

On critical studies of organizations and management in Brazil

by Vitor Klein

Students of organizations and management in Brazil have many reasons to engage in critical research. As a Brazilian I can't help thinking that many of our grievances and afflictions about our very society are poorly represented in our knowledge about organizations and management. Corruption, work exploitation, income inequality, poor infrastructure and misuse of natural resources have origins that run deep in Brazilian society: *coronelismo* (a form of patrimonialism operating during the Old Republic in which local agrarian oligarchs exerted dominance over state structures) reverberates through the constituents of Brazilian bureaucracy; racial exploitation insidiously undergird contemporary forms of organizing, and cronyism and big businesses' interests have far flung consequences that ask for elucidation. In a moment when there is a feeling that management study in Brazil has drifted away "from the practical needs" of this society (Tonelli, 2015), Brazilian academics should tackle such problems head-on.

Saying that critical research plays a marginalized role within Brazilian academia doesn't mean that critique is wholly absent from organization and management studies. Some scholars have, in fact, nurtured genuine concerns about the role of critique in their context (e.g. Misoczky and Flores, 2009; Misoczky et al., 2009; Flores, 2009; Faé and Flores, 2012). These concerns stem from an interest in developing theories that make sense to a Brazilian readership and which, thereby, tackle the problems that more directly affect Brazilians. Much of this tradition is rooted in the works of scholars such as Alberto Guerreiro Ramos, Fernando Prestes Motta, Maurício Tragtenberg, Paulo Freire, Caio Prado Junior and Milton Santos. Writing from a critical

stance long before the consolidation of the CMS field, these scholars gave centrality to Brazil in their writings and today exert a strong influence on a younger generation of critical researchers.

Guerreiro Ramos is probably one of the most influential within this younger generation. He is widely known for his concepts of sociological reduction and the parenthetical man. He saw the sociological reduction (Guerreiro Ramos, 1958) as paramount to avoiding the unreflective transposition of concepts between cultures. Here, Guerreiro Ramos was crusading against the mindless adoption of North-American and European literatures, which, for him, were mechanistically assimilated by Brazilian sociologists. Also of great relevance is his conceptualization of the parenthetical man (Guerreiro Ramos, 1971), a response to the naïve psychologism inherent in the bulk of management literature. The works of Guerreiro Ramos can be viewed today as a rather static approach, especially when read by researchers with a poststructuralist inclination. However, his concerns about an increasing dominance of instrumental rationality within society, his critical imagination in outlining a theory that delimits the role of markets and his keen eye over the ways in which ideas get distorted remain relevant.

Efforts to preserve the contributions of Brazilian scholars, such as those of Guerreiro Ramos, must be praised. Especially, as Misoczky and Flores (2009) argue, the dictatorship in Brazil – from 1964 to 1985 – pushed many of them and their ideas into oblivion. However, though these contributions remain relevant to an engaged critique, critical studies of organizations and management in Brazil can be considered rather limited. Surveying major journals in the country, Davel and Alcadipani (2003) found that only 2% of the papers published during the 1990s employed a critical perspective,

mostly adopting a modernist conception of critique and displaying a lack of empirical studies. Here I can only speculate about why this is the case.

One reason might be the prejudices against critical research built into the ideology of positivism. The misconception that science progresses through accretion, that new ideas must strictly fit into previous frameworks and the bad reputation that critical research has under the badge of Marxism forestall the proliferation of critical research in Brazil. To this matter, the formulaic type of research described by Alvesson and Gabriel (2013) works in Brazil as a kind of shield against critical ideas. Another reason is the lack of institutional support. Davel and Alcadipani (2003) have shown that around 50% of those papers adopting a critical perspective during the 1990s came from only three institutions. A new survey is needed, but if this concentration persists today, when the country counts more than 2000 bachelor programs and 100 MA and PhD programs in management, this would indicate that a lot of work must be done to expand the reach of critical perspectives within the field. Hence, the difficulties in doing critical research in Brazil reside not only in academic orthodoxy, but also in the lack of incentives for producing it, be it from the absence of journals with a clear orientation towards critical research, or from academic programs that have it as mere accessory in their syllabi. Unsurprisingly then, critique is narrowed down to modernist and Marxist conceptions limiting the reach of its applications.

The task of critical researchers in Brazil is anything but trivial. At the end of the day they deal with as many prejudices, hollow assumptions and obsession with methods as mainstreamers do. "Nailing the pudding on the wall" is the metaphor Günther Ortman employs (2008: 116) to describe how difficult it is for new ideas to thrive in the face of academia's stubborn insistence on precision and rigor. Yet, theoretical puritanism leads, on the one hand, to a bureaucratization of critique

(Alcadipani and Tureta, 2009), and on the other, to a situation in which critical researchers, borrowing from Heidegger, continually sharpen the knife but never get round to cutting the meat, as in the endless debates around the 'correct' ways of doing critical research (Alcadipani and Tureta, 2009; Paula, 2009; Alcadipani, 2005; Misoczky and Amantino-De-Andrade, 2005a; Misoczky and Amantino-De-Andrade, 2005b). Thus, while rigor comes at the expense of sociological imagination, homogeneity is antithetical to the very project of a humanist science (Feyerabend, 1975).

Historically, one must concede, critique has thrived less on the correctness of conceptual usage than on the possibilities it opens up. That means that a critical attitude does more than to eradicate errors, as Foucault cogently explains (Foucault, 2007 [1978]; Butler, 2002). As the art of not being governed so much (*ibid.*), critique is a virtue unruly to authoritative truths. Daring to disobey would be therefore a welcomed twist to the Kantian motto *sapere aude* (*Dare to Know*). Critique as disobedience applies likewise to academic practice. For while we are all bound by the rules of our craft, courage to question what needs to be questioned greatly benefits from a bit of critical imagination. Bearing this in mind, students of organizations and management in Brazil will be better off by crafting multiple lenses for critique instead of framing it, and by using ideas of previous generations to cultivate thinkers instead of disciples.

In light of this, a rather sensible domain deserving critical scrutiny is the very terrain dwelled by academics: the university. Brazilian universities must carry out a transformation if their aim to transform students from disciples of a profession or market into agents of change. A pressing issue for critical researchers would then be to lay bare how universities are implicated in the reproduction of modes of domination and subordination both outside and inside its walls. Max Weber raised important

concerns about the perpetuation of submissive mediocrity in German universities when the state actively intervened in the process of hiring faculty (Weber, 1989). Unlike Weber's, ours is a time when Brazilians lay their hopes for a better future over better education. And yet, in the way academic life in Brazil is organized (e.g. Godoi and Xavier, 2012), only by chance will thinkers of great stature thrive. Unveiling the contemporary forms of submissive mediocrity perpetrated by Brazilian universities is thus an important step to reform them. This alone offers no guarantee of a better society, but it is certainly paramount to salvage intellectual integrity and the highly extolled values of science.

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