Critical management studies and critical theory: A review

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Abstract
Critical management studies (CMS) has pervaded the field of management studies, claiming to be based on the Frankfurt School of critical theory. This paper examines that claim. It starts with a brief outline of management studies vs. CMS, and of some of CMS’s goals: micro-emancipation, the production of better managers, good management, and fairer organisations. The aim is to provide an overview of current literature, to outline critical theory’s epistemological theory, and to deliver an assessment of CMS in the light of that.

Keywords
Critical management studies, critical theory, domination, emancipation, management studies

A historical introduction to management, management studies, and critical management studies
Advocates of management studies claim that management dates back to the pyramids, since such a large project would have demanded managerial skills for its accomplishment (Kreitner 2009: 33; Scott 2013: 9f.; Griffin 2013: 33). This is pure ideology. Management is a 20th-century phenomenon intimately linked to managing for-profit companies, or what Jessop (2013) calls ‘accumulation regimes’. Without profit there is no management. Perhaps the pyramids demanded organisational skill but there were no shareholders, and no scientific management existed 2,500 years ago. Perhaps more than Fayol’s (1916) management principles (e.g. managerial authority paired with workers’ discipline, a

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managerial unit of command, subordination, order, and esprit de corps), it was Taylor's quasi-scientific management (1911) that marked the transition from simple overseeing of a factory to modern management (Margini 1974; Lipietz 2013). Taylorism remains a crypto-scientific enterprise: in his 1911 work *Scientific Management*, Taylor stated, 'he [the worker] shall be so stupid and so phlegmatic that he more nearly resembles in his mental make-up the ox than any other type' that a worker should be trained like an intelligent gorilla, and be 'so stupid that the word “percentage” has no meaning to him' (Taylor 1911: 59). Taylor's writings led to a more structured approach to the exploitation of workers. While still based on an 18th- and 19th-century 'Satanic Mills' model of factory administration that will be familiar to readers of Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853), with brutal and sadistic overseers armed with whips and sticks (Engels 1892), the management of people only moved from punishment regimes to rewarding regimes (Klikauer 2012) when theory X (punishment, stick) was superseded by theory Y (reward, carrot) as McGregor (1960, 2006) had outlined in the mid-1960s.

But a more structured way of extracting surplus also meant that managers had to be trained in specialised facilities (Locke & Spender 2011). This allowed rising management schools to teach a newly invented field of management 'studies' that remained – at least in philosophical-theoretical terms – well below classical '-ologies' like psychology, sociology, biology and the like. In order to gain crypto-scientific recognition, management studies staunchly followed the positivistic track by transferring methods of natural science into the world of management studies (Horkheimer 1937; Habermas 1976a; Klikauer 2007). By the late 1980s, management studies was an established field. Around that time, a new field – critical management studies – began to emerge as a hermeneutic critique of traditional management studies. It borrowed ideas from 'critical theory' to frame itself as a 'critical' discipline. CMS's founding edition *Critical Management Studies* (Alvesson & Willmott 1992b) introduces CMS with the statement, 'critical theory provides the primary inspiration for this volume' of CMS (Alvesson & Willmott 1992b: 1).

More recently, this point was re-emphasised in 'Critical Theory' (2011: 93), by CMS theorist Robert Cluley, who states, 'critical theory, in the context of CMS, is most closely associated with the work of a particular group of German scholars belonging to the Institute of Social Research at the University of Frankfurt' (e.g. Butler & Spoolstra 2014: 543; Jeanes & Huzzard 2014: 5, 13, 20, 29, 74, 79, 85, 99, 110, 115, 236, 242; Wickert & Schaefer 2015: 110).

Over the years, CMS has distinguished itself from traditional management studies by rehearsing its numerous and continuously outlined links to critical theory (Tables 1 and 2, below). With that, CMS introduced a new theme into an overwhelmingly non-critical and perhaps even anti-critical but largely functional and positivist field. It introduced critique as a creative way of thinking that helps managers to iron out system deficiencies in order to perfect the managerial apparatus (Klikauer 2013). While critical theory's project is overtly dedicated to ending domination as a pathway to emancipation, CMS appears to remain part of management studies, calling its project 'micro-emancipation' (Alvesson et al. 2009: 446ff.; Huzzard & Johansson 2014: 97; Wickert & Schaefer 2015: 115). It attempts to use carry-overs from critical theory, adjusted to management studies' prime ideology of managerialism (Butler & Spoolstra 2014: 539). Incidentally, managerialism has never been discussed in any substantial way by CMS (Klikauer 2013). Instead,
Table 1. Links between critical management studies and critical theory.

| 1. | Alvesson & Willmott (1992a, b) |
| 3. | Alvesson (1994) |
| 6. | Ackroyd (2004: 166) |
| 7. | Adler et al. (2007: 125, 138) |
| 10. | Hancock (2008: 10) |
| 12. | Rowlingson (2008: 206) |
| 15. | Safranski (2010: 19) |
| 17. | Cluley (2011: 92ff.) |
| 18. | Alvesson (2011) |
| 19. | Clegg (2011) |
| 20. | Tatli (2012) |
| 22. | www.criticalmanagement.org |
| 24. | group.oomonline.org/cms/ |

CMS wants ‘the production of better managers’ (Alvesson et al. 2009: 446ff.), with next to no interest in Kinna’s (2014: 611) exhortation that it should ‘expose, subvert and undermine dominant assumptions about the social order’. Perhaps CMS is more in line in its historical origins with Fayol’s ‘managerial authority paired with workers’ discipline, command and control, and subordination’. Hence, CMS seeks improvements on authority, discipline, command, control, and the subordination of workers. It seeks a genuine ‘betterment’ of domination. Meanwhile, critical theory’s emancipatory project is directed against domination (Farrands & Worth 2005). These seemingly divergent sets of ideas are examined below, beginning with a brief overview of CMS’s argument that it is based on critical theory, before moving on to detail the Frankfurt School’s critical theory.

**Critical management studies and the Frankfurt School of critical theory**

Ever since its invention in the late 1990s, CMS has claimed to work in the tradition of the Frankfurt School’s critical theory, with the most recent example being found in Hartz et al.’s (2013) CMS Conference announcement about ‘dealing with contemporary critical theorists’ and critical theory ‘classics as mere footnotes of CMS’. CMS links to critical theory have become so numerous that only a selection can be listed here. While the incomplete list below does not claim to represent the full range of CMS literature on critical theory, it nevertheless shows the abundant, established and enduring ways in which CMS has linked itself to critical theory. This has been rehearsed over and over again. The examples shown in Table 1 show 26 occasions on which CMS has claimed to be based on critical theory.

While these references depict more than twenty years (1992 to 2013) of intensive and prolonged CMS-critical theory linkage, three of them are examined here in greater detail in Table 2 to exemplify the longstanding CMS programme of connecting itself to critical theory, which can be observed at the ‘Critical management studies’ Wikipedia page, and
Table 2. Examples in which CMS connects itself to critical theory (1992-2009).

- ‘critical management studies (CMS) is a loose but extensive grouping of ... theoretically informed critiques of management ... grounded originally in a critical theory perspective’ (wikipedia.org).
- In what might be called CMS’s founding document (Alvesson & Willmott’s Critical Management Studies, 1992b: 1), the authors note, ‘the standpoint of critical theory ... provides the primary inspiration for this volume’ (1992b: 4).
- ‘Contributors to this collection have been attracted by the capacity of critical theory’ (1992b: 4).
- ‘critical theory as a counterpoint to mainstream management studies’ (1992b: 8).
- A chapter referencing key works on critical theory (1992b: 20ff.).
- In the Oxford Handbook of Critical Management Studies (2009) the CMS–critical theory link is presented as follows: ‘critical theory’s wide compass continues to offer a valuable resource’ (2009: 6).
- ‘critical theory has perhaps had even more influence on the development of CMS than other theoretical foundations’ (2009: 29).
- ‘the critical theory tradition became relevant’ (2009: 37).
- ‘critical theory provides a potentially valuable contribution to CMS’ (2009: 46).
- ‘we started this chapter by outlining some of the underpinning assumptions of CMS and the impact of these upon the methods employed. Initially we explored the methodology of a long-standing and highly influential perspective closely associated with CMS: critical theory’ (2009: 361).

In more formal, chronological terms in works stretching from CMS’s founding document (Alvesson & Willmott 1992b) to the current Oxford Handbook of Critical Management Studies (Alvesson, Bridgman & Willmott 2009):

Table 2 depicts a multitude of links in which CMS demonstrates its links to critical theory. In their (2009: 361) elaboration of CMS’s ‘long-standing and highly influential link to critical theory’, Duberley and Johnson pose the question, Is CMS reflective of critical theory, or does it follow the paradigm of traditional management studies? They approach the answer to this question using a somewhat Hegelian three-step approach: a) critical theory (thesis); b) CMS (anti-thesis); and c) their relationship to one another (synthesis). In other words, the question is not whether critical theory is CMS’s ‘only’ theoretical background – it isn’t. CMS has incorporated other theoretical fields (postmodernism, labour process theory, critical realism, etc.), perhaps to broaden its appeal. Nonetheless, the key question of this review remains whether CMS (Tables 1 and 2) carries critical theory’s emancipatory project, or whether it is simply a ‘critical’ version of management studies. In order to answer this, the article will briefly introduce the philosophical-theoretical origins of the Frankfurt School at the Institute for Social Research. When the Nazis occupied the institute in 1933, its members escaped to New York, where they became known as Frankfurt School of Critical Theory (Jay 1974; Rasmussen & Swindal 2004; Tarr 2011; Masquelier 2012; Berry 2012; Nickel 2012; Outhwaite 2012; Forst 2013).
Table 3. Critical theory’s three knowledge-creating interests.

- an empirical-analytical interest in organisational control over production, time, workers, output, etc.
- a hermeneutic-historical interest in understanding meaning in its historical continuations
- a critical-emancipatory interest in freedom and autonomy, assisting those pressed into production processes and domination to free themselves.

Historically, critical theory’s epistemological origins are found in the Enlightenment philosophy of Kant’s (1724-1804) ‘Trilogy of Critiques’ (1781, 1788, 1790), and subsequently in Hegel (1770-1831), Marx (1818-1883), Engels (1820-1895) and Lukács (1885-1971). Kant and Hegel (1807) acknowledged the existence of the human ‘subject’ by positioning it in relation to the objective world, and elementary to their work have been ‘critical consciousness’, morality, Sittlichkeit, self-determination, freedom, self-actualisation, alienation, and Hegel’s master-servant dialectics (Kojève 1947).

Critical theory, creating knowledge and critical management studies

In a seminal founding essay, ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’ (1937), the philosopher-sociologist Max Horkheimer (1895–1973) constructed critical theory’s basic epistemological parameters, coining the term ‘critical theory’. For critical theory, theory is more than a disconnected research method: it has social, material, ethical, historical, philosophical and political significance. Historically, traditional theory assumed its role as a critique on religion challenging the hegemony of feudalist regimes. Most importantly, traditional theory resulted in the positivist idea of a seamless transfer of methods developed in natural science to social science. It operates as an enclosed system (e.g. system theory) of propositions in an attempt to discover never-ending law-like foundations of society that are neutral to historical developments (Habermas 1976a: 142; Adorno 1993; Bernstein 2001).

It is a conceptual ordering of invented facts, which lacks an examination of the social reality of the factors that created the so-called facts. Law-like hypotheses are developed in anticipation of legal policy regulators, without there being any democratic justification for them. This disregards the existence of contradictions as if these had no influence on the observable phenomenon. Traditional theory has a tendency towards logical and purely mathematical correlations. These models have been more influential to management studies than to CMS, even though CMS has never been immune to approaches generated by traditional theories. Rejecting traditional theory, Horkheimer’s initial approach to theory was elaborated in Habermas’s Knowledge and Human Interests (1987), constructing normative foundations for three knowledge-guiding interests, as seen below in Table 3.

Table 3 shows the three knowledge-creating interests to which science in general, social science, management studies and critical management studies adhere. In general, management studies adopts an uncritical-positivist understanding of management, supporting prevailing paradigms while enhancing domination (Grandy & Gibbon 2009).
Most empirical-analytical research is guided by a Comte-Weber-Popper illusion of ‘pure scientific values’. It is formulated as a ‘standpoint-unboundedness’ linked to the illusion of a partition between researcher and social reality, with the idea that research is totally separated from the sphere of real life rendering objectivity a key ideology. This is carried out by people whom Bartiz (1960) has called ‘servants of power’.

Since Kant’s post-feudalist 19th-century philosophy, however, this is no more than a dangerous delusion or a deliberate attempt to mystify research, concealing the key interest of empiricism – managerial domination – behind the veil of scientific objectivity. Ever since Kant, people have been aware that our objective-subjective world is inseparable. In sharp contrast to positivism’s pretence that Kant’s epistemological philosophy never existed, critical theory argues that all knowledge has a ‘perspective’ and flows from certain epistemological, social, ethical, and political commitments, because truth cannot exist independent from the subject. Therefore, no researcher can be over and above social totality, because society and research are a single unit from which life cannot be detached. Hence, researchers in all fields must reflect upon themselves from within this context (Habermas 1976a: 131).

A key attempt to somehow remain disconnected from society in empirical-analytical research is found in establishing hypothetical-deductive, non-historical, and law-like classifications with empirical content, using controlled observations, experiments, tests, and models. This is a version of knowledge that attempts to create and justify exact knowledge. Its validity is achieved through recourse to the source of knowledge. It is a kind of circular self-validation that is grounded in the objectivist illusion that observations can be expressed in basic statements by relating facts in a descriptive fashion, seeking to eclipse prescriptive intentions. In the end, the acceptance or rejection of such statements is made in accordance with law-like rules disconnected from society and researcher (Habermas 1976b: 204). The research occurs in a self-invented vacuum inside which no life exists.

This version of knowledge is linked to a ‘cognitive interest in technical control over objectified processes’ (Habermas 1968: 290) – managerial knowledge used to set labour power in motion while dominating it (Fromm 1980; Bonß 1984; Smith 2010). Knowledge is used to establish and expand the power of direct, technical, bureaucratic, coercive, cultural, neo-normative, and internalised control (Sturdy et al. 2009; Fleming et al. 2010). As a consequence, a substantial number of publications on research into for-profit organisations can be called ‘auxiliary science’, supporting and stabilising domination (Anderson 2009).

Since the Enlightenment, it has been proven over and over again that natural science, technology, technical knowledge, and instrumental rationality have never been able to guarantee material and social emancipation (Marcuse 1968b). Often, such research has been a support function for purely technical policy recommendations supportive of managerial domination. Any managerial research restricted to empirical-analytical knowledge-creation is limited to a position of ‘examining the self-preservation … of social systems in the sphere of pragmatically successful adjustment processes’ (Habermas 1976b: 222). Apart from empirical-analytical knowledge which analyses management solely from ‘within’ a self-invented technical rationality constructed as problem-solving, Habermas’s second knowledge-creating interest is geared towards meaning and understanding.
Historical-hermeneutical research is the science of interpretation. It originated in literary theory and began with the Greek god Hermes. It does not seek to access facts by observation, but through interpretation (Gadamer 1974; Klikauer 2007: 82ff.; Letiche 2006: 170). Inside CMS, for example, hermeneutics interprets texts such as contracts, agreements, mission statements, rules, directives, arrangements on organisational issues, committee minutes, policies, company documents, etc. (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2009; Alvesson 2010). Knowledge is mediated through language and linguistic pre-understanding (syntax and semantics) that derives from the researcher’s initial situation. Generally, all representations are social actions occurring inside a context that is part of a social-historical continuation (Hegel 1807, 1821; Adorno 1993; Habermas 2000). Consequently, all knowledge is formed inside a living societal context that is part of a socially constructed framework.

Hermeneutics is not satisfied with the production of facts, but focuses on understanding the factors behind the facts. It replaces hypothetical-deductive empiricism with a hermeneutic quest for meaning and sense-making. Habermas (1976b: 222) calls this science ‘adjustment processes’, while CMS calls it ‘working affirmatively with managerial discourses’ (Spicer et al. 2009: 546). CMS does this through a set of (prefixed ‘critical’) interpretations of a given reality, such as management, while remaining strictly within managerial parameters (Fournier & Grey 2000: 27; Hancock & Tyler 2008: 32).

By contrast, the third knowledge interest of critical-emancipatory empiricism goes beyond both through its critique of the ideological content of research. It rejects the idea that methodology is merely an application of mechanical, observational, and statistical techniques, and a purely technical device (Marcuse 1964, 1966; Adorno 1976; Morrow & Brown 1994). Critical-emancipatory science criticises such techniques as ritualistic in order to legitimise a certain form of knowledge. Critical-emancipatory research uses non-empirical methods such as the research-society interface with the method of self-reflection being determined by an emancipatory interest directed towards autonomy, human freedom, self-determination (Kant), ethical life and self-actualisation (Hegel), non-alienation (Marx), liberation (Marcuse), ideal speech (Habermas), mutual and equal recognition (Hegel & Honneth), and Mündigkeit (Horkheimer & Adorno). Critical theory’s term ‘emancipation’ encompasses these philosophies while adding its own specifications (Adorno 1969, 1973; Klikauer 2007: 85).

Management, managerial capitalism and managerialism – issues on which CMS is strangely quiet (Locke & Spender 2011; Klikauer 2013) – work in the opposite direction, with pathological consequences (Bakan 2004; Samuel 2010). As Habermas (1967: 222, cf. Marcuse 1972: 98) emphasised:

under the conditions of reproduction of an industrial society, individuals who only possessed technically utilisable knowledge, and who were no longer in a position to expect a rational enlightenment of themselves nor of the aims behind their action would lose their identity.

Critical theory works to overcome pathologies created by management. The interest of critical-emancipation is directed towards any analysis that frees consciousness from the domineering dependence on hypostatised powers, empiricism, positivistic approaches, and from its neutral-scientific associations (Adorno 1976: 113). The undeniable link
between knowledge and interest challenges empirical-analytical and historical-herme-
neutic science because both seek to establish the fantasy of objectivism and ‘the illusion
exposes ‘pure-facts-and-value-neutrality’ ideologies as a mirage that can be evaluated
through critical reflections on knowledge and interest. Emancipatory criticism focuses
on the dialectics between knowledge and interest, while being a reflective method of

In broad terms, critical theory is directed towards self-reflection and emancipation,
preserving the emancipatory element in Kant, Hegel, Marx, Marcuse, Adorno,
Horkheimer, Habermas and Honneth. It is a radical re-constitutive project of a transforma-
tion directed towards universal human emancipation. This is quite different from
CMS. While CMS includes some elements of critique, critical theory is designed to work
towards emancipation (cf. Tarr 2011: 33, 179; Adler 2002: 388). This can be shown in
a simple sociological three-by-three matrix indicating each field’s main knowledge inter-
ests in black, and minor interests in grey:

Figure 1 shows the three relevant fields of inquiry (traditional management studies,
CMS, and critical theory) on the horizontal axis, and Habermas’ three knowledge-creating
interests on the vertical. It shows three black areas of inquiry, with their prime knowl-
dge-creating interest. For traditional management studies, empirical analysis produces
knowledge that assists management. CMS’s hermeneutical interest is reflected in inter-
preting and understanding management, designed to show management’s shortcomings
and formulated as system-confirming critiques; and for critical theory, it is a critical-
emancipatory interest in creating knowledge that ends domination and is directed
towards emancipation.

Figure 1 also shows four grey areas that have secondary relevance to the main knowledge
interest of each field. Management studies have a limited interest in understanding mean-
ing, with the prime interest remaining inside the production of empirical-analytical knowl-
edge. This situation is reversed in CMS, with a prime interest in meaning and understanding,
while empirical-analytical research takes a secondary position. CMS’s main interest is a
critical evaluation or re-interpretation of empirical-analytical findings. Things are very dif-
ferent for critical theory. Its major interest is in critical-emancipatory knowledge while
using empirical-analytical and hermeneutical research to support its quest for emancipa-
tion, not control (management studies) and not re-interpretation (CMS).
The only three forms of knowledge that are relevant to all three fields of inquiry are found at the historically basic level of post-Enlightenment's empirical-analytical knowledge. But this has three different meanings depending on each field of inquiry. For traditional management studies, it is the production of empirical knowledge within the framework of instrumental rationality (Scherer 2010) that is analysed and presented to management (e.g. the Academy of Management Journal, Harvard Business Review, etc.), while its secondary knowledge – hermeneutics – is a fringe issue (e.g. the Academy of Management Review, cf. Eden 2003; Thompson 2004; Clarke 2009). For CMS, the role of empirical-analytical knowledge rests in its critical analysis and re-examination of empirical knowledge, designed to 'search for loopholes in managerial and organisational control' (Alvesson & Willmott 1992a: 446). For critical theory, the production of empirical-analytical knowledge is of use when it advances human freedom and emancipation. In sum, the knowledge-interest of management studies is primarily the support of management; CMS’s central interest is a critique of management and management studies; and emancipation and human freedom are the focus of critical theory. Consequently, critical theory is significantly different from traditional management studies and CMS.

**The review: Key themes of the Critical Management Studies Handbook**

How an academic field sees and presents itself and which are its key themes is often explained via a major publication such as, for example, a ‘handbook’. The Oxford Handbook of Critical Management Studies provides a comprehensive insight into CMS (Alvesson et al. 2009; cf. Parker 2010: 297, 300; Hodson 2012). In line with previous CMS research, the handbook seeks to combine critical theory with management studies. It represents a kind of linear thinking, along the lines of ‘critique + management studies = CMS’.

In an attempt to merge two ‘strange bedfellows’ (Soririn & Tyrell 1998: 305), CMS reduces 90-plus years of critical theory’s philosophy, theory development and research to a ‘study’ in an endeavour to equalise CMS’s non-philosophical and non-theoretical existence with critical theory’s philosophy and history. CMS views itself merely as a ‘study’, not as an academic, theoretical and, above all, philosophical discipline. Critical theory’s strong philosophical origins (Kant, Hegel, Marx, Adorno, Habermas, Honneth) are sacrificed on the altar of managerial ‘studies’. Having rejected the true notion of science and philosophy as a subject that exists only ‘for itself’ (Hegel 1807, 1821; Adorno 1993), CMS remains a ‘study’ inside managerial infrastructures, frameworks, paradigms, and ideologies. Critical theory is the exact opposite. It only exists for itself, serving nobody – with the exception of those oppressed (Marcuse 1966) – but least of all management and managerialism. Some of the key differences between CMS and critical theory are
tabled below:

Table 4 provides a short overview of core differences between critical theory and CMS, starting with the philosophical history of critical theory and CMS’s management history. Both are products of different epochs and different experiences with critical theory’s strong critique of capitalism, fascism, and Stalinism, and CMS’s critique on management. The German sociologist Max Weber appears to remain the
### Table 4. Key differences: Critical theory vs. CMS.

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<th>Key issues</th>
<th>Critical theory</th>
<th>CMS</th>
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<tr>
<td>Early:</td>
<td>Immanuel Kant, G. F. W. Hegel, Karl Marx, George Lukacs</td>
<td>Taylor, Fayol, Henry Ford, McGregor, Drucker, Mintzberg, Chandler</td>
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<td>CT=philosophers</td>
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<td>CMS=writers</td>
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<td>History</td>
<td>1920s</td>
<td>1990s</td>
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<td>Country of origin</td>
<td>Germany (20s-30s) USA (30s-50s)</td>
<td>Europe: Sweden &amp; UK</td>
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<td>Three historical</td>
<td>Fascism, capitalism, Soviet state-socialism (Outhwaite 2012)</td>
<td>Managerial control &amp; domination, management culture (Alvesson 2002)</td>
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<td>themes</td>
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<td>Three key sociologists</td>
<td>Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, etc.</td>
<td>Max Weber (dominant), Durkheim, &amp; Marx (partially)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Key theories</td>
<td>Critical theory</td>
<td>Critical theory but also critical realism, postmodernism, feminism, labou process theory (lpt), pragmatism, symbolic interaction-theory, environmentalism</td>
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<td>Management, managerial ‘for-profit’ organisations</td>
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<td>Contemporary</td>
<td>Society, capitalism, consumerism, mass-media &amp; communication</td>
<td>Management, consumerism, mass-media &amp; communication</td>
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<td>research areas</td>
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<td>Institutions</td>
<td>Institute of Social Research New School of Social Research (NY)</td>
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<td>Key authors</td>
<td>Adorno, Horkheimer, Fromm, Marcuse, Habermas, Kellner, Honneth, etc.</td>
<td>Alvesson, Willmott, Knights, etc.</td>
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Table 4. (Continued)

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<td>Self-determination &amp; actualisation</td>
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<td>a better world (Spicer)</td>
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<td>Thesis Eleven,</td>
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<td>Constellations, Critical</td>
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<td>e-journals: Ephemera, M@nagement, Tamara</td>
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predominant source of CMS, whereas critical theory’s key writers originate from philosophy, economics, sociology, psychology, and from within critical theory. Both also differ strongly in their respective research areas, with critical theory’s wider societal focus and CMS’s narrow managerial-organisational focus. Most decisively, critical theory has a well-developed, comprehensive, and concise body of theories that are philosophically grounded, while CMS has exposed itself to a claim of being a ‘bit of everything’ (cf. Adler et al. 2007). While critical theory is narrow in its theoretical background, it is wider in its research interest. CMS represents the opposite: examining a specific issue (management) from a wide – sometimes somewhat contradictory – array of theories, ideas, models, and concepts, e.g. labour process theory versus post-modernism (Johnson & Duberley 2000: 11; Alvesson & Deetz 2005; Hassard & Rowlinson 2011; Mills & Mills 2013).

Examining key texts in critical theory and CMS, one quickly recognises that there is no overlap. With the exception of Marcuse’s One-Dimensional Man (1966) and a few others, most critical theory texts do not deal specifically with management. Perhaps this is because of management’s non-philosophical, non-theoretical, un-cultured, and non-intellectual existence of a particularity expressed such as the narrow subject of factory administration. In CMS, it is the exact reverse: management and organisations are the be-all-and-end-all of its existence. They define and shape CMS’s mediocre, confined, and simple universe. Practically no text within the CMS portfolio provides a substantive critique of ethics, history, philosophy, society, culture, consumerism, managerialism or capitalism in general; but all its texts have management as their subject. Perhaps critical theory’s research interest is best reflected through Bauhaus-architect Walter Gropius’s ‘the human mind is like an umbrella – it functions best when open’. CMS focuses on management while avoiding any distraction through linking management to capitalist pathologies, managerialism, and consumerism. While critical theory’s telos is universal emancipation, for CMS it is ‘micro-emancipation, the production of better managers, good management, shap[ing] organisations to become fairer, and the idea that management’s social engineering can be balanced’ (Alvesson et al. 2009: 446ff.; cf. Akella 2008; Smith 2008: 18, 19; Rowlinson 2008: 208; Barros 2010: 168, 181; Johnson 2009: 271ff.; Tatli 2012).
Each also has its own respective journals. CMS scholars do not publish in critical theory journals, and there is no cross-referencing between critical theory and CMS. They are neatly separated and so are their views on management. CMS seeks to reform management and also, albeit marginally, management’s denigration of labour to human resources, while critical theory views human beings as self-reflective agencies with emancipatory potentials. CMS criticises the managerial (mis-)use of people inside organisations, but stays clear of labour's overall role in the capitalist profit system (Marcuse 1966; Postone 1993; Long & Lee 2001; Payne & Barbera 2010).

CMS’s history began with Alvesson and Willmott’s ‘On the idea of emancipation in management and organisational studies’ (1992a), published in one of management’s major journals, the Academy of Management Review (AMR), published by the American Academy of Management. The AMR represents the extreme opposite of critical theory, while Alvesson and Willmott’s article is not reflective of critical theory’s core philosophies (Butler & Spoelstra 2014: 539). At first glance, the title appears to contain a tautology: ‘emancipation in management’; but Alvesson and Willmott strenuously seek to combine what essentially cannot be combined by artificially dividing critical theory into a ‘progressive’ and an ‘accommodating’ stream.

In CMS’s *carmen obscura* version of reality, critical theory’s progressive approach to emancipation is then labelled ‘orthodox’ and dismissed as ‘grandiose’, while the CMS invention of organisational ‘micro-emancipation’ is deemed acceptable. This represents a reductionism rejected by critical theory (Klikauer 2011; cf. Marcuse 1966, 1968a, 1968b, 1969). For critical theory, emancipation remains a Kantian categorical imperative (a universal ‘must’), not a hypothetical one (Kleingeld 2012; Klikauer 2010: 68-76, 2012: 173ff). There can never be ‘if-then’ conditions (e.g. micro, organisational, etc.) attached to emancipation, such as ‘if management was nice then emancipation would follow’ (Klikauer 2012: 168ff.). Instead, emancipation as a universal duty – not micro-emancipation – finishes the ‘Unfinished project of modernity’ (Habermas 1985). Already critical theory’s Kantian-Hegelian origins make it impossible to accept anything but universal and unconditional emancipation and freedom. Armstrong’s (2010: 2) critique on CMS, for example, highlights CMS’s use of ‘emancipation’:

> in this manner the nonsensically truncated sentence ‘I emancipate’ becomes ‘emancipation’ or ‘emancipatory’, thereby conveying a vague sense of doing good whilst the grammar covertly strips away the inconvenient questions of whose emancipation might be at issue and from what oppression.

In other words, CMS does not appear to ‘give voice to the voiceless’ (Parker 2010: 299). It cannot place the ‘to be’ emancipated subjects – workers – at the centre, because CMS’s centre is occupied with for-profit organisations and management. Therefore, CMS creates a ‘vague sense of doing good’ while circumventing emancipation in the absence of a subject that is forced into managerial-oppressive regimes. Through the skilful Houdini-like vanishing act of a subject’s emancipation, CMS has no emancipated individuals left to construct a *sittliche*-rational society (Hegel). Marcuse (1941: 185) made the very opposite of CMS very clear: society is to be constructed by the critical reason of the emancipated individual. Moreover, critical theory’s ‘emancipatory
idea – just an idea! – is not ‘a group of projects, each limited in terms of space, time, and success’, as claimed by CMS. And critical theory can never be reduced to a ‘search for loopholes in managerial and organisational control’ (Alvesson & Willmott 1992a: 446). Critical theory’s emancipatory project can never be reduced to ‘loophole-searching’ implicitly affirming managerial control and domination.

Finally, for CMS, ‘the costs of emancipation must be acknowledged’ (Alvesson & Willmott 1992a: 447). For critical theory, managerial costs are irrelevant to universal human emancipation. Human emancipation and freedom are not questions of managerial costs. Instead of counting the cost of emancipation to management, critical theory counts the human cost of unfreedom under managerial regimes. If critical theory would accept the dependency of freedom and emancipation on managerial costs, it would deny its philosophical origins and annihilate itself. CMS is firmly aligned to managerial cost-cutting strategies rather than to critical theory’s emancipation. For CMS’s crypto-criticism, the theory and philosophy of critical theory is simply orthodoxy. How much CMS is part of the managerial paradigm can be exemplified by a key statement in CMS’s original key article (Alvesson & Willmott 1992a: 457): ‘users of orthodox critical theory are inclined to be dismissive of ideas that are intended to enhance the capacity of managers to raise the productivity of labour’. Set against that, CT argues that its philosophy is not just ‘orthodox’. It does not simply have ‘inclinations’, but a well-developed theoretical and philosophical body, and is not simply dismissive of management (Marcuse 1966; Marcuse 1968a; Postone 1993; Adorno 1993; Ellem 2008; Berry 2012). CT does not accept an ‘increase in labour productivity’ as natural, neutral, and for all to accept. This is pure ideology (Klikauer 2008; cf. Wood & Kelly 1978: 19). The issue is CMS’s ‘productivity of labour’ vs. critical theory’s ‘liberation of labour’ (Calas & Smircich 2002; Bridgman & Stephens 2008; Cunliffe 2008; Roan et al. 2009: 17ff.).

CMS’s claim that ‘CMS has emerged as a movement that questions the authority and relevance of mainstream thinking and practice’ in management (Alvesson et al. 2009: 1; cf. Walsh & Weber 2002: 402), invites three problems: firstly, CMS admits that it emerged as a restrictive critique of management studies; secondly, if CMS were part of critical theory it would reflect on critical theory’s philosophical origins and critical theory’s body of theories; and finally, if CMS were aligned to critical theory, domination and emancipation would be its core instead of ‘questions of authority and relevance’ (Klikauer 2007: 76-96).

Clearly, CMS’s own introduction already indicates significant differences between CMS and critical theory. CMS emphasises that being critical towards management is nothing new, while mentioning Weber, Durkheim, and Marx. First, Weber and Durkheim are not in the tradition of critical theory (cf. Simich & Tilman 1980). Marx’s strong emphasis on political economy is continued in critical theory, while remaining critical of reducing the human condition to issues of political economy. Second, as the theoretician of the Wilhelminian Empire, one of Weber’s favourite terms – *Herrschaft* domination (cf. Marcuse 1968a; cf. 1972) – remains conspicuously absent from CMS (Alvesson et al. 2009). Finally, Weber, Durkhei, and CMS may ‘question authority and relevance’, but do not include emancipation from domination and oppression (Jeannot 1994, 2010).
The Handbook’s ‘Recalling the bigger picture’ has four concerns: critical questioning, negations and deconstruction, social reform and emancipation, and the legitimate purpose of organisations. A critique in the tradition of critical theory goes beyond a simple ‘critical questioning’. Instead of de-construction, critical theory would radically re-construct management so that it no longer reflects what it currently is. One of the clearest dividing lines between CMS’s post-modernist ‘de’-construction and critical theory’s ‘re’-construction is based on destruction under postmodernism and an emancipatory re-construction of society towards ending domination under critical theory. Suddenly, ‘emancipation’ appears in CMS’s handbook, but not as a fully developed concept, as in critical theory. For CMS, emancipation appears to be non-essential (Hegel). For critical theory it builds the key of every thing critical theory has ever produced.

Meanwhile, the CMS focus on the ‘legitimate purpose of organisations’ indicates that CMS accepts for-profit organisations as ‘a given’, marking a ‘TINA’ (there is no alternative) critique from ‘within’ the managerial paradigm, not about management (Grey & Willmott 2002; King 2008). For critical theory, current business organisations have no legitimacy, even discounting management’s anti-democratic stance and managerialism’s fight against democracy. For critical theory, the democratic formation of Rousseau’s volonté générale, (e.g. Habermas’ communicative action) remains highly relevant to industrial organisations. CMS fails comprehensively to expose management’s lack of democracy. Equally, issues such as the ‘pathology of commerce’ (Bakan 2004; Beder 2002), organisational pathologies, white-collar crime and environmental destruction, etc. are all absent from the CMS handbook’s key chapter, which sets out the theoretical framework for CMS (cf. Alvesson 2011).

CMS’s ‘Critical theory and its contribution to CMS’ is, of course, of key interest to critical theory. In a writing style akin to story-telling rather than critical, philosophical and emancipatory reflections, selective sections of the Frankfurt School’s history are retold. While outlining some of critical theory’s key points from ‘critique of the dialectics of environment, the one-dimensional society, a critique on technology, to an emphasis on communicative action’, it manages to entirely miss the theory of almost every one of them. One of critical theory’s key concepts is communicative action (Habermas 1997). This can serve as an example delivering valuable insights into CMS’s treatment of a core critical theory element. It is imperative to note that communicative action does not imply that an ‘idea becomes central as a point of reference for the creation of a free and just society where no social groups become marginalised and all interests are heard, as well as for the methodical orientation of social research’ (Alvesson et al. 2009: 36). Communicative action is not about ‘marginalised groups’ and getting ‘heard’, as CMS claims. It is about a domination-free dialogue enshrined in ideal speech that would render management impossible (Johnson & Duberley 2000: 122).

Communicative action sets categorical imperatives under which one either communicates free of domination, or does not (Klikauer 2008: 149ff.). There is no middle-ground: no ‘a-bit-of-both’; no conditioning, as Habermas makes abundantly clear (Klikauer 2008: 160ff.). A dialogue is either free of domination (Klikauer 2007) or it represents communicative distortions (Klikauer 2008). Unfortunately, CMS is not representative of Habermas’s key demands. Instead, it accommodates management. CMS also relates itself to critical realism and to ‘Perspectives on labour process theory’,
emphasising that CMS needs to develop a ‘credible account of the relationships between capitalist political economy, work systems and strategy and practice of actors in employment relations’ (Alvesson et al. 2009: 108). CMS cannot take on critical theory’s ‘life-world’, since it is locked into the managerial paradigm depicted in its lack of consideration of management studies’ forgotten actors: namely, workers.

In short, CMS cannot move beyond its current organisational confinements. CMS’s ‘Organisations and the environment’ mentions some of the main representatives of social ecology; but neither ‘social ecology’ nor ‘deep ecology’ are conceptualised, even though both are reflective of critical theory. In Arne Dekke Eide Ness’s conception of ‘shallow’ versus ‘deep’ ecology, the former is concerned with a fight against pollution and resource depletion, and has the health and affluence of people in developed countries as a key focus. Deep ecology, on the other hand, focuses on biospheric egalitarianism, departing from the moral standpoint ‘all living things are alike’, with an inherent value in their own right. This is so, independently of their usefulness to others. For a critical theory approach to management, these criticisms are impossible to neglect when discussing environmentalism.

CMS’s concept of culture highlights ‘shared values’ (Alvesson et al. 2009: 233). Being an institutional setup for the creation of profit-maximisation under asymmetrical power relations, corporations do not create shared values, because those who are supposed to share managerial values – workers – are excluded from the process of creating those so-called shared values. As long as management excludes workers, shared values can never eventuate. CMS fails to take account of this. The exclusion of workers and self-actualisation (Hegel) prevails in CMS’s view on ‘organisational changes’. In sum, organisational culture and change are reflective of Lockwood’s ‘system’, not ‘social’ integration (1964 Habermas; 1997 Klikkauer 2012: 144).

System integration is highly problematic for ethics, a term related to moral philosophy. Whether critical or not, almost all key philosophers who contributed to moral philosophy are absent from CMS’s main discussion on moral philosophy. A discussion on moral philosophy in the tradition of critical theory would include, at least, its own intellectual predecessors: Kant, Hegel, Marx, Lukács, Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcus; and contemporary exponents such as Habermas and Honneth. All have written on moral philosophy – but none are of concern to CMS.

An unexpected highlight is Fleming and Mandarini’s ‘Towards a workers’ society? New perspectives on work and emancipation’. However, even CMS’s analysis of ‘workers society’ largely fails to highlight the ‘class inequalities’ prevalent in society and managerial regimes. There is ‘silence on the question of class [which] has been the norm within CMS’ (Armstrong 2010: 3-4; cf. Hassard & Rowlinson 2011: 225ff). But the inclusion of a chapter on workers’ emancipation at least covers CMS from the claim to have neglected both. However, critical theory’s ‘ideal of the autonomous subject’ (Barros 2010: 168), for example, is nowhere to be seen. The following statement is almost self-evident for CMS’s approach to workers and emancipation: ‘we return to the question of emancipation’. If one needs to ‘return’ to emancipation, it certainly has never been a key part of CMS. In line with that, CMS’s ‘Critical management and methodology’ is not reflective of critical theory, because critical theory’s key methodological text remains absent; that is, Critical Theory and Methodology (Morrow & Brown 1994; Johnson &
Duberley 2000: 121; cf. Alvesson & Sköldberg 2009; Brooke 2009; Alvesson & Kärreman 2010). In sum, rather than engaging with critical theory or being reflective of critical theory’s philosophies, theories, and methodological developments, CMS lacks all the key texts ever produced by critical theory on these subjects (Lettiche 2006: 17; Forsslund & Bay 2009).

**Conclusion: Some inconsistencies between CMS and CT’s emancipatory project**

The trouble lies with CMS itself. If one positions CMS as a continuum between critical theory and the management-accommodating forces of those who Baritz calls ‘servants of power’, then CMS should be located close to critical theory (critical-emancipatory). But this points to inconsistencies between CMS and CT’s emancipatory project. In ontological terms, CT’s emancipatory project is directed to the emancipation of the human individual while CMS’ ontology is the individual within capitalism. CMS’s ontology suggests a ‘problem-solving’ approach to this. It appears that CMS is aligned with managerial capitalism’s triage of management, management studies, and managerialism. It never fundamentally questions this paradigm. CMS’s inconsistency with critical theory, paralleled by its closeness to management studies, becomes evident when one considers CMS’s lack of critical theory comprehension: an absence of critical theory’s founding philosophers Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Lukács; and a lack of 20th century critical theory writings: Horkheimer’s seminal critique on traditional theory; Adorno’s sharp critiques on 20th century mass-consumer society; Marcuse’s devastating critique of consumer society and managerial regimes; Habermas’s domination-ending philosophy of communicative ethics; and Honneth’s demand for equal and mutual recognition.

It remains striking that, in the twenty years since CMS’s invention (Alvesson & Willmott 1992a, 1992b), there should exist a plethora of articles, books, editions, collections, handbooks, four-set-volumes, classical readings, and several CMS conferences, with hundreds of papers, etc. – and yet that there is not one single substantial, theoretical, and critical publication inside CMS dealing with critical theory. CMS articles are exclusively published in managerial/organisational journals. The absence of critical theory is reflected in CMS’s triviality of fault-finding. Overall, CMS remains firmly locked inside the hermeneutical interest of understating meaning, creating system-conforming alternatives to standard management studies without providing a serious challenge to the managerial paradigm (e.g. Alvesson & Willmott’s ‘making sense’ [1996]; Alvesson’s ‘understanding’ [2002]; Alvesson’s interpretation [2010]; Butler & Spoolstra’s [2014: 548] ‘critical scholars may find themselves complying with [rather than seeking to challenge] managerial prerogatives’). CMS appropriates selective themes of critical theory for its mild critique from within, rather than its being about or against management. CMS remains paradigm-conforming, rather than challenging, failing to highlight the inherent contradictions between human existence and management. Therefore, it can never develop a framework for emancipation.

CMS can never see itself understood in terms of one of critical theory’s earliest predecessors – Kant – because in order to do so, it would have to adhere to three categorical
imperatives: universalism, ethics, and means-ends – all of which are too problematic for CMS. Instead, it advocates ‘micro-emancipation’ – not universal emancipation. CMS can never be in line with an imperative that demands to treat human beings as an ‘end in-themselves’, rather than as a managerial ‘means’. CMS is more in line with the ‘Kingdom of Means’ than with the ‘Kingdom of Ends’.

Finally, CMS can never be representative of critical theory’s human emancipation of the Enlightenment, including power and reason attained in communicative action, because any adherence to Habermas’s project of communicative action would annihilate management. Instead of domination, critical theory’s communicative action would establish emancipation, ending all the hierarchies, pathologies, asymmetrical power-relationships, and dominations prevalent in management. This is a form of communication and emancipation that CMS can never tolerate, but which critical theory advocates. CMS’s micro-emancipation neglects critical theory’s key philosophy of a management-society/capitalism interface. Understood as a mild critique from within, CMS represents an exquisite collection of system-stabilising themes, with no threat to the ideological dominance and hegemony of the management paradigm because it is system-maintaining, rather than system-challenging. CMS provides an important system-improving corrective to that. Inside the managerial paradigm, CMS is respectable, while critical theory is the very opposite.

CMS does not end Theodor W. Adorno’s 1944 assertion, ‘there is no right life in the wrong one’ (cited in Brink 2010). Management is a ‘wrong way of living’ because it is inherently anti-democratic, hierarchy-creating and sustaining, and based on power, domination, and anti-emancipation. CMS’s acceptance of the managerial paradigm is linked to its pretense that there can be a ‘correct life’ inside management, while simultaneously cutting off the management-society-capitalism link. As Horkheimer would say, ‘those who don’t want to talk about capitalism should keep silent on management’.

Finally, it is wrong for CMS to claim that ‘the intent of critical theory is not to indulge in the utopian project of eliminating hierarchy’ (Alvesson and Willmott 1996: 18). Already Kant highlighted the inextricable link between ‘what is’ and an always utopian ‘what ought to be’, while Hegel established that one cannot exist without the other (Hegel 1807; Benhabib 1986). Kant’s entire philosophy is inherently utopian, directed towards ‘The Kingdom of Ends’ (Korsgaard 1996). Hegel continued the utopian project with the philosophy of human freedom. Like critical theory, they saw Enlightenment as a still ‘unfulfilled’ project (Habermas 1985), with the Kantian/Hegelian and critical theory project of human emancipation still outstanding. Horkheimer (1947) outlined this when writing ‘the mythical scientific respect of people for the given reality, which they themselves constantly create, finally becomes itself a positive fact, a fortress’. CMS displays this ‘mythical respect for the given’ when annihilating critical theory’s utopian project of emancipation and Kant’s ‘what ought to be’, while simultaneously asphyxiating itself inside the ‘fortress’ (Horkheimer) of the managerial paradigm.

Critical theory’s utopian project seeks to end domination and hierarchies, even in management. CMS meets Adorno’s (1944) warning: ‘since the banishment of utopia and the unity of praxis and theory was made compulsory, one has become all too practical’. CMS has banished utopia so that it can provide practical adjustments – labelled ‘critiques’ – ‘for’ management. CMS is neither ‘in-itself’ (Kant) nor ‘for-itself’ (Hegel), but
for management, seeking to create ‘better management’. In his masterpiece, *The One-Dimensional Man* (1966), Marcuse noted that ideas like CMS are ‘developed within the historical continuum of domination to which they pay tribute. And this continuum bestows upon the modes of positive thinking their conformist and ideological character; upon those of negative thinking their speculative and utopian character’.

CMS, which developed as an inconsequential sideshow to management studies (Voronov 2008: 940), fulfills this to perfection: it ‘bestows upon the modes of positive thinking their conformist and ideological character’. Those who think critically are dismissed as ‘speculative and utopian’, accused of ‘indulging in utopian projects’. Not only because of its 500-year-long history (More 1516), critical theory does exactly that, because it is based on emancipation that strongly negates ‘the given’. For critical theory, the end of authoritarian and undemocratic management, domination and hierarchies, and the quest for human freedom and emancipation, remain utopian projects. In its finality, CMS offers nothing of the intellectual brilliance and philosophical strength of critical theory’s radical-utopian project as outlined by Adorno and Horkheimer; none of the emancipatory vibrancy of Marcuse, the thoughtfulness of Fromm and Benjamin, or the farsighted critical-analytical skills of Reich, Kirchheimer and Neumann; and none of the theoretical and philosophical thoroughness of Habermas, or the illuminating-critical insights of Honneth. CMS is not in line with critical theory’s project of emancipation and human freedom.

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**References**


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