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Time had but effaced his image when the show began

A reflection on the academic career of Slawomir Magala

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to outline the background and the plot of the academic career of Slawomir Magala, particularly from the point of view represented by the author who had co-created significant international conference on critical theory and the sciences of management which triggered off the critical management studies in the British and subsequently global academic research networks.

Design/methodology/approach – The content of the research is based on a mixture of a historical account of a conference on the Frankfurt school of social research, observations and participatory observations, qualitative content analysis and a bibliographical case study.

Findings – The long-term effects of an international networking event are hard to predict and almost never respect the academic borders and gate keepers.

Research limitations/implications – This paper is a very personal point of view.

Practical implications – This paper is a case study of academic school emergence.

Social implications – This paper is a case study of social and political relevance of managerial research.

Originality/value – The unique selling point of this paper is that it is based on a critical event in uncritical sciences.

Keywords Scholarship

Paper type Research paper

In my contribution to this special issue devoted to the work of Slawek Magala I want to highlight the role of a conference we organized together in 1988, which may be considered to have been the incubator of critical management studies as we know it today. It was during the 75th anniversary of Erasmus University that I started to organize this conference on the Frankfurt School of Social Research entitled The Frankfurt School: How relevant is it today?

It was not so much that the primary objective of the conference was to consciously create this stream of critical management research, because we thought it was somehow needed or because we had a particular aim in giving business research a new direction. The reason to take up the task of organizing the conference was rather different, as I happened quite by accident to come into the possession of a collection of unpublished

The title is an English translation of the first sentence from the novella *Pensioen* (Retirement) by the famous Flemish novelist Willem Elsschot, Atheneum-Polak van Gennep 2003. In Dutch the sentence reads: “*De tijd had zijn beeld zo goed als uitgewist toen het spektakel begon.*”

This paper has been composed with the generous help of Juup Essers and is partly based on an interview the author had with him.



letters by members of the Frankfurt School, containing correspondence between Horkheimer and Adorno dating back to their childhood friendship, as well as some letters by Walter Benjamin, which could throw new light on the history and development of the Frankfurt School. The collection also contained the musical scores of a couple of symphonies composed by Adorno himself. Initially my aim was simply to officially offer this unpublished legacy to current members of the Frankfurt School to include it in the biography and esoteric appraisal of its historical development. Much to my disappointment, after having travelled to Frankfurt (and losing the engine of our car along the way) to discuss with Habermas how to hand over the material, he seemed quite uninterested and refused his cooperation.

Back in Rotterdam I pondered the options I had. I did not feel much inclined to write an alternative biography of the Frankfurt School myself based on this new material. This was the case as well for the possessors of the collection before me. Otmar Preuß, a professor in education, had come across it through his friendship with Matthias Becker, who was supposed to have written the biography but had died unexpectedly before he had even started it, partly because Horkheimer had not proven very cooperative either. When Preuß received the material after Becker's wife had threatened to throw it in the bin, he did not feel capable to do the work involved. As for myself, after having thoroughly studied the material, which instilled in me a strong dislike of Horkheimer for his rather authoritarian intellectual demeanour, and because I was only remotely familiar with or interested in reconstructing the history of the Frankfurters, I decided I had to find a way to get the material to where it belonged, in German hands. It was then that I contacted Ute Kirchhelle from the Goethe Institute in Rotterdam, who did appreciate the culture-historical value of the collection and generously sponsored the conference.

The conference

After two months of intense preparation and having overcome the initial resistance of the university's academic establishment, who did not want to see their anniversary celebrations hijacked by a symposium of alleged "Marxists", I got the support from my colleague and friend Slawek Magala who had the academic network we needed to start inviting people. With the handsome budget provided by the Goethe Institute we both organized the conference, from 30 November till 2 December 1988, around a number of sub tracks next to a general meeting on art and postmodern thought, a concert of the Rotterdam Philharmonic with compositions of Adorno, Alban Berg, Hindemith and Schönberg and a series of exhibitions on architecture, ballet and theatre, hosted by several museums, theatres and dance companies, among which an exposition at the Municipal Museum in The Hague of Frankfurt furniture from before Second World War and a number of paintings by the famous Dutch painter Rob Scholte.

The core tracks of the conference concerned the *Influence of Critical Theory and Critical Thought* (Van Engeldorp Gastelaars *et al.*, 1990a), *Critics and Critical Theory in Eastern Europe* (Van Engeldorp Gastelaars *et al.*, 1990b), and *Critical Theory and the Science of Management* (Van Engeldorp Gastelaars *et al.*, 1990c). In the first of these, through the avid networking efforts of Slawek and with his untiring social charm, we managed to attract such internationally renowned scholars as Peter Sloterdijk, Helmut Dubiel, Axel Honneth, Thomas McCarthy, David Held, Martin Jay and Niklas Luhmann as well as some prominent members of the Dutch Critical Theory Circle like Lolle Nauta, Harry Kunneman and Willem van Reijen. The second track saw the attendance of many Eastern European scholars and human rights activists like Svetozar Stojanović,

Mate Szabo, Dmitrina Petrova, Wolfgang Templin and the late Zoran Đinđić, who was actively involved in the liberation movement of Yugoslavia and later served two years as Prime Minister of Serbia before being assassinated by Serbian terrorists. The third track witnessed the presence of researchers that have since belonged to the most prominent figures in the field of critical management studies, like Hugh Willmott, Mats Alvesson, Barbara Czarniawska and John Forester.

Looking at the contributions of some of these participants to the conference one cannot help but feel one is entering a kind of time capsule. Only a year after the conference we saw the fall of the Iron Curtain, followed shortly after by the devastating war in former Yugoslavia, and since then the rise of global capitalism, its first major crisis in the burst of the dotcom bubble and of course most recently the global financial crisis. With hindsight one can hardly expect participants to have foreseen these events, nor the particular flavour that critical management thought has taken on since, not least because of the pervasive changes in the institutional organization of the academic world itself which through the advent of the worldwide “publish and perish”-rat race was to turn academic work into the fraud-prone and intellectually debilitating numbers game it has now become. At the time of the conference English was not yet the universal *lingua franca* of academia, which is noticeable not only in the (sometimes) limited level of English competence of the contributors but also in the fact that almost half of the contributions was in German. Given that personal computers had not yet widely penetrated the academic world at the time either, I also remember the enormous amount of hard work we spent behind typewriters and primitive word processors to get the proceedings of the conference published. It took us practically two whole years.

The conference’s legacy

While the conference certainly shook the scientific world of those days, it is also fair to say that its impact nonetheless was fairly limited. Not only was this the case, because the conference was not supported by the Frankfurt School, as a result of which the attendance of Frankfurt School affiliates from Germany was relatively low. Also, although a large part of the left wing intellectual elite from Europe was present, this could not be said for the presence of French intellectuals of the day. As such the conference missed the infusion of a broad range of postmodern thought that was about to engulf critical management research for roughly a decade after. All in all, the conference could neither be seen as a continuation of the thoughts and ideas of Frankfurt school representatives like Adorno, Benjamin, Marcuse, Horkheimer and their followers nor as an instance of the impending deconstructionist wave taking hold of leftist social thought in business and management studies through the earlier work of Deleuze, Lyotard and Derrida.

For the development of Critical Management Studies this may have proven to be a mixed blessing. On one hand, it freed the field of CMS from the sometimes restrictive interpretive frameworks imposed by such schools of thought and allowed the newly built network of participants to the conference to creatively pursue their own less-traditionally Marxist avenues of inquiry, freely and sometimes somewhat eclectically borrowing what they could use from them, while addressing issues as they unfolded in the field of management and business studies on their own terms. As German critical thought, perhaps with the exception of Habermas and Sloterdijk, did not for quite some time venture outside its own language community to keep up with academic globalization, and French social thought struggled with the same handicap, the CMS community concentrated around Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, the UK, the USA and other English speaking parts of the world.

Thus, for instance, after the penetrating criticism by Willmott of the culture management hype in the early nineties (Willmott, 1993), which was already foreshadowed by the contribution of Willmott and Alvesson to the conference, critical avenues in culture management studies emerged around issues like subjectivity and personal identity in organizations, critiques of neoliberal management and human capital discourse and practice and of course the impact of globalization. In a sense this positioned Magala's chair in cross-cultural management in the epicentre of critical intellectual development. No longer fettered by old-fashioned, deterministic historical-materialist or neo-Marxist doctrine, it allowed the CMS community to focus on current developments such as the transition economies of Eastern Europe and the rise of the East-Asian tigers, as well as critical analyses of the role of the internet in consumerism and brand management.

On the other hand, though, one cannot help but observe that CMS has been largely reactive in its response to such developments. Nobody seems to have prophesied the kinds of torrential crises the business and management world has witnessed since the turn of the century. And generally, for all the penetrating and insightful analyses it produced, CMS has not been able to counteract or put a stop to the neoliberal sentiment taking hold of the world, as long as it was backed by high welfare and economic growth (however much feigned or fabricated) in most Western countries. In the dominant constructionist mood of CMS discourse, we never realized that the neoliberal "side" were the far better, or let us say far more effective constructionists. Outside the direct field of management studies, other members of the critical persuasion did not fare much better, like Miliband (1983) or Whitley (2002), let alone the mainstream scholars from fields like financial management and banking, especially regarding the worldwide developments of financial infrastructures and their fusion with technological infrastructures around the globe. Only in the most recent of years perhaps, after the major tremors of the financial earthquake had already died down, some independent authors like Graeber (2011), Piketty (2014) and Stiglitz (2015) outside the field of management studies have made the first meaningful inroads into fleshing out the structural socio-cultural determinants of these events.

Second though, and far more importantly in my opinion, there are the profound methodological and epistemological issues social science is incessantly struggling with, the religious and metaphysical roots of which are still insufficiently appreciated. Usually referred to as the crisis of representation these issues revolve around the impossibility of our direct and undistorted access to reality as such access is always already tainted by the symbolic structure of language, the inevitable collective enactment of such misrepresentations in social behaviour leading to all kinds of self-fulfilling prophecies, and consequently the self-referential ideological contamination of "objective" social reality itself in a constant blurring of fact and fiction, which for all intents and purposes forecloses any possibility of a-political social research. That all knowledge from this perspective is in the deepest possible sense idolatrous, violating the biblical prohibition of grafting images of God or even naming Him, or of aspiring to a position of omniscience similar to His, for which humanity was punished by the dispersion of languages and our inability to communicate, reflects the deep-rooted suspicion of our ever being able through knowledge to regain Paradise. As Ralston Saul (1993, p. 427) avers, while most world religions from Judaism and Islam to Shintoism and Buddhism and many African religions shared this fundamental suspicion of image worship, the paradoxical situation with Christianity is that in spite of its official denunciation of such worship "no civilization has ever been so resolutely idolatrous as the Christian".

Now more than ever the realization of this highly problematic nature of knowledge and, from a semiotic perspective, its structural similarity to the “rule” of purely symbolic money in market ideology and to the spectral status of self-identity in psychology through their common source in the inconvertibility of the sign, i.e. its arbitrary, non-referential nature as a general standard of equivalence, should sensitize us to the dictatorship of representation and of the image in postmodern society (Hawkes, 2003).

Again this puts cross-cultural management at the heart of critical reflection on management and business studies in a globalizing world, not just in debates about intercultural convergence or diversity, the promotion of intercultural communication and understanding through mass media and the (Marcusian) role of the global culture industry as a reproduction system of ideologies, but also in the strenuous relationship between different scientific disciplines and paradigms. Slawek has always been acutely aware of the intricacies of these themes and like many wise men avoided getting caught in the coils of paradigmatic strife. Far from implying in the title of this paper, that at the moment of his well-deserved retirement, he is already on the verge of being “effaced”, to the contrary it is rather meant as a call to reinvigorate CMS in Slawek’s erudite style, now that it is most needed to critically address the role of business and management studies in the current development of capitalism, of financial markets and information technologies and their effects on social change, i.e. to focus on the entwinement of economy, culture, technology and law to understand the dynamics of global society. Perhaps a new critical research programme inspired by Pitirim Sorokin’s analysis of socio-cultural dynamics (Sorokin, 1941, 1970) would provide a promising start.

For Slawek, next to now being able to thoroughly enjoy with his wife Joanna the pleasures of grandparenthood, I also wish him the joy of a newly regained academic freedom to further pursue his inspiring research. Because of his emphatic rejection of any kind of one-dimensional research or vision of society, like many of his illustrious Polish predecessors in science among whom we may mention not only Copernicus, but also Florian Znaniecki, Zygmunt Bauman, Leszek Kolakowski and Stanislaw Ossowski, I gladly add him to this list.

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