porosities and involutions that allow the 'outside' to become 'inside' and prevent the university from being a castle that hoards power/knowledge.

Twenty years on from writing *Against Management*, I feel as if the book was the beginning of a thread of thought. The last chapter prefigures much of what I have done since, which I rather resent, because I would like to imagine I was less predictable than that. But it is also a document of lost time, of action that was directed at writing rather than doing. We are now 20 years closer to climate collapse, and global inequalities continue to widen, at the same time that many business schools in the UK are purging their 'critical' people, seemingly in the belief that maximizing income for their institutions is their key performance indicator. Academics continue to overproduce words that most people never read, and 'critical' academics spend time imagining that writing a 'critical' piece and tweeting about it is the same as engaging in politics. Change needs to happen faster and more radically now, with all teaching and research on management and business across the globe helping to produce a fair and regenerative economy. In 20 years time, I don't want to have to write this again, and you don't want to have to read it. So lets make sure that doesn't happen.

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Notes

1. The Centre for Social Theory and Technology.
2. Ashridge is now owned by Hult International, a private company headquartered in the USA, and *The Higher* is owned by Inflexion Pvt. Equity Partners LLP, who also own the UK part of the restaurant chain 'TGI Fridays'.
3. See, for example, Gibson-Graham et al. (2013), Felber (2015) and Raworth (2017).
4. And yes, this includes me.

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