

**On critical management studies: An interview with Ekaterina Chertkovskaya for
Forsat Emrooz, conducted by Seyyed Ehsan Golparvar**

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Forsat Emrooz (FE): What is your definition of critical management?

Ekaterina Chertkovskaya (EC): Critical Management/Organisation Studies (CMS) may be broadly understood as theoretically informed critical research on work/management/organisation, which analyses the established relations of power, control, domination and ideology, as well as the relations among organisations, society and people.

Unlike what may be called ‘mainstream’ management and organisation studies, which usually take for granted certain organisational goals, such as profitability and efficiency, and discuss various other themes in light of these, CMS problematises the taken-for-granted and analyses management and organisations as social and political phenomena. Furthermore, CMS also looks at organisations and organising in the broadest sense of these words, not confining them to corporations or for-profit organisations and studying a whole plethora of organisational forms, including cooperatives, collectives and social movements.

While the Marxist and Foucauldian theoretical traditions could be seen as the starting points of CMS research (which may roughly be associated with the late 80s and the 90s), this approach to doing research on management and organisations embraces various theoretical traditions including anarchism, critical theory, feminism, post-structuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism and psychoanalysis.

FE: Would you please introduce outstanding figures in this domain?

EC: Personally, I prefer not to think in such terms and hope a lot of people in the area would support me in this. I guess the main reason for such a stance is that for me CMS as an approach to doing research also implies a certain ethos, which includes being non-hierarchical, evaluating academic work based on ideas presented rather than people these come from, as well as appreciating plurality in approaches to doing CMS research. The risk in identifying certain people as ‘outstanding’, then, can challenge this ethos, for example, by copying the approaches that have been adopted by them and hence reproducing certain modes of thinking, closing off myriad other ways of doing important research.

However, for the readers of your magazine, I can recommend some seminal work in CMS, which could be a good starting point for further digging into the area. These could be, for example, ‘Sociological paradigms and organisational analysis’ by Gibson Burrell and Gareth Morgan, ‘Against management’ by Martin Parker or the ‘Oxford handbook of critical management studies’ edited by Mats Alvesson, Todd Bridgman and Hugh Willmott. ‘Key concepts in critical management studies’ edited by Mark Tadajewski and colleagues is a short book, which provides a helpful overview of the key concepts in the field.

FE: Why organizations and corporations need to pay attention to critical management studies?

EC: When answering this and similar questions, I would like to stress that CMS is not some tool that can be applied in management practice. One of the key features of CMS, as identified in the work of Valerie Fournier and Chris Grey, is de-naturalisation, i.e. problematising the taken-for-granted assumptions and goals in management practice and mainstream research. Challenging various 'common senses' and illuminating them in light of their social and political contexts is arguably important in itself, whether or not it then informs certain personal and organisational decisions and practices.

For example, my own research has looked at how a certain ideology of work is constructed at universities, where working at corporations is presented as this ideal work choice for students, and is quite aggressively marketed to them on campus. Such ideology confines the students' projections of our society and its future to particular and, I would argue, limited and problematic organisational forms. Seducing young people to become part of these organisations can also lead to them not challenging the problematic and unethical corporate practices. So for me it was important to highlight this issue and to de-naturalise this 'common sense' of working for a corporation as the most desirable choice for students, even though certain personal or organisational decisions might follow from being aware of this issue too.

Or, as another example, there is now a strand of research in CMS looking at alternative organisational forms, such as collectives and social movements. These are often organised to be non-hierarchical, inclusive and cherishing democratic decision-making. CMS research on such forms might, for example, highlight certain hierarchies that are reproduced in such organisations despite the values they are based on, which may then result in organisational members becoming aware of it and acting upon this issue in their practice.

FE: How can critical management improve managers' efficiency?

EC: Efficiency is exactly the sort of concept that would be de-naturalised in CMS, and I am happy this question allows me to explain the previous point on de-naturalisation a bit more. It is often assumed that efficiency is good and desirable in itself. In management, efficiency is then supposed to be part of managerial activity, something to be evaluated upon etc. So de-naturalising efficiency would be in saying that efficiency should not be an organisational, managerial or personal goal in itself, and that we should ask at least two questions when talking about efficiency.

First, what is sacrificed in strive for efficiency? For example, standardisation and fragmentation of work within the process of production may bring efficiency gains, leading to faster production and more output within a certain amount of time. However, the sacrifice is that such organisation of work is often alienating, dehumanising and deskilling, as well as negatively affecting physical and mental well-being of employees, who need to

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follow ever increasing paces of production. This description is, of course, especially visible in factory work, which has been largely outsourced to the southern hemisphere. However, this also often holds for what has been labelled as the 'service work' and even 'knowledge work'.

Second, what is this efficiency for? For example, industrial production is so standardised and fragmented in order to produce more stuff quicker. This does allow corporations to earn more money, of course, but the substantial side effects of this are often waste, which contributes to all sorts of environmental problems, as well as excessive consumption by certain groups of people (for example, in the northern hemisphere, as well as within the elites and rising middle classes in the southern), with people producing the goods often being barely able to survive. Or, to take another example, outsourcing certain organisational functions to other parts of the globe or to some specialist organisations can be considered more efficient. However, this comes at the cost of precarity, worsening terms and conditions of employment and the well-being of people and their families too.

This, of course, does not mean that efficiency is not needed. For example, permaculture is an important example of sustainable organising of agriculture, where the features of natural ecosystems are used in farming. Efficiency of organising permaculture, as long as it is done with nature and using organic inputs, matters a lot, as it allows to reduce cost of production and to be able to grow more and better within a certain often limited space.

To sum up, efficiency should not be a goal in itself and should not be harmful, so the 'what is sacrificed' and 'what for' questions are crucial to address.

FE: What is the role of critical management in developing organizational culture?

EC: Again, I don't think there's a role for critical management to play here, precisely due to the understanding of critical management developed above. However, I can recommend anyone interested in the theme of organisational culture to read Martin Parker's book 'Organizational culture and identity'.

FE: What are the roles and responsibilities of middle managers in organizations?

EC: I'm afraid this is not something I can comment on as the question does not relate to CMS or my particular research interests, nor does it speak to the issues that occupy my thoughts in general.

FE: How much do you know Iran?

EC: Not very much, I must admit. But it would definitely be nice to know more. Cinema can be one way of familiarising oneself with a country's culture, so I'd be happy to hear any recommendations. Thanks for your questions!