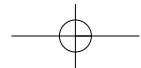# Part I

Theory and Paradigms

1

Critical Theory: An Introduction

Introduction

Knowledge of alternative ways of theoretically underpinning critical management research requires an understanding of the role of theory and what makes theory critical. Indeed, since we have already placed much emphasis on the importance of critical theory for generating anti-oppressive, emancipatory and self-critical forms of management research, it seems fitting to begin this book by exploring in a little more detail what theory is, why it matters and to whom. Different conceptions and typologies of theory abound within organisational studies and it is not always easy to detect a general consensus among academics about, for example, what constitutes 'critical theory'. In shedding light on some of these issues, this chapter (the first of two chapters in Part I) performs a crucial role in establishing the background against which the discussion developed in later chapters is set.

The chapter begins by outlining the role of theory in management research. We then briefly discuss the types of theory commonly found in organisation studies: predictive and interpretive theories. Since it is critical theory that concerns us most here, the rest of the chapter unpacks the notion of critical theory. We start by providing a short history of critical theory by pointing out its association with the Frankfurt School and subsequent developments that paved the way to postmodern critical theories. We also provide an illustration of critical theory applied in a management context, before sketching out in more detail how we understand critical theory. Next, we examine some of the conceptual features of critical management research. We do this in three ways. First, we discuss the influence of CMS for furthering critical forms of management research. Second, we examine how scholars have made distinctions between 'non-critical' and 'critical' theories. Third, we argue that being a critical management researcher does not equate to someone who is anti-management. Here we elaborate a nuanced version of what critical management research entails. We then summarise the

chapter's main themes and draw out the implications for thinking about paradigmatic approaches to management research.

The role of theory

Popular perceptions suggest theory to be abstract and detached from the 'real life' every-day concerns of people. This conception of theory has often led to criticisms that academics, paid to theorise for a living, have little knowledge of the world around them. *At worst*, common perception suggests that academics occupy ivory towers in which they produce theory that has little relevance for practitioners. It is worth commenting upon this in more detail (see also Kelemen and Bansal, 2002). Numerous commentators have argued that management researchers' interests are different from practitioners' and that is why some researchers pursue 'knowledge for knowledge's sake' (Huff, 2000). These researchers are less interested in how knowledge is used and more concerned with pursuing a line of enquiry. In most cases, such pursuits do not match the concerns and real problems of the practitioners and are perceived as esoteric and irrelevant (Astley and Zammuto, 1992). Other researchers, for example 'critical researchers', make a deliberate choice not to contribute to improving the efficiency of managerial practice in terms defined by current management orthodoxies. Instead, they redefine what counts as best managerial practice in line with the concerns of multiple stakeholders and the society at large (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992, 1996). In so doing, they challenge the 'technical neutrality' of management practice, shifting the research focus on its social and political aspects (Grey and Mitev, 1995), in particular on the moral preferences and commitments inherent in what managers say and do.

From another perspective, academic theorising may not permeate the world of management due to poor dissemination channels (Willmott, 1994), and the lack of communication between researchers and practitioners, particularly once research findings are in the public domain. We do not doubt that many researchers engage successfully in communicating with both managers and other organisational actors during the research process. Many researchers are also very successful in relaying the essence of very complex social science research in the classroom to practitioner audiences of middle and junior managers. However, given that researchers are expected to publish their findings mainly in academic journals, they have no choice but to follow academic writing conventions. These may prevent the practitioner from fully grasping the essence and practical implications of their theoretical insights. This is not to say that practitioners are to be treated as an undifferentiated mass; they vary tremendously, not least in their willingness and ability to handle social science abstractions and management theoretical jargon.

Without needing to develop the argument any further, it is already clear that the relationship between theory and practice is vexed. The crucial point we wish to draw out is that we do not see theory as having little or no relevance for practitioners. After all, any managerial act is influenced by past events or expectations about the future. These serve as theoretical anchors that make individuals (be they managers or workers) think and behave in a certain way. While the tensions arising out of the relationship between theory and practice are very complex and require extensive analysis, we do wish to outline a framework for the role of theory that may inform our readers about the value of theory for management practice.

Here, we draw upon Alvesson and Deetz's careful (2000) assessment of the function of theory. Accepting the idea that theory is better viewed as a way of seeing and thinking about the world around us rather than as an opaque abstract representation of it, theory may have certain roles to play. Alvesson and Deetz contemplate the function of theory in a threefold manner. First, theory is good at 'directing attention'. By that, they mean that theory has a guiding characteristic for it draws our attention to details that are important. Theory helps us to note key differences that assist us in making sense of the world. The problem here is that some differences are presumed to be 'natural' and unproblematic, obscuring other ways of seeing. For example, the interrelationship between sex, gender and sexuality has often been explained and analysed along the lines of human biology. But, noting differences and ascribing them importance is a perceptual matter. Theory can help us to recognise this, prompting us to ask what comes into view and what we can think about if, for example, we could re-consider the linkages between sex, gender and sexuality as culturally constructed.

Second, theory is good at 'organising experience'. In other words, theory helps us to present our observations of the world around us to others. We can then locate our observations as being part of a wider pattern of how humans structure and make sense of the world. The importance attributed to the identification of certain patterns will vary historically, culturally and across time. But the impulse to identify patterns that can help us to specify what things are and how they might be related to other things is a key driver of much social science theorising.

Third, theory 'enables useful responses'. In making this assertion Alvesson and Deetz pinpoint a pragmatic motive behind theory. Theory can be extremely useful for certain individuals or groups of people in helping them to satisfy their needs, as well as designing and building future organisational worlds. Nevertheless, how the pragmatic motive of any given theoretical response is weighed up and decided upon will vary enormously. Issues of importance, as they might pertain to managers, for example, are likely to diverge from those issues considered important by their subordinates. For instance, the useful theoretical responses to management dilemmas of engendering employee motivation, leadership and commitment may well have different features and implications than those orientated towards an employee's point of view.

Just as theory may be conceived of as having different functions, so different types of theory will give different emphasis to the functions of theory outlined above. Before outlining how critical theorists might envisage the role of theory, it is worth discussing the most popular types of logic (deductive and inductive) commonly found in management theory; namely, predictive and interpretive theory.

Deductive logic and predictive theories

Deduction presupposes the testing of theories through the observation of the empirical world. The deductive approach argues that what is important in social science is not the sources of theories or hypotheses that researchers start out with. Rather, it is the process by which those ideas are tested and justified. For example, one may read previous work in the field of leadership and hypothesise that charismatic leadership is positively correlated with organisational commitment. Also, one may gain a similar insight by observing day-to-day organisational practices. In addition, one may simply speculate that this is the case based on past experience and immediate expectations. Indeed, human behaviour rests upon assumptions about what has happened and conjectures about what will happen. In other words, it rests on some sort of theory.

Deductive methodologies were initially employed in the natural sciences, but the social sciences were quick to follow suit. Deductive theories take the shape of hypotheses or propositions that link together two or more concepts in an explanatory/causal fashion (Gill and Johnson, 2002). Concepts are abstract ideas that are used to classify together things sharing one or more properties. Deductive logic entails the development of a conceptual and theoretical structure prior to its testing through empirical observation. Gill and Johnson (2002) discuss four stages of the deductive process that the reader may regard as a useful summary:

1 The researcher decides upon the concepts that represent important aspects of the theory or problem under investigation. These concepts are abstract and cannot be observed empirically.
2 The operationalisation of a concept: the researcher creates rules for making observations so that he/she can determine where an instance of a concept has empirically occurred.
3 The creation of standardised procedures for undertaking observations that can be followed by any other researchers.
4 The comparison of assertions put forward by the theory with the facts collected by observation.

In deductive logic, theory is taken to be representational of experience. Often associated with a positivistic philosophy of science, deductive logic has informed countless studies

undertaken by scholars within mainstream management theory. For example, research carried out by Bansal and Clelland (2004) which tests propositions regarding organisations' environmental legitimacy exemplifies poignantly the logical process by which theory is tested in the deductive tradition.

Inductive logic and interpretive theory

Induction is the process of moving from the realm of observation of the empirical world to the construction of explanations (namely, theories) of what has been observed. According to this approach, explanations about the world are relatively worthless unless they are grounded in experience. Human behaviour cannot follow a causal model simply because human actions are infused with values, intentions, attitudes and beliefs. Human action has an internal logic of its own which must be understood in order to make action intelligible. As such, the imposition of an external logic upon human action is inappropriate. The starting point of inductive theorising is the immediate reality; observing, reflecting upon it and constructing explanations about what has been observed are the main methodological steps. Interpretive theorising has no concern for classifying objects, whether they are human or otherwise.

This is a rather unstructured approach for it allows the researcher to get inside situations and reflect upon the way in which individuals and groups construct, negotiate, enact and challenge meaning. Resulting theories may be developed in propositional or story-like form. In the former case, theories provide causal explanations of what has been observed and can be subsequently tested via processes of deduction. In the latter case, theories take a story-like shape and serve as meaning-making devices rather than predictive ones. Two inductive strategies popular in management studies include grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and theory from case study research (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Critical theory

As we have already stated, this book is positioned within the realm of critical theory. Critical theory, however, is a contested term. As we outline in some detail over the remainder of this chapter, how critical theory is understood to be critical among academics varies considerably. First of all, we mentioned in the introduction to this book that critical theory is often deployed as a label denoting a particular school of thought. More specifically, the term 'critical theory' has been heavily associated with the collective works of those scholars affiliated at various times during the twentieth century with the Institute of Social Research at Frankfurt University. These scholars (Theodor

Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and Jurgen Habermas, to name but a few) have been gathered together under the banner of 'The Frankfurt School'. The scholarly works produced by the Frankfurt School scholars is characterised by its Neo-Marxist flavour: the academics within this school of thought sought to develop the ideas and theoretical insights derived from Karl Marx. The theories emerging from the Frankfurt School do not feature in Part II of the book, so it is not our intention to repeat previous detailed accounts provided by organisational scholars on the impact of the Frankfurt School on organisation theory. Readers are directed to Alvesson and Deetz (2000) for a solid overview of the relationship between the Frankfurt School and organisational research. Nonetheless, it is vital to acknowledge the importance of the Frankfurt School for promulgating a type of critique that has become familiar within critical management research.

As a process of emancipatory and self-critical critique, critical theory has an important point of origin in the Frankfurt School. As Carr (2005) points out in an incisive overview of the contributions of the Frankfurt School to organisation theory, Max Horkheimer is credited as the first to use the term 'critical theory' in this way. Running counter to positivism as a scientific methodology and as a philosophy, Horkheimer (1976, cited in Carr, 2005) argued that the social world could not be studied in the same way as the natural world. For Horkheimer the notion of the researcher as an all-knowing subject was very troubling indeed. As Carr (2005) duly notes, Horkheimer's insistence on tackling the epistemological questions surrounding the researcher's claims to knowledge, especially claims to know the 'truth', was pivotal in generating a major turn in critical theorising. From this turning to address epistemological questions, critical theory could be seen as a catalyst to change reality through enlightenment and emancipation. This conception of theory as 'critical' radically departed from what Horkheimer and other members of the Frankfurt School saw as 'traditional theory': theory that claimed to accurately mirror reality. Bearing more than a faint resemblance to orthodox Marxist ambitions to emancipate those enslaved by ideology, the idea of critical theory as an emancipatory and enlightened form of knowledge was central to a great deal of the scholarship to emerge from the Frankfurt School. Notably, the concept of critical theory advanced by Horkheimer and others within the Frankfurt School found resonance with other theories such as those developed by Freud, as well as with later (postmodern/poststructuralist) theorists such as Michel Foucault (1983a: 200), who once praised the work of the Frankfurt School in enthusiastic terms.

While the form of critical theory developed by the Frankfurt School fuelled an critique of ideology and consciousness, the idea of critical theory as an emancipatory project has found fertile ground in which to take root within organisation theory. Needless to say, the targets of critique are not confined to matters of ideology or consciousness, as many postmodern and poststructuralist theorists would point out. Discourse, knowledge and language, for instance, have become prominent targets of critique ever since the postmodern turn within the social sciences.

With the above in mind, we see critical theory as providing a wide umbrella for an array of theoretical perspectives including those drawn from the Frankfurt School, American pragmatism, critical realism, postmodernism and feminism, to name but a few. What is more, these theories might be located within broader frameworks – namely, paradigms (see Chapter 2). We can take two examples to illustrate the point. First, our gathering of critical theories may fall under Guba and Lincoln's (1994) 'critical theories and related positions' paradigm. In broad terms, theoretical perspectives within this paradigm assert that reality is constructed by social, political and cultural factors, solidified into structures that, although not 'real', have material effects on individuals. Second, many of the same theories may find accommodation within Burrell and Morgan's (1979) 'radical humanist' paradigm. Generally speaking, theoretical perspectives within this paradigm take the view that science is a social and political process influenced by ideology and related cultural practices. Both paradigmatic positions are explained in much more detail in Chapter 2, but it is useful to show at this stage how theories may be framed by academics in order to articulate the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions upon which specific theories rest. These underpinning assumptions help us to determine in what way theories might be considered critical.

Since critical theory is seen to consist of a broad range of perspectives, it goes without saying that certain theoretical perspectives will conflict with some others. Tensions arise partly due to the variation in both the framing and focal point of critique. For example, the Frankfurt School operates within the Marxist tradition in which its claim to criticality derives from its critique of the hegemony and oppressive effects of ideology. In contrast, postmodernist and poststructuralist theories propose that we live within a linguistic universe. Within this frame, the hegemony of ideology is rejected given its deterministic tendencies. Instead, theoretical positions that draw upon postmodernism and poststructuralism focus on the complex ways in which power is exercised within a network of discursive relations used by individuals to construct identities and subjectivities. Although different in their theoretical frame and focus, we argue that such critical theories are broadly united in their concern to explore material inequalities and in their desire to link critique to action. Seen as such, critical theory can generate arresting analyses, challenge orthodox understandings about management and open up new avenues for thought and advancing management knowledge.

It is useful to provide an example to illustrate this train of thought. One of the co-author's empirical explorations (Kelemen, 2000) of the ambiguity of Total Quality Management (TQM) language sought to narrativise organisational life and build critical theory in the area of TQM. The study was based on ethnographic data collected in four UK service organisations, all of which claimed to have embarked on successful TQM programmes. By focusing on the role of language in the 'production' and 'consumption' of TQM, the study embraced postmodern perspectives that were able to

point up the limitations of the prescriptive and interpretive perspectives on TQM that have dominated the literature for at least the last three decades.

The study argued that the language of TQM is a powerful device in the hands of top managers, aimed at producing organisational practices and employees of a certain sort. While managers may have a certain amount of discretion over the use of TQM language, the consequences of using language cannot be predicted or, indeed, known beforehand. In the organisations studied, language was used in semantic and poetic fashions: the former attempted to suppress ambiguity by instilling clarity and specificity, while the latter tapped into ambiguity by inviting multiple interpretations from below. For example, quality related labels were used semantically. By labelling certain practices 'quality improvement projects' (in the mail carrier company) or 'our contribution counts circles' (the logistics company), labels made transparent those behaviours that were valued by the organisation and were to be included in the province of quality. Also, by labelling individuals as 'quality champions' (in the mail carrier and logistics companies) or 'missionaries' (in the logistics' case), or 'dinosaurs' (in the case of mail carrier companies), labels made a clear distinction between those who were in favour and those who opposed TQM. Consequently, quality champions and missionaries reflected a type of employee to be emulated by the rest of the organisation, while the dinosaurs were seen as irresponsible and, therefore, to be disregarded, ignored or punished until their eventual extinction.

Quality related metaphors were used poetically. For example, in the logistics company, top managers used the metaphor of the market (with its associated paraphernalia) to enforce the dominant quality message. Talk about 'internal customers', 'the chain of quality' and 'the customer is king' dominated managerial talk, expressing the commodification of internal organisational relationships. Because of their ability to convey different and multiple meanings, metaphors produced order, coherence and a sense of organisational identity. This may sound counter-intuitive, as the conventional view is that people acquire and share meaning before order is established. However, controversial issues, among which quality was one example, were settled by being specified in a form requiring subsequent interpretation, thus permitting disparate groups and individuals to redefine issues in ways that were relevant to their immediate interests or circumstances.

The concluding theory was that there could never be too much or too little ambiguity that managers could not turn to their advantage in the attempt to construct organisational practices and employees aligned to the managerial logic. This is not to say that ambiguity could be entirely instrumental in its usage by managers (even though they might set out to do just that). Employees' responses to such ambiguity stand firmly in the way. Employees may choose to respond to ambiguity with ambiguity, so that top managers will find themselves in a position of having to decipher the meanings coming from below. Ambiguity may also act as the social glue that binds people together. For

example, when employees did not understand what was going on at the top level, they banded together in an attempt to find comforting meanings around ideas of survival.

Thus while top managers attempt to produce employees whose identities are inscribed in the TQM language, their achievements can never be complete. Through a process of interest translation (Latour, 1987), which may suppress or elevate ambiguity, employees are seduced, forced or rationally convinced that TQM is a viable and profitable option for all of them. However, the discursive responses of the employees to the language in use (discourses riddled with ambiguity) cannot be fully controlled or managed from the top. In the companies studied, the discursive strategies ranged from resistance and compliance to the internalisation of managerial language.

In summary, what this illustration shows is the concern critical theory holds for questioning what lies behind TQM rhetoric and the managerial practices that draw from mainstream TQM discourses. In that respect, Kelemen (2000) is an empirical example of a form of critique that embodies a critical epistemology that reveals the ambiguities, contradictions and tensions that arise from acknowledging the multiplicity of reality. The next move in our explication of critical theory concerns what we mean by critical management research.

What is critical management research?

As we stated in the introduction to this book, confidence in CMS as a wellspring of critical forms of work on management has grown considerably (if somewhat unevenly) over the last decade and more. Since we are sympathetic to CMS and would posit a relationship between CMS and the theoretical oeuvre of the book, we must say a bit more about what CMS has to offer researchers aiming to undertake management research. In what follows we draw upon a number of key writings on CMS that have emerged in recent times. Among the most informative and inspired (listed here in no particular order of influence and illumination) are Hotho and Pollard (2007), Hancock and Taylor (2004), Parker (2002a), and Fournier and Grey (2000), as well as Sotirin and Tyrell (1998). Of these, Fournier and Grey's (2000) work serves as a guiding framework for the discussion in this section, since we regard it as the most enlightening and accessible overview of CMS in the UK published to date.

On critical management studies (CMS)

As Martin Parker explains in *Against Management* (2002a), CMS is a child of the 1990s and still in a period of infancy. Although well into its second decade, CMS remains something of a puzzle. What we mean here is that despite attempts to the contrary, there is no simple way in which CMS can be neatly summed up. As a body of work its outline is amorphous

and its contents extremely varied and nascent. The intellectual endeavours that constitute CMS have explored the phenomenon of management in a number of directions. For instance, Smith et al. (2001) explore management through the tool of science fiction, Parker (2002b) advocates a queering of management, Grey and Sturdy (2007) urge us to consider friendship as a folk concept to explore forms of management and organising, while Brewis et al. (2006) contemplate the dark side of motivation by investigating the roles of addiction, sex and death in organisation. The list of such vibrant forms of critical management inquiry is long, and too long to fully detail here. What this small selection shows, however, is that CMS is a wildly eclectic intellectual project.

Thus as a number of management scholars note of CMS (Fournier and Grey, 2000; Parker, 2002a), it resists the simplicities of classification. Therein lies, perhaps, part of its appeal to those who wish to join its ever-expanding membership. CMS affords spacious accommodation for those academics mobilising ideas and cultural resources in ways that they believe are distinguishable from mainstream managerial studies of business (Parker, 2002a). But even as CMS has started to develop a sense of coherence about its identity, so there are some who now resist assuming the CMS label. Some academics are now in the business of being critical about CMS (Parker, 2002a), perhaps with good reason. So, what then do we make of this creature called CMS?

For us, CMS represents an opportunity to explore resonances with other academic perspectives on management that aim to question the prescriptive/descriptive management literature that finds ample bookshelf space in business school libraries the world over. To our minds, there is much to be concerned about within traditional management theory. As has been amply shown in many ways by different scholars, conventional management wisdom of the type that is issued from mainstream texts has often resulted in oppressive forms of organising and management. A quick review of the myriad of management practices reveals illuminating evidence of a welter of managerial misdemeanours. For instance, within the field of human resource management (HRM), a number of critical writers have lampooned the prescriptions of HRM textbooks and their associated practices in organisations. The insider stories of those at the blunt end of the tools in the HRM kitbag are the object of interrogation in Mabey et al's brilliant (1998) edited collection of essays. The book's aim is to 'give voice to the other players in HRM strategies – i.e., those on the receiving end' (p. 95). This aim turns on the idea that those with a vested interest in perpetuating the rhetoric of HRM are not necessarily the 'best' people to consult in the matter of whether HRM has actually delivered on its promises, as well as naming those advantaged by HRM techniques. One message is elegantly articulated throughout the book: employees have invariably suffered at the hands of those who endeavour to manage and organise labour along the principles of HRM. Elsewhere, similar stories are being told in relation to the gender blind and patriarchal nature of management theory (Collinson and Hearn, 1996;

Hearn et al., 1989) and the inimical effects of the organisation of labour within capital-istic societies, as evidenced in call centre work environments (Taylor and Bain, 1999).

What is clear from all of this research is that management, in some of the forms it finds expression, is problematic. Worryingly, threatening and violent values may char-acterise some managerial regimes that seek to optimise the human contribution within organisations. One of the most pertinent examples is Business Process Re-engineering (BPR). In his original article, Hammer (1990) defines BPR as the fundamental rethink-ing and radical redesign of business processes to achieve dramatic improvements in critical contemporary measures of performance such as cost, quality, service and speed. Hammer suggests that BPR inverts much of the logic of the Industrial Revolution, by breaking free from the long established principle of the division of labour. BPR is heralded as a radical departure from conventional change management programmes. Its central idea is that rather than trying to evolve business operations gradually over time, the organisational designer takes a fresh piece of paper to design a radically new system. Hammer and Champy's (1993) bestseller talks about axes, machine guns, lobot-omy and shooting as devices to facilitate change in the organisation, while the empir-ical studies on BPR suggest that reengineering leads to work intensification and is no more than another form of managerial control (Grey and Mitev, 1995; Willmott, 1995). Other critics (Knights and McCabe, 1998) suggest that employees who remain in employment after reengineering experience more stressful and intensive working con-ditions. Moreover, according to Horsted and Doherty (1994), whether individuals stay with or leave a reengineered organisation, they generally experience feelings of psycho-logical 'trauma' rather than empowerment.

With this in mind and following Hotho and Pollard (2007), one crucial aim of the CMS project is to critique the oppressive regimes of management and organisation and, at the same time, advocate more benevolent forms of management and organising in the workplace. Expressed in a slightly different way, as Fournier and Grey (2000) put it, CMS is a project that 'aims to unmask the power relations around which social and orga-nizational life are woven' (p. 19). We embrace both articulations of the political dimen-sions to CMS. Indeed, we put our hope in those readers who will be galvanised by what they find in this book's chapters to generate management research that questions forms of domination and asymmetrical power relations. At the same time, we are minded to sound a cautionary note. To simply view CMS as being organised around a central polit-ical goal is misleading. The entire CMS project is criss-crossed by political currents that are varied and inseparable from the theories CMS scholars mobilise. Whatever the degree of variation in how these political goals are constructed, CMS pays direct atten-tion to the moral and ethical issues of management. As we note below, the matter of sift-ing the 'critical' from the 'non-critical' perspectives within CMS in order to attend to the interrogation of these dimensions to management is equally discordant.

On the critical from the non-critical

The distinction between what may be termed as 'critical' and 'non-critical' manage-
ment research is arbitrary. For one thing, there is cultural variation in what theories
academics have badged as being critical. For another, differences among scholars about
distinguishing the critical from the non-critical are drawn out according to academics'
personal preferences, the reputations of certain university business schools as intellec-
tual powerhouses loyal to a particular body of theory, as well as cultural and political
shifts that influence how certain theories wax and wane in terms of their popularity
and intellectual currency. It is worth unpacking some of these points in detail.

Arguably, the starkest contrast in academic discourses regarding what counts as critical
management research is found in the scholarly outputs from university business schools
in the USA and the UK. The USA has long been regarded as a comfortable home for tra-
ditional, positivistic management research. As Fournier and Grey (2000) suggest, certain
cultural and political climates (e.g., the impact of the Cold War and McCarthyism) in the
USA have influenced the availability of access routes to critical resources that scholars in
the UK and Europe appear to have been able to draw from more readily. This is not to
say that scholars in the UK have enjoyed an unfettered ability to avail themselves of the
cultural and material resources to pursue their own brand of non-positivistic, critical
management research. This is too suggestive of a strict dichotomy between the USA and
UK, especially as numerous scholars can be found in both countries that conform to and
rebel against management school orthodoxy. This notwithstanding, business schools in
the UK have been subjected to the mean and lean, cost-cutting, efficiency-orientated
principles of what has been dubbed 'new managerialism'. One result of this is that cer-
tain forms of research (those with the potential to deliver financial pay-offs) are more
likely to be prioritised and funded by research councils and committees. Not surpris-
ingly, positivistic research designs and proposals lend themselves well to the quantifica-
tion processes that abound in UK universities.

Interestingly, Fournier and Grey (2000) also take stock, historically, of the develop-
ment of US business schools. Established much earlier than those in the UK that first
opened their doors to students in the 1960s, the tradition of studying management has
a longer pedigree. Efforts to improve the bloodline of US business schools came about
in the period following World War II when moves were made to boost the scientific
status of these institutions by attaching a high premium to scientific (positivistic)
research. As Fournier and Grey highlight, while UK business schools ought not to be
seen as 'seething hotbeds of revolutionary fervour' (p. 15), since many can be charac-
terised by their managerialist agendas, the dominance of American positivistic research
is keenly felt by many academics on this side of the Atlantic. None, perhaps, capture
the dilemma so vividly and neatly as Karen Legge, writing on the status and activities

of 'critical writers' in the field of human resource management. It is worth quoting Legge at length on this matter:

> **If British researchers aspire to publish in these top-ranked journals, with all the benefits this confers, they must inevitably engage with the debates and paradigmatic positions that these journals support. Even if they prefer the easier (?) route of publishing in British or other European journals, the influence of the American journals is such that any academic that aspires to an international reputation has to engage with the 'American' debates unless they locate themselves firmly within the non-empiricist, critical, European tradition of the gang of three and eschew the American Academy of Management conference scene, except in the role of guerrilla fighters or lepers. (2001: 34)**

These essays by Legge (2001) and Fournier and Grey (2000) illustrate well the point that critical management research conjures up a number of different meanings for individuals and institutions in different cultural contexts. Admittedly, we have been partial in our account of such debates here, leaving aside the variation in meaning that occurs across parts of Europe, Asia and Australasia. Nonetheless, since one of the anchors for this book is within the British CMS community, it is necessary to provide some insight into the forces that have shaped the debates about critical management research on British shores.

Another factor responsible for the lack of scholarly consensus about what counts as critical management research is the variation that exists in the criteria used to evaluate whether a theory might be eligible enough to be termed 'critical'. The eligibility criteria to determine what theories might be classified as critical vary considerably among academics. Scholars have their own emotional investments in such criteria since it may be that some academic identities pivot on an individual's research or orientation within a certain theoretical vein. Sometimes these preferences and views are put forward with great vitriol.

One reason for all this apparent mayhem over what counts as critical is partly a result of allegiances and orientations scholars might have towards a particular body of theory. For example, as Parker (2002a) points out, tensions within CMS may be witnessed in the bitter quarrels between (post-) Marxists and followers of the poststructuralist theorist Michel Foucault. Here, critical theory has often been used as a term to describe a raft of Neo-Marxist theories that carry on articulating the concerns around the structure and effects of capitalistic societies. Adherents to this rigid conception of critical theory have often lambasted poststructuralism (and postmodernism) for its lack of attention towards social structure and providing an adequate account of power. From the most intractable Neo-Marxist positions, poststructuralists and postmodernists (sometimes referred to pejoratively as 'pomos') are said to have collapsed the social into the literary. In other words, their mobilisation of discursive devices and conceptual

resources gives much credence to the notion of a 'linguistic universe' in which individuals are reduced to subjects and the positions, subjectivities and identities they construct and perform. For opponents of the linguistic turn in the social sciences, poststructuralist and postmodernist perspectives eschew analysis of social structures, institutions and the materiality of everyday life. Such intellectual sparring is often characterised by its finer-grained analysis of theory. Unfortunately, it does not mean to say these debates are always conducted in a convivial manner. Academic points of view regarding what is considered critical and, therefore, what really counts in the quest to destabilise the dominance of orthodox management research are worth defending aggressively, so it seems. Indeed, certain academic conferences have achieved notoriety as bastions for followers of specific theoretical perspectives to muster, with 'outsiders' espousing competing theoretical sensibilities venturing within at their peril.

Ontologically, much is at stake in the academic world when it comes to being called a critical theorist or not. Laying claim to such academic identities can confer rewards such as peer admiration and 'celebrity' status. Rather in the manner that chaff is sorted from wheat, so these intellectual manoeuvrings (and associated posturings) can separate the 'hard-boiled theorists' from the 'soft-centred non-critical empiricists'. Disturbingly, such dualisms not only create the separation of theory from empiricism, but they also retrench the very types of behaviours and stances among CMS academics that many within the CMS community would seek to contest. As Fournier and Grey (2000) note, the dissent among academics as to who is 'inside' and who is 'outside' of the circles of critical theory reveals very little about where the boundaries between critical and non-critical actually lie. Indeed, their assertion that 'the theoretical pluralism of CMS and the fact that there is no unitary "critical" position mean that there is no single way of demarcating the critical from the non-critical' (2000: 16) might be a dead hand on our ambition to be 'critical'.

Fournier and Grey offer a way out of this impasse, noting how (non)critical boundary-making within CMS turns upon the three issues of performativity, denaturalisation and reflexivity. As we stated in the introduction to this book, these issues act as the cornerstones of our vision of critical management research. We will briefly describe each one in turn. The performative intent in non-critical work, as it may be found in much mainstream management theory, is concerned with maximising organisational efficiency. Management is taken-for-granted in the sense that it is naturally assumed to be beneficial for all those directing and on the receiving end of its practices. From this perspective, to be 'against management', as some scholars like Parker (2002a) are, is undesirable if not inconceivable. As Fournier and Grey remark, management is only interrogated 'except in so far as this will contribute to its improved effectiveness' (2000: 17).

The second issue, denaturalisation, involves exposing the gaps and absences in mainstream managerial theory. Much in the manner of how organisational gender theorists

have unveiled the gendered nature of management (Collinson and Hearn, 1996), so CMS aims to underline similar glaring omissions and erasures, as well as proposing alternative ways of (re)constituting management without replicating the unquestion-able 'naturalness' it sometimes betokens (see Parker, 2002b). Lastly, CMS is seen, albeit in different ways and to varying measures, to be reflexive philosophically and method-ologically. Indeed, this is a point we are at pains to emphasise throughout this book, since much (though by no means all) orthodox management theory does not question its own methodological underpinnings. As Fournier and Grey (2000) aver, positivistic research is often presented as matter-of-fact, which is to say that research of this kind is often unbothered with justifying the use of positivism – a fault most obvious in American positivistic business research.

In summary, our claim to be critical rests upon the three concepts established above. It might be wise here to anticipate the criticisms that in being critical about management we (and others like us) are, therefore, steadfastly opposed to the strenuous efforts of organisations to improve efficiency. As we have already said, our business across the pages of this book is to showcase a number of the theories that could be employed to question and reformulate those ideas and practices that are often discursively tagged as 'common-sense' ways of going about management. This might lead to efficiency gains, but, then again, it might not. Hopefully, it will lead to an enlightened manner of thinking about management. What this does not amount to, as we discuss below, is an unyielding stance that is 'anti-management'.

On not being anti-management

We have already declared certain forms of management problematic. One perspective might be that we are therefore anti-management, that it is our intention to demolish management practice, to discredit all the mainstream management texts that stand against the theoretical orientation of ours. It is not our intention to throw out the past; arguably, mainstream management is not all bad. It is not a simple case of positioning critical theory in opposition to mainstream management theory – the latter may contain critical components or serve as a source of theoretical inspiration. It is more productive to argue for viewing critical theory as a relational and dialogical concept, but not one that is tethered to mainstream management theory within an artificial dualism.

This careful framing is crucially important, as a recent spate of academic argumen-tation about whether CMS and specific academics are anti-, against or for management illustrates. Singling out Parker's *Against Management* (2002a) as an object for pillory, Clegg et al. (2006) in an article entitled 'For Management?' voiced their fears about the likes of Parker and CMS more widely for offering up management as a totalitarian

phenomenon worthy only of negative criticism. Their slanted (and unjust) reading of Parker and of CMS appears to turn on the notion of 'against management' equating to a reductionist interpretation of management (as a set of practices, as a social group) being rotten to the core.

Like Parker (2006) and Willmott (2006), both of whom responded to Clegg et al. (2006) in the journal *Management Learning*, we do not assume that management (as a form of organising) is all bad. Neither are all managers demons nor all managerial practices nefarious. It is important here to rebuff the assertion that just because we (and many others) lay claim to be critical of management, we must therefore be opposed to management. If, by anti-management, it is taken that we are for the wholesale demonisation of management and managers, then our aim here has been misread. One can be critical and for management in the manner of Parker and others of the same opinion. As Parker (2006) points out, the idea espoused by Clegg et al. (2006) of being both critical and *for* management is one that clearly accords with the polyphonic understanding of management in *Against Management* (2002a); or, as Willmott (2006) pithily puts it, Clegg et al. just seem to be 'pushing clumsily at an open door' (p. 37).

Viewed as a sympathetic form of art, doing critical research on management is not necessarily about tearing down the pillars upon which traditional management theory rests – although some critical theorists might well advocate this for good reasons. There has to be some element of concern in order for critique to be *generative*. Otherwise, we might lapse into a mode of analysis that is ultimately destructive – it is all too easy to bulldoze an idea or argument into rubble and walk away. Generative critique, however, cannot be left there. Even if one is passionately interrogating managerial practices that are clearly beyond the pale in their harmful effects on employees, any critique should be deployed productively. This might involve gutting traditional and other forms of critical management theory (critical theories are not exempt from this endeavour), inspecting their contents, exposing their deficiencies and then, perhaps, reconstituting the form.

In another way, being critical of management is also about recognising the possibilities for individuals to resist management where it is experienced as an oppressive force in organisations. By individuals, we would include managers as well as their subordinates. CMS has been accused by Wray-Bliss (2003) of (re)constructing managers as omnipotently powerful and employees/workers as helpless, thus needing to be liberated by the interventions of critical management researchers. This dichotomous line of thought is problematic in the sense that it assumes all managers are homogeneous, not only in their capacity to exercise power over their subordinates but also in their needs, interests, desires and abilities. Returning to Willmott (2006), managers are a heterogeneous body of people, despite their repeated constructions (often in mainstream management texts) as a uniform group of employees/workers. For instance, the role of management is undertaken by a large number of individuals formally employed

as 'managers', but many are not managers. Numerous (non-manager) employees now undertake the work of junior and middle managers. Parker makes a similar observation in the introductory chapter of *Against Management* (2002a). Whichever way we might wish to illustrate the sentiment, being critical of management is not to view management as a monolith.

Summary

In this chapter we have argued that, in order to generate critical forms of management research, researchers need to have an understanding of the potential role theory can perform, why theory matters and to whom. For our purposes, critical theory is a powerful way of (re)thinking and (re)envisioning the world of management. Clearly, theory matters to many business school scholars (theorising keeps some of us in employment), but it should also be of prime concern to critical management researchers. As this chapter has discussed, critical theory can help researchers of management to develop emancipatory forms of research. Indeed, we sponsor the notions of performativity, denaturalisation and reflexivity that, according to Fournier and Grey (2000), underpin much of the critical management research within CMS. But, it is important to note that mobilising these conceptual tools does not equate to arming oneself with a weapon 'against' management. What debates on being anti-, against or for management reveal is that, in order for a critique on management to be effective, it is vital to view management sensitively.

In light of all this, this chapter provides a key building block in the foundations for going about critical management research. Knowledge of what makes theory critical (as arbitrary as it is because it is contingent upon prevailing scholarly views about what criticality should stand for and achieve) is useful for management researchers. Decisions can be made about what types of critical theories are most appealing and suitable for providing the conceptual support that undergirds informed critical empirical analysis. Extending debates about the importance of critical theory in research, we turn in the next chapter to exploring the significance of thinking about paradigms in critical management research. As we have already mentioned in this chapter, theories may be thought of as frameworks – or paradigms – in which researchers operate. The conceptual contours of any given paradigm will influence the decisions made about, for example, what kind of data to gather and how these will be analysed and presented. As we discuss in the next chapter, while paradigms are useful for paving an approach to thinking about research methodology, they can become prisons within which some scholars confine themselves, discounting ideas and evidence that does not accord with their chosen paradigm. We will therefore demonstrate the benefits of multi-paradigm research for generating critical forms of analysis.

Further reading

For more detail on the critical theories inspired by the works of Karl Marx, including those that emerged from the Frankfurt School, and how they have impacted on management research, we would suggest you read Alvesson and Deetz (2000) *Doing Critical Management Research* (London: Sage) (especially Chapter 4, 'The critical tradition: critical theory and postmodernism'). Another informative commentary on the contribution of the Frankfurt School within organisation theory is: Carr (2005) 'The challenge of critical theory for those in organization theory and behavior: an overview', *International Journal of Organization Theory and Behavior*, 8 (4): 466–494.

The edited collection by Grey and Willmott (2005) *Critical Management Studies: A Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) is an excellent collection of papers produced by scholars associated with the CMS project. Also, for more detail about the debates on whether some CMS scholars are anti-, against or for management, a very good place to start is Parker (2002a) *Against Management: Organization in the Age of Managerialism* (Cambridge: Polity). The highly charged journal article aimed at Parker's *Against Management* thesis is Clegg et al's, (2006) 'For Management?', in *Management Learning*, 37 (1): 7–27. The responses by Martin Parker and Hugh Willmott (in the same journal volume) are also essential reading: see Parker (2006) 'Stockholm Syndrome', in *Management Learning*, 37 (1): 39–41; and Willmott (2006) 'Pushing at an open door: mystifying the CMS manifesto', in *Management Learning*, 37 (1): 33–37.