JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT STUDIES

Journal of Management Studies 0:0 Month 2025
doi:10.1111/joms.13256

Critical Management Studies: From One-Dimensional Critique to Three-Dimensional Scepticism

Mats Alvesson[a,b,c] **and André Spicer**[c]

[a]*University of Bath;* [b]*Lund University;* [c]*Bayes Business School, City and St George's, University of London*

ABSTRACT Critical Management Studies (CMS) has largely relied on one-dimensional critique which focus on the negation of a dominant social order. This strong focus has made the field increasingly stale and preoccupied with standard objects for critique. This paper suggests that if CMS is to move beyond these problems, it needs to develop three-dimensional thinking, including understanding, questioning, and reparation. Drawing on the idea of 'reparative critique' (Sedgwick, 1997), we outline what this looks like in practice and how it might be done by practitioners of CMS. We argue that reparative critique involves three steps of understanding, developed through empirical inquiry relaxing assumptions and thick description, critique developed through exploring dilemmas and examining ironies, and reparation which is created through deflation and concept creation. By working through these three steps, we think it is possible for CMS to move beyond identifying the 'dark side' and begin to identify positive visions for the future of management.

Keywords: critical management studies, critique, reparative critique, three-dimensional thinking

INTRODUCTION

In a recent review of Critical Management Studies (CMS) since 2008, we identified some novel contributions but also shortcomings in this tradition (Spicer and Alvesson, 2025). We argued that CMS, despite merits, involves critiques which are often author-itarian, obscurant, and exhibit a strong dose of formulaic radicalism and empirical minimalism. In the paper, we provided an overview and critical discussion of recent work. In the present paper, we develop new ideas for CMS to address some of the mentioned problems.

Address for reprints: Mats Alvesson, Lund University, Dept of Business Administration, Box 7080, 220 07 Lund, Sweden (mats.alvesson@fek.lu.se).

Much existing work in CMS is more interested in pointing out often familiar social problems. It has led to what we would like to call one-dimensional critique. We borrow the term from Herbert Marcuse (1964), who castigated the one-dimensional society of the 1950s and 1960s. For Marcuse, this means a world where people were too focused on 'what is' and were not able to engage in processes of negation by questioning the world around them. Marcuse was probably correct in his analysis of mid-century north America – and the West in general – as caught in consumerist and economic growth ideals. However, we think that contemporary critical management studies (and indeed other forms of critical studies) reveal another kind of one-dimensionality. This is where critics become overly focused on the process of negation (Marcuse's second dimension) and neglect the first dimension of understanding 'what is' (Marcuse's first dimension). This means that instead of going through the difficult work of understanding a particular phenomenon before engaging in processes of negation, researchers will tend to start with negation. They immediately take an oppositional stance to a particular phenomenon, often before properly understanding its complexity and nuances. This leap to negation means that often there is a thin description of a particular phenomenon followed by very thick critique and an entirely absent account of better alternatives.

The process of negation itself is often limited and highly pre-determined in direction. Goal identification is quick. This is because researchers are often heavily guided in their questioning by strongly established theoretical commitments (sometimes driven by author-itarianism, the faithful following of a celebrated theoretical authority), strong and unbending political assumptions (institutionalized radicalism) and the formulaic ways of writing about their targets of critique. This often leads to cookie-cutter critique. The lines of questioning and the patterns of negations are more or less the same in many articles – managers are always power hungry, neo-liberalism is always negative, almost everything bad is gendered and everything gendered is bad, marginalized groups of employees suffer and so on. While these critiques may seem satisfying, they can lead to a remarkable narrowness of both the questions which are asked and the insights which are generated. This often means that critiques end up reproducing the same claims over and over. It also means our knowledge of a particular phenomenon is not really enriched. Instead, we find researchers repeatedly beating over familiar ground.

Finally, the process of one-dimensional critique often remains bound up in processes of repeated questioning among a group of initiates, and it rarely translates into any meaningful attempts to imagine realistic alternatives. When critics engage in attempts to imagine alternatives to their targets of critique, they are often placed into a relatively narrow genre of small-scale localist participatory alternatives. This means that there is not much offering a wider range of imagined alternatives and recognition of their problems and shortcomings. This leads to a kind of one-dimensional understanding of alternatives, which are often not very imaginative.

The present paper addresses this problem and suggests ways of moving beyond one-dimensional CMS. We suggest some ideas for a conceptual development of CMS work, pointing at shortcomings in much of the existing work (including some of our own) and indicate ways of moving ahead, beyond working with standard targets of critique and repeating and varying points that the reader may have heard before. We advocate a

multi-dimensional view, encouraging a richer imaginary for CMS moving beyond suspicion, formulaic critique, and activism.

Often the one-dimensional critique characterizing much CMS work, based on thin understandings, thick critique and thin alternatives, involve a kind of critical paranoia. This is something which the literary critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1997) detected in some parts of her own field at the time. Sedgwick argued that the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' was common in literary studies. This involves a tendency to look on anything – even the most minor issues – as a potential manifestation of some darker plot or instance of power. It creates a particular position and set of practices which would-be critics operate from. Sedgwick argues that this critical paranoia entailed five features. It involved a strong *anticipation* whereby a critic sets out with a set of assumptions and is on the lookout for even the most minor indicators which might prove them to be right. This pattern of anticipation is often developed through *mimesis* whereby a particular suspicion seems to spread not just between critics but within the critical gaze: once one issue is taken to be 'problematic' then any other issues which is even just tangentially related issues is also considered suspicious. Critical paranoia also tends to rely on *strong theory* whereby a set of assumptions are treated as being almost universally applicable and it is not necessary to pay close attention to local issues and manifestations. It also focuses on what Sedgwick calls *negative affect* – that is paranoid readings tend to be overly focused on identifying and protecting themselves from darker emotions and themes (anxiety, depression, domination and so on) and often largely neglect neutral or even positive emotions and themes. Finally, critical paranoia places a great deal of faith in *exposure* – it assumed if you can 'unveil' supposedly hidden structures of domination, this in itself is an important revolutionary act.

Sedgwick argued that critical paranoia has meant that critical practices are remarkably narrow as well as out of touch with the wider world around them. We tend to agree. Thin empirics, thick critique, narrow politics, fixed theoretical convictions and paranoid reasoning mean that often practitioners of CMS go looking for the same patterns of domination, examine them using the same patterns of reasoning and end up with the same conclusions. The result is a repetitive set of findings and conclusions. The solution for this dull paranoia, Sedgwick thought, was a turn towards what she called 'reparative' critique. Instead of seeking to search out patterns of power and domination which the paranoid critic already 'knows' are there, reparative critique seeks to bring to light the richer and more complex realities which actually exist with the hope of revealing alternatives (for other accounts see Felski, 2015; Anker and Felski, 2017; Christensen, 2021).

Sedgwick argues that reparative critique differs in five ways from paranoid critique. Instead of being highly anticipatory (always arriving with strong assumptions of what one might find), reparative critique tends to be *open to surprises and novel ways of thinking*. This means the focus for the critic is not what they have expected to find or see, but the unexpected features. Instead of being mimetic (where critical suspicion spreads), it tends to be *additive*. This means the focus of critique is not repeating existing insights but seeking to focus on observations and practices which add something new.[1] Instead of being driven by strong theory (with a set of widely applicable assumptions which can be applied in a range of settings, facing no resistance), reparative critique

tends to focus on what Sedgwick calls '*weak theory*'. This entails smaller concepts which do not try to explain everything but can help to explain particular empirical phenomena in limited settings. Instead of being overly focused on negative affect (always looking for the 'dark side'), reparative critics also pay attention to *pleasure*. For us, the important insight here is that critics need to be attuned not just to what is problematic, but positive aspects – as well as more neutral aspects. We think this would give a richer picture. Finally, instead of focusing on exposure (trying to reveal or show problematic power relations), Sedgwick argues that reparative critique should seek to be *ameliorative*. This means they aim to do more than just show problems but also seek to improve upon these problems through showing what might be better in a particular setting.

While Sedgwick provides some broad guidance as to what reparative critique might look like in literary studies, the question remains what this kind of reparative critique might look like in the study of management and organizations (and perhaps the social sciences more generally). A distinct attempt to explore this question is a study of a large Danish music festival (Christensen, 2021). After being steeped in critical management studies, the researcher set out to study volunteering at the festival. Driven by strong theory, he was looking for the problematic and even exploitative nature of volunteering at the festival. His aim was to reveal it. However, when he began interviewing some of the people who ran the festival, he quickly found they were well aware of these issues and the tensions they created. There was nothing to reveal. As his research continued, he realized that just adopting the paranoid perspective of critical theory would reveal very little which was new. This led him to drop his search for the dark side and instead try to take a broader view which was attuned to issues like pleasure and was not motivated by strong theoretical assumptions. He realized that his 'paranoia had already prepared me to expose (neo) normative organizational control' (Christensen, 2021, p. 8). This meant he began to recognize patterns of trust which he had not seen before. He also began to take greater note of positive experiences, feelings of freedom and pleasure, as well as aspects of the festival which he had missed (such as a self-organized LGBT+ encampment). The result was a much richer account which was attentive to the wide range of dynamics in volunteering – rather than an account which found yet another instance of (neo) normative control.

While Christensen provides us with some initial guidelines of what this kind of reparative critique might look like, we think it is worthwhile to push the notion further and start to identify some more general principles. Instead of following the kind of one-dimensional critique (which focus on negation but misses description and articulation of alternatives), we think a more reparative approach would be three-dimensional. It would seek to develop a good understanding first, then (if required) generate a complex critique, and finally identify alternatives. In the sections which follow, we would like to argue that this kind of reparative critique could work in the following way: It would provide good descriptions through relaxing assumptions and generate a detailed empirical account; it would provide a complex critique by exploring dilemmas, and examine these using irony; it would aim to offer alternatives through offering an additive account and ameliorative recommendations. In what follows, we will explore each of these points in some more depth.

DIMENSION ONE: UNDERSTANDING

Developing a critical account should begin with understanding. We have already seen that one of the components of Sedgwick's approach to critique is openness to surprise. This means that instead of setting out to anticipate particular outcomes or findings based on dominant assumptions, it starts with being able and willing to make unexpected observations and construct new phenomena. This means that instead of leaping directly to spotting problems, injustice, and oppression, the critic needs to begin with careful observation. If a would-be critic leaps too quickly to criticism, they are likely to fall into some of the traps which we have outlined earlier in the article. To develop a clear understanding, the first step is to begin by relaxing assumptions and opening up inquiry for unexpected findings and inspirations. Instead of beginning – and ending – with very firmly held assumptions about what one will see and what is good or bad, a three-dimensional critic will try to identify and relax some of their core assumptions about the object of analysis and consider a broader range of interpretative possibilities. This will allow the critical researcher to put aside some of their constraints on observing the world and potentially be open to seeing unexpected issues and produce more unexpected insights. One option here is to not only study well-know issues but also construct novel phenomena for investigation (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2024a). After relaxing received assumptions, it is important that researchers develop a thick empirical description of the particular subject which they have selected. To do this, critics need to focus on producing rich and engaging descriptions of their site by being attentive to and following unexpected leads. Doing this provides the foundations for careful and nuanced critique and questioning. In what follows, we will look at each of these two dimensions.

Relaxing Assumptions

Researchers in CMS are often quick to identify their targets. Patriarchy, capitalism, class, neo-liberalism, bureaucracy, new public management, Western domination, and managerialism are objects of study and predictable critique. These usual suspects are often selected because they are easily demonized, and the author can make a strong case for being on the right side of political and ethical issues. The storyline often seems to be written before the research even begins. Women are discriminated against, workers are exploited, minorities are marginalized, the environment is degraded, and managerialism dominates people. Without doubt, many of the themes are worthy targets. However, there are also a range of themes without a clear story of good and bad. These are topics which do not have established narratives and strong positions. These are topics which many of us are implicated in – despite the fact that we might not like to recognize it. Some examples include grandiosity (Alvesson, 2022), narcissism (Lasch, 1978), the culture of fear (Furedi, 2018), escape from freedom (Fromm, 1941), cultures of coddling (Lukianoff and Haidt, 2015) or academics building their own careerist cages in pursuit of success and recognition (Alvesson, Gabriel and Paulsen, 2017). While these themes are familiar, they tend to be marginalized in critical work. There are also other themes that are not entirely easy to spot which call for some detective work.

Often critical researchers have strong moral and political agendas. Their research sets out with clear goals which are often self-declared. For instance, Contu (2020) argues that critical work should be treated as a form of intellectual activism which is directly tied to questions of justice and political struggle. This sees CMS – and indeed any scholarship – as necessarily connected with a political position. For the critic, to do research is to do politics. This is because 'we (our performing bodies) are always part of a praxis that reproduces (or challenges) the status quo' (Contu, 2020, p. 6). Contu argues that the close connect between research and politics is much more obvious to people who find themselves in marginalized positions (such as women of colour). Accepting these assumptions then means that a critic is required at the outset to establish the political positions one is against and the position one is for. Furthermore, it also follows that research should be produced which clearly furthers their preferred political objectives. The political agenda which most practitioners of CMS espouse is broadly progressive or radical and focuses on objectives of social justice. This means scholarship from the outset should be linked with supporting 'struggles against environmentally and economically exploitative relations of neo-liberal capitalism, those against heteronormative patriarchy, authoritarianism, imperialism, neo-colonialism and white supremacy' (Contu, 2020, p. 4). This supposition can limit space for curiosity or openness to constructing phenomena in other ways that don't neatly fit into a defined political agenda.

While progressive or radical political agendas are appealing to CMS researchers, we think there are dangers with always setting out from strong political commitments to fixed political positions. First, these can lead to researchers largely looking for confirmation of their pre-existing views and assumptions. McSweeney (2021) shows this to be the case in Dar et al.'s (2021) claim that business schools are racist. Few denies the existence of racism, but care in demonstrating it is needed. There is a risk of a one-dimensional approach to the targets of critique based on insufficient empirical inquiry. Sometimes objects are largely described as being all good or all bad – depending on where they fit into one's political schema. Indeed such 'hyper-critique' can often lead to negativity bias and lopsided descriptions of a particular phenomenon (Latour, 2004). For instance, in most critical work, researchers start with a strong anti-managerial bias. This can mean that the negative sides of management and managers are over-represented in CMS descriptions. While this may be reasonable, it can mean in some important insights could be missed. Reality can come out in a one-dimensional, flattened way rather than multi-dimensional way. Critique can come out as predictable and preaching to the converted.

A second problem that arises from beginning with strong political commitments is that it often leads to a low likelihood that critical social scientists will add anything significant or novel. Claims that neo-liberalism is exploitative, managers dominate workers, and people who are not white heterosexual males are marginalized have been made many times before. There is also an extensive library of research showing the long list of many ways in which domination and exploitation work (see Spicer and Alvesson, 2025 for a review). Critics point out that such conclusions are self-evidently true; they often fall on deaf ears and therefore need to be repeated. People who strongly identify with these well-rehearsed messages are likely to enjoy another repetition (perhaps with a subtle twist). Others who are not so deeply initiated and

have heard it many times before are likely to respond with indifference or even irritation. To be clear, this is not limited to critical theory – many fields remain trapped in repetition of well-established insights which initiates find great, but outsiders find tiresome. CMS shares with other fields problems of following conventions and recipes which mainly lead to unsurprising results. In the sciences as a whole, there are fewer disruptive contributions (Park et al., 2023) and in social and management research, most work is incremental and geared to what is publishable without much risk (Alvesson, Gabriel and Paulsen, 2017). But this does not make the remarks less relevant for CMS. Most fields benefit from the critical scrutiny of taken-for-granted assumptions and some challenging of this (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2024b). As Davis (1971) observed, this is what makes a theory interesting and thus more likely to be influential.

This pattern of strong assumptions and well-rehearsed messages leading to repetitive findings can be found in studies of resistance. Much of the research on the topic assumes that resistance is progressive and productive (e.g., McCabe et al., 2020; Mumby et al., 2017). While the literature explicitly or implicitly celebrates resistance, it often overlooks the fact that resistance may be in opposition to necessary work requirements, safety regulations, environmental initiatives, and diversity programmes. Resistance can also undermine people doing a good job, which leads to some value for beneficiaries of this work (employees, consumers, pupils in schools, patients in health care etc). The celebration of resistance may align with assumptions of critical management studies, but these assumptions may blind critics to how resistance can create problems.

A more fruitful way of approaching a topic like resistance is by relaxing the assumption that resistance is necessary good and progressive. Resistance is often a complex issue. For example, Contu (2009) relaxed the assumption that resistance is always progressive. This led her to offer the concept of decaff resistance to capture how resistance can often be a way of putting on a show of opposition while not really significantly challenging power relations. She points out how these gestural forms of resistance often legitimize and strengthen compliance. Kunda (1992) and Rintamäki and Alvesson (2023) also have demonstrated 'private' or closeted resistance co-existed with full compliance with delivering what the (disliked) management asked for. A third example of studies of resistance which relaxed assumptions in order to come to more interesting conclusions is Knights and Clarke's (2014) study of academics. The paper largely follows the assumption that neo-liberalism leads to an increasing role of metrics in academic work and brings about frustrations and identity problems. However, they also do mention in passing that many academics comply with various publications metrics because they are quite narcissistically preoccupied with their own work. We think this could be a potentially interesting theme for a study – the role academic narcissism plays in compliance with various forms of performance metrics which academics like to criticize. It may equally be connected to academics' eagerness for career progress, confirmation, promotion, and sense of justice. Thus the power of metrics as a form of control may come from below and 'inside' as much as from above and the 'outside' of the seemingly pressured and suffering academics. Our point is that relaxing assumptions allows critics to see potential aspects of a phenomenon

which they might have been blinded to if they had held fast to their earlier political commitments which come with relatively fixed storylines.

Thick Description

Once a researcher has begun by relaxing their assumptions, they should undertake an in-depth study of a selected phenomenon. To do this, the researcher should produce *unpredictable*, *rich*, *and engaging stories*. Social science is full of such examples of these rich and engaging stories being used as a central part of the process of critique. Some examples include Sigmund Freud's detailed case studies, Erving Goffman's rich descriptions of life inside institutions, Clifford Geertz's study of Balinese culture and Henry Mintzberg's detailed observational work on what managers actually do during the day.

One way which researchers can generate these rich descriptions and stories is through primary empirical observation. For instance, Jackall (1988) details the life within a large corporation with its hidden dynamics and rules. Much can be understood through careful description of revealing episodes or interactions. This can be found in Rosen's (1985) classic study of a corporate breakfast, Kunda's analysis of *Engineering culture* (1992), Michel's (2011) long running study of banking professionals and Hallett's (2010) study of conflict in a school. Relying on ethnographic work provides a greater body of empirical material to work with. This is because ethnographic work often provides a scope to observe action. This enables researchers to observe tensions between talk and organizational culture in practice. These tensions can often be quite revealing and useful for thinking about and developing a critique of a culture. For instance, in his ethnographic analysis of a trading floor, Beunza (2019) points out the tensions between the talk about an increasingly virtualized market and the continued importance in day-to-day behaviour of physical space (i.e., the actual office in which people worked). Concepts developed by the academic community need not be privileged to give voice to concerns and understandings in everyday contexts. Such concepts can be generative and lead to the questioning and reconstituting of social experience. However, they do require an in-depth understanding and connection with the experiences of people which are not ordered and domesticated by theoretical concepts. Such concepts also require insights of people about their life and work to be taken seriously.

This in many ways resembles general qualitative, inductive research, however, critical studies typically unravel deeper structures and aim to investigate deeper layers of meaning, including what may be repressed, tabooed or at least is outside institutionalized ways of ordering reality. References to conventional themes like managers, leaders, strategies, quality systems, diversity, sustainability, and innovation may not invite the most interesting critical insights. There is a dilemma between taking 'the native's point of view' seriously and challenging people's labels, meanings and reasoning. CMS studies need to rely less on 'pure data' by taking the interview and observation material at face value. This requires breaking with the conventional recipe of a large number of one-off semi-structured interviews about a specific theme. Instead it needs sensitive to hidden cues, submerged stories and subtle subtext.

Another, less empirically ambitious and demanding way which critically oriented researchers can develop these rich stories is through selecting telling examples and vignettes and using these as a basis for theorizing. This kind of work relies on already existing empirical work (whether academic study or high quality journalism). However, it seeks to provide a reinterpretation of these observations inflected through a wide range of theories, before selecting one or more as a dialogue partner. For instance, Alvesson and Spicer (2016) draw together a wide range of other studies and provide a new interpretation using the concept of functional stupidity. Similarly, Cederström and Spicer (2015) explore the problems with notions of wellbeing and how they play out in particular settings. They often relied on unusual observations and stories about wellbeing practices in order to develop theory. This approach calls for some extra headwork and creativity as the empirical material can't take on the major part of the burden to deliver a research report.

Whether the stories are primary or secondary, the work we have in mind may involve being more creative, flexible, and bold in selecting empirical observations. Critics should seek to broaden their focus, relate their observations to wider social trends, and avoid standardized formats. Studying one's home ground, watching out for interesting events, and using everyday observations can help to provide additional insights (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2022). CMS do not necessarily depart radically from general qualitative/inductive studies, but the critical-interpretive reflexivity and empirical work needs to consider other problems and possibilities. A more suspicious and questioning attitude to empirical data is needed.

Generating thick descriptions is not only about being there, developing an in-depth knowledge of the site, and making detailed observations. It also requires a specific intellectual attitude which combines openness with theoretical sophistication in order to go beyond common sense and identify surface patterns without using a specific theory leading to a (predictable) 'depth' (Alvesson and Deetz, 2021). Some useful techniques in developing thick descriptions include defamiliarizing the everyday (seeing the well-known as strange, exotic, arbitrary), use pre-understandings more ambitiously and systematically, mobilizing alternative metaphors and perspectives to imagine different ways of seeing, looking for surprises, and turning logic on its head (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011; Alvesson and Sandberg, 2024b). Key questions could be: what is going on here? What do the natives think they are up to? What the hell do they think they are up to? Where are ideas, beliefs and talk coming from? Asking such questions can increase the chance of coming up with unexpected themes and novel observations. Asking these questions calls for quite a lot of intellectual work with alternative theories and vocabularies that open up and challenge our assumption, perspectives, vocabulary and general zone of comfort.

DIMENSION TWO: QUESTIONING

The first stage of critique involves developing a careful understanding of a phenomenon through clear, compelling, detailed, and open-minded description. The second stage entails a shift towards questioning. Sedgwick's account of reparative critique

reminds us of the importance of what she calls weak theory (as opposed to following stronger sets of assumptions set out in an existing theory) and attending to pleasure and other positive aspects (instead of just a one-dimensional focus on negative aspects). For us, this means that instead of casting judgment based on strong theory and only focusing on negative aspects, the three-dimensional critic should ask questions which explore the tensions between positive and negative and, of course, also more 'neutral' (or less easily value-assessed) aspects. As well as searching for the 'dark side', they could also look for valuable aspects such as effectiveness, justice, autonomy, democracy, or recognition. The first step in developing this more balanced questioning entails exploring dilemmas already evident within the field. This means looking at trade-offs, tensions, and double-binds. Doing this makes it possible to move away from the moral chiaroscuro of traditional critique towards a much more complex and subtle picture. Once these tensions are located, the task becomes analysing and describing them. Instead of trying to represent them using tragic narratives (which is often the case in CMS work), we think an often more revealing approach is to use ironic narratives as a way of representing tensions (e.g., Alvesson and Spicer, 2016; Graeber, 2018; Jackall,1988). This allows a more playful and potentially more rounded and less judgmental critique to emerge. In what follows, we look at each of these points in some more depth.

Explore Dilemmas

Good critique requires nuances. Blanket rejections of managerialism, neo-liberalism, or bureaucracy may sound good. However, most people, including many critics, benefit from and participate in some management, some elements of neo-liberalism, and a certain degree of bureaucratization. Most critics are implicated within each of these dynamics as well: they engage in management or are managed, they navigate neo-liberal metrics (and often seek to maximize their benefits from them), and they make use of bureaucracy in appeals to good procedure. Much of this is a trade-off between the facilitating and the constraining. In some cases, people seek or willingly accept control and limitations of freedom. They may more or less voluntarily build their own prisons (Barker, 1993) or refrain from using voice (Szkudlarek and Alvesson, 2025). We see the possibility of CMS developing throee the possibility of CMS developing through taking these dilemmas much more seriously. Work life is a balancing act, and simply contrasting bad (e.g., oppression, constraints) against the good (e.g., emancipation, justice) is not always helpful. Authority, workplace democracy, and self-management are cases in point, as are diversity management and equal opportunity. It is easy to favour the good, but often too easy.

Instead of setting up a stark contrast between good and bad practices, good critique should explore contrasts and tensions. Instead of the typical pattern of 'anti-isms' found in CMS (anti-managerialism, anti-capitalism etc.), we think a different approach is needed. You could call this *anti-anti-isms*. For instance, managerialism often triggers anti-managerialism. Excess faith in management and an over-supply of systems, structures, procedures, routines, and mechanistic performance management systems can create problems. They can undermine autonomy, dignity, meaningfulness

and wellbeing. They can result in frustration, alienation and general waste. At the same time, pure professionalism, autonomy, resistance, anti-bureaucracy and liberation from performance management and work pressure may lead to forms of (un) freedom, structure-lessness, conflict, ineffectiveness and free riding. This can bring about new tyrannies and greater frustrations for employees and the stakeholders an organization is supposed to serve (patients in health care, pupils in schools, customers in professional service firms, etc.).

Anti-management, anti-bureaucracy and anti-organization may be appealing, but who would like to go to a hospital, fly on an airline or invest in a pension fund ruled solely on the type of ideals expressed by CMS scholars? Some situations call for order, guidelines, direction, control, sanctions or other 'non-emancipatory' ways of dealing with incompetence, foot-dragging or resistance to change. Most people would like groceries to be available in the supermarket for a reasonable price, hospitals to be effective, schools to be well run and affordable houses to be built. Improving efficiency may not be the key concern for CMS. However, often ineffective workplaces are a source of frustration for employees (Graeber, 2018). Calling for efficient workplaces may sometimes be in line with emancipatory or progressive ideals (Hartmann, 2014). For instance, better quality management and performance pressure leading to reduction of surplus bureaucracy and meaningless jobs may improve people's sense of satisfaction at work and lead to better results. Caring for vulnerable groups – in hospitals, elderly care, schools – calls for well-functioning organizations and a selective discipline rather than only a resistance-minded and autonomy-maximizing workforce.

An example of these tensions can be found in the study of empowerment. Often the concept is an attractive 'weasle word' which is used to mean the removal of middle managerial layers. Critics of management link it to the rise of the neo-liberal subject as a 'self-managing, self-caring, self-promoting, and self-actualizing entity' (Ivanova and von Scheve, 2020, p. 781). Although empowerment could be seen as some CMS ideals being realized, it is often viewed as a 'discursively constructed management technique' (Ivanova and von Scheve, 2020, p. 777), and therefore worthy of suspicion and critique. All forms of management and organization call for critical scrutiny, but it is also important to consider that some imperfections are often inevitable and serious forms of empowerment may come at a cost such as stress. Quite a lot is a mixed blessing. Picard and Islam's (2020) study of a bank characterized by informalism and low levels of structure leading to varied responses from employees is revealing.

A second example is performance measurement. Critics devote a significant amount of ire towards 'neo-liberal' performance metrics. Academic performance metrics may be frowned upon but universities devote a significant amount of societal resources to the production of research, and with resources it is reasonable to ask for some degree of accountability. Many probably see the peer review as superior to laissez fair, nepotism and hierarchy as accountability and assessment principles. Journal lists and performance management may invite questioning, but one could work with more moderate criteria for assessing what is a reasonable demand in terms of research contributions. This would allow researchers to think outside a storyline of the tragically suffering or resisting academic. For instance, they could ask whether having so many academics doing research is worth the taxpayers' money and whether societal

resources would be better spent on other activities. Or they could ask how academics complaining about publications are often the same people who actually establish and maintain the practice of sometimes pedantic and formulaic gatekeeping which causes so much work and frustration ('scholarcracy'), conformism and highly compliant academics. So the critical eye could at least partly be turned to us academics ourselves and not only to postliberalism or the managerialization of the university (Alvesson, Gabriel and Paulsen, 2017).

Another instance of this is bureaucracy. Critics, including the authors of this paper, have long railed against the oppressive nature of bureaucratic organizations. However, the picture is not so one sided. This is something Weber pointed out a century ago and du Gay (2005) and Monteiro and Adler (2022) have also elaborated upon. The beneficiaries of bureaucracy are not only top management and political elites. Unions and advocates of equal opportunities frequently favour formal rules to reduce uncertainty, provide direction, fairness, and achieve higher standards (Alvesson and Thompson, 2005). Enforcing the rights of women at work typically leads to an expansion of bureaucratic rules and standards (Billing, 1994). There are 'feminist cases against bureaucracy' (Ferguson, 1984), but in practice most equal opportunity initiatives take a bureaucratic form. Feminist organizations also tend to adapt some bureaucratic principles despite their initial ambitions to avoid hierarchy and formal rules (Ashcraft, 2001).

There are also interesting dilemmas associated with leadership which can be explored. CMS often makes a strong case against the leaderization of society (e.g., Alvesson and Spicer, 2014; Collinson, 2012; Learmonth and Morrell, 2019). But progressive and balanced ideas on leadership may sometimes be socially beneficial. Fryer (2011) suggests the use of a Habermas (1984) framework for examining leadership as a form of communicative action. Fryer commends forms of leadership which aim to create less restricted communicative communities, where there is freedom to make and dispute assertions, and where barriers that might distort communication are identified and dismantled. In order to make leadership practically legitimate, as opposed to rhetorically appealing, it needs to be communicatively authorized. This requires employees to be engaged, as responsible organizational citizens, in the selection, appraisal and retention of leaders. Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) refer to this as 'reflexive leadership' and suggest we need to consider a wider set of ways of organizing including leadership, management, power, groups, and networks. Gjerde and Alvesson (2020) point at the sandwich position of heads of academic departments (being middle managers) – some of whom see a key task as holding up an umbrella and protecting junior people from excessive demands from above. Sometimes followers take little responsibility and rely heavily on the senior person to do the job (Einola and Alvesson, 2021). Such situations call for some more nuanced considerations of authority relations and how people avoid responsibility.

A further way in which CMS scholars can explore dilemmas and tensions is by examining the imperfections of people at work. These include narcissism, selfishness and opportunism, author-itarianism, social paranoia, defensiveness, self-serving behaviour, the denial of cognitive dissonance, and the preference for functional stupidity. People at work sometimes engage in self-imprisonment, grandiose projects, fall prey to plan and policy fetishism, ask for authority figures, and demand excessive bureaucracy. Functional stupidity is not only an outcome of managerialism, elite

projects, and socialization into extensive division of labour. It is also accomplished from below. For instance, specialists often are frugal with their cognitive resources, follow fashions and mimic other high profile organizations and occupations (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016). People sometimes want to abdicate responsibility for thinking through issues. They often build their own iron cages from below, without much prompting from the powerful.

Some of the more interesting and counterintuitive critical work identifies the contradictions in ordinary people and the institutions which they build and maintain. For instance, Foley (2010) explored the absurdities of society, our escalating aspirations for the good life, our unrealistic demands and, our primitive responses when our wishes are not fulfilled. Furedi (2018) addressed how the culture of fear[2] has come to infuse many of our institutions while Lasch (1978) looked at how the culture of narcissism has shaped everyday life. Sennett (1980) investigated how authority is something many people relate to in complicated ways. Many favour order, structure, and compliance (Alvesson and Nörmark, 2025; Desmet, 2022) and suffer from anxiety when faced with openness and flexibility (Moxnes, 2018). In each of these studies, the critique and politics are less one-dimensional and less targeted at the 'usual suspects'. However, they also maintain a critical edge insofar as they link structural and cultural critique with an interest in human imperfections.

Relevant and effective CMS means exploring the dilemmas and dialectics between different ideals: the desires for community, equality, and democracy need to be seen in the context of preferences for hierarchy, differentiation, and reliance on authority. Effective decision-making and coordination need to be seen alongside the fear of bureaucratic constriction. The lack of support and structure needs to be related to fear of authority. An interest in participation needs to be connected to occasional wishes to avoid the demands for effort, responsibility, and the burden which come with it.

Ironic Narratives

Once a research topic has been identified, and interesting and important tensions explored, the next challenge becomes how they can be narrated. Research reports typically follow a genre or style. The major narrative style of CMS is tragedy (Jeffcutt, 1993). Critics focus on the dark and gloomy side of organizations. They see a tragic fall from cherished values and cruel oppression everywhere. For instance, a study of CMS practitioners discusses how the regime of 'excellence' has undermined values of critique (Butler and Spoelstra, 2012). This negative focus on 'excellence' means they often overlook the more neutral or positive aspects of efforts to secure high quality research. Regimes of 'Excellence' are far from unproblematic, but they also motivate people and may counteract (personal) favouritism and facilitate allocation of resources. Another instance is fun at work. If joy is spotted, critics understand it as a reflection of the operations of power exploiting emotions and pleasure. Even if management tries to liven up and make workplaces fun, a sinister story is typically told following CMS conventions (Fleming, 2005), although of course some authors point at other sides of the issue (e.g., Picard and Islam, 2020).

Critics often portray 'subjects behaviouristically, as formless, conditionable creatures' (Honneth, 1995, p. 179). Those who don't clearly follow this pattern are seen as 'resisting' (e.g., Mumby et al., 2017; Prasad and Prasad, 1998; Thomas and Davies, 2005). One upshot is that some critics find resistance everywhere. The tiniest behaviour or indication of a negative emotion qualify as resistance. While the resister may show glimpses of heroism, these only happen within a basically tragic scene. When people are asked by a CMS researcher about the situation they work within, they can sometimes exaggerate – making things seem much more oppressive than they seem to an outsider. The CMS research can then have a negativity bias – picking out the darker aspects of their narrative to represent. For instance, relatively well paid academics with moderate teaching loads who publish articles infrequently sometimes refer to themselves as working under extreme pressure. The same individual represents a disruptive contribution during a committee meeting as a form of radical resistance. Many people are eager to exhibit signs that they have a mind of their own (Bristow et al., 2017). Focusing on these small, insignificant acts of (heroic) resistance in the face of a large system of power fits into the genre of tragedy that many critics are comfortable with.

It is possible to escape from tragic narratives while retaining a critical edge. Organizations are often less controlled, less rational and much more messy, confusing, fragmented, and ambiguous than they appear. Some workplaces are laid back. For instance, Paulsen (2014) looked at employees who worked on average 1–3 hours per work day - despite getting paid for a full time job. Their major challenge was using up their spare time by just waiting for something to happen (e.g., a customer entering the shop), taking long coffee breaks, surfing the internet, meticulously planning a purchase, or a holiday. Paulsen noticed that many of the 'empty labourers' he spoke to carefully planned and structured their hours of non-work activity like work project with deadlines, flow charts and much more. Some organizations are full of pseudowork (Normark and Jensen, 2021) and bullshit jobs (Graeber, 2018) which require effort but have little or no consequences. Organizations are pluralistic, decision-making is garbage can-like, symbolism, myths, and conservative beliefs rule, jargon-filled talk is common and many spectacles are performed. A better metaphor for organizations than a cage might be a circus, a comedy, a spectacle, or a theatre. Organizations are full of people who find their own pet projects more important that the overall purpose and objectives. They can move between being totally cynical about their projects and then extremely upset when they are thwarted. To capture these dynamics, CMS scholars might need to put aside the genre of tragedy and instead explore irony (Jeffcutt, 1993) or satire. The concept of the stupidity-based theory of organizations exemplifies this. Management sometimes do stupidity management and employees engage in self-stupidification (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016).

Using irony can be one way of making CMS less one-dimensional less predictable, less gloomy, and better attuned to vital aspects of organization and management. It is possible to combine tragedy with irony. Jackall's (1988) study of life in a bureaucracy is a good example. It presented the absurdities as well as tragedies of organizational life. Similarly, leadership can be seen as a source of domination, but also as an unintentionally comical phenomenon. This becomes clear when managers try to do

'leadership' but their followers are not interested. They prefer to get on with work rather than being interrupted by managers trying to do leadership (Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson, 2017). Managers often claim to be grandiose leaders working with big questions such as strategy, culture, and talent development. But in reality, they often spend their time in meetings, dealing with administration, and engaging in fire-fighting. There is much more leadership talk than leadership practice (Fischer and Alvesson, 2025).

Irony can be seen in different ways. It can be seen as a humbling appreciation of paradoxes. But it can also be seen as limiting the ability of human beings to realize grand ideal or as a source of distance and detachment which lowers ambitions and legitimizes a laid back attitude. Rhodes and Badham (2018) refer to irony's 'usefulness in addressing the tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions of organizational life' (p. 13). They see the ironist as 'associated with a wry smile rather than a self-satisfied smirk or a sardonic grin' (p. 14). They argue that:

> 'Irony encompasses forms of thought and action that find meaning in recognizing yet questioning the vocabularies that frame our world, the conventional stories that we live by, the established meanings and coherence we impose upon the world, and the confident ambitions that we possess and strive for. In this sense, irony not only acknowledges fallibility, it also identifies folly, questions arrogance, and delights in reflection . . . this form of irony variously incorporates a perspective that acknowledges incongruities'.

Rhodes and Badham advocate 'a liberal, and reflective human being, sensitive to their own limitations, aware of and tolerant of the limitations of others, charitable but not gullible, and with a wry scepticism and sense of the comic in observing and participating in the carnival of human life'. While tragic descriptions can leave people trapped in imagined systems of oppression, irony allows people to suspend and question their assumptions and call them into question. Irony and satire are underutilized narrative styles in CMS, but there are some inspiring exceptions, for example, Grey and Sinclair (2006), Jackall (1988), Tourish (2019), and Alvesson and Spicer (2016).

DIMENSION THREE: REPARATION

The first two steps of critique are understanding and questioning. But stopping at step two is not enough. As Eve Sedgwick argued, good critique also entails reparation. Doing this entails seeking to make critique additive (rather than just mimetic) and ameliorative (rather than just relying on exposure). For us, seeking to ameliorate the damage or harm which the targets of critique have caused calls for adding something by revealing something new, describing something which has not been seen, or providing a novel insight about something that is not socially insignificant. By doing these things, it becomes possible to move beyond just describing and questioning a target of critique. This overlaps with what are sometimes referred to as critical performativity (Spicer et al., 2009), critical

research based on an affirmative stance, an ethic of care, a pragmatic orientation, attending to potentialities, and a normative orientation.

The idea of critical performativity has evoked some interests in the CMS community (e.g., Hartmann, 2014). Much of this has been debates about the precise meaning of 'performative' and how to read various authors on the issue rather than than work making CMS research more performative (Cabantous et al., 2015). There is not a great deal of work which seeks to 'do' critical performativity (Spicer et al., 2016). The present paper may not do much better, but it does aim to add to and sharpen ideas on critical performativity by developing a three-dimensional framework for critique which triggers new thinking and potentially new action.

Optimally, our three-dimensional approach can mean opening up new possibilities rather than institutionalizing an existing line of critical thinking. It also entails seeking to deflate or remove harmful concepts, but also offering alternative interpretations and understandings. The first aspect of this can be achieved through the minimization or elimination of existing concepts. By *deflating* existing concepts, it becomes possible to limit their power and create some degree of freedom. The second aspect of this is creating new insights through the *creation of novel concepts*. These novel concepts help to construct alternative understandings of an issue, which may give rise to better ways of engaging that issue. In what follows, we will look at each of these in more depth.

Deflation

One way which critique can seek to ameliorate the harmful nature of phenomena is through deflation. This means seeking to cut down to size what can often be puffed-up or overinflated concepts in popular debates about issues such as leadership, strategy, competence development, corporate social responsibility, and quality management. Perhaps the archetypical example of deflation can be found in the well-known parable of the emperor's new clothes.[3] The small boy who points to the king's nakedness is often seen as an exemplar of the critic. This is because he not only points out the clear tension between rhetoric and reality, but the fact that by doing this he deflates the powerful illusion of the emperor's invisible cloak. Indeed, the boy's intervention points out just how empty and powerless this supposedly powerful fiction is. The crucial move in this small boy's act of social critique is to move from talk about the beauty of the cloak to pointing out that it does not exist. He reverses the discussion of the king's clothes and acknowledges his nakedness. What this young critic is doing is effectively reserving or flipping the accepted discourse. By doing this, he deflates the power which it might have. This move of flipping the discourse is a fairly common within social criticism. For instance, people who are quick to point at fear and futility of not using their voice may simply be driven by comfort and opportunism (Szkudlarek and Alvesson, 2025), supposedly meaningful discourse can be seen as meaningless bullshit (Spicer, 2018), apparently highly controlled organizations can be seen as chaotic and even fun circuses (Alvesson, 2008), processes of sense making can also involve aspects of non-sense making (Alvesson and Jonsson, 2022). In each of these cases, reserving what are often treated as apparently powerful interpretations can quickly take the air out of dominant views.

We think these kinds of deflationary moves can have three potentially important impacts. First, they can help to remove any pretence which an audience might have about the social fiction which they are part of. They can allow participants in a social fiction to point out the empty and often ridiculous nature of what they are involved in. Doing this effectively takes much of the weight and symbolic grip out of the performance. In a way, it symbolically inoculates the audience to what otherwise may have been a rather harmful myth. Second, such symbolic acts help to question the practices of those who have put together social fictions. It effectively shows the role which various symbolic workers have played in perpetuating such myths. By doing so, it tries to show their own work for what it is – often a skilful ruse. Finally, deflations can help to show up the foolishness of people in powerful positions as well as others who participate in absurd social fictions. It can remove much of the weight and power which is given to these people and show the empty and often ridiculous nature of their actions – even to themselves.

Many works in CMS have sought to deflate and bring down to earth what are often puffed-up social fictions which organizational life runs on. For instance, in our own work on ideas about 'knowledge' and 'intelligence' in organization, we tried to show how much of the talk stood in stark counter-distinction to the reality of the workplace (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016). Despite the talk about increased intelligence and the celebration of knowledge work, the reality of most day-to-day work is actually fairly mind-numbing and organization's frequently make rather stupid decisions and engage in meaningless work activities. This leads us to the conclusion that instead of perpetuating a myth of smartness, it was perhaps a better idea to discuss a counter myth of what we refer to as functional stupidity. This allowed us to notice and indeed point out much of the evidence of socially prescribed stupidity which surrounds and imprints organizations. By doing this, we sought to show how many aspects of organizations involves forms of stupidity. This in turn led us to exploring what we called anti-stupidity management.

A second example of this kind of deflation work which we might mention here is critical work on wellness and wellbeing (Cederström and Spicer, 2015). This work began with the popular assumption that various measures designed to encourage wellbeing made you into a healthier, happier and more productive person. This widespread assumption was then treated as a social myth and explored through looking at ironic and perhaps absurd counterexamples (such as suicidal happiness coaches). Doing this helped to reveal how some wellbeing measures could actually end up triggering the opposite of what they intended: for instance, they could undermine your health, make you feel less happy and make you less productive. Showing these counterproductive outcomes aimed to take some of the 'hot air' out of the discussion about wellbeing and show how wellness was not always necessarily a good thing. One effect of this was to try to loosen the grip which this social myth had over many people's lives. The ultimate aim was to allow some of the 'worried well' to stop being obsessive over their wellbeing and simply get on with living.

These examples point towards a more serious point: would-be critics can make an important difference through taking some of the hot air out of overly inflated social fictions that take up too much space in social life. This kind of symbolic deflation can help to minimize much of the empty ideas or grandiose talk that make up such a large part of contemporary organizational life. Simply doing this can help to declutter people's

working lives – and indeed entire organizations and sectors – of counterproductive and energy-sapping fictions (Spicer et al., 2016, 240–241). Doing this can also help to create more space for more substantive practices and activities that are important to the organization, the individuals within it, and the people it serves (Alvesson and Spicer, 2025).

Concept Creation

Letting some of the air out of overinflated social fictions in organizations can be important. It can help to minimize the space, time, and resources which they take up in organizational life. However, simply minimizing and reducing potentially harmful concepts, strategies, and practices may not be enough. Critical work often needs to take a step beyond this and create alternatives which might take the place of more harmful systems and activities. This can be done through the exploration and creation of novel concepts which might help to create new and potentially more emancipatory practices within organizations. Concept creation is about constructing a reference point which can trigger critical insights and potentially change practice.

There are techniques which can be useful for creating alternative concepts – and practices in organizations. One way is *relativization* – which means putting a favoured organizational practice alongside other alternatives. For instance, the typical corporate form can be relativized by placing it alongside the wider ecology of other organizational forms (Parker et al., 2014). Doing this can help people to see that there are multiple ways which economic and social activity can – and indeed is – organized. One example of this kind of relativization can be found in a study which contrasts two IT/management consultancy firms with radically different structures. One firm emphasized hierarchical differentiation, extensive HR procedures and career steps, while the other focused on flatness, community, and informal HR (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2004). CMS researchers sometimes study 'alternative' organizations, but these are often small and relatively marginal. This can mean the alternatives that are explored are not particularly relevant for most people in working life.

Another example of this process of relativizing can be found in recent work on leadership (Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson, 2017). This work points towards a process of 'leaderization' whereby people are divided into leaders and followers. This can cultivate a pattern of passivity and dependence among employees who are expected to see themselves as followers and an elitist and unrealistic view on the part of managers who are supposed to see themselves as leaders. The leadership industry can often fuel this leaderization process by making employees into 'followers' in the eyes of managers, HR, and consultants. At times this can lead to harmful or perhaps even toxic approaches to leadership (Learmonth and Morrell, 2019). However, this does not mean that leadership should always be demonized or indeed entirely eliminated. Often there are good reasons for some forms of authority or leadership. Undertaking many tasks requires some degree of coordination and direction and this may imply hierarchy, co-ordination and the management of meaning. In certain situations, people may benefit from some level of. There may be considerable differences in a team in levels of ability, knowledge, information and experience. This can prompt the need for some kind of leadership structures. However, this does not suggest a whole-hearted embrace of leadership. Rather it requires selective use of leadership and authority. Leadership could be considered alongside alternatives for coordinating activity including other hierarchical

mechanisms (such as management or bureaucracy) as well as horizontal means of guidance and support (professional norms, group dynamics, network-based forms of coordination). Doing this requires some degree of reflexivity – which entails a critical interpretation as well as a pragmatic response to deal with organizing issues.

Alvesson and Nörmark (2025) introduce the concept of post-infantilized management (PIM). It refers to the idea that people can be expected and encouraged to be mature and rely on their judgment, to step up rather than embrace a position as subordinate or follower. It also requires taking a balanced, reflective, and accepting approach to well-grounded authority relationships which are not caught in counter-dependency relationships which fuel immature attempts to resist authority and act rebelliously. The ways we relate to authority are often complicated. It often requires that we work through our excessive dependency on and anxiety about dependency which occasionally can lead to an obsession with autonomy and resistance (Sennett, 1980).

These kinds of reflexive approaches of asking what kind of authority relationships we want (and/or benefit from) can be democratically grounded. One way of doing this is through treating leadership as something that employees may ask for – in other words 'leadership on demand' (Blom and Alvesson, 2014). By doing this it is possible to show that while leadership may be useful, it is far from the only way in which people can get things done. It is only one approach which exists alongside many other potential approaches.

Relativization shows that what we think of as a dominant way of doing things (or even the only way of doing things) can in fact only be one approach among a wide range of options. This can help people to see the potential range of options which they have to select from when making decisions about how to organize.

There is another method which can prove useful for creating alternatives – *reversal*. Instead of taking a dominant approach and placing it alongside other concepts (as is the case with relativization), a reversal approach takes a dominant concept and then explores the flip side of it. For instance, instead of focusing on the capitalist elements of large corporations, some researchers have examined how large firms have elements which appear to operate in a similar way to socialist or even communist systems (Adler, 2019). Similarly, the rise of work practices like 'agile' has led to a wider-spread focus in many organizations on speed and hastiness (Kärreman et al., 2021). However, this obsession with speed can give rise to some rather questionable practices – which led to the exploration of the opposite of speed: slowness. Focusing on more relaxed alternative points of departure allows us to examine the potential benefits of an alternative approach to organizing which harnesses local variants, careful deliberation, and so on. It also directs attention to alternative ways of organizing such as craft-based practices which are fairly widespread in particular industries. This helps to show how alternatives to a largely faddish approach to organizational life can be crafted and created. Through reversing a dominant myth, it becomes possible to show alternative ways of thinking about and designing organizational life which are not trapped in existing dominant assumptions.

Instead of focus on activity and practice, one may consider the problems with too much activity leading to the creation of 'organizational sludge' where excess of everything obstructs and slows down core work and smooth work processes (Alvesson and Spicer, 2025). Rather than trying to add more initiatives, removing things could be an

option. This is what Sutton and Rao (2024) suggest in their book on organizational friction. They identify how pain points such as lengthy meetings or pointless administrative processes could be removed to make working life better. This focus on subtraction helps to create space for more productive and meaningful work. It also avoids 'addition bias' – whereby pressures from activists and reformers for progressive policies can often lead to the creation of more demands and additional processes which in time become another bureaucratic burden.

Reparation may also include more specific ideas for alternative practices. In various writings we (e.g., Alvesson and Spicer, 2016, 2025) explored how anti-stupidity management measures could work. Rather than adding 'competence', the idea is to reduce stupidity. For instance, one could use a devil's advocate on a rotating basis, have anti-stupidity task forces, engage in reflexive exercises where the usual assumptions are temporarily suspended, harness the insights of newcomers or outsiders to organizational absurdities. Bullshit bingo can be used as a deflation device. This entails having a long list of management buzzwords and then having people mark them off as they are used, and then calling 'bingo'. These kinds of platforms and games would point towards the more mature and responsible position of employees as well as revealing the absurdity and emptiness of much managerial language and posturing. They could influence organizational cultures in a more critical reflection oriented way and also promote employees more inclined to speak up and take broader responsibility for organizational issues.

CONCLUSION

Critical Management Studies is a field which has rapidly grown during the last three or four decades. There is now a large body of CMS research of robust quality on a wide range of topics. However, as the field has grown, it has started to fall into a range of traps. It has become a victim of author-itarianism, obscurantism, formulaic radicalism, usual-suspectism, and empirical light-touchism (Spicer and Alvesson, 2025). Each of these problems means that the field is in need of rejuvenation. We think what is needed is more ambitious and imaginative work on worthy themes that an audience may find interesting and helpful. It calls for something unexpected and novel. This is not easy as it implies more time-consuming, creative and risky research. This is often at odds with the contemporary focus on publications and the careerism of many academics, eager for promotion, and securing of self-esteem and status through publications in the 'right' journals. This often means following the conventions of the research tribe one belongs to in a way which leads to not particularly original work.

Really valuable contributions to CMS need to go beyond existing approaches. In this paper, we have tried to outline a range of ways that people can do this. But in closing, we would like to reiterate three central ways that this could be achieved.

First, one valuable development would be to focus less on the usual suspects. Rather, researchers could consider exploring new suspects or common targets in novel ways. We think that a more open-minded and curiosity-driven approach is needed. As Latour (2004) points out, much critique has run out of steam because it focused on well-known targets

and problems. Sedgwick (1997) suggests that we need to move away from a one-sided hermeneutics of suspicion and paranoid critique and be more openly curious about the phenomena in which we are interested and engage in restorative critique. Doing this, we think, will allow the emergence of a more curious and inquisitive (rather than judgmental) approach to critical management studies.

Second, we think that CMS could move beyond one-dimensional approaches to critique and engage in a broader, three-dimensional critique. This would mean a less quick focus on the critique and the negation of what exists – or what is claimed to exist. More emphasis would be placed on developing a richer understanding of empirical phenomena, and a more open-minded approach to sites and topics under investigation. This may lead to other themes of critical interest appearing than those which are typical on the CMS agenda. This empirical inquiry could be called dimension one, while the critique becomes dimension two. A third dimension could address restoration and transformation. CMS may concentrate on any of the three dimensions, but as a three-dimensional project, it has much more to offer than the present often usual-suspect focused work.

Third, we think CMS needs to move beyond the trap of tragedy. Even if the very point of CMS is an exploration of the 'dark side', this gloomy main message can be combined with other messages. One possible bedfellow here is *irony*. This entails pointing at the confusions, ambiguities and irrationalities of organizational life. These key qualities allow a critic to move behind the facade of rationality, order and control, and see other aspects at work. For instance, they might begin to recognize how the organization operates as a comedy – or tragi-comic account of a bizarre world. Such efforts might allow new ways of thinking about organizational life which reveal novel insights and provide insightful alternatives.

NOTES

[1] This point is a bit more complex in Sedgwick's text. She focuses on the example of drag performances. She points out that one way literary theorists like Judith Butler examine them is a form of mimesis – which is copying gender stereotypes and through coping them showing them to be ridiculous. Sedgwick argues that drag performances are additive – instead of just copying stereotypes they add in new dimensions and thereby create an entirely new cultural form (rather than just criticize an existing set of cultural stereotypes). In this text we are not interested so much in questions of drag or cultural production more generally. We are interested in what Sedgwick can tell us about knowledge production and the role of critique. We think the point we can take from Sedgwick is that mimesis often just ends up repeating many of the features of the target of critique, whereas an addictive approach seeks to focus on what is new and characteristics of novelty which can be bought about through careful study and critique.

[2] It is not hope but fear that excites and shapes the cultural imagination of the early 21st century. And indeed, fear is fast becoming a caricature of itself. It is no longer simply an emotion, or a response to the perception of threat. It has become a cultural idiom through which we signal a sense of growing unease about our place in the world (Furedi, 2018, vii).

[3] In this folktale written by Hans Christian Anderson, two con-men arrive in a town where the king if known for lavish spending on clothing. They offer him a cloak made out of invisible fabric, which he enthusiastically commissions. His couriers check on the progress of weaving this invisible fabric, and agree it is indeed very fine. When the non-existent cloak is finished, the king proudly parades around the city wearing it. His subjects go along with the façade until a small boy yells out that he is naked. The townspeople realize the ruse, but the king continues his procession.

REFERENCES

Adler, P. (2019). *The 99 Percent Economy: How Democratic Socialism Overcame the Crisis of Capitalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Alvesson, M. (2008). 'The future of critical management studies'. In Barry, D. and Hansen, H. (Eds), *The Sage Handbook of New Perspectives on Organization Studies*. London: Sage.

Alvesson, M. (2022). *The Triumph of Emptiness: Consumption, Higher Education and Work Organization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Alvesson, M., Blom, M. and Sveningsson, S. (2017). *Reflexive Leadership*. London: Sage.

Alvesson, M. and Deetz, S. (2021). *Doing Critical Research*. London: Sage.

Alvesson, M., Gabriel, Y. and Paulsen, R. (2017). *Return to Meaning: For a Social Science with Something to Say*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Alvesson, M. and Jonsson, A. (2022). 'Organizational Dischronization. On Meaning and Meaninglessness, Sensemaking and Nonsensemaking'. *Journal of Management Studies*, **59**, 724–54.

Alvesson, M. and Kärreman, D. (2004). 'Interfaces of control. Technocratic and socio-ideological control in a management consultancy firm'. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, **29**, 423–44.

Alvesson, M. and Kärreman, D. (2011). *Qualitative Research and Theory Development*. London: Sage.

Alvesson, M. and Nörmark, D. (2025). *Return to Judgement*. Book ms.

Alvesson, M. and Sandberg, J. (2022). 'Pre-understanding: An interpretation-enhancer and horizon-expander in research'. *Organization Studies*, **43**, 395–412.

Alvesson, M. and Sandberg, J. (2024a). 'The art of phenomena construction: A framework for coming up with research phenomena beyond "the usual suspects"'. *Journal of Management Studies*, **61**, 1737–65.

Alvesson, M. and Sandberg, J. (2024b). *Constructing Research Questions*. London: Sage.

Alvesson, M. and Spicer, A. (2014). 'Critical perspectives on leadership'. In Day, D. (Ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Leadership and Organizations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 40–56.

Alvesson, M. and Spicer, A. (2016). *The Stupidity Paradox*. London: Profile.

Alvesson, M. and Spicer, A. (2025). *The Art of Less*. London: Bloomsbury.

Alvesson, M. and Thompson, P. (2005). 'Post-bureaucracy?'. In Ackroyd, S., Batt, R., Thompson, P. and Tolbert, P. S. (Eds), *Oxford Handbook of Work and Organization Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Anker, E. S. and Felski, R. (Eds) (2017). *Critique and Postcritique*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Ashcraft, K. (2001). 'Organized dissonance: Feminist bureaucracy as hybrid form'. *Academy of Management Journal*, **44**, 1301–22.

Barker, J. (1993). 'Tightening the iron cage: Concertive control in self-managing teams'. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, **38**, 408–37.

Beunza, D. (2019). *Taking the Floor*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Billing, Y. D. (1994). 'Gender and bureaucracies – a critique of Ferguson's "the feminist case against bureaucracy"'. *Gender, Work and Organization*, **1**, 179–93.

Blom, M. and Alvesson, M. (2014). 'Leadership on demand: Followers as initiators and inhibitors of managerial leadership'. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, **30**, 344–57.

Bristow, A., Robinson, S. and Ratle, O. (2017). 'Being an early-career CMS academic in the context of insecurity and "excellence": The dialectics of resistance and compliance'. *Organization Studies*, **38**, 1185–207.

Butler, N. and Spoelstra, S. (2012). 'Your excellency'. *Organization*, **19**, 891–903.

Cabantous, L., Gond, J. P., Harding, N. and Learmonth, M. (2015). 'Reconsidering critical performativity'. *Human Relations*, **69**, 197–213.

Cederström, C. and Spicer, A. (2015). *The Wellness Syndrome*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons.

Christensen, J. F. (2021). 'Orange feelings and reparative readings, or how I learned to know alternative organization at Roskilde Festival'. *Culture and Organization*, **27**, 152–70.

Collinson, D. (2012). 'Prozac leadership and the limits of positive thinking'. *Leadership*, **8**, 87–107.

Contu, A. (2009). 'Critical management education'. In Alvesson, M., Bridgman, T. and Willmott, H. (Eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Management Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1–16.

Contu, A. (2020). 'Answering the crisis with intellectual activism: Making a difference as business schools scholars'. *Human Relations*, **73**, 737–57.

Dar, S., Liu, H., Martinez Dy, A. and Brewis, D. N. (2021). 'The business school is racist: Act up!' *Organization*, **28**, 695–706.

Davis, M. S. (1971). 'That's interesting! Towards a phenomenology of sociology and a sociology of phenomenology'. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, **1**, 309–44.

Desmet, M. (2022). *The Psychology of Totalitarianism*. London: Greenleaf.

du Gay, P. (Ed) (2005). *The Values of Bureaucracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Pres.

Einola, K. and Alvesson, M. (2021). 'When "good" leadership backfires: Dynamics of the leader/follower relation'. *Organization Studies*, **42**, 845–65.
Felski, R. (2015). *The Limits of Critique*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
Ferguson, K. E. (1984). *The Feminist Case Against Bureaucracy*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
Fischer, T. and Alvesson, M. (2025). 'A theory of leadership talk and the talking-doing gap'. *Journal of Management Studies*.
Fleming, P. (2005). '"Kindergarten cop": Paternalism and resistance in a high-commitment workplace'. *Journal of Management Studies*, **42**, 1469–89.
Foley, M. (2010). *The Age of Absurdity: Why Modern Life Makes it Hard to be Happy*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
Fromm, E. (1941). *Escape from Freedom*. New York: Farrar and Rinehart.
Fryer, M. (2011). 'Facilitative leadership: Drawing on Jürgen Habermas' model of ideal speech to propose a less impositional way to lead'. *Organization*, **19**, 25–43.
Furedi, F. (2018). *How Fear Works*. London: Bloomsbury.
Gjerde, S. and Alvesson, M. (2020). 'Sandwiched: Exploring role and identity of middle managers in the genuine middle'. *Human Relations*, **73**, 124–51.
Graeber, D. (2018). *Bullshit Jobs*. London: Penguin.
Grey, C. and Sinclair, A. (2006). 'Writing differently'. *Organization*, **13**, 443–53.
Habermas, J. (1984). *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Boston: Beacon.
Hallett, T. (2010). 'The myth incarnate: Recoupling processes, turmoil, and inhabited institutions in an urban elementary school'. *American Sociological Review*, **75**, 52–74.
Hartmann, R. K. (2014). 'Subversive functionalism: For a less canonical critique in critical management studies'. *Human Relations*, **67**, 611–32.
Honneth, A. (1995). *The Fragmented World of the Social: Essays in Social and Political Philosophy*. Albany, NY:: Suny Press.
Ivanova, M. and von Scheve, C. (2020). 'Power through empowerment? The managerial discourse on employee empowerment'. *Organization*, **27**, 777–96.
Jackall, R. (1988). *Moral Mazes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Jeffcutt, P. (1993). 'From interpretation to representation'. In Hassard, J. and Parker, M. (Eds), *Postmodernism and Organizations*. London: Sage, 25–48.
Kärreman, D., Spicer, A. and Hartmann, R. K. (2021). 'Slow management'. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, **37**, 101152.
Knights, D. and Clarke, C. A. (2014). 'It's a bittersweet symphony, this life: Fragile academic selves and insecure identities at work'. *Organization Studies*, **35**, 335–57.
Kunda, G. (1992). *Engineering Culture: Control and Commitment in a High-Tech Corporation*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
Lasch, C. (1978). *The Culture of Narcissism*. New York: Norton.
Latour, B. (2004). 'Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern'. *Critical Inquiry*, **30**, 225–48.
Learmonth, M. and Morrell, K. (2019). *Critical Perspectives on Leadership*. London: Routledge.
Lukianoff, G. and Haidt, J. (2015). 'The coddling of the American mind'. The Atlantic, September.
Marcuse, H. (1964). *One-Dimensional Man*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
McCabe, D., Ciuk, S. and Gilbert, M. (2020). '"There is a crack in everything": An ethnographic study of pragmatic resistance in a manufacturing organization'. *Human Relations*, **73**, 953–80.
McSweeney, B. (2021). 'Fooling ourselves and others: Confirmation bias and the trustworthiness of qualitative research. Part 1'. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, **34**, 1063–75.
Michel, A. (2011). 'Transcending socialization: A nine-year ethnography of the body's role in organizational control and knowledge workers' transformation'. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, **5**, 325–68.
Monteiro, P. and Adler, P. (2022). 'Bureaucracy for the 21st century. Clarifying and expanding our view of bureaucratic organization'. *Academy of Management Annals*, **16**, 427–75.
Moxnes, P. (2018). 'Anxiety and organization: What I learned about anxiety in a psychiatric ward in the '70s that turned out to be useful for managers in daily practice'. *Culture and Organization*, **24**, 100–13.
Mumby, D. K., Thomas, R., Martí, I. and Seidl, D. (2017). 'Resistance redux'. *Organization Studies*, **38**, 1157–83.
Normark, D. and Jensen, A. F. (2021). *Pseudowork: How we Ended up Being Busy Doing Nothing*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal.
Park, M., Leahey, E. and Funk, R. J. (2023). 'Papers and patents are becoming less disruptive over time'. *Nature*, **613**, 138–44.

Parker, M., Cheney, G., Fournier, V. and Land, C. (Eds) (2014). *The Routledge Companion to Alternative Organization*. London: Routledge.
Paulsen, R. (2014). *Empty Labor: Idleness and Workplace Resistance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Picard, H. and Islam, G. (2020). 'Free to do what I want'? Exploring the ambivalent effects of liberating leadership'. *Organization Studies*, **41**, 393–414.
Prasad, A. and Prasad, P. (1998). 'Everyday struggles at the workplace: The nature and implications of routine resistance in contemporary organizations'. *Research in the Sociology of Organizations*, **15**, 225–57.
Rhodes, C. and Badham, R. (2018). 'Ethical irony and the relational leader: Grappling with the infinity of ethics and the finitude of practice'. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, **28**, 71–98.
Rintamäki, J. and Alvesson, M. (2023). 'Resisting whilst complying? A case study of a power struggle in a business school'. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, **22**, 257–73.
Rosen, M. (1985). 'Breakfast at Spiro's: Dramaturgy and dominance'. *Journal of Management*, **11**, 31–48.
Sedgwick, E. K. (1997). Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think this Introduction is About You. In Barale, M.A., Goldberg, J. and Moon, M. (Eds), *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*. Sedgwick, New York, USA: Duke University Press, 1–38.
Sennett, R. (1980). *Authority*. New York: Norton.
Spicer, A. (2018). *Business Bullshit*. London: Routledge.
Spicer, A. and Alvesson, M. (2025). 'Critical management studies: A critical review'. *Journal of Management Studies*, **62**, 446–83.
Spicer, A., Alvesson, M. and Kärreman, D. (2009). 'Critical performativity: The unfinished business of critical management studies'. *Human Relations*, **62**, 537–60.
Spicer, A., Alvesson, M. and Kärreman, D. (2016). 'Extending critical performativity'. *Human Relations*, **69**, 225–49.
Sutton, R. and Rao, H. (2024). 'Rid your organization of obstacles that infuriate everyone'. *Harvard Business Review*, 2024.
Szkudlarek, B. and Alvesson, M. (2024). 'Doing silence: How silence is produced in meetings'. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, **23**, 304–24.
Thomas, R. and Davies, A. (2005). 'Theorizing the micro-politics of resistance: New public management and managerial identities in the UK public services'. *Organization Studies*, **26**, 683–706.
Tourish, D. (2019). *Management Studies in Crisis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.