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Can it? On Expanding Institutional Theory by Disarming Critique

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Can it? On Expanding Institutional Theory by Disarming Critique

A long silence. Suddenly: a flash, a rumble, a deluge. Does the Lok downpour revive institutional theory or swamp it?

I am grateful to Professor Lok for his thoughtful, careful response to my intervention. (Actually, my debt is less to "Professor Lok" than to "Jaco" [trans. 'he who supplants'], my erstwhile PhD student who I count as a friend – up until now, at least!). I immediately apologize for this indiscrete deviation from the scholarly mystique of dispassionate impersonality. In a gesture of entente, requiring the loose talk of critical analysis to be restrained by the buttoned-up norms of institutional theory, I will avoid any further improper, overly transparent declarations.

In many ways, Professor Lok's 'Why (And How) Institutional Theory Can Be Critical' expresses my core argument more cogently and forcefully than I did. He also gently chides me for claiming and perpetuating the distinctive, emancipatory monopoly of critical analysis that he associates with its 'continued marginalization' (*all single quotes are taken from Lok, 2017 in press*). I

I am urged to 'resist' and 'traverse' the fantasy of 'wholeness' by contributing to 'creat[ing] the conditions of possibility for a more productive symbiotic relationship between (small 'c') critical institutional theory and (big 'C') Critical [T]heory'. My initial response is to say that I eagerly await the development of this 'symbiotic relationship' as I strain to discern signs of such a mutation and,

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relatedly, struggle to detect evidence of such 'productiveness' amongst exponents of the (North American) Hydra-like variant of institutional theory (IT) that is the focus of our exchange. In what follows, I offer a response to Professor Lok's counter-proposition - that Institutional Theory (IT) *can* be critical. I broadly follow the sequence of his essay but adopt a streamlined format, and keeping references to a bare minimum, in order to make the most of the available space.

1. *Grand Challenges*. Institutional theorists have indeed widened their range of concerns to address "grand challenges" - such as income inequality and poverty alleviation. However, many approaches, conservative as well as radical, examine such "grand" issues. Attentiveness is not a persuasive indicator of a commitment to critique and/or to facilitate a transformation of relations of domination, oppression, exploitation, etc. Recent interest in "grand challenges" by exponents of IT might be more plausibly attributed to other concerns - such as a desire to make IT less irrelevant and/or (even) more all-conquering.
2. *Conservative Pedigree*. In common with critical forms of analysis (e.g. radical Weberian, neo-Marxist, post-structuralist, etc.), IT has diverse intellectual debts. That said, it is difficult, to identify any roots of IT that are nourished by anything other than a conservative or liberal intellectual tradition. To re-cycle Professor Lok's well-chosen epithet, IT has a '*conservative pedigree'* (my emphasis) that, I suggest, frustrates or compromises any aspiration by well-intentioned efforts to make IT critical. To argue that the 'onto-epistemological assumptions [of IT] are

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not necessarily an impediment' to this venture, or that 'a primary interest in the operation and effects of power itself is not a necessary precondition' of IT becoming critical, is to underestimate the most daunting obstacle to such a development: the ethico-political commitment inscribed within IT's 'conservative pedigree'. Urging a leopard to change its spots is unlikely to yield the desired mutation.

3. *Reflection*. The tradition of IT places limited value upon reflection, including reflection upon its own development and limits. IT may show how 'institutional processes constrain and naturalize the ways in which people come to know themselves in relation to organizational or societal practices'. But exponents of IT rarely turn this attention on their own practices. Consequently, there is little recognition of how, by sparing IT from such critique, its self-satisfaction and pervasiveness operates to maintain the established order. This conservative effect is both underpinned and justified, as Professor Lok notes, by a subscription - whether naive or cynical - to 'a neo-positivist myth of impartial, detached, politically neutral science' – a myth that IT 'uncritically reproduces in its journals of choice'. Perpetuating this myth may bestow some spurious, legitimacy upon IT. But it inhibits, if it does not entirely 'preclude', 'institutional theorists from becoming more critical in their work'.
4. *From Denaturalization to Domination*. Denaturalization, which recalls the socially constructed nature of taken-for-granted realities, is a necessary yet insufficient condition of critical engagement. Where IT facilitates denaturalization, it may potentially enable 'people in society [to] realize how they can unwittingly contribute to their own domination and

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oppression'. However, *this* (radical) interpretation of the significance of widely institutionalized (common)sense-making practices requires an additional element: the engagement of an alternative, critical form of analysis. As Professor Lok acknowledges, the notion of "domination" or "oppression" is largely absent from the prospectus and vocabulary of IT, an absence that is not, I wager, accidental.

5. *Scientific Objectivity and Neutrality*. IT's investment in the neo-positivist myth of impartiality and detachment does not make it 'well equipped' to foster critical self-reflection on the scientistic ceremonials of its scholarship (ironically enough, given the focus on ceremony in a seminal text of IT). On occasion, there may be some 'acknowledgement of the role of the researchers in the interpretation of the data, and the resulting historical, partial, and/or fallible nature of qualitative analysis'. But it seems to make little difference to how IT research is undertaken and presented. Where do we find the implications of the recognition of partiality or fallibility drawn out with regard to their ethico-political significance? There is, it seems, great resistance to confronting how 'the authority…and the related academic status [of IT] appear to rest primarily on the legitimacy of the myth of scientific objectivity and neutrality'. A plausible reason for such resistance is the risk of critical reflection 'nullifying the positive social impact institutional theorists increasingly desire to make though their work, because it could undermine its authority in, for example, the public policy realm by exposing how institutional theory is itself politically constructed'. Here Professor Lok valuably debunks IT's 'neutrality' or, better, points to how its ostensible

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'objectivity' is '*politically constructed*' (emphasis added) but he stops short of explicating the features and implications of IT's political construction. Instead, he seems to retreat into the IT closet from where he entertains the fantasy of 'facilitate[ing] effective emancipatory interventions in society based on the authority and legitimacy [the] dominance [of IT] lends' to such 'emancipatory interventions'. What conceivable kind of 'emancipatory intervention' can derive legitimacy from an association with IT?

6. *Smoke and Mirrors*. It is argued that the Goffmanesque presentation of the IT-self as 'value free' and 'politically neutral' is a 'stylistic choice' that does not convey the personal preferences or political views of IT exponents but, rather, reflects the 'dominance of the top American journals'. Somehow, there is a forgetting of how the sadomasochistic discipline imposed by 'top journals' is self-inflicted and enforced through labyrinthine processes of *peer* review. Since it is the practitioners of IT that evaluate and regulate each other's work, the enemy of transparency about values and politics lies within. More specifically, disingenuousness is embedded in 'institutionalized academic careerism…[that] is responsible for the systemic effect of crowding out, and thus rendering mute, alternative approaches as soon as any particular theoretical approach becomes dominant'. By jumping onto the capacious IT bandwagon , a comfortable career protected from any de-stabilizing contact with critical analysis.
7. *A Question of Commitment*. My cursory and occasionally waspish responses (1-6) to Professor Lok's essay may perhaps be read as a

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confirmation of the desire 'to affirm the superiority of…more "genuine" and/or "radical" and/or "pure" critical commitments over those of institutional theorists'. I accept that my initial provocation (Willmott, 2015) and my responses here are intended to highlight the difficulty, and indeed the improbability, of IT becoming critical. The scare quotes placed by Professor Lok around the terms "genuine" and "pure" in relation to 'critical commitments' indicate, plausible enough, that all forms of theorizing are an impure amalgam (see point 2 above); and also that they invariably affirm their "other"(s), even as the "other" is found wanting. In the case of critical analysis, "superiority" (the elevation of this/self over that/other) is, I suggest, associated with the depth of commitment to being critically self-reflective - such that critical analysis becomes "other" to itself, albeit in an incomplete and imperfect form. As Professor Lok notes, being 'open' to the 'other(s)' requires the harboring of sufficient doubt and humility about one's own standpoint - by, for example, giving 'the benefit of the doubt' to others' espoused interest in facilitating emancipatory change. The difficulty, however, resides less in the intention, or interest, of the scholar, or even in the receptivity of "the target audience". Instead, at issue is the fitness of the chosen analytical vehicle for undertaking critique and enabling emancipatory change. IT can apparently be made "critical" simply by equating an attentiveness to "grand challenges" with being critical. That is to evade what, for me, is the central question which is: how can the (conservative) pedigree of IT make it 'well equipped' to *become* critical in a form that is congruent with the ethico-political commitment of critical analysis to emancipatory change.

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8. *Critical v. critical approaches*. Professor Lok relies heavily upon a distinction between Critical and critical approaches. Critical approaches are held to refer to 'the post-Marxist tradition including post-structuralism' whereas critical approaches are 'aimed, possibly implicitly, at exposing, disrupting, or changing institutional arrangements in society for the betterment of humanity by engaging with issues of domination, oppression and/or inequality without necessarily following in the Critical tradition'. I have a number of difficulties with this distinction. First, I disagree with Professor Lok that the C/c distinction is 'similar' to the one that I deploy between traditional and critical theory. I distinguish critical theory from traditional theory by its rejection of the assumption of separation between the subjects and objects of research and the subscription of traditional theory to "value free" science. Second, and relatedly, the C/c distinction is confusing as a common and perhaps defining thread of diverse forms of critical analysis is a commitment to the generation of scientific knowledge that is guided by an emancipatory intent, irrespective of whether it is "post-Marxist", "post-structuralist" or whatever. Finally, and as a prickly aside, I note that Professor Lok ascribes the fantasy of 'wholeness', or fullness, to what I have termed critical analysis, but he employs the unitary and totalizing notion of 'Critical' to characterize such analysis.
9. *"Radical Constructivism".* I question the ascription of a 'radically constructivist epistemology' to my position (and, perhaps, to Critical theory). I do not subscribe to the understanding that '[W]hat we call reality(…) is wholly our construct'. Yes, I am doubtful that our knowledge

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is likely to 'reflect or represent what philosophers would call an "objective" reality ' because I believe all knowledge to be conditioned by, as well as constitutive of, the (particular and contested) interpretive frames deployed by communities of researchers when generating and evaluating their propositions, including their claims about ontology. However, that does not mean, or imply, that reality is equivalent, or reducible, to our accounts of it. To the contrary, the partiality of our accounts is recurrently dis-closed by the "constitutive lack" – the Real, in Lacanian terms - that unsettles or "queers" claims to objectivity – notably, by the (often unwelcome) recognition that scientific knowledge is, as Professor Lok puts it, 'politically constructed'. I therefor find it implausible to ascribe to me the view that '"Reality" may be real enough, but this is of little relevance to Critical analysis; the nature and effects of our knowledge construction about "it" is what is important'. Nor, relatedly, do I consider analyses based upon a realist ontology or, for that matter, the uses of quantitative methods in research, to be necessarily "uncritical" or conservative. As noted above (Point 2), I define critical analysis by reference to its emancipatory interest and effects, and not by its ontological or epistemological assumptions, whilst also recognizing that the existence of this interest is contested, and that its enactment can have contradictory consequences. I do believe, nonetheless, that ethico-political commitments are key – because it is they, rather than Reality or Method, that inform and justify such assumptions about reality and knowledge. Critical analysis is self-consciousnly political in the sense that *inter alia* it advances and/or critiques the performative nature and effects

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of knowledge, including IT and critical analysis, in reporting and reproducing, or challenging and transforming, the status quo. Such critical analysis is exemplified by, but not limited to, the disruptive and transformative effects of, say, radical feminist thinking/activism.

In conclusion, I fully concur with Professor Lok that my intervention/ provocation/ polemic has 'fallen on deaf ears', are at least has not prompted any noticeable response prior to Professor Lok's extended commentary – perhaps because, politically, it is considered astute to deprive critical analysis of the "oxygene of publicity". Muteness is also an adroit form of passive-aggressive non-affirmation. Lack of engagement with the tradition of critical/emancipatory scholarship is perhaps the most eloquent indicator of disinterest in making IT critical, at least in a form that is recognizable as critical analysis. More charitably, the reticence to speak up may be symptomatic of the difficulty of realizing a latent, closeted interest by "coming out" as critical.

So, on a more optimistic note, perhaps my intervention is a "slow burn", with Professor Lok's response facilitating some sustained reflection on the purpose of IT, fostering disenchantment with perpetuating a conservative form of analysis, and anticipating an embrace of emancipatory, radical change-oriented scholarship. Well, perhaps.

References

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