

# **Antagonism, Accommodation and Agonism in Critical Management Studies: Alternative Organizations as Allies**

## **Introduction**

'What's the point in criticizing everything like that? ... That's a bit dark... to be focussing on all that negativity... Haven't you got better things to look at?' (Employee at Anuvelar Investments)

From its beginnings, Critical Management Studies (CMS) has engaged in discussions about the purpose of critique and the possibilities of engagement (Alvesson and Willmott 1992, Parker 1995, 2002, Grice and Humphreys, 1997, Wray-Bliss, 2003, Clegg et al, 2006)<sup>1</sup>. Critique has always been in tension with a desire for influence. More recently, an explicit demand for practical relevance has become evident (Cox et al 2009, Malin et al, 2013) with one expression of this demand calling for CMS to moderate its 'negative' critique of management and instead use words like care and affirmation to enable engagement with managers (Spicer et al, 2009). This 'performative turn' has been poorly received by some, suggesting that critique is being blunted through the acceptance of the status quo, or worse, co-opted to serve managerial ends. This paper argues for a middle ground between antagonistic versions of CMS which claim to oppose themselves to managerialism, and 'performative' scholars who appear to accommodate with managers. We do this by situating the debate firmly within an empirical setting and a crisis that the first author experienced as a 'critical scholar' when conducting an ethnography at a sustainable financial services firm. Initially he anticipated an excellent opportunity to uncover oppression and control structures. What he found, as we will show later, is an organization that has arguably achieved far more than CMS has ever done in terms of challenging common conceptions of banking and finance.

The paper is organized as follows. First we outline the largely antagonistic history of CMS and then quickly explore the literature on critical performativity before using each to analyse an ethnographic vignette from a case study of an alternative organization. We then discuss ways in which it might be possible to establish an engaged critique without losing a critical sensibility, that is to say, without replacing antagonism with accommodation. In order to do this we explore Chantal Mouffe's concept of agonism (2013, 2014) to establish a particular mode of political engagement that acknowledges a space between being 'for' and being 'against'. This means making decisions about allies and adversaries, and to explore this further we return to some more empirical material from our particular case. We conclude by suggesting that the exploration of alternative forms of organization and management, themselves already involved in struggle against a hegemonic present, should be the

proper task for CMS academics who wish to engage with the present and remain 'critical' at the same time.

### **For and Against Performativity**

Critical Management Studies is diverse. Theoretically fragmented and without a cumulatively derived 'CMS theory' (Adler, 2008), ontological assumptions, theoretical positions and methodologies vary widely. What appears to link CMS academics is that they are against things and this sense of antagonism is largely what has held CMS together. Such a position is evident in the much cited paper by Valerie Fournier and Chris Grey (2000) that drew boundaries around what CMS was and should be. Most relevant here is their explanation of non-performative intent. They suggest, quoting Lyotard (1984), that performativity is the 'intent to develop and celebrate knowledge which contributes to the production of maximum output for minimum input' (Fournier and Grey, 2000: 17). So, according to Fournier and Grey, CMS seeks to challenge and denaturalize this assumption. A non-performative stance would problematize notions of efficiency and hence should continually distance itself from any co-optation into performative managerialism.

CMS appears to be a project which needs the mainstream as something to identify against because the problem of capture clearly haunts anyone who claims to be a critical intellectual in the business school. A rather more nuanced attempt to preserve a sense of criticality at the same time as engaging with management can be found in the now extensive literature on 'Critical Performativity' (CP). This has been proposed as a way of moving CMS away from its antagonistic relationship with management whilst maintaining a critical sensibility. In order to do this, CP scholars have to first clarify what they mean by performativity. Spicer et al (2009) reinterpret Fournier and Grey's version of performativity as a concept that relates purely to the relationship between inputs and outputs and instead define the term as an active intervention into discourse and practice. They approvingly quote Judith Butler (1993: 225):

'Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech; most performatives, for instance, are statements that, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power'

For Butler, showing that discourses are performative opens up a space where it is possible to partly loosen their power over us, because we can create different sort of performances, including subversions and refusals. Spicer et al suggest that this understanding of discourses points to the possibility of understanding them as 'actively used, parodied and changed rather than just how they are fitted with existing meaning structures' (2009: 544).

Though this clearly isn't what Fournier and Grey meant by performativity, sponsors of CP have employed this redefinition to characterise much of CMS as 'anti-performative' in the sense that it refuses engagement with management. Supposedly by contrast then, CP recognises the 'need to appreciate the contexts and constraints of management' (Spicer et al, 2009: 545). This allows them to position CP as fundamentally pragmatic, involving care, respect and encouraging reflection for both the researcher and researched. This stance should be present in engaging affirmatively with management, understanding 'what works' and infusing critique with 'an affirmative and constructive impulse' (Alvesson et al, 2009: 13). Wickert and Schaefer provide support for Spicer et al's position by elaborating on the 'performative effects of language, to induce incremental, rather than radical, changes in managerial behaviour' (2014: 107). To introduce these changes it is suggested that critical scholars locate and identify management 'allies' and to encourage 'reflexive conscientization' - that is, a dialogic process between researchers and researched that aims to gradually raise the critical consciousness of actors in order that new practices can be 'talked into existence'. Hartmann (2014) on the other hand, proposes that CMS develops its capacity to contribute 'subversive' ideas to conventional management theory. In so doing CMS might then be taken seriously by the mainstream, and stand a chance of achieving change.

Less enthusiastic responses to this performative turn in critical management studies have also started to appear. Some have expressed concerns about CP but see it as a larger contribution to academic engagement with organisational life (King and Learmonth, 2014). Others have sought to correct the conceptual usage of the term, suggesting that it rests on a misreading of Butler (Cabantous et al, 2015). For example, Gond et al (2015) suggest that most of the tactics in a CP approach remain discursive, rather than material as Butler suggested. As a result, it 'may rely too much on the "magic" property of performativity and thus lose touch with important aspects of the solid conceptual roots provided by the foundational works on performativity' (Gond et al, 2015: 18). Fleming and Banerjee (2015) are even more sceptical about the power of language to achieve the emancipatory changes proposed. Sharply antagonistic, they suggest that CP presents a naïve and conservative notion of critique that is ultimately protective of the managerial status quo. In addition to expressing doubt about the power of language in being able to talk into existence new practices, Fleming and Banerjee claim that some advocates of CP seem to have a heroic conception of human agency. The idea that managers are likely to be able to unleash their inner activist against power relations in their own organization is, they suggest, unrealistic. Furthermore, this understanding of agency extends to the researcher's ability to engage so powerfully and persuasively with the middle-manager in the first place. Thus, the critics suggest that most advocates of CP appear to have a limited understanding of the material and linguistic context of the subject who seeks to 'perform' change and hence present 'politics' as if it were a matter of rational persuasion. In summary,

antagonists to CP collectively suggest that if you want to change the world, you need to go further than language.

In a recent special section of *Human Relations* Spicer et al (2016) were given space to respond to these issues. Recognising that their original 2009 paper was rather abstract, in 2016 they become rather more practical, offering comments on issue selection, forms of reasoning and, most relevant to us here, forms of engagement and desired outcomes. In terms of engagement, critical academics are encouraged to talk to disgruntled elites, mobilize resources, create forums for discussion and frame issues in a way that resonates with the wider public. Avoiding 'bullshit' ideas that might entice management with 'scant regard for truth' (Ibid: 241) it is suggested that advocates of CP should develop forums to have conversations with stakeholders and develop deliberative processes. Parker et al's (2014) work on alternatives is cited to show how it is possible to explore alternative organizational forms in order to 'compare and contrast progressive practices from other empirical realities and in that way re-imagine future social arrangements' (2016: 241). Another example provided by Spicer et al are the 'progressive' principles of management on show in professional services firms where profit is shared amongst the work force and meritocracy is a key principle for promotion.

Spicer et al's two papers certainly present a convincing demand for engagement, but in what sense is it 'critical'? Perhaps it is better described as a liberal position, a 'decaff' CMS (Contu 2008) which looks for slightly better management practices and a little bit of surplus redistribution. It seems to us that this whole debate leaves us no clearer about just what the modifier 'critical' might mean in conjunction with performativity. That is why, in this paper, we seek to interrogate what CP proposes with reference to an empirical 'alternative'. This is intended to help critical scholars decide just which alternatives to 'vigorously promote' (Schaefer and Wickert 2016: 222) and also provide an example to ground what are usually abstract discussions. We agree that if CMS is to try and achieve something with the voice that it has gained, then simply staying within its own comfortable, and theoretically rich, form of antagonism is unlikely to have much purchase on the world. That is precisely why it is so important to explore alternatives. But what is 'an alternative'? What normative commitments allow us to make a distinction between a strategy of liberal amelioration, and an attempt to justify the prefix 'critical'? In the following section we provide a vignette from the first author's ethnography of a sustainable financial services firm called Anuvelar. In so doing, we present some data on an alternative organization that is doing things differently, and then consider what CMS scholars might do with this sort of account.

## **Anuvelar**

Anuvelar<sup>2</sup> is a small North American financial services organisation that deals in sustainable investments in renewable energy, organic farming and various charity organisations and faith groups. They have a very simple model - they take money from individuals who want interest but also want to see their money invested exclusively in ethical or sustainable projects. Anuvelar ensure that this happens and show their customers what they are doing by being transparent about the projects that they support. They deal with a variety of enterprises and screen investment opportunities based on the environmental, social and spiritual good produced for society. Over the past 20 years, Anuvelar has grown from a small entrepreneurial group of investors to an organisation with just over 100 employees. Due to their experience and longevity in the field they also now play a key facilitator role, using their knowledge and networks to considerable effect. Anuvelar see themselves as thought leaders attempting to change consumer attitudes towards finance, and also promoting the sensitive and patient use of capital as a way of changing the strategies of large financial institutions and corporations.

The empirical material used in this paper was collected during the first authors' six month ethnographic stay at the headquarters of Anuvelar in 2013. He worked in a variety of departments during that period, and assisted with the development of the organization's induction process. As part of the research, he interviewed 44 people from all levels within the organization, attended many different meetings and took notes on the everyday life of the organization. Data was handled using Nvivo 10 software, notes and memos were taken overtly within the 'natural environment' (Silverman, 2007) of Anuvelar and were developed further outside of the study setting (Van Maanen, 1988). These field-notes included thoughts, reflections, feelings, frustrations and successes. Since the study, the first author's representation of Anuvelar has been disseminated, discussed and agreed by current and ex Anuvelar employees. This account of a Monday morning at Anuvelar below is compiled from these notes and this process.

### **Monday Morning**

*I'm currently working with HR on their 'on-boarding' process, getting new co-workers excited about coming to work for such an environmentally caring and 'alternative' organisation. Thanks to the sixty eight page booklet I was given on my arrival I know that the fabric in my chair is made from 65% nettle and that my desk is made from 100% sustainably sourced wood. It is very nice too with its slight imperfections and rustic sturdiness. I also know that the electricity used to power my PC, the lights and the coffee machine – Fairtrade and organic of course – is all sourced from a renewable energy supplier who are also a customer. I wasn't in the office on Friday as I was visiting a customer specialising in organic muesli so I have a look at the*

*'daily news' email that is sent to everyone around mid-morning every day. It comes from marketing and picks up stories about Anuvelar in the media and also highlights some of the evil-doings of other financial services companies. Banks driving up food prices in Africa for profit, funding cluster bombs, money laundering all got a healthy going over during my time and are fuel for discussion at lunchtime.*

*Behind me are the customer service team. They have big TV monitors showing incoming calls, who is currently taking a call and who is currently in down time – writing up what a call was about. Of all the places in the office the customer services team are most obviously 'managed', both in terms of managerial processes and via the use of technology. Since the customer service manager moved to Anuvelar from a mainstream financial services company she has been focussed on consistency, professionalism and above all efficiency. I recall back to an interview with her:*

*'When I arrived here, it was a mess. There was no filing, no system for logging complaints, just lots of paper stacked up in a basement somewhere. The phone would ring 3 times before anyone would answer... I was like: 'wow, this has to change'. I have spent a lot of my time changing a lot of the processes here. Now, I think we are far more professional and that is a good thing if we want to continue growing like we are'*

*As it comes up to 9:30am we all make our way up to the 4<sup>th</sup> floor for the co-worker meeting that happens every Monday. When you get up to the 4<sup>th</sup> floor you are greeted by some graffiti-style art containing the words 'Green, not Greed!'. A quick scan of my key card and I enter into the 4<sup>th</sup> floor 'co-worker' space. Two fruit bowls of biodynamic, or at least organic, fruit greet me as I walk into the room which are sat on a long counter. A guitar sits next to books about ecology and the economy and various green awards and plants on a shelving unit. The furniture would not look out of place in an upmarket, yet rustic, café or bookshop in a posh part of any American city. Bean bags are on the floor, brightly coloured (and sustainably sourced) chairs are set around coffee tables at one end of the room and down the other are more traditional looking tables and chairs for people to eat their lunch or breakfast. Towards this end of the room there is the main meeting area.*

*The co-worker meeting is a space to hear about, disseminate and reflect upon the work that the various departments are doing. It could be an update from the renewables team about a new wind farm purchased or news from the investments team about a new housing project. The co-worker meetings are a very uplifting experience and are a way of really engaging with the great projects and achievements of the organisation. The majority of co-workers tell me that they look forward to every Monday morning as a real motivator for the rest of the week and it is easy to understand why.*

*Today's session is led by human resources and is looking at co-worker satisfaction and the responses to a survey that took place 6 months ago. This has been a difficult project as many key issues came up in the*

survey regarding advancement due to the small size of the organisation. There were also concerns regarding 'headcount' which is a method the organisation uses to divide labour and to ensure that there is a significant amount of surplus work before new co-workers were brought in. Both were sticky issues within the organisation and were being dealt with and discussed openly within the group at the co-worker meeting. Finally, the managing director brings the question and answer session to a close. We then all leave the room and head back down to our desks. When my HR colleague and I return to our desks he starts to talk to me about what the co-worker meetings are about:

*'It is predominantly about getting people to engage in what we do, about tapping into the commitment people have for the environment or organics or renewable energy'*

*'All the sustainable stuff?' I reply.*

*'Yeah, there are so many people who are so involved in all these things. Of course there are some who are less interested, but we want to get them all on-board and energised by the great work that we do. I mean, how can you not be excited by what we do?'*

*Within Anuvelar there are various camps of people who are engaged with different aspects of what can loosely be termed 'sustainability'. Some champion renewable energy, others care about organic food and are against the use of pesticides in farming. Other members of the organisation value cultural and spiritual expression and focus more on social and human elements of sustainability, whereas some look to change the way people think about and use money. I could go on with the various positions people occupy within Anuvelar, and will just mention the few members who are quite happy to just to work in a nicer atmosphere than some of the more corporate financial firms. But it is clear that, although sustainability ties many of these thoughts, feelings and activities together, it is not a homogeneous force within the organisation. Rather, the organisation attempts to 'unify through diversity', as a senior manager discussed with me at length. This unification is by no means easy and is premised upon an active participation in discussion, which can get quite heated. It involves more than just a person's job role or responsibility and accountability. Individuals often take these concerns with them beyond their work. It is a difficult and different method of engagement.*

*As usual on a Monday morning the Managing Director is now walking around the office talking to people. He seems to know everyone's name and they respond with jokes, quips and information about their weekend. 'Hello, Simon, still managing to do some work?' he asks. 'Just about' I laugh.*

## **Two Views of Anuvelar**

The first author's time at Anuvelar was challenging for many reasons. Not only did he have to learn banking as he went along, he was also thoroughly pushed outside of his comfort zone as a self-

identified 'critical researcher'. When he began the research, perhaps concerned to defend his identity against co-optation, he secretly wanted this organisation to be a greenwashed bubble that he could gleefully pop. He expected to see over-worked and over-committed employees typing until their fingers bled. To observe resistance against tyrannical management or the hegemonic discourse of neo-liberalism producing neo-normative control, ripe for the critiquing. Although elements of these critical hunches appeared, they were not the big story while he was there. Having left the field he was able to be more critical of what the organisation does and of some of the activities of its management. However, he could not really commit to a negative position. His overwhelming thought was that Anuvelar Investments were probably doing a better job of resisting market managerialism than CMS itself, assuming of course that CMS is a practice of resistance, not merely a badge for certain academics. Anuvelar actually proposed something, and their critique was interwoven with their actions. They were 'getting things done' and he was not willing to pull that apart.

To show this thought process in a little more detail, in the following section we analyse this organization and some of the activities and behaviours that were apparent in Anuvelar through two different lenses. The first is an antagonistic CMS lens, focussing on domination, sceptical in regard to performativity and antagonistic towards management. The second draws upon the progressive inclinations of those who wish to sponsor CP.

### *Antagonistic CMS*

Using the evidence of the Monday morning vignette from our case study, it is easy enough to imagine a reading of Anuvelar from an antagonistic CMS perspective. For example; notions of efficiency brought up by the customer services manager seem to reflect a performative intent (Lyotard, 1984). The customer contact team is essentially a smaller version of a call centre, a common enough target of critical research (e.g. Knights and McCabe, 2003). The use of information technology to engage in surveillance is another candidate for critique (Brooke, 2009), and the tricky issue of 'headcount' could be challenged from critical HRM (Townley, 1994) as a technology which objectifies individuals as resources. A consequence of its deployment is that individuals are forced to work to their limit before they can gain additional help. Another obvious critique would be reserved for issues regarding identity and subjectivity. Informed by Alvesson and Willmott (2002) and others (Barker, 1993; Du Gay, 1996) we could discuss the ways in which management's attempt to get employees engaged with the goals and ethos of the organisation is an attempt at cultural indoctrination and the regulation of identity. In a similar vein, writers discussing authenticity and subjectivity, would see the attempts to harness employee 'passion' for the environment as another form of control (Costas and



Karreman, 2013). It is then possible to conclude that this represents an insidious sort of activity which breaches the boundaries between work and free time, promotes the delusion of 'being yourself', and is a clear case of neo-normative control (Fleming and Spicer, 2003, 2008; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009). Analysing Anuvelar from this perspective is fairly straightforward. Management is a problem and organisations are places where indoctrination, overwork and stress are manifested. A well-crafted CMS paper on this would expertly deploy theory and empirical evidence in order to demonstrate the impossibility of escape for employees who are caught in a trap of their own making.

### *Critical Performativity*

So what difference would CP make? According to Spicer et al, an understanding of Anuvelar should begin with an affirmative stance and what they call an 'ethic of care' (originally developed by Gilligan, 1982). This attitude conveys a concern for participants' views, yet at the same time seeks ways to challenge their thinking. The task would be to proceed from the informant's practices and experiences and then expand these through 'selective and informed critical-constructive questioning' (Spicer et al, 2009: 546). This seems laudable, but appears to come with a rather ambivalent attitude towards judgement, a sense that the researcher should try to understand, but without condemnation or celebration. They approvingly quote Barbara Czarniawska (2005: 159):

'...as researchers it is our moral right to reveal everything that harms people or makes them suffer. At the same time I believe that researchers have no moral right to decide that something is wrong or absurd if the involved actors do not think so.'

Spicer et al use this quote to point towards the difficulty of balancing the dilemma referred to by Alvesson and Deetz (2000) as the line between researcher as 'elite/a priori' or 'emergent/local' and hence question whose voice to privilege when writing research accounts. Nonetheless, it does raise questions as to how a CP approach distinguishes itself from a non-critical approach. For instance, within the Anuvelar case, since none of the organisational members appeared distressed or hinted towards any form of suffering, the researcher should document ('affirmatively', 'pragmatically' and with an 'ethic of care') what is happening within the organisation. Considering the advice of being less 'theory-led' and shaking off the 'weighty intellectual baggage' which supposedly comes with non-performative CMS (Spicer et al, 2009: 549), then we might assume that a description of Anuvelar will be largely a synthesis of the accounts given by local actors. However, CP advocates also claim that they aim to be critical in discussing the need to 'attend to potentialities' such as heterotopias and instances of resistance, and to have a strong 'normative orientation'. It must be then that it is also their duty to go beyond a description of managerial practices, but also to engage in a discussion as to whether particular activities are to be considered good or bad. In doing so, it seems necessary to go beyond, or at least synthesise, the emergent views of participants and into matters of normativity.

So who decides whether something is good or bad? In order to perform affirmative, pragmatic and caring research Spicer et al suggest that these decisions must be grounded in a clear normative philosophy, a 'systematic assertion of criteria used to judge good forms of organization' (Ibid: 546). Following this quote we are pointed toward the work of Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004) and Gibson-Graham (1996) as potential sources for this normative position, as if they then tell us what a good form of organizing would look like. However, neither are developed in any detail in the paper. This opening to debate, justification and so on is one that few would disagree with, but it is largely deferred within their paper by using further citations.

'In order to make such choices, performative CMS might take advantage of normative resources within political philosophy (e.g. Kymlicka, 2001; Wolin, 2004). Here we do not seek to proscribe a singular set of criteria. Rather, we are gesturing towards the need to begin the debate about what these criteria may actually be and the potential costs and sacrifices involved.' (Ibid)

So, according to its leading proponents, CP does not yet have a normative base to draw upon when evaluating an organization, and needs to borrow ideas from other places in order to begin developing one. That being said, Spicer et al do come back to a well-established CMS concept - micro-emancipation (Alvesson and Willmott, 1993, 1996). Micro-emancipation is an idea that can be mentioned in many critical normative positions as it gestures towards examples of resistance and small escapes from domination. However, despite widespread citation, the concept has struggled to find empirical application (see Huault et al, 2014). Leaving aside the epistemological problems with identifying 'emancipation', there are wider normative issues here. Should we encourage freedom from *any* form of domination, or should we make a special effort towards *particular* modes of domination and the organisations that foster them? Unless we are concluding that *all* forms of organization are problematic, then presumably there are some organizational forms and practices which are preferable?

These questions are evidently pertinent to our problem with Anuvelar. If CMS aims to have some effect on the world of management and organizations then it will need some sort of position from which to celebrate or criticise a particular practice, organization, market or whatever. CP is certainly a claim about the necessity of engagement, but in practical terms it is difficult to see its stress on the 'micro', and its assumptions about agency as anything other than a continuation of some longstanding interpretivist assumptions in parts of organizational sociology (see Parker 2015). It seems to us that the most obvious way to engage with larger scale forms of social change, as well as being clearer about normative commitments, is through the documentation and elaboration of alternative organisations that do things differently precisely because they appear to share a common adversary

with critical scholars. So how might we think about such an approach? In the following section we elaborate on this possibility and develop Chantal Mouffe's notion of agonism as an approach to politics.

## **Agonism**

Fournier and Grey (2000) establish a position of non-performative intent, but they certainly did not propose that CMS academics should avoid engagement with management and organizations. They quote the Habermas inspired early Alvesson and Willmott, who offer a certain performative engagement with management and organisations and warn CMS scholars:

'...not to indulge in the Utopian project of eliminating hierarchy, removing specialist divisions of labour or even abolishing the separation of management and other forms of work. Rather, its aspiration is to foster the development of organisations in which communications (and productive potential) are progressively less distorted by socially oppressive, asymmetrical relations of power' (1996: 18)

This position was one that advocated collaboration, dialogue and engagement with managers and organizations. It was never intended to involve a withdrawal from any engagement with practical matters.

However, there are still questions about the form of that engagement, because it is certainly true to say that, since then, CMS has not distinguished itself in terms of application. 'Antagonism' is an easier position than engagement. One way of articulating a position opposed to antagonism yet also not of the mainstream might be understood as 'agonism'. Writing in 2014, Chantal Mouffe states:

'The agonistic confrontation is different from the antagonistic one, not because it allows for possible consensus but because the opponent is not considered an enemy to be destroyed but an adversary whose existence is perceived as legitimate' (150-151)

If an antagonistic relation seeks immediate action against an enemy (Stavrakakis, 2014) then agonism proposes an on-going confrontation with an adversary. The adversary's existence is perceived as legitimate, indeed inevitable, because antagonisms will always be prevalent within human societies. For Mouffe, conflict will not disappear, either because it can be managed away or because struggle will eventually produce a world without contradictions. Confrontations between different interests are a permanent feature of any social order, and they will result in a tendency toward antagonistic relations. Agonism seeks to mobilise critique and political discussion to challenge an 'adversary' on their own terms (Mouffe, 1999: 755). So rather than retreating, Mouffe suggests that we should engage with the present because -

'it is not enough to organise new forms of existence of the common, outside the dominant capitalist structures, as if the latter would progressively ebb away without any confrontation' (Mouffe, 2013: 115-116)

This means that agonistic struggles expand the sites and possibilities for political engagement by constructing discourses and projects that actively oppose, but do not *reject*, the dominant system (see Pekka-Sorsa, 2013).

There are similarities of course, because at the heart of either antagonistic or agonistic approaches is some sort of normative claim about the problems with the present and/or the possibilities of the future. However, the difference lies in the extent to which a future can be described as based on some sort of consensus, perhaps an ideal speech situation in Habermas's terms, or a neo-Kantian specification of justice, for Rawls. Such an image of the future then tends to paint engagement as co-optation, and dialogue as subjection, because actual social relations will never be as perfect as imagined ones. So when discussing agonism, Mouffe is suggesting that there is no final ground or foundation for knowledge or politics, there is only contingency. Subsequently, every society is the 'product of practices that seek to institute an order in a context of contingency' (Mouffe, 2014: 151). Following Gramsci, such an order is referred to as hegemony, an endless struggle to fix meanings in a certain way (Laclau and Mouffe, 1984).

In Mouffe's work on the political theory of agonistic democracy she contends that there is a distinction between 'politics', which is comprised of concrete political struggles, interventions and recommendations, and 'the political' which is a description of a contingent social ontology. Theoretically, she develops 'the political' as being comprised of the antagonisms that are inherent in all human society (1999: 754). 'Politics', on the other hand: 'refers to the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions that seek to establish a certain order and to organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of 'the political'' (Mouffe, 1999: 754). 'Politics', therefore, relates to an attempt to deal with the tensions that stem from the ('political') nature of human relations and to create some form of temporary settlement within a ('political') context of conflict and diversity (*ibid*: 755). So if we begin with this fluid ontology of the political it becomes impossible to articulate some particular group or practice as being unambiguously and timelessly 'good' or 'bad'. Viewing management as multiple and as always tinged with ambiguity, wrought with competing articulations and capable of different representations does not encourage stable lines for conflict and struggle. After all, to be antagonistic towards management we must begin by assuming that we know what it is, whether it has changed and what it is up to.

At this point, it might be assumed that agonism looks a lot like CP, since it refuses to 'other' management and appears to be seeking engagement. There are similarities, because scholars engaging with CP clearly have ideas and strategies in mind for doing politics within organisations through an engagement and dialogue with management. However, this strategy appears to be unable to clarify, in any but the most general terms, just what it is critical of. Putting it bluntly, CP lacks a normative position as to what it is 'for' and which might distinguish itself from modern managerialism. Some of those who have built on the initial Spicer et al (2009) paper are already creeping towards a more managerial than critical position, being keen on bemoaning the problems with antagonism, as if being against a straw version of non-performativity was a position in itself. But being against the 'against', is not the same as being 'for'. In Mouffe's terms, it is clear that CPs have spent some time thinking about the necessary compromises of 'politics' and less time thinking about a normative approach to 'the political'. This leaves CPs open to the criticism of being in a position that still struggles to talk about what *should* be done or what *could* be seen as preferable beyond the supposedly egalitarian space of the professional services firm, or the undefined but seductive heterotopia.

Ironically, this takes them back to the same problem that they accuse antagonistic critical researchers of having - being unable to engage with management in a practical manner. For instance, how might one make proposals as to what kinds of management a CP approach would like to see, or even specify which forms of management are deemed better or worse than others? What would be the aim of the various forums, nudges and attempts to get managers to take part in 'reflexive conscientization' (Wickert and Schaefer, 2014)? What is the purpose of the subversion in 'subversive functionalism' (Hartmann, 2014)? Answering these questions might mean that the now substantial number of authors who have sponsored some version of CP would have to clarify the nature of their disagreement with the mainstream if they wanted to continue to claim the label of 'critical', rather than just 'performative'.

### **Agonism in Action**

If we begin with an agonistic ontology of 'the political' then antagonistic purity is a position that refuses politics. That is to say, by not engaging in practical struggle it is either a-political or, worse, covertly supports the status quo by not challenging it. However, the same goes for those who appear to sponsor a version of CP which assumes that affirmation, reflexivity and care are the necessary constituents of any engagement with management. Again, by refusing struggle, CP might become indistinguishable from the common consultancy or critical friend relationship that Business

School academics have with businesses. So what sort of 'politics' might CMS build on this ontology of 'the political'?

It seems to us that what needs to be articulated are concrete instances of struggle by organisations, in effect, against other organisations. As CMS now has a voice in business schools, then a strategy for agonistic politics would be to describe and advocate certain organisations which themselves struggle against the current context. In contrast to a theoretical position that explains away struggle in order to get close to management, or that refuses struggle in order to maintain purity, what is needed is an explication of struggle in a language that will gain purchase with allies and adversaries. This form of critique would refuse the inevitability of the present, assuming it to be a temporary hegemony which can be contested. It would seek to join up various struggles against capitalism, be they sustainability and environmentalism (in the case we are using in this paper) or feminism, social justice, union or consumer movements, horizontalism, prefiguration and so on. In the context of CMS, agonism must necessarily understand the endlessly fragmented 'political' in terms of the politics of specific forms of organising.

Work on alternative organizing is not new, though it has only recently become framed within the context of CMS. Co-operatives, mutuals, intentional communities, complementary currencies, worker self-management and so on have usually been studied within sociology, geography, politics and industrial relations. They have not been topics for mainstream management and business, and we would argue that their neglect needs to be shown to be a choice, just as their selection is also a choice. By researching certain types of organization - those informed by attempts to reconfigure ownership, management, growth and so on - it is possible to be 'less theory driven' as the CPs urge. Yet, in contrast to CP, we think that it is necessary (if the word 'critical' is to mean anything) to establish an agonistic commitment by making a capitalist context visible from the start. Instead of taking the present for granted we want to de-centre capitalism, to show that it is a partial, incomplete and contradictory structure which is never final, or stable. Any intervention, any 'politics', must be then be understood against the background of this ontology of 'the political'.

Now of course this also means that any research on 'alternatives' is not immune from this procedure either. There are no organisations or practices that are unambiguously good or bad, no final judgements can be made. Markets can be helpful forms of reward and distribution in some circumstances, and communes can be oppressive and narrow places which crush individuality and enforce obedience. Hierarchies of authority can be useful in some circumstances, while democracy can easily reproduce ideas that are sexist, racist and so on (Parker et al 2014: 31 *passim*). But unless CMS takes alternatives as its central project, it risks either accommodation or irrelevance.

Returning to Anuvelar then, we can begin to think about how we might assess its claims to be an alternative, to be offering a new way of thinking about banking and finance. One way of thinking about this would be to separate means and ends and consider their relationship. Are the managerial means of motivating, controlling and organising justified by ends which could be arguably put forward as 'good'? In other words, is it enough to decide that a particular form of organising aims at an end that we deem to be 'good'? If a bank makes money, but small sustainable organizations are financed, then we might be satisfied. Or, if a very hierarchical form of managerialism is being used in a company that manufactures organic foods using short supply chains, then we might agree that this is still a good organization. This thinking can of course be played in reverse, as the antagonistic variants of CMS would propose, insofar as the means used involve the management of subjectivities, identities and authority relations. However, if we choose to engage agonistically with any form of organizing, particularly one that engages in 'management', we need to accept that no arrangement is ever perfect because 'the political' never ends. Any case presents local variances, specific procedures which can only be understood as more or less desirable, producing particular consequences or externalities. The question then becomes what cases we choose to explore the possibilities of organizing in ways that are other than the dominant.

Let's explore this idea in some detail with some more ethnographic notes from Anuvelar.

### **The Lending Evaluation Committee**

*Friday in the business lending department of Anuvelar was always punctuated by the gathering and printing of information about companies in preparation for the Monday morning lending evaluation meeting. It is produced by software that monitors business performance, draws attention to poorly performing companies and produces data on companies that were up for their yearly review. It is printed by an often exasperated woman called Mary-Jo. She would regularly be sent extra information by relationship managers (RMs) and special requests from the credit manager. She dislikes Fridays.*

*The purpose of the lending evaluation meeting is to monitor companies who have received a loan from Anuvelar. It was also the place where new loans, overdrafts and new accounts were approved having first been brought in by the RMs. I had negotiated my way into this meeting and on Friday afternoon, with the faintest smile, Mary-Jo showed me a plastic wallet that had my name on it. It was finally my opportunity to see the nitty-gritty of sustainable banking. On Sunday morning I decided to have a proper look at who or what was in my plastic file. There were eight different companies. Three new proposals, four to review and one problem client. I did not know this at the time as all I received were sparse notes from the RM, a*

detailed history of the company and its values, growth forecasts, balance sheets, existing loans and overdrafts as well as profit and loss sheets. I had to dig back to my school business studies to make sense of the various numbers on the page and begin to make sense of the facts presented to me. I resisted the urge to deconstruct the language used to describe the Buddhist retreat or the organic farm. I wrote words like 'break-even?', 'poor liquidity?' and 'oh dear..' – hoping upon hope that no one in the meeting would ask me to share my workings or findings.

On Monday I arrived a bit late to the meeting having been grabbed by a colleague from marketing after the Monday morning gathering. In the room is a beautiful and solid looking wooden table, full of blemishes and is made from reclaimed wood. The chairperson and the risk manager are sat on one side of the table with a TV monitor on the back wall and the walls around the meeting room are all glass apart from on one side where there is an external wall with a large window. Very transparent. The RM for the first two companies knocks on the glass door and is ushered in by the chairperson with a wave of the hand and a joke as he enters. We all look down at our documents. The first is a new loan to an organic farm. The front page outlines the previous debt of the organization and the proposed amount for the new loan (i.e. the exposure to Anuvelar). In this particular case they have no previous debt and had a fairly healthy credit rating and the interest margin charged by Anuvelar has been identified. Below these financials is a matrix detailing risk issues.

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Market</b>	<b>Management</b>	<b>Rating</b>	<b>DSCR<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>Financials</b>	<b>Decision</b>
1	Mature and Diversified	Strong, diversified management	> ABB	>2,5	No loss in the past 6 years	
2	Stable and Diversified	Strong CeO plus separate full time financial employee	>40%	1,5-2,5	No loss in the past 4 years	
3	Small and Not diversified	Experienced management, Key person risk	15-35%	1,1 – 1,5	Max 2 year of loss in the past 4 years, strong start ups	
4	Dependent on a small market, new market or new product	New management, poor management, management accountant change	10-20%	<1,1	At least 1 year of loss in the past 3 years, overdue payments, weak start ups	



5	Market down	Bad management	< 0%	< 1	More than 120 days overdue payments	
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*(From Lending Evaluation Form)*

*This grid was used to determine overall risk to Anuvelar with each column being shaded in on the relevant finding and a number being given in each column for the particular organisation under review. Underneath this table is an area of the form called ‘Effects’ followed by the words Cultural, Social, Environmental with space for additional comments.*

*Turning the page there are recommendations from the relationship manager, conditions of the agreement and an outline of the security the organisation has, in case the worst comes to the worst. In this example it is the machinery that the farm is trying to purchase. Following this is a lengthy report from the relationship manager who specifies that this organisation “meets the criteria for faith group organisations that we would like to support”. The report then goes on to detail background, sustainability/impact, proposal, management, financials (recent and projected), security, risks and future funding opportunities. The document ends with a little more information from the organisation seeking investment and a balance sheet and profit and loss account for perusal.*

*As expected in a lending evaluation committee meeting, talk of risk, exposure, projected profits, interest, cash and the market dominate the discussion. Sustainability is not explicitly discussed, it does not appear at all really, it is queried at one point and the relationship manager simply says, “yes it fits our values”, and we get back to whether the farm can make enough money to make this viable. But there is a human touch to all this too. “Have you gone out and seen the group?” The Director of Lending asks, “have you looked them in the eye and got a feel of who they are?” The Relationship Manager responds “yes, they are good people”. Looking someone in the eye, as well as exposure, returns on investment, assets, matching values and profit and loss are the words in which we use to assess the organization’s “market” and we take our time going through the details. However, it then dawned on me that we still had seven of these documents to go, it was not going to be an easy morning.*

*This is a vignette about one document and one meeting. Many of the details that we recount here could probably be transposed to other financial service organizations too, but there is enough here to show that Anuvelar’s practices are distinctive, and that they might be evaluated for their differences from mainstream banking. For example, it seems to us that two things makes this*

different to typical high street or retail banking. Firstly, in addition to the standard measures of exposure, risk and return, what mattered in this meeting was the demonstration of an alignment of values. It is perfectly valid to consider the evaluation grid as representing the colonising logic of the market, to adopt a standard CMS critique, but this is not all that was informing decision making in the meeting. This emphasis on 'values' was crucial as a way of rejecting, or moderating, any assumption about minimising risk and maximising return. Secondly, and this goes beyond the glass walls surrounding the meeting, Anuvelar are largely transparent about their lending. Any customer can go onto their website and learn who has received a loan and this has a massive impact on what goes on in that meeting. The decisions that are made in that room are visible, and those who make them are held accountable for their fit with the values of the bank. As a result, Anuvelar are open to comments and complaints from their customers who are articulate and well informed about environmental problems, corporate destruction and social issues generally. Of course things do go wrong - loans go bad and assets are seized – but even those failures are open to scrutiny.

An agonistic position would assume that struggle and conflict do not go away, but it would assume that engaging in politics means taking a position on allies and adversaries. If we apply this to CMS, we think that the core project should be to document alternatives, not begin by searching for alliances amongst disgruntled elites or middle managers in conventional organizations. Hunting for alternatives means that you are straight away considering difference as a central criterion for interest. This could mean organizations that challenge capitalism, or patriarchy, that are collectively owned, that refuse standard measures of profit or growth, that avoid environmental externalities, or that seek to organize in a way that challenges hierarchy and so on. Some organizations are going to be more admirable than others, and this sort of adjudication would be a central task for an agonistic CMS. This would raise interesting questions for the critical community about what sort of allies they might want to cultivate, and hence what counts as an alternative.

So what forms of engagement would be appropriate for an agonistic approach? Many of the practices proposed in Spicer et al (2016) - setting up forums, talking to the media and so on - are unobjectionable in themselves. However, there is a real question about who this involves working with. If the co-participants in these practices are members of alternative organizations, or activists, unions, state regulators, social enterprises and other potential allies, then it seems to us that there is a clear politics in this practice. Of course CP doesn't discourage such activity, but then it actually disqualifies very little, since working with and alongside managers in conventional organizations in conventional ways also appears to be an acceptable part of its programme. In contrast, we think that choices about who we work with have to be at the heart of any CMS worthy of the name.

## Conclusion

Finding a space between accommodation and antagonism has been the task that we set ourselves here, using a North American bank that invests in sustainable projects as its example. CP does focus our attention on the practices and strategies needed for an engagement with management and managers. This is a creditable move, but it is also one that can risk jettisoning any meaningful definition of critique in its attempt to get alongside and understand. We think that CP lacks an approach to the 'the political' and hence an understanding of what it means to do politics within an agonistic context. Without such an understanding, it can easily slip into a far too co-opted relationship with management. The same argument in reverse applies to antagonistic CMS, in the sense that decisions about the relationship between purity and corruption might leave no space for engagement. Instead, a principled refusal of co-optation runs the danger of leaving 'politics' to others, while thought stays on the side of theory.

One way to think about the cumulative project that we propose here would be to imagine producing a library of alternative case studies. The 'case study' has a long history in Business School teaching and research, and it is often argued that it works because of the bridge it creates between theory and practice. Case studies have problems of course (Starkey and Tiratsoo 2007: 83 *passim*) but at their best they pull abstractions into a particular instance of organizing, presenting a messy and complex example – such as that of Anuvelar - for exploration and deliberation. Importantly though, cases also naturalise particular organizational forms and business models, often presenting them as if they were inevitable. Cases, that is to say, are a form of politics. For us, it suggests that researching, writing about and teaching an alternative organization is a helpful way of both showing and engaging in struggle. Thinking about Anuvelar is in itself an attempt to indicate that banking and finance do not have to operate in the way that they currently do. For an academic to engage with the management and employees in this organization is a choice that places other financial institutions as adversaries, just as the management and employees of this organization do too. It is an engagement, but one clearly made with certain organizations and not with others. It is not an unconditionally affirmative stance, because Anuvelar will display conflicts and problems, but a clear taking of sides in a struggle concerning the relationship between finance and sustainability. Empirical case studies – of cooperatives, mutuals, community interest companies, transition towns, complementary currencies and so on - can be used as resources for debate within the critical community of scholars, activists and employees of alternative firms. These case studies can also be used to present a potential vision of futures, and provide counter examples to the 'there is no alternative' politics of organizing found in most management and business studies teaching.

Work on alternatives starts with the present. It means trying to change things from within the 'belly of the beast', a phrase uttered many times at Anuvelar during the first author's ethnography. Displaying and advocating alternative organisations is a practical engagement with actually existing organizations which provides a platform for discussion with employees, managers and other academics around a shared object, although not necessarily a shared vocabulary (Voronov, 2008). The contrast with CP can be illustrated in terms of the idea of micro-emancipation. Micro-emancipation is predicated on foregrounding the existence of coercive managed organizations, and then finding or encouraging spaces within them. The existence of these particular organizational forms is assumed, and implicitly presented as dominant, so it is unsurprising that any projected emancipations are described as micro. An agonistic approach would differ in that beginning with alternatives we immediately open the possibilities of transformations of the present. This is not to say, as we hope is clear from the above, that any organization is ever finished, perfect; that its politics have somehow ended. But if the aim of agonistic critical work is to engage with an adversary, then such an engagement will be stronger if it can point to alternatives, rather than merely criticising the present (as antagonists do), or beginning with such modest expectations (as accommodationists do).

If CMS were to reimagine its project as contributing and developing resources which detailed alternative forms of organising and managing, then this allows a space for discussion between students, academics, activists and alternative organizers. If we relate this back to Laclau and Mouffe's understanding of politics then we can say that change happens when there are discursive spaces that allow potential equivalences and commonalities to develop, that allow for chains of meaning to be formed which allow the world to be thought of differently. Assuming 'the political' by beginning with alternatives, and developing ways of talking about politics within these organisations, provide the basis for engagement with existing organisations which challenge common assumptions about work and economy. It means that the orthodox must confront the questions posed by the heterodox, in terms of ideas about profit, growth, ownership, democracy and so on, which are manifested by an organization like Anuvelar. 'Getting things done' then involves pointing to, exploring and understanding things that are already being done differently, and considering their differences and similarities in a systematic manner.

Such an approach allows the possibility of being a consultant, but one who chooses which sort of organizations they wish to help reflect on their practices (Macalpine and Marsh, 2009). In the first author's case he was a participant observer - able to take part in meetings, work on a few small projects and offer a critical voice to some of the activities happening at Anuvelar. In the interviews he conducted he offered a space for reflection on both the good and bad aspects of the organisation.

Now, in writing about his experiences, he continues this attempt to be a continuation of his attempt to be a friend of the organization. So this was never an antagonistic relationship, because Anuvelar is doing so much that both authors believe is worthwhile, and helping us to understand how banking and finance might become different. We think that CMS should pay out the promise of being performative, but with some organizations rather than others.

Taking a bigger step, it becomes possible to imagine a sustained research project into alternatives as a resource which would allow for a more substantial challenge to the idea of business as usual. We might imagine this evidenced in books (Atzeni 2012; Gibson-Graham 1996, 2006, 2013; Parker et al 2007, 2014), journal articles like this one or whatever, but the point is that it has to be compelling in its scale. All too often, an alternative economy is dismissed on the grounds that it can never achieve the coverage required to compete with the 'real' economy. We aim to establish a substantial collection of alternate cases. CMS scholars could detail what is done well or differently explaining the political forms and passions developed in each setting. In so doing, CMS scholars could collectively contribute to a corpus that would be used for teaching, research and contribute to changing the foundational assumptions of mainstream management theory, as well as forms of CP which appear to accommodate to those assumptions. Anuvelar would be on this list, for now, as would any organization which already has an agonistic relationship to the dominant forms of organization that shape the present world. In trying to influence our adversaries, we think that CMS needs to begin by putting its arms around our friends.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Valerie Fournier, Dan King, Marton Racz and the *Human Relations* reviewers and editor for their very helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Anuvelar is a pseudonym, and various other details have also been changed here to ensure anonymity.

<sup>3</sup> Debt Service Coverage Ratio – a measure of the financial health of a company.