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Organizational Culture and the Trend of Critical Management Studies

Keywords: CMS, critical trend, organizational culture

Introduction

The perspective of the critical trend stands out in radicalism in the questioning of both the cognitive and above all pragmatic and ideological values of the current research on cultural achievements in the sciences of management. This is a rapidly growing trend and one gaining in importance, which, moreover, uses most of the skeptical topics raised before the institutionalization of Critical Management Studies, as part of the wider critique of the mainstream cultural management. Precisely because of: 1) institutional crystallization of, 2) the growing importance and 3) the clear radical position of the representatives of this trend the main aspects of cultural criticism are worth considering.

Areas of critique of organizational culture in CMS

Organizational culture has been a controversial issue since the very moment this term appeared. Therefore critical reflection is not only based on the trend of Critical Management Studies. Nevertheless, representatives of the critical trend propose the most radical and reflective attitude, which synthesizes many ideas appearing in earlier critique.

The analysis presented here includes both the problems considered by representatives of the Critical Management Studies and by other scholars. The most important problems of the organizational culture raised within the critical trend refer primarily to:

- culture as a tool of dominance and oppression,

- organizational culture as hypostasis and ideology,
- organizational culture as a pseudoscientific trend and fashion,
- culture as mental prison.

CMS considers a lot of issues present in the criticism of the cultural trend in the sciences of management. The issues include both critical aspects and proposals of theoretical and methodological solutions. Criticism of achievements of the cultural trend in management is presented by means of ideas taken both from CMS and other skeptical trends in social sciences, such as: neomarxism, poststructuralism, the Frankfurt School, radical feminism.¹

Main points of critique from CMS perspective

1. Oppressiveness of the organizational culture.

According to representatives of CMS organizational culture is not axiologically neutral and is a reflection of the power structure. It is oppressive as it realizes interests of some groups at the expense of others. It defavours people subjected to power and sanctions unjust order. Critical researchers generally agree with interpretivist researchers in assuming that organizational culture can be understood as a core metaphor, that is what organization is and not what it has. Such a perspective makes culture problems fundamental for the functioning of the organization in all its dimensions.² Thus oppressiveness of culture is directly connected with repressiveness of the organization.

2. Ideological character and “false consciousness” of cultural processes in a contemporary organization.

Promoting indoctrination and manipulation, culture is a mechanism of exercising power. Owners and managers, as well as employees, may not be aware of the injustice and repressive character of the culture of contemporary organizations. Oppressive culture is assimilated, it is considered to be natural, obvious, and thus impossible to change. Culture becomes ideology, it creates “false consciousness” rationalizing, to those holding power and those subordinate to power, unjust order as the only possible model. Its alternative could only be chaos and destruction.³

¹ C.Grey, H.C.Willmott, *Critical Management Studies: A Reader*, Oxford University Press, 2005

² D.Knights, H.C.Willmott *Organizational Culture as Management Strategy: A Critique and Illustration from the Financial Services Industry*. “International Studies of Management & Organization”. Vol. XVII, No 3, 1987, p. 40-63.

³ N. Monin, *Management Theory. A Critical and Reflective Reading*, Routledge, London, New York 2004, p.191

3. “Symbolic violence” in organizations.

Contemporary organizational, managerial and consumerist culture has become the most important tool of controlling and exercising power. The tool is very effective and dangerous as it is often a tool in disguise and acting implicate, rather systemically than personally. It is not “naked violence” connected with physical repression, but subtle mechanisms of control and social self-control, which, after P.Bourdieu, can be called “symbolic violence”.⁴ Language, value systems and norms, organizational structures, communication networks are hierarchical and have control of minds in the interest of the owners of financial, political, relational, or more generally cultural capital. “Symbolic violence” penetrated all aspects of organizing through culture which according to the core metaphor is an organization.⁵ Using the Foucault’s metaphor, culture becomes the panopticon, controlling organizations and instilling systems of self-control in their members.⁶

4. Instrumental methods of “culturism” in organizations.

As H.Willmott said, organizations practise “corporate culturism”, which manifests itself in a drive to create monoculture oriented only to realization of aims and interests of owners and managers.⁷ That means implementation of practices integrating the organization and promoting conformism in order to create a strong, homogenous organizational culture.⁸ “Corporate culturism” is a reflection of the functionalistic understanding of culture as a variable subject to controlling and being a controlling tool at the same time. According to representatives of CMS, functionalists popularized the idea of an organizational culture which can be easily manipulated, thus becoming another tool of oppression for those holding power. Researchers representing CMS criticize the use of instrumental, manipulative and sociotechnical methods of managing culture, people, meanings, pointing at their bases connected with maintaining status quo. They also indicate that the methods of exercising control and power and connected with realization of interests of those holding power are becoming more sophisticated. Autonomy of the employee, give sense to organizational work, non-material motivation, building loyalty

⁴ P. Bourdieu, *Espace social et pouvoir symbolique*, in : “Choses dites”, Minuit, Paris 1987.

⁵ L.Smircich, 1989. *Koncepcje kultury a analiza organizacyjna*. Transl. J.Gąciarz. [in:] Marcinkowski A., Sobczak J.B. (ed.). *Wybrane zagadnienia socjologii organizacji. Część II: Perspektywa kulturowa w badaniach organizacji*. Kraków, UJ, p.57

⁶ D.Lyon, *Theorizing surveillance: the panopticon and beyond – Reference, Information and Interdisciplinary Subjects Series*, Willan Publishing 2006.

⁷ H.Willmott, *Strength is ignorance; slavery is freedom: managing culture in modern organizations*. “Journal of Management Studies”, 1993b, No 30/4, p.515-552.

⁸ M.Alvesson, *Understanding Organizational Culture*, London: Sage, 2002, p.35.

and organizational identity, can all be tools of increasing profits. It means that autonomy, loyalty, identification are not autotelic, but are only means of increasing efficiency and profitability. Hence, it is “ostensible subjectivization“, developed by such conceptions as: “theory Y”, school of interpersonal relations, social responsibility of business, self-management etc, which, in fact, is of manipulative character.⁹

5. Organization and organizational culture as a “total institution”.

E.Goffman, creating the conception of total institutions, described organizations which were relatively isolated and had their own, very efficient control mechanisms which led to destruction of individualities of the organization’s members.¹⁰ In result of the planned, but also spontaneous development of the controlling system in such institutions as: hospitals, penal institutions, monasteries, a bureaucratized, depersonalized system was created. Its priority were exclusively the aims of the organization, at the expense of its members. Visions of such dehumanized management, resembling a total institution or even totalitarian systems with their dream about one, coherent and true culture and ideology, are sometimes presented as threats to contemporary organizations.¹¹ They refer to the whole organization which creates sophisticated systems of bureaucratic control, increasingly using modern surveillance technologies and permanent control.¹² Systems of self-control and self-censorship are of cultural character and they contribute to homogenization of culture, building of strong organizational identity but also suppressing nonconformism, individuality, maybe even creativity.¹³ Dehumanized organization resembling a total institution finds reflection in various areas of the organization, for example in

⁹ Compare: H.Willmott, *Strength is ignorance; slavery is freedom: managing culture in modern organizations*. “Journal of Management Studies” 1993b, No 30/4, p.515-552.

¹⁰ E.Goffman: “Charakterystyka instytucji totalnych” in: *Elementy Teorii Socjologicznych*, PWN Warszawa 1975.

¹¹ Ł.Sułkowski, *Groźne oblicze organizacji – dehumanizacja w zarządzaniu personelem*, in: “Współczesne problemy i koncepcje zarządzania”, ed. J.Stankiewicz, Uniwersytet Zielonogórski, Zielona Góra 2003, p. 125-130.

¹² D.Lyon, *Surveillance as social sorting: privacy, risk, and digital discrimination*, Routledge, 2003; *Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development* OECD Publishing, 2004.

¹³ J.Brewis, J.Gavin, 2009, *Culture: Broadening the Critical Repertoire*. [in:] Alvesson M., Bridgman T., Willmott H. (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Management Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.234-235.

Comp. I.Erdogan, *Recommendations on Media and Ethics*, Proceedings “International Symposium on Media and Ethics”, November 3-4, 2006, <http://www.siyasaliletisim.org/pdf/medyaveetikongrebildirileri.pdf>, p.207.

the system of human resource management.¹⁴ Personnel function oriented to maximization of exploitation of people is, according to CMS representatives, a reason for the growth of subdiscipline and practice of human resource management.¹⁵ Mechanisms of total institutions, whose manifestations we find in contemporary organizations, can also be found at the level of organizational subcultures. A famous experiment conducted by P.Zimbardo, where students were divided into groups of “prisoners” and “guards”, shows how fragmentation of culture and creation of subcultures become a catalyst for violence in the organization, violence that can take symbolic as well as physical forms.¹⁶ The base for total institutions is also human psyche and mechanisms of authority present in the culture. In another famous experiment of social psychology, S.Milgram showed how the pressure of authority may lead to formation of social structures using violence.¹⁷ Pressure of authority of any kind can force people to use violence against others.

6. “Neocolonialism” of cross cultural management and globalization

Representatives of CMS refer to the criticism of neoimperialism present in the discourse on management and other humanities and social sciences for several years. N.Chomsky publishes and conducts social campaigns to develop awareness of the necessity to change neoimperial orientation of American culture and the process of “colonization” making use of globalization mechanisms.¹⁸ According to Chomsky, international corporations, financial institutions and governments of the richest countries create an order of exploitation and maintain status quo in their own interest.¹⁹ It is manifested by free flow of capital, economic hegemony of the financial and banking sector, which is politically protected. In order to realize their economic interests, governments of many countries are ready to take military action. However, the role of culture in this neoimperial system is important, as it rationalizes, camouflages and glorifies activities of corporations and managers. According to many critical researchers, managerial culture, cross cultural management are a kind of disguise for neoimperialism

¹⁴ A.P.Brief, *Still Servants of Power*, “Journal of Management Inquiry”, 9/4, 2000.

¹⁵ P.Boxall, J.Purcell, P.Wright, *The Oxford Handbook of Human Resource Management*, Oxford 2007.

¹⁶ P.G.Zimbardo, C.Maslach, C.Haney, *Reflectionson the Stanford Prison Experiment:Genesis, transformations, consequences* [in] T.Blass, *Obedience to authority: Current Perspectives on the Milgram paradigm*. Mahwah N.J.: Erlbaum, 2000, (pp.193-237).

¹⁷ S.Milgram, *Obedience to authority*. New York: Harper & Row, 1974.

¹⁸ N.Chomsky, *Making the Future: The Unipolar Imperial Moment*, City Lights Publishers 2010

¹⁹ N.Chomsky, *Powers and Prospects: Reflections on Human Nature and the Social Order*, Boston: South End Press, 2006.

and exploitation on the one hand, and on the other – they are instrumental tools and techniques of obtaining highly-efficient work in international environment. Therefore the theory of management in globalization conditions is developed primarily as rationalization of interests of the people in power. Intellectualists, researchers, academics and consulting sector getting excited about globalization processes can glorify this trend in their own interest on the one hand, but on the other hand they have the role of Lenin's "useful idiots", "intoxicated" with the idea of world unity.

7. "Colonization of mind" of a "one-dimensional man" controlled by consumerist culture.

Consumerist culture channels human nature in accordance with the interests of people exercising power. It is not by chance that culture often becomes a tool of exercising power as well as losing it. A projection of contemporary power shared by: corporations, managers and owners on the one side and governments, politicians and the media on the other, is the postmodernist culture of contemporary consumerism. Janus face of power is reflected in seemingly individualistic culture. In reality, as S.Deetz said, we live in the world of "everyday life colonized by corporations" which shape our consumerist needs through mechanisms of cultural, social and media communication.²⁰ N.Klein describes the practice of artificial swelling of consumers' needs by means of sophisticated tools of psychomanipulation and social engineering in marketing. People become slaves of brands, which, through successful advertising, PR and branding, become the basic source of identification and satisfaction for them.²¹ Thus, paradoxically, although standard of living today is much higher than even several years ago and technical progress improves comfort of life, it still does not change social structure and human condition. All the time the world is divided into the privileged, holding power, and the subordinated, that is defavoured. In order to maintain the existing social order and to make exploitation more efficient, the system mechanism in the form of culture, mass-media and education "programmes" human minds, stressing the natural and unavoidable character of the existing order. In this way culture *implicite* creates a "model" postmodern consumer, whose freedom to make market choices is often limited to the role of "one-dimensional man" and controlled from the outside.²² Consumerist choice in conditions of getting identity by identifying

²⁰ S.A.Deetz, *Democracy in an age of corporate colonization*, State University of New York Press, 1992

²¹ N.Klein, *No Logo*, Świat Literacki, Izabelin 2004.

²² H.Marcuse, "Introduction to the Second Edition", *One-dimensional Man: studies in ideology of advanced industrial society*, London: Routledge 1991.

with brands and the excess of information leading to disorientation, is in fact in keeping with the interests of the dominating groups.

8. Achievements of management sciences as a projection of culture legitimizing power.

Threads of power have been inseparably woven with the conception of culture in management sciences. According to representatives of CMS, it results from the instrumental character of the discipline of science and its practices created primarily for the more effective exploitation of other people. This is reflected in most conceptions created in management. Human resource management, using dehumanized language of “resource”, “human capital”, “personnel” or “staff” indoctrinates to legitimize power. Marketing culture creates illusions of choice channelling defavoured groups in narrow paths of consumerism.²³ Accounting and finance management are totally depersonalized and treat a man as money flow.²⁴ Strategic management rationalizes profit and development of the organization at the expense of people.

9. Critical management education

Critical management education, which is a part of CMS, develops criticism of dehumanized management education based on instrumental reasoning on the one hand and on the other hand it proposes a breakthrough in the form of deeper reflection and development of methods engaging people and treating them as subjects in the organizations.²⁵ CMS criticizes ideological character of management culture manifesting itself in management education being a kind of secondary socialization based on instrumental rationality. The education system supports power relations because it combines theory and practice. Graduates of business studies or MBA are educated in a spirit of business ethics and not all-human ethics, so they concentrate on effectiveness, economicality, loyalty to the owners and managers.²⁶ Managerial ethos is thus rationalization of the lack of moral scruples. After this kind of education employees are treated as a “resource”, only a means for realization of economic

²³ D.Brownlie, M.Saren, R.Wensley, R.Whittington (eds.), *Rethinking Marketing: Towards Critical Marketing Accountings*, London: Sage 1999

²⁴ T.Tinker, *Paper Prophets: a social critique of accounting*, New York, 1985, Praegar.

²⁵ Compare. M.Zawadzki (2010), *Autorytet symboliczny jako wyzwanie dla edukacji menedżerskiej i nauk o zarządzaniu*, [in:] L.Witkowski, M.Jaworska-Witkowska (ed.) *Pedagogika i zarządzanie edukacją i rozwojem. W perspektywie troski o uniwersytet i kulturę humanistyczną*, seria: “Przebudzenia Humanistyczne. Kolokwia”, vol. I, published by A.Marszałek, Toruń, p.222-248.

²⁶ See. A.Contu, *Critical Management Education*. [in:] M.Alvesson, T.Bridgman, 2009, Czarniawska B.,Gagliardi P. (ed.) *Management Education and Humanities*. Cheltenham, Norhampton: E. Elgar, 2006.

and market goals. Management education is thus based on indoctrination and conveying technocratic knowledge, whose aim is often instrumentalization of people in organizations.²⁷ Education and socialization of managers also serves reproduction, that is transferring power to the chosen ones. As P.Bourdieu put it, management education creates a habitus favouring reproduction of power structures, which is a manifestation of symbolic violence.²⁸ We can say that ideology, but also ethos and profession of manager (habitus) are “inherited” or instilled during the education process. The system of schools of higher education, as studies of P.Bourdieu and J.C.Passeron show, promotes students who have cultural capital, that is those coming from the social class of owners. Similar results were obtained in earlier studies of B.Berenstein.²⁹ At the same time the education system effectively selects nonconformists who do not want to accept managerial culture and ethos.

10. Guru in power structures

Managerial culture is based on authorities which are created in the society and reflect structures of power. Some of the most popular and influential representatives of management take a position of guru instead of the one of a reflective and critical researcher. Gurus are then “heroes” and the most important popularizers of the oppressive managerial culture and ideology. Gurus “producing” the most popular handbooks and simple and “practical” conceptions of management concentrate on a clear, infectious idea, combined with successful marketing. Gurus are read because their conceptions “are seductive”, that is they: 1) do not require any deeper reflection, 2) are easy to understand and remember, 3) have an element of a “shocking” novelty, 4) are presented in a simple, nonacademic language. However, contrary to what may seem, gurus are not rebels destroying the existing power structures, but they support them. They have the function of a “cultural industry” in management, that is a mechanism described by the French school. They create media interest in conceptions and structures of management sanctioning this order as obvious and natural. They absorb minds with “memos” of infectious conceptions, pushing aside a reflection on issues basic for the organization, such as power and justice. Consciously or unconsciously gurus try to “program the minds” of managers in the way that promotes the interests of those holding power.³⁰

²⁷ L.Perriton, M.Reynolds, *Critical Management Education: From Pedagogy of Possibility to Pedagogy of Refusal?*, Management Learning 2004, 35, 1: 61-77

²⁸ P.Bourdieu, J.C.Passeron, *A Reproduction. Elements pour une theorie du systeme d'enseignement*, Les Editions de Minuit Collection Sens Commun, Paris 1970.

²⁹ B.Berenstein, *Towards a Theory of Educational Transmissions*, 1975; B.Berenstein, *Selection and Control*, 1974.

³⁰ J.Micklethwait, A.Wooldridge, *The world tomorrow: The essentials of globalization*, Times

“Cultural industry” of gurus is supported by advertising, PR and scientific marketing, which lead to building a position of “idols” for managers. Gurus are treated in a special way because their publications are of popular character and do not meet academic requirements and therefore they are subject to reliable academic criticism relatively rarely.³¹ However, we need to stress that relations with the practice and the counseling sector are inherent to management understood as a practical scientific discipline and thus writing for practitioners and managers is a value in itself. Some management gurus from the past, such as P. Drucker, P. Kotler or I. Ansoff had significant scientific achievements, sometimes being a base for the whole subdisciplines of management.

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³¹ E. Chiapello, N. Fairclough, *Nowa ideologia zarządzania. Podejście transdyscyplinarne krytycznej analizy dyskursu i nowej socjologii kapitalizmu*. [in:] A. Duszak, N. Fairclough (ed.) *Krytyczna analiza dyskursu. Interdyscyplinarne podejście do komunikacji społecznej*. Kraków 2008: UNIVERSITAS, p.403.

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Abstract

Representatives of CMS believe that in order for the theory and practice of management to get a humanistic dimension, it is necessary to incorporate emancipation as a core value in the organizational culture. Without it, all theories and methods of management will be instrumental.

Problems of culture in management were an area where alternative management trends originated and developed. It is similar in the case of CMS, for which cultural issues are of key importance both from epistemological as well as methodological and pragmatic points of view.

A value of CMS is the use of neo-marxism, the Frankfurt school and feminism in the studies of neomarxist culture. Earlier they were used rather in political sciences and sociology. Another advantage of CMS is stimulating of the awareness of researchers, managers and workers, the aim which is to increase ethical sensitivity and social responsibility of management sciences. It is connected with a proposition to develop new methods and techniques of culture studies, such as: empowerment, parities, action research, discursive tools.