Chapter summary

Students we talk with sometimes think that critical theory is:
   a) being negative (‘critical’) about everything
   b) one particular ‘theory’ (i.e.: a ‘critical’ – important – theory)
For us, the diversity of theories grouped as ‘critical theory’ is useful because it provides many perspectives through which we can explore underlying assumptions of what we often take for granted. Such theories may be used to examine not only what appears readily observable but also what is ‘not [so easily] seen’. Critical scholars provide diverse and far reaching insights about how meaning is made and controlled in and through the context of the organisation of our humanity. The making of meaning (to be experienced as knowledge and truth) involves the shaping of relationships among people, between people and other creatures, and the human relationship with Earth – the source of all life. In Chapter 2 of Understanding Management Critically we introduce some of the critical theorists who have influenced what is now known as Critical Management Studies (CMS). The task undertaken is to expose to view the ideas with which we make sense of ourselves and each other, and through which we justify, tolerate, collude with, or try to change the way we organise ourselves, each other and our institutions. When ideas and systems seem like objects, such apparent objects are called reifications. These apparent objects are ‘vested’ with meaning and ideas about power, authority and the proper order of things. In Chapter 1, we developed the notion of reification as a word that points to a key human creative capacity: the capacity to create social worlds by inventing concepts and investing these with meanings and by crafting forms of organising to turn them into practice, routine, normality. Forms of organisation and practices that become ‘taken for granted’ might be valued by some but may turn out to be downright dangerous to others. Creating order (or realities) is a human activity. It comes with significant responsibility. Understanding this idea of reification as a process brings us to two companion ideas in critical theory: dereification and deconstruction. Lukács and Foucault are examples of critical scholars whose work demonstrates the analytical power of these ideas. They encourage us to examine more closely what kinds of values and power are vested in ideas, how such ideas become routine and come to be seen as kind of ‘natural’ – even when, under the conditions of hegemony, they work against our personal or collective interests.

Webpage structure

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2.1 Revision notes: Categorising and ordering meaning

In *The Order of Things*, Foucault draws our attention to the human tendency to classify concepts and objects, and to arrange these concepts and objects into some kind of agreed or imposed order. He argues that each epoch creates a table or grid of similarities and analogies that are accepted as sensible or coherent. The coherence of one epoch becomes the myth of a later age. The tenuousness of any truth claim is made explicit when we examine particular ideas across cultures, space and time. Very few ‘facts’ have universal and enduring support. But surely cats, dogs and elephants are identifiably distinct categories of creatures when and wherever such creatures are to be found? To believe this is to miss many nuances and perhaps to impose our preferred ways of seeing the world by organising ideas as we do.

Foucault uses an example from medieval Chinese classifications of animals that challenge modern European distinctions made between Same and Other. This ancient Chinese form of order sets out fourteen categories of animals, including those that are “fabulous, belong to the Emperor, are sirens, seen from a distance and those having just broken the water pitcher” (1966; English Translation 1970: xvi). Foucault suggests that such forms of order may appear to be disturbing or laughable. They may even create anxieties. Nevertheless, such ordering can be researched empirically, for a “system of elements” (ibid.: xxi). Order is that which is given as an inner law and at the same time has no existence except in the grid, created by “a glance, and examination, a language ... [I]t is only in the blank spaces of this grid, that order manifests itself in depth as though there, waiting in silence for the moment of its expression” (ibid.: xxiii). Think about the changes in meaning within the grids you know of: healer/witch; traitor/hero. Even the seemingly solid categories of male and female are disturbed when we reflect on the many human beings born with an unclear biological sex but to whom a gender is soon ascribed. Thinking outside of the given grid is difficult.

Researchers in this field are encouraged to seek the limits and forms of what is say-able. The object of this type of research is the examination of discourse, the movement of the savoir – the known. Foucault’s definition of discourse is that body of ideas accepted/experienced as truth, which arises and exists in different ways in varying social contexts. These contexts provide the perceived conditions of existence and practical fields of deployment and practice. Let’s turn our mind to management education – the ahistorical, apolitical, amoral teaching of the functions of organisation? Yeah Right!

For a number of years, a top New Zealand beer brewer has run an advertising campaign in which a witty series of billboards feature a common NZ pun: “Yeah Right”. The pun on which this advertisement is based is used as a response to an outrageously false or delusional statement – by drawing attention to its opposite.
We are of the view that for a very long time, students have been lead to believe that management education was a kind of functional training – and that the examination of values is a ‘soft’ OB topic where well pre-digested and sanitised ideas about goodness assured those with some conscience that ‘management’ is a force for good. Management education, as all education and as all management practices, is rooted in various histories, and manifests particular politics and values that are not always easy to observe. In this webpage we provide some resources and exercises you might use to test your own position on various ideas or situations that require management. In its broadest sense of this question we could posit that the global system of organisation is based on Truth, Justice and Dignity. Yeah, Right! Try: Greed, Exploitation and Destruction skilfully covered by a veil of delusions and justification, clever PR and obstinate false consciousness. Surely not? How do we assess ourselves, our corporate actions, and our place in the world? How can we practise understanding critically the ideas of critical thinkers on the situations all around us? How about crafting some fun billboards of your own that contrast aphorisms you would like to challenge.

2.1 Exercising your understanding

Think of something you have always believed to be true: I am a male; my father loves me; my manager is trustworthy; my savings are secure. Now imagine that the opposite is true. What would be the ramifications if the change in belief came to be ‘the truth’?

2.2 People to meet, [web]places to go, actions to take

People to meet

- **Albert Einstein**: Advocate for a free mind or anarchy?
- **Ai-Weiwei**: a helpful dissident – but helpful to whom?
  http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ai_Weiwei
- **Ernesto Laclau**: Radical democracy and neoliberalism – diverging paths.
- **Chantal Mouffe**: Democratic and agonistic public spaces.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Wpwwc25JRU
- Socrates: Foundations of Western economic thought.
- Professor Resnick on Karl Marx (again): See a full list (57 short video lectures).
  http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8B2364D7C0D31D63

[Web]places to go
- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a7pm_mRwL-0&list=PL1ACF5051B37EB634
  David Boje: Direction, Duration, and more ‘D’s for the Future: Implications of quantum physics to organisational studies is explained
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGunYtdYXk&list=PLmo9vOINxhRmw0KVrK4NIaheLWsg4xhp&index=3
- James Burke: The Day the Universe Changed – What do we [think we] know and how did we come to think this way?
- Plough Shares as Praxis: Waihopai Three – A courageous Trio or unholy wreckers?
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ioONhpIJNY
- What the Bleep DO we Know?
  http://www.famousquotes.me.uk/epitaphs/7.htm;
  http://www.flickr.com/photos/66604929@N00/2934618417
  Zizeck at the Occupy Movement

Actions to take

- Become a [Graffiti] artist
- Tell more stories that may pique a critical response
  http://storytellingorganization.com/
- Find ways to make [critical] theory interesting and fun
- Devise advertisements that encourage critical thinking on campus, on the metro, in the CBD – Anywhere!

2.3 A journal exercise for Chapter 2

When you reflect on your own personal and intellectual development, you can likely identify key people in your life who have stimulated your thinking, challenged your perspectives, and inspired your spirit to soar to new and unexpected levels. Who are some of these people in your life? How did they stimulate you and enrich your life? Do they continue to influence you, even though you may no longer be in touch with them? Visit the website below to meet with ancient philosophers whose ideas still reverberate in much that we take for granted today.¹ Open a journal on your computer or buy a gorgeous notebook, and record your responses to the ideas we offer you in this Understanding Management Critically. Read back to see if over time your ideas are changing, how, and what such change might imply.

2.4 Could you? Would you? Should you?

¹http://www.pearsonhighered.com/readinghour/philosophy/assets/Chaffee_0205254691_ch02.pdf
Would you, could you, should you step out of ‘the grid’ whenever and wherever you can?

2.5 Reflection

Tellingly, Marx’s tombstone contains two epitaphs: 

*Workers of All Lands Unite*

and

*The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways – the point however is to change it.*

Why would Marx’s concerns about human well-being require a global perspective? How much time is made available in your course of studies to think deeply about:

i) what contribution philosophers make to our collective well-being in this era of intensifying globalization; and

ii) how change in our social arrangements can be consciously achieved?

If you could change anything in the world as you know it, what would that be? Why? Where would you start? Who would you invite to join you? What would you count as evidence of effectiveness?