Critical Practices in Organizations[1]

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Abstract

This paper deals with the phenomenon of criticism in organizations. Existing organizational literature, where it has addressed criticism, mostly tends to see it as an extraordinary phenomenon. By contrast, in this paper we argue that criticism may also originate from strongly embedded and more ordinary practices. Thus, there is a theoretical need for considering those critical practices which are structurally and/or formally institutionalized within the organization. They reflect the organizational status quo and tend to promote a reproduction of existing structures of power/knowledge. Drawing upon ideas from practice theory, institutional theory, and Foucault's analytics of power/knowledge regimes, we introduce a typology which distinguishes forms of criticism according to the degree to which they are coupled with particular organizational practices, their rationalities and corresponding power relations. We then focus on those forms of criticism which are strongly linked to organizational practices ('critical meta-practices') and illustrate the ambiguous effects of such an 'organization of criticism'.

Keywords: Criticism, practice theory, Foucault, institutionalization, power/knowledge

Introduction

Research has repeatedly stressed the importance of critical reflection and critical discourse in the management of organizations, particularly in the literature on organisational knowledge and learning, where critique tends to be regarded as a main trigger for learning processes (e.g. Argyris and Schön 1996; Nyström and Starbuck 1984; Preskill and Torres 1999). While these contributions are usually framed within a 'managerialist perspective', which tends to regard criticism as a means to improve organizational performance, a different stream of thought focuses on more subversive forms of criticism in organizations.

In the tradition of Critical Management Studies (CMS), researchers have studied criticism as a form of resistance or protest against fundamental managerial goals and values (see Alvesson and Willmott 1996). Examples include the reflexive construction of versions of the self (Bruner, 1990), the diffusion of rumours and whistle-blowing (Jermier et al. 1994), the use of irony (Trethewey 1997), scepticism (Fleming and Sewell 2002), and cynicism (Fleming and Spicer 2003). From these critical perspectives criticism is not only a refined art but one that is widely practised.

Despite the major differences between managerialist and critical accounts, both see criticism as being something *exceptional rather than routine,* as something which occurs outside of organizational routines. Managerially, criticism has an instrumental purpose: it enables an organization to break with routine practice to better achieve organizational goals; for the CMS community critique is a timely effort by members to assert and differentiate their self from fundamental organizational values and power systems. In both cases, criticism is framed as exceptional rather than as being embedded in organizational routines.

There is a category of criticism somewhat neglected by both perspectives – those critical actions that emerge rather *routinely* within the organization. These critical practices may either be structurally and formally institutionalized as a form of meta-practice or they

may be the result of the enactment of an established rationality within the organization. As a consequence, such criticism cannot be regarded as exceptional or extraordinary. Rather, it is part of the organizational status quo and, as such, is supported by institutionalized rationalities and power systems.

Our interest in criticism may be termed 'pragmatic' because it treats critique as a particular regime of action to be studied descriptively rather than viewing it normatively as a good or bad thing (see Bénatouïl 1999); thus, we are neither 'for' nor 'against' critique but interested in its ambiguous effects. In brief, critique is ambiguous because it can both *open up* and *close down* organization practices and discourses. Critique may be a driver of new organizational practices and trigger institutional change, such as when social movements challenge the dominant logic of organizational behaviour (Schneiberg and Lounsbury, forthcoming). The more powerful it is, however, the more easily critique may turn into a form of discipline and domination, subjecting other practices to continuous critical scrutiny (e.g. Townley 1993b; Hopper and Macintosh 1998), or even degenerating into a ceremonial practice in which criticism assumes a ritual quality (Meyer and Rowan 1977). When criticism becomes a routine which constantly constrains actions that might otherwise have been attempted, it may no longer be 'functional, useful, and a generally good thing' (Alvesson and Kärreman 2001: 999-1000). The 'rhetoric of critique' may, in other words, mask the uncritical nature of an alleged critical practice.

In the following, we shall first lay out the foundations for a pragmatic approach to criticism. In the second part of the paper, we discuss forms of criticism in organizations and the ambiguous effects that an organization of critique can bring about. Concluding our paper, we will highlight the implications of our analysis for further research.

Critique and practice

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Critique

The notion of 'critique' implies at least two common meanings for organization researchers. In everyday discussions, people typically criticise to indicate that some alternative would be preferable or that the activity or practice in question could have been performed more desirably. Generally, and colloquially, we speak of criticism when we refer to a judgment or evaluation that focuses on some, usually negative, aspects of the object or practice being criticised. Second, there is a 'scientific' notion of critique that refers to the practice of theoretical investigation into a subject area as carried out by critical scholars. Generally speaking, such a critique is considered to be 'critical' to the extent that it is both more informed than lay actors' everyday judgments and actions and more reflexive about those lay actors' accounts as they are available in mundane reality.

While research may study forms of everyday criticism from various disciplinary perspectives, such as psychology, sociology, or linguistics, there is a more specialized general social theory perspective, associated in particular with Jürgen Habermas' attempts to reconstruct the critical capacity of lay actors. In his *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas uses speech-act-theory to illustrate how actors justify and criticise the validity claims that are raised in symbolic actions (Habermas 1995a, 1995b). He does so using a theory of action and rationality that draws, in part, on academic traditions of critique, as well as lending support to an ordinary language conception of criticism. He thereby distinguishes between theoretical, practical, aesthetic and expressive critical statements, depending on the type of validity claim being questioned. Habermas situates his pragmatic sociology as a normative project, making a plea for an ideal speech situation in which communication is not distorted by system imperatives, normatively grounding his projects as a critical theory rather than a theory of critical practices *per se*. Habermas (1995a: 48) argues that, in discourses,

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speakers ideally are relieved from the pressures of their life world background and are therefore unconstrained in formulating and raising criticisms.

Similar, but somewhat more pragmatic (see Bénatouïl 1999), is the approach taken by a group of French sociologists clustering around Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (1991, 1999). While Habermas claims that rationality emerges as a result of a consensus among discourse participants, Boltanski and Thévenot stress the differences in the rationalities that actors bring to disputes. They distinguish between several 'regimes of justification', each of them representing a different criterion against which circumstances, actions, statements, or other practices can be judged. The authors show that these logics are regularly applied in everyday disputes and suggest that criticism can be understood as the mobilization of one regime of justification (rationality) against another, while taking an agnostic stance towards the critical instruments. Boltanski and Thévenot (1999: 373) do not allude to structural constraints that may have an impact on the way criticism is exercised. They argue that actors can resort to different regimes of justification but they do not examine the unequal access of individuals to these regimes (Bénatouïl 1999). However, as is evident, 'far from being completely free and flexible, individuals can only choose from the ultimately limited pool of regimes of criticism and justification that happen to have been made available to them' (Silber 2003: 430). In other words, criticism is a practice that will be constrained (and enabled) by the structural features upon which its proponents draw, most notably by the knowledge they possess.

In order to understand the origins and effects of critical practices, it is important to consider them as linked to competing modes of rationality which are, in turn, embedded in institutional fields. The notion of modes of rationality was developed by Clegg (1975) in a structural model to characterize the different forms of deep structure that could underlay the everyday production of organizational discourse. As Lounsbury (2007: 289) has argued

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"multiple forms of rationality provide a foundation for ongoing struggle and change in organizational fields." (See also Lounsbury and Crumley, forthcoming). In other words, criticism *is a practice* that will always be constrained (and enabled) by the structural features upon which its proponents draw, most notably the knowledge they possess which makes possible the discursive moves that they make.

Practice

The risk with structural accounts of competing rationalities is that they can be somewhat determinist: the rationalities determine the discursive moves of the actors. Recently developed theory, with its roots in older schools such as ethnomethodology, seeks to resolve this issue. At the centre of practice theories (see Schatzki et al. 2001) is a concern with overcoming a dualism between structuralist argumentation on the one hand, in which agency tends to get short shrift and, on the other, an individualistic action theory, where structures rarely intrude. The category of *social practices* is introduced to transform the dualism of structure and agency into a duality, such that 'the structural properties of social systems are both the medium and the outcome of the practices that constitute those systems' (Giddens 1979: 69).

The focus on practices alerts us to what it is that is done, how it is done, as well as how it is possible that it be done. Practices can be defined as 'regularized types of acts' (Giddens 1976: 75) and thus as 'routinized way[s] in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood' (Reckwitz 2002: 250). Practice theories hold that agency is always bound to sets of available practices with which actors make sense, and thus to the structural features of the social system, composed of a set of situated social practices, possible vocabularies of motive, and members' categorization devices for interpreting them (Dupuy et al. 1989; Gomez and Jones 2000; Sacks 1991).

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Many practice theories stress the 'iterative dimension' of social action (see Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Bourdieu (1977), for example, uses the notion of *habitus* to capture this iterative dimension, which refers to the formative influence of the past on present action. Giddens (1984), in turn, associates the routine character of social action with the implicit pursuit of ontological security that he sees as characteristic of human agents. Both Bourdieu and Giddens emphasize the habitual and taken-for-granted nature of social life and suggest that it is 'normal' and existentially important for actors to follow routines. Recurrent practices are one way of routinizing the life world.

It is the particular merit of Foucault to have revealed the contingency of some of the dominant practices and systems of thought in our society, seen as the specific 'orders of things' (Foucault 2002) or 'orders of discourse' (Foucault 1987) that prevail in particular discursive arenas, and to have raised awareness of the power effects of such systems. In his historical analyses of the asylum, the clinic, the prison, and sexuality, Foucault illustrates how particular 'regimes of truth' become acceptable at a given historical moment, as they are supported by a set of technologies and practices that 'create' this 'truth'. Power and knowledge operate in a mutually generative fashion, as 'nothing can exist as an element of knowledge if ... it does not possess the effects of coercion' and because 'nothing can function as a mechanism of power if it is not deployed according to procedures, instruments, means, and objectives which can be validated in more or less coherent systems of knowledge' (Foucault 1997a: 52). The notion of practice plays a crucial role in the relation between power and knowledge: practice represents the interface, the link between knowledge and power. Practice is where a certain way of doing things and a certain mode of acquiring knowledge collide. Individual actors both reproduce and change practices through their specific interpretations and situational enactments (Feldman and Pentland 2003; Lounsbury and Crumley, forthcoming). Hence, knowingly or not, skilled actors innovate as they enact and appropriate practices in their everyday organizational contexts

Following Giddens (1984: 200), we can understand organizations as places where the continuity of day-to-day practices is *reflexively regulated*, i.e. the reproduction of the organization's structure is actively monitored and intentionally influenced (also see Ranson et al. 1980; Whittington 1992; Jarzabkowski 2004). Organizations use meta-practices to reflect on and change existing practices and to develop innovative practices (Adler et al. 1999). These meta-practices are thus a primary means of *reflexive structuration*, as defined by Giddens (1984). Reflexive structuration practices tend to be institutionally specific and specialized in organizations, exhibited in practices such as those of general management, financial control, or personnel evaluation, which can be considered meta-practices, since they both reflect on and refer to other practices rather than being self-sufficient. Institutionally, while they critically question other practices in the organizational domain they are, at the same time, committed to the systems of rationality and power relations that support their functioning.

Foucault, who was not an organization theorist but a historian of ideas used familiar ideas from statecraft to capture such practices of reflexive structuration, which he referred to as forms of 'government', i.e. as strategies used 'to structure the field of possible action' (Foucault 1982: 221). Government, in the general sense in which Foucault uses it, is not confined just to what states do but can include many other organizations, such as schools or the family. The focus is on the institutional exercise of power and the creation of 'truth', which works on both the levels of practices and of discourses. Government addresses practices through systematic forms of rule, such as timetables in schools, the creation of a curriculum which is a routinized product rather than the effect of individual choices. Discourse is addressed through the shaping and prioritizing of appropriate 'mentalities'. For instance, British schools developed a canon of literature that framed the curriculum. Foucault saw the idea as born of a radical realignment of the disciplines of knowledge that created 'literature' as a definite category, indeed as an institutional ordering embedded in devices such

as distinct curricula that can be subject to critique (Hunter 1988). Critical practices are thus those discursive practices that subject other practices to critical scrutiny in order to govern them. While such criticism might be only loosely coupled to established organizational practices, it might also be structurally and formally institutionalized as a meta-practice.

Critical practices in organizations

Many authors have pointed to the importance of *critical reflection* as a trigger for knowledge creation and learning (e.g. Preskill and Torres 1999; Reynolds 1998). A critical attitude towards established routines and ways of thinking has been regarded as crucial for achieving the state of a 'learning organization' because, as Brown and Starkey (2000: 111) argue, 'without contention there is no internal stimulus for change'. With few other exceptions in the learning literature, among which are Coopey (1995), Blackler and McDonald (2000), and Vince (2001), power/politics have not been central to analysis. Vince (2001), in particular, illustrates how established power relations and emotional ties limit learning and change at an organizational level. The connection between emotions and power that resulted from processes of organizing and that, over time, acted as a limitation to fundamental learning and innovation, created what Vince refers to as the 'establishment'. In the case in question the establishment was highly impervious to criticism coming from people who are not recognizably members of it, displayed in terms of their emotional style, social and cultural capital. Where criticism is closely coupled to existing sets of knowledge and power relations, then it might actually reproduce such an 'establishment' rather than open up the organization for new knowledge and opportunities.

Where established ways of thinking and acting are challenged critical reflection can provide for a certain dynamic within organizations that brings about a 'new quality' of learning. From this perspective critique does not encourage consolidation and confirmation of

existing knowledge so much as opening the organization, or even entire institutional fields, up to new perceptions and actions, which Hedberg (1981: 18) refers to as 'unlearning': 'a process through which learners discard knowledge' making way 'for new responses and mental maps'. Unlearning is often triggered by problems or crises that force the organization to question established routines (Hedberg 1981: 19; also see Kiernan 1993). Organizations can stimulate processes of unlearning by listening to dissent, complaints and warnings, by introducing new perceptions and experimenting with existing practices (Nyström and Starbuck 1984; March et al. 1991; also see Argyris and Schön 1996).

The social actors that drive unlearning can be many and varied, ranging from the top management team that wishes to change direction; consultants, who have a new process to instigate; customers, from whom new desires are learnt; collaborating partners, who bring new routines and ways of doing things into the organization's orbit; influential commentators in the public sphere, such as media representatives; regulatory authorities and standards bodies that mandate institutional isomorphism with ways of doing things not yet adopted; social movements that criticise and challenge dominant practices, and, finally, employees, who may avail themselves of specific quality circle practices or suggestion schemes. All of these actors are capable of making a difference to what organizations do by exercising their ability to be critical of existing practices. While such critical efforts may help the organization unlearn existing habits they need to be investigated with respect to the contingency of their own knowledge and power supports.

The rationales in which criticism is embedded deserve to be subjected to critical scrutiny. For instance, the critical intervention of consultants are sometimes built upon some stereotypical meta-narrative about how organizations should be run, rather than on a contextually detailed concern with the specific situation of a particular organization (see Berglund and Werr 2000; Sorge and van Witteloostuijn 2004). Similarly, when top managers raise their critical voice, there is always the risk that it is their hierarchical authority that

weighs heavier in persuading others to accept their views than the specific contents of their proposals. Thus, it is important to capture the degree to which particular critical actions rely on the rationality and power support of specific organizational practices.

Generally speaking, we argue that the tighter criticism is coupled to an established practice, the more sceptical one needs to be with respect to the 'quality' of this criticism. For if criticism relies on a certain rationality that is well embedded in the organization, it may, after all, not be at all 'critical' to the *status quo* but rather serve to reproduce existing habits of thought and action. Of course, such a conservation of the *status quo* may often be just what is intended with a critical practice. The question, however, is whether such a practice at some point becomes ceremonial, i.e. whether criticism is exercised for the sake of criticism rather than for a justified reason.

Forms of criticism: A typology

In practice, the degree of coupling between criticism and organizational practices will assume different positions on a continuum. Theoretically, it is more useful to abstract from continuous space by making a distinction between three 'ideal-types' of criticism which enable us to develop a helpful heuristic device for analysis.

< Insert Table 1 about here >

First, we can identify a form of criticism that is only loosely coupled to organizational practices and established rationalities. In this case, we speak of discrete or idiosyncratic actions through which criticism is raised. These actions are not driven primarily by organizational practices and those actors issuing criticism do not act from their specific institutional background. An important type of such criticism is *internal* criticism, which

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focuses on inconsistencies within other actors' actions or argumentations. Such 'criticism of inconsistencies and problems can flow in all directions', as the logical resources for such criticism are usually available to all members of the organization (Kemp 2003: 80). Thus, the particular claim made by the critic is not a routine enactment of a specific rationality. But loose coupling may also exist in the case of *external* criticism, which is based on different values or understandings of the world. Here, established organizational rationalities may be less important than the rather spontaneous feeling that something should be done differently. Such a spontaneous reaction to a particular situation builds upon the creativity and responsiveness of the actor. The imaginative and evaluative dimensions of action loom large in such a form of criticism, while the iterative or routine dimension scores low (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Criticism emerges from the responsive relation which organizational members have each to the other. In this sense, it is part of the 'moment-by-moment versatility, flexibility, and negotiability' that is characteristic of organizational life more generally (Shotter 2005: 129).

Second, criticism often arises out of a clash of rationalities within the organization, much as Boltanski and Thévenot (1991, 1999) argue will occur in everyday situations. Cohen et al. (1972) account for this tendency with their garbage can model, according to which different rationalities, premised on different forms of knowledge, collide in their definition of problems in terms of the solutions that each finds normal. Ezzamel and Burns (2005) provide an illustration of confrontation between competing rationalities. In their case study of a UK retailer, the organization's purchasing managers opposed a new financial control system introduced by finance staff. They built upon their 'perceived sense of centrality, power, and professional superiority' (2005: 770) and maligned the new system as an 'alien' concept (2005: 768) which conflicted with the 'tried and trusted' status quo (2005: 770). The discussions between purchasing and finance managers in this case show how '[d]iscourses produced and circulated by professional groups create truth-like qualities that define the

"entry points" with which they engage in professional competition' (2005: 757). Importantly, such competing organizational rationalities may be linked to competing logics that are of wider institutional relevance. For example, in his recent study on the mutual funds industry in the U.S., Lounsbury (2007) showed how the behaviour of Boston-based and New York-based mutual funds was influenced by the competition of two logics of fund management, the trustee logic and the performance logic. The co-existence of these logics allowed for practice variation among mutual funds, some of which established contracts with professional money management firms on the basis of efficiency considerations (trustee logic), while others did so mainly on the basis of performance considerations. Although Lounsbury focuses on the dynamics of the organizational field, one can easily imagine that such a competition of rationalities may lead to competing positions also *within* an organization, before one of the logics finally prevails over the other or they are institutionally separated – as when Accenture split from Andersen Consulting in 1989 (http://www.accenture.com/Global/About_Accenture/Company_Overview/History/Accenture Leader.htm) .

Criticism can happen because of potentially conflicting rationalities among different practices. A recurrent pattern results from the actual interdependencies of practices that is independent of the privileges of the social actors involved. Without both a conflict of interest and some point of contact this kind of criticism is unlikely to take place. When the underlying organizational practices have been institutionalized for a longer period of time and then, latterly, come into conflict with each other, criticism will tend to occur more often. However, since criticisms will disrupt existing routines they will be the exemption rather than the rule, and will, of necessity, be 'transitory because they break the ordinary course of action' (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999: 360).

Third, criticism may be even more tightly coupled to an organizational practice. Where a critical attitude is exercised in an organizationally systematic form, residing in a particular rationality defined by rules and resources, which are enacted in its practice, it differs from the critical attitude that might arise from a clash of rationalities. It forms a *meta-practice* in which criticism is routinely exercised, referring not only to the content and motivation of criticism, and thus to the interpretative and normative rules enacted but also to the social actors involved and the corresponding time horizon. The critical actors are able to criticize with impunity because they occupy a unique structural position in relation to the organization. In addition, they are usually contracted with a very specific brief to review certain practices, processes and structures.

Some examples may suffice to make these abstractions more concrete. First, within the practice of human resource management, criticism will often be a routine component of personnel appraisals and evaluations. For instance, Townley et al. (2003) have analyzed the introduction of performance measurement in a public institution. As they argue, performance measurement is linked to the rationalization of organization (2003: 1045). Interestingly, Townley et al.'s (2003: 1065) observations 'of how formal systems and templates for performance measurement were introduced [in the organization] shows how an instrumental reasoning came to dominate reasoned justification and communicative action.' In this case the critical aspect of performance review introduced to the organization triggered change in other parts of the organization, 'inculcat[ing] an instrumental rationalization that depersonalizes social relationships and extends technically rational control over social processes.' (2003: 1056). As this example shows, particular acts of criticism may be tightly coupled to the underlying practice of evaluation. First, there are the criteria for evaluation, which are usually formally established and linked to the goals of the organization, business unit, or individual person. Thus, the rules of signification and legitimation (Giddens 1984) applied in the exercise of criticism are directly related to the intended functionality of the practice, to ensure

that employees act in conformity with certain established standards. Second, to raise criticism during personnel evaluations is usually the privilege of a certain group of people, either people from the personnel department or superior managers. In both cases, the privilege to criticize is granted by formal means, such as job descriptions or department functions. As a result, there are certain persons who are responsible for exercising criticism. Third, this form of criticism is normally maintained over a longer period of time, establishing critical practice as normal within the organization.

Quality control is a second example: typically, quality control practices are specifically designed to be critical towards other organizational practices such as production or customer service (Tuckman 1994; Lillrank 2003). In this sense quality control is a meta-practice in which criticism is routinely exercised. Importantly, critical practices such as quality management or HR management may be institutionalized to different degrees. Therefore, they do not necessarily function as a meta-practice. As the examples in table 1 show, human resource management often takes place in a rather informal and hardly routinized way, such as when managers give situational feedback to their employees and peers without resorting to the official procedures designed for appraisals.

While performance criteria will be quite fixed and non-debatable in some organizations, they might be more fluid in others (Bourguignon and Chiapello 2005). As a consequence, members in different organizations will have variable opportunities to give voice critically and to challenge established forms of 'critical performance'. The range of 'technologies of the self' (Foucault 1988, 1997a) that employees can effectively apply to position themselves vis-à-vis the institutionalized forms of criticism will thus vary among organizations (Townley 1997). Furthermore, the degree of institutionalization may also vary with respect to the social actors involved. For instance, some organizations opt for peer

assessments with changing constellations in order to avoid too strong an institutionalization in the social dimension.

The distinction between discrete acts of criticism, criticism linked to organizational practices, and critical meta-practices is designed to encourage inspection of the structural background of particular acts of criticism and understanding of why criticism occurs and by which rules and resources it is supported. As illustrated above, criticism might be motivated by either a clash of rationalities or an insufficient coordination between rationalities. Likewise, it may be motivated by a dominant rationality which is firmly institutionalised as a meta-practice. To study the mechanisms behind particular critical actions in detail is an important means for uncovering and problematizing established systems of power/knowledge.

The typology encourages consideration of the 'connections that can be identified between mechanisms of coercion and elements of knowledge' applied in critical practices and thus the 'interplay of relay and support developed between them, such that a given element of knowledge takes on the effects of power in a given system where it is allocated to a true, probable, uncertain or false element, such that a procedure of coercion acquires the very form and justifications of a rational, calculated, technically efficient element' (Foucault 1997b: 50). The argument is not intended to define 'true or false, founded or unfounded, real or illusory, scientific or ideological, legitimate or abusive' (1997b: 50) forms of criticism, but to make transparent the power relations and types of knowledge that legitimate such definitions in organizations and institutional fields.

The organization of criticism

Besides human resource management and quality control, several other practices involve the routine exercise of criticism and in this sense function as critical meta-practices. Table 2 provides a selection of such practices, showing their potentially ambiguous effects. It is

important to note that criticism can also become organized in practices which are not principally focused on economic rationalities, such as works committees or equal opportunities officers within the organization, or social movements in the organizational environment (see Schneiberg and Lounsbury, forthcoming).

< Insert table 2 about here >

Importantly, table 2 puts emphasis on the ambiguous effects that critical practices may bring about in the organization. A tight coupling of critical practices to particular rationalities and actors can result in a very effective state of constant vigilance and criticism. The institutionalization of personnel evaluation practices demonstrates the point. Each time a personnel decision is made, the rationalities of personnel evaluation come into play in a way that is discontinuous with previous decisions. A general rule is deployed, despite whatever basis 'in reality' the decision is made on. In any moderately bureaucratized organization 'accounting' for such action is always an organizational accomplishment, such that, no matter what its underlying 'real' motive might be, the decision must be rationalized. Each case is a case in itself, with each and every employee notionally being considered on the basis of a formal and rational calculus applied to their achievements. Such decisions, when organized as a meta-practice, appear to be made in an 'ordered' way, deploying similar criteria in each case, demonstrating an overall 'personnel strategy'. The 'organization of criticism' can prove very effective in ensuring a continuous and focused problematization of practice but it has a downside: in the case of performance appraisals, the effect of criticism cannot be determined a priori – while some people might take it as fruitful feedback, others might not. In the latter case they might feel de-motivated, resign psychologically, or even become aggressive to their managers or colleagues (Fedor et al. 2001; Ilgen and Davis 2000; Geddes and Konrad 2003).

Appraisals operate as mechanisms of power/knowledge (Foucault 1995), 'rendering aspects of existence visible, calculable, and thus manageable' (Townley 1993b: 235-6).

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Ultimately, the power of an appraisal resides in its ability to govern people's behaviour, a power not only related to the personal authority that the manager has over the employee (Findlay and Newton 1998) but which also originates from the authority of the knowledge claims that are being made within the appraisal process. Here, the 'power of the Norm' (Foucault 1995: 184) is at work, urging organizational members to commit themselves to what is considered normal and functional within the organization. Commitment to such knowledge might well help an employee break with dysfunctional behaviour and better manage his or her work in the future (see Grey 1994). But it may equally turn into a commitment to a set of standards and norms that is not subjected to critical reflection itself, such as the rhetoric associated with quality, the customer, and zero defects in quality management.

When critical knowledge claims are institutionalized within the organization as a meta-practice they often appear to be uncontentious, especially where they are (implicitly) linked to the manifest power differentials between managers (those who appraise) and employees (those who are appraised). Some organizations introduce 360 degrees feedback to try and overcome these structural barriers and to normalize criticism as a practice, irrespective of claims to speak authoritatively that are lodged in the managerial hierarchy. The more criticism becomes a *normal* procedure *of,* and *embedded in,* hierarchical power, making it a taken-for-granted performance by elites within the organization, the more likely it is to degenerate into a form of institutionalized domination.

To be more participatory criticism would need to be problematized with respect to the body of knowledge that fuels its criticism (Barker 1993). Criticism that is 'organized' by its reliance on a given system of thought produces visibility and ensures constant vigilance with respect to certain issues; at the same time, it runs the risk of routinely producing invisibility without being aware that it is doing so. Instead of raising the level of critique, critical meta-

practices may turn into a form of detrimental self-discipline, fostering learning and change only within the limits of a given system of power/knowledge (Contu et al. 2003).

Discussion

The ambiguity of critical practices has been touched upon with respect to different organizational practices, as Table 2 demonstrates. Comparing the literatures, we can see not only that these practices share a critical impact on other practices; they also feature a similar ambiguity with respect to the quality of their criticism, as well as mechanisms which increase the probability that a detrimental form of criticism will go uncontested in the organization.

With respect to ambiguous effects, two mechanisms are particularly noteworthy. First, when a certain way of seeing and evaluating becomes institutionalized, there is the risk that it becomes disembedded from the details of the operational tasks at hand. It then becomes 'abstract management' at a distance, 'based on aggregation' rather than 'local knowledge' (Townley 2002: 564), as has been observed frequently in respect of accounting and performance measurement (Armstrong 2002; Townley 2002) as well as human resource and quality management (Skålén et al. 2005). Second, the danger of becoming disembedded is related to the motivations for promoting critical practice, which can be quite diverse. Organizations may want to foster self-criticism and thus establish institutions that have the formal right and responsibility to issue such criticism.

Not all critical practices will be established for the sake of criticism in the first place. Institutional rationality (Meyer and Rowan 1977), isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), management fashion (Abrahamson 1996) and other external pressures may act as fundamental drivers for the adoption of these practices (Slack and Hinings 1994). If this is the case, critical practices become relatively disconnected from routine organizational concerns and are thus

seen as largely ceremonial by those subjected to them. The supposedly critical practice of auditing institutionalized at Enron (Sims and Brinkmann 2003), or the practice of internal auditing at Barings' Bank (Stein 2000), for example, were farcically ceremonial. The actors involved, who, as auditors, were supposedly routine practitioners of critique, suspended their critical ability, presenting a mere façade of judgement apparently but not really conforming to external pressure (Meyer and Rowan 1977; see Power 1997). By contrast, a practice originally adopted for ceremonial reasons may become critical (in the double meaning of this word!) because of the way in which it is enacted in the organization. For instance, TQM may start as mere rhetoric without much practical impact, but, over time, assume a critical role and become part of the organizational *habitus* (Mueller and Carter 2005).

One example of a practice originally adopted for ceremonial reasons becoming critical can be found in Lounsbury's (2001) study on the diffusion of recycling in US Colleges and Universities. Recycling was diffused across education institutions in different ways. In most schools recycling programs were staffed through role accretion and seemed to be adopted more ceremoniously (Lounsbury, 2001: 50; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). When staffed with full time and committed employees recycling programs were adopted more substantially. When a social movement, the Student Environmental Action Movement, actively criticised existing waste management practices in organizations, more substantial responses were more common. Criticism by a social movement was the key driver institutionalizing a new practice. Hence, social movements can play an important role in the institutionalisation of critical practices (see also Schneiberg and Lounsbury, forthcoming).

As Foucault (1995) has shown, power effects are not necessarily causally linked to initial practices and intentions. In giving certain institutions the authority to criticize according to clearly specified criteria, management can – intentionally or not – promote certain forms of criticism while simultaneously forestalling others not thus empowered.

Establishing critical practices can promote an organizational culture in which criticism is supposed to be channelled authoritatively rather than coming from everywhere. In such cases 'spontaneous' criticism may not emerge because critique is already channelled and 'managed' to such an extent that organizational members who are not 'expert critics' neither feel sufficiently empowered nor willing to take a critical stance. The heterogeneity of critique reduces and leads to a state where critical meta-practices remain 'beyond the reach of questioning or justification' (Gomez and Jones 2000: 699) and become an 'unquestioned (and unquestionable) way of doing things' (Burns and Scapens 2000: 11).

The literature is replete with examples. Perhaps the best can be drawn from the quality movement, an initially highly critical activity oriented to minimization of defective production, but with the unanticipated effect that '[t]otal quality stops people from thinking', as W. Edwards Deming once said (Senge 1999: 34; see Zbaracki 1998). TQM is linked to the 'production of employees of a certain sort' that the use of TQM language promotes (Kelemen 2000: 492), and while the effects may initially be critical, as they are institutionalized they become a conservative template.

The particular rhetoric that often surrounds a critical meta-practice may amplify its uncritical acceptance. Where management accountants are regarded as 'change agents' (see Granlund and Lukka 1998), when consultants are praised (and feared) for 'exposing their client's weaknesses' (Sorge and van Witteloostuijn 2004: 1207), and auditors are associated with the search for fraud (see Power 1997), then the 'rhetoric of critique' becomes a matter of impression management: what could be more critical than the deployment of such critical expertise? Indeed, if organization members try to be more critical by opposing what the experts say, their behaviour is usually considered to be resistance to change rather than a case of 'constructive critique'.

Conclusion

In this essay, we have made a case for thinking about critique not only in terms of an exceptional action that not only 'opens up' organizational practice and discourse but that may also 'close down' such phenomena. That knowledge is good and critique is better, as the saying goes, is not necessarily confirmed in mundane organizational practice.

For scholars, research conceptions of critique often equate it with critical reflection institutionalized in scholarly work rather than studying it in its practical and institutional embeddedness. An increased awareness of the links between criticism and organizational practices may help overcome the one-sided picture that often surrounds writings on critique and acknowledge that even where a practice begins as critical, in the sense of 'opening up understanding or facilitating reflection', it might 'end up locking people into fixed, unreflexive thinking' (Alvesson and Willmott 1996: 175).

A focus on the 'organisation of criticism' can also be seen in light of some recent work that tries to combine insights from practice theory and institutional theory in order to get a better understanding of how practices can challenge other practices, compete with them, and replace them as dominant practices over time (see Lounsbury and Crumley, forthcoming). In such a setting, one may observe particular critical practices, analyse the rules and resources they draw upon as their 'deep structure', and study their impact and dissemination throughout the organization or institutional field. Forms of criticism which, in the first place, emerge outside organisations, such as the critical discourses of social movements, can become organizationally relevant once they are enacted in organizational practice (see Lounsbury, 2001). In recent times, the feminist and green movements are successful examples of social movements that have translated critique into institutionalized stake holding through measures such as EEO and environmental and carbon footprint audits. Thus, a concern with critical practices need not be confined to forms of criticism that aim at making organizations more

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profitable and efficient. A concern with critical practices may not only help organizations to learn, unlearn, and change but may also trigger a more encompassing rethinking of the rationalities and power relations that dominate contemporary organizations and institutional fields and thus shape 'the society of organizations' (Perrow 1991) in which we live. Something of that sort seems to be in play at present with the emergence of issues concerning organizations' carbon footprint having moved discursively from the arena of committed ecologists to the board room of many major corporations and cabinet rooms of governments.

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	General characteristics	**Examples**
Discrete criticism	• Criticism is not based on specific organizational practices or meta-practices, but on a rationality which is not that prominently institutionalized within the organization. • The critical actor does not act out of his or her specific institutional background. Thus, all actors can potentially raise this kind of criticism. • There is no routinization, since a permanent state of discrete criticism would question the very idea of organizing.	• These are *ad hoc* criticisms that might arise in any context, from a specific and idiosyncratic reflection on a given practice by an actor. • In the case of human resource management, an example would be the situation-specific criticism of an employee's action by her superior.
Criticism related to organizational practice	• Content and motivation of criticism are related to the logic of the corresponding practice. Criticism is mainly fuelled by conflict with some other practice or action. • Both the critics and the actors being criticised can vary from occasion to occasion. However, the constellation will usually be influenced by how practices relate to and depend on each other. • While organizational practices are usually established for a longer period of time, criticism will arise punctually and disrupt the established routines.	• Criticism depends on contingent rationalities and agendas. Certain agendas bring together certain opposing points of view operating from different rationalities. • In the case of human resource management, there could be a conflict between the HR department and an operational department regarding the need of personnel development.
Critical meta-practice	• Criticism of certain, rather well-defined issues is a routine part of these practices. Criteria for criticism are often fixed and formalized. • Certain actors are responsible for carrying out the meta-practice. They might thus be regarded as the (expert) critics. • The meta-practice is usually institutionalized for a longer period of time. It is an established part of the organization.	• Bringing in consultants to review practices; using auditors to review and advise on practices; instituting internal critical practices, such as ethics committees or equal opportunity officers. • Human resource management often comprises routines for evaluation and appraisal, based upon well-defined performance criteria.

Table 1: Forms of criticism according to their coupling with organizational practices

Table 2

	Exemplary expressions of criticism	Ambiguous effects observed in the literature
Human resource management	Criticizing the performance of employees in appraisals and evaluations	Human resource management may facilitate knowledge production (Lengnick-Hall and Lengnick-Hall 2006), promote beneficial organizational change (Kochan and Dyer 1993), and help employees better manage their career (Grey 1994). At the same time, HRM practices often fulfill a disciplining and normalizing role (Townley 1993a, 1993b, 1997, 1998; Townley et al, 2003), producing conformist identities (Alvesson and Willmott 2002) and thereby impeding creativity and ad-hoc criticism (see Legge 1995; Watson 2004).
Total quality management	Identifying opportunities for continuous improvement	While TQM may be an alternative to management by control (Price 1989) and lead to empowerment, heightened responsibility and commitment of employees, it may also reinforce bureaucratic control (Mueller and Carter 2005) and restrict critical debate about organizational goals (Webb 1996; Wilkinson and Willmott 1995). Moreover, quality management concepts have been criticized for often being too abstract in nature to be sensibly adapted by organizational members at the local level (Skålén et al. 2005; Townley 2002). Finally, scholars have put emphasis on the ambiguity of TQM processes (eg Edwards et al, 1998; Mueller and Carter, 2005; Kelemen, 2000).
Management accounting	Scrutinizing the financial viability of investment projects	Management accountants may well act as change agents in their organizations (Granlund and Lukka 1998; Burns and Baldvinsdottir 2005) and critically challenge established mindsets of managers (Becker and Messner 2005). But strongly institutionalized accounting practices may at the same time degenerate into a ceremonial practice (Siti-Nabiha and Scapens 2005), disciplining organizational members (Hopper and Macintosh 1993) and inhibiting innovation and change (Soin et al. 2002).
Consulting	Problematizing strategies and operational practices	Consultants can open up a 'liminal space' for the organization (Czarniawska and Mazza 2003) and by that introduce noise that will help overcome organizational lock-ins (Clegg et al. 2004). However, consulting projects often conform with the political interest of top management (Sturdy et al. 2004; see Clark and Fincham 2002) and are based on a particular rhetoric that is more about persuasion than problem-solving (Berglund and Werr 2000; Sorge and van Witteloostuijn 2004).
Auditing and internal control	Assessing compliance with standards	Auditing and internal control are major means to ensure compliance with standards. However, there is an increasing gap between expectations and reality of audits, and the latter are often rendered ceremonial (Power 1997). Prominent examples of internal controls degenerating into a farce are those of Enron (Sims and Brinkmann 2003) and Barings' Bank (Stein 2000). On the other hand, control may turn into a neurotic practice when anxieties amplify as reasons for anxiety diminish (Foley et al. 2005).

Table 2: Selected critical meta-practices and their ambiguous effects