

EMPIRICISM, EPISTEMOLOGY AND MODERN POSTMODERNISM: A CRITIQUE

In writing this piece at the kind invitation of Jean Helms Mills, and Albert J. Mills this article is seeking to stimulate a fundamental debate as to the nature of knowledge, most particularly in the fields of business and management history. For one of the problems that afflicts academic today is that we tend to operate within echo chambers, publishing in journals sympathetic to our epistemological approach in the knowledge that if we submitted to a journal associated with contrary views our work would (most likely) be summarily rejected. One consequence of this, when we come to the broad schools of postmodernist or “critical” thought is that these ideas are not rigorously challenged by those holding a contrary viewpoint; an outcome that reflects the fact that, in large part, these opponents do not take postmodernist-informed views seriously. This is a mistake. For although one may disagree with postmodernist-informed ideas, we need to recognize that these ideas are deeply rooted in the Western philosophic tradition. As I hope readers will soon appreciate, this author may disagree with conclusions that postmodernists of various hues draw from the traditions of philosophic idealism. Nevertheless, I recognize the importance of those traditions. An understanding of not only Foucault and Derrida, but also Fichte, Schelling, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, are as important to comprehending current debates as are Hume, Popper, Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill. Hopefully this article, and the response to it by Simon Mollan, will produce a serious, thoughtful intellectual contest.

Introduction

If there is a work that delineates the modern world from the pre-modern - a world of superstition and absolute faith in the authority of divine being – it is Nicolaus Copernicus’s *De Revolutionibus (On the Revolutions)*. In the book’s Preface, directed to Pope Paul III, Copernicus laid out two principles that heralded what we now think of as the “scientific revolution.” The first of these principles was one of *purpose*, Copernicus (1541 / 2008, p. 4) declaring that every “philosopher” should “endeavour to seek the truth in all things, to the extent permitted to human reason by God”. In other words, “reason” should accept no human or doctrinally-imposed limitations on the scope of its inquiries. The second principle was epistemological, the *means* for achieving the first, Copernicus (1541 / 2008, p. 5) arguing that knowledge should always rest on hypotheses supported by empirical evidence. “For if the hypotheses” are “not false, everything which follows” from the hypotheses is “confirmed beyond doubt”. Profoundly revolutionary, these principles nevertheless raised problems as well as solutions. For while Copernicus (1541 / 2008, p. 24) correctly believed - on the basis

of empirical observation - that the planets orbited the sun, he also wrongly believed (on the basis of the same observations) that beyond planets there existed a zone of “immovable stars”. No doubt Copernicus would have argued that errors of both fact (empirical observation) and theory are resolvable through the testing of theory against new evidence. Any complacency as to the neatness of this solution disappears, however, the moment we think seriously about evidence and how to explain the human condition. If we seek generalizable theories that help explain humanity’s plight how can we do this in ways that give weight to individual being? Do we give primacy, as idealist philosophy would suggest, to individual consciousness? Or, alternatively, are we to be guided by observed experience as the empiricist or positivist tradition would have us do? These are *the* most fundamental questions in research. If we cannot locate our own guiding principles in ways that suitably answer these questions then we are methodologically lost; we become the human equivalent of the bower bird, an animal that collects objects that are blue in colour, oblivious to their worth.

If the intellectual maturity of a scholar rests on their being able to defend the fundamental epistemological premises of their work – and being aware of the strength and limitations of the intellectual heritage upon which they stand – than, sadly, evidence of confusion and / or a failure to articulate these premises is all too evident. This is particularly the case, this paper will argue, in the broad fields of postmodernist and “critical management” thought. Reflecting on the postmodernist tendency to use contemporary “proxies” (typically a colleague of like-minded opinion) in lieu of the controversial original, Peter Armstrong (2015, p. 30) – himself of Foucauldian opinion - observes that Foucauldian frameworks in “critical accounting theory” are now typically presented without “explicit references to Foucault”. In a recent editorial of *Management & Organizational History* we witness a similar tendency. In outlining a theoretical “model” that supposedly integrates “history and theory” the journal’s editor, Peter Miskell (2018), boasts of his journal’s work in “theory development and refinement” (p. 214), whereby “history and theory meet on equal terms” (p. 213). When, however, one looks at the references used in the model’s construction one notes that only three of the references – two to Alfred Chandler (1962, 1977) and one to Philip Scranton (1997) – predate Clark and Rowlinson’s article from 2004 that launched the so-called “historic turn” in organizational studies. Instead, virtually all of the cited sources for Miskell’s model – Rowlinson, Stephanie Decker, Roy Suddaby, Dan Whadwhani, Bill Foster, Diego Coraiola, Charles Harvey, Mairi Maclean – are regular contributors who constantly cite each other’s work. Most of those cited are also contributors to the recent *Routledge Companion to Management and Organizational History*. Absent from Miskell’s model (and the work of those he cites) is any discussion of *the* most important problem for an historian: time. Do we perceive time as something that is contemporaneous, thereby giving primacy to human agency? Or do

we, as Braudel (1946 / 1975, p. 20) recommended, treat the “events” that capture immediate attention with “suspicion”, as “crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong back”. Similarly, what does Miskell’s model tell us about the problematic nature of evidence? We are recommended to studies such as Rowlinson, Hassard and Decker’s (2014, pp. 257, 254) article in *Academy of Management Review*, where we read “that there is a ‘literary’ or ‘fictive’ element in all historical and scientific writing” and that “objectivist history” (i.e. one constructed around “facts”) “is clearly inimical” to critical “reflexivity”. Elsewhere, among the theorists that Miskell recommends, we are told that we should be “rhetorically reconfiguring the past” (Suddaby and Foster, 2017, p. 31).

Understandings of evidence such as those articulated by the authors that Miskell recommends would have been alien to Copernicus. Instead, they are rooted in various strands of postmodernism. The idea that we can “reconfigure” the past through “rhetoric” draws on the ideas of Paul Ricoeur (2000/ 2004, p. 44), who argued that historical accounts represent “the ideologizing of memory”. The idea that history is “fictive” (i.e. it can be constructed in a variety of ways), owes a debt to the late Hayden White, arguably the most influential postmodernist thinker to emerge in the English-speaking world. For White (2005, p. 333), “History’s subject matter is a place of fantasy”, a place where the borders between the “truthful” and the “purely imaginary” are dissolved (White, 1966, p. 130). In referencing White’s ideas, Rowlinson, Hassard and Decker (2014, p. 251) do not, however, locate them within postmodernist canon. Instead, we are simply advised that he was “a leading philosopher of history”. There are two obvious problems with this approach, whereby ideas located within postmodernist canon are presented as theoretical novelty. First, the reader can be confronted, often unknowingly, with theoretical frameworks that are not only poorly integrated but also mutually exclusive. Although the reader would never know from perusing Suddaby and Foster (2017), or Rowlinson, Hassard and Decker (2014), methodological incompatibility certainly characterizes the work of White and Ricoeur. For, unlike White, Ricoeur *did* believe in the distinction between historical fact and fiction. As Ricoeur (2000 / 2004, p. 280) explained it, “past things” may be “abolished” (i.e. deliberately or accidentally “forgotten”) “but no one can make it be that they should not have been”. The second problem in not locating theory within the tradition that inspired it is that we have no understanding as to why one tradition is chosen over another. Even where postmodernist frameworks are made explicit, as occurs in Cummings et al.’s (2017) *New History of Management* - where the authors declare their intention to write a Foucauldian-inspired “counter-history” (p. 40) – the reader is typically presented with uncritical appraisal. Nowhere, for example, do Cummings et al. advise of the many problems with Foucault’s approaches that even notable defenders of his work such as White readily concede; White (1973a, pp. 31, 38) accurately noting that Foucault rejected “all causal explanations”.

Confusion as to basic premises are also found in the critically-inclined research found within the pages of *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management*. Czarniawska (2008, p. 15), in linking social activism with “management and organizing”, observes of Max Weber that “in his time” many “professor colleagues” issued “Nazi propaganda ... from their lecterns”. In fact, when Weber died from Spanish flu in 1920 virtually no one had heard of the Nazi party. More consequential errors are found in Woiceshyn and Daellenbach’s (2018, p. 185) recent article, “Evaluating inductive v deductive research in management studies”, where we are advised that, “[Rene] Descartes and [David] Hume claimed that our senses are not valid means of attained knowledge, and therefore we need to rely on innate ideas ... and deduce hypotheses from them.” In putting forward this radical suggestion - which mistakenly conflates the ideas of Descartes, an exponent of *idealist* scepticism, and Hume, the masterly exponent of *empiricist* or *positivist* scepticism - Woiceshyn and Daellenbach admirably seek to differentiate ideas that are core to virtually *all* current theoretical debates. Debates that pit idealist explanations emphasising human consciousness, on the one hand, against empiricist explanations that give primacy to the material world, on the other. However, while it is true that Descartes (1641 / 1912, p. 84) *did* question the very existence of a material world – raising the *possibility* that the perceived world is “nothing better than the illusion of dreams” – Hume argued totally the reverse. Articulating the sceptical distrust of theorizing that became the hallmark feature of British empiricism, Hume (1748 / 1902) suggested we can *never* proceed beyond the limits of observation and experience. Accordingly, in the view of Hume (1748 / 1902, pp. 43-44) – and of the whole positivist tradition he inspired – it is impossible to deduct “causal” relationships from “reasoning”. Instead, Hume (1748 / 1902, pp. 43-44, 19) concluded, all deductions as to cause and effect can only rest on “inferences from experiences”; a fact that confines “our thoughts” within “very narrow limits”.

In reflecting upon Hume’s total and utter emphasis on observation and experience, Immanuel Kant (1783 / 1902, p. 3) observed in his *Prolegomena* that “since the origin of metaphysics ... nothing has ever happened which was more decisive to its fate than the attack upon it by David Hume.” If anything, Kant’s estimation understates the significance of Hume’s positivist scepticism and the responses which it induced; responses that made these debates an intellectual spring from which all modern explanations of the human condition owe a debt. It was not only the empiricist, or positivist, tradition that was framed by Hume’s scepticism and his emphasis on material experience. So also were the fundamental premises of the Scottish Enlightenment and its most notable product, classical economics with its emphasis on self-interest. In opposition to this positivist tradition, building on the idealist scepticism of Descartes and George Berkeley, were the various stands of (largely German) philosophic idealism with their emphasis on human consciousness. One of these strands – extending through Johann

Fichte, Friedrich Schelling, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas to Jacques Derrida – provides the intellectual scaffolding for the “deconstructionist” or “poststructuralist” schools of postmodernist thought. Another strand – extending through Fichte, Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche to Michel Foucault – gifts the scaffolding for another strand of postmodernism; a strand that links the ways in which the world is “represented” to will, consciousness and individual freedom. In between these diametrically opposed positivist and idealist schools of thought is a school of philosophic “realism” that is intellectual heir to Immanuel Kant; a philosopher who shared with the idealist schools the opinion that we understand the world indirectly, through mental representations, but who nevertheless shared the positivist belief “that there is something empirical ...something real without us” (Kant, 1783 / 1902, p. 102).

In structure the remainder of this paper undertakes two tasks, each of which represents a continuation of the critiques that I commenced with my recent book, *Work, Wealth and Postmodernism: The Intellectual Conflict at the Heart of Business Endeavour*. First, it expands upon the discussion that was commenced in the previous paragraph, locating current debates within the traditions – positivism, philosophic idealism and philosophic realism - that emerged from the intellectual maelstrom that was the European Enlightenment. The second task is to trace how the strands of one of these traditions – philosophic idealism – informs postmodernist and critical management thought; a heritage that makes these modern frameworks ill-suited for the positive social alternatives that their advocates proclaim. Now, one does not need to be an opponent of postmodernism (as this author is) to ascertain the fact that problems stem from its intellectual relativism (i.e., its idealist refusal to be bound by the understanding that there are verifiable “truths” in the social sciences). As Gabrielle Durepos and Albert Mills (2012, p. 105) accurately record, the “relativism” associated with postmodernism “often leads to ... an *anything goes* [emphasis in original] attitude, in which no standards exist to govern academic efforts.” Durepos and Mills’s answer to such problems is articulated in their theory of “ANTi-History”; an intellectual effort I have described elsewhere as “the most significant attempt to address the internal failings of postmodernist thought in management and organizational studies” (Bowden, 2018, p. 231). Despite the willingness of Durepos and Mills to acknowledge failings in postmodernist schools of thought, they (like their postmodernist colleagues) remain within the confines of idealist philosophy: with all the strengths and limitations that that implies. For the fundamental problem with any idealist philosophy is that is bereft once it attempts to extend its compass beyond the domains that are its primary concern, namely matters relating to being, consciousness, power and will. Despite this, we read in Durepos and Mills (2011, p. 131) that the whole structure of Western philosophy is flawed due to its “eurocentricity”; that modern societies are based on the subjugation of the

“weak and subordinate” (Durepos, 2015: 161). Similarly, we read that the fundamental “premise” of the Critical Management Studies Division of the Academy of Management – as outlined in its Newsletter of December 2018 – “is that structural features of contemporary society encourage organizations and their managers towards domination and exploitation” (Cummings and Prasad, 2018, p. 12). The question one has to ask oneself with such conclusions is: what is the methodology that allows such sweeping generalizations as to society’s “structural features”? It is difficult to discern any. Certainly, the tools that, for example, the French *Annales* used in ascertaining a society’s “structural” features – economics, demography, long-run statistical series – are equally alien to both ANTi-History and postmodernism. Superficially attractive, the tendency to link research with socially-disembodied claims to being “emancipatory” and “liberating” (see, for example, Durepos and Mills, 2012, p. 89; Cummings et al., 2017, p. 333) - is also profoundly misguided. Freedom is not an abstraction. It is a socially constructed system of protections and responsibilities. The dangers of freeing “freedom” from its social moorings is perhaps best demonstrated in Friedrich Schelling’s *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*; a work that arguably pushed understandings of freedom to their extreme limits in ways that profoundly influenced Nietzsche, Derrida and Foucault. For, as Schelling (1809 / 2006, pp. 23-24) argued, the “most profound” issue “in the entire doctrine of freedom” is found in an individual’s (and society’s) capacity “to do evil”, to totally and utterly break the bounds of the socially acceptable. Of undeniable truth, this exposition of freedom arguably led Germany not to Nirvana, but to Buchenwald and Theresienstadt.

The Enlightenment, Positivism and Philosophic Idealism

Intellectually and materially, the European Enlightenment, a period of political and economic ferment between the mid-seventeenth century and the French Revolution, continues to shape our world. Drawing on understandings from the ancient Greeks, Enlightenment thinkers confronted a problem that has existed since time immemorial: how do we understand and explain the world in ways that allow scope for human agency? At first glance, what we think of as the empiricist or positivist tradition would appear the least likely candidate for revolutionary solutions to this problem. The foundational tenets of positivism were (and remain) the closest to everyday “common sense”, Hobbes (1651 / 2002, p. 3) declaring that “there is no conception ... that hath not at first, totally or by parts, been begotten upon the organs of sense”. In terms of evidence, positivism’s founding figures (Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Hume, Edmund Burke) readily endorsed the opinion of the Greek historian, Thucydides (c.411 BC / 1975, pp. 47-48) – Hobbes first book being a translation of Thucydides’ *Historian of the Peloponnesian War* – who advocated use of “the plainest evidence”; evidence drawn from “eye-witnesses whose reports” are “checked with as much thoroughness as possible”.

Despite its apparent simplicity and inherent conservatism the thinking that stemmed from post-Hume positivism is arguably characterized by three strengths. First, Hume (1748 / 1902, p. 30) provided a deceptively simple explanation for the processes of human understanding, arguing that *no* abstractions can exist without a basis in experience, and that we cannot “infer any cause or effect, without the assistance of observation and experience.” The second great (under-appreciated) strength that Hume bequeathed positivism was a framework for integrating irrationality into rational explanation. Devoting the second volume of his *A Treatise on Human Nature* to “passions”, Hume’s solution to the problem of *rationality* explaining the social effects of emotion was obtained through his identification of “self-interest” as humanity’s preeminent emotion. As Hume (1739 / 1896, p. 266) expressed it, “Men being naturally selfish ... they are not easily induc’d to perform any action for the interest of strangers, except with a view to some reciprocal advantage.” It was, Hume (1739 / 1896, p. 267) further reflected, only due to “this self-interested” reasoning that “commerce ... begins to take place, and to predominate in society”; an understanding famously taken up by Hume’s close friend, Adam Smith. The third (under-appreciated) insight of the empiricist tradition was its understanding that intellectual inquiry, economic progress and a socially-endorsed system of individual rights are all interconnected. As Hobbes (1651 / 2002, p. 62) famously observed, without guarantees for individual right and property there can “no place for industry”; and without industry the circumstances of life are “solitary, poor, nasty, short and brutish.” For Hobbes, Locke, Hume and Burke, the key foundation for individual right and inquiry was the protection of property; protections that served the interests not of the powerful (who seldom needed them) but the small entrepreneur, the wage-earner and the intellectual dissident who would otherwise be left not only powerless but penurious.

Positivism’s practicality and its close association with capitalism and the protection of property rights have made it the natural foe of idealist philosophies that place emphasis on human spirit and consciousness. For the Italian philosopher, Giambattista Vico (1744 / 1968, pp. 118, 120) – whose critiques profoundly influenced both Foucault and White – civilization’s advance dulled the “vast imagination” enjoyed by pre-industrial peoples “entirely immersed in the senses”. Similarly, for the German idealist philosopher, Friedrich Schelling (1799a / 2004, p. 201), empirical science was “a mongrel idea” and the “physics” that relied upon such principles “nothing but a collection of facts”. Positivism’s emphasis on observed experience to the exclusion of all else was also contrary to respected theorems of classical philosophy. It also requires a considerable stretch of the imagination to locate many of the abstractions that we deal with in mathematics (calculus, logarithms, etc.) and the social sciences (freedom, democracy, profit, etc.) with sensory experience. For Plato (380 BCE / 2003, pp. 239-248), as he indicated in *The Republic*, it was also evident that we do not perceive the world directly but

rather through mental “representations” and “forms’. Thus, we categorize certain shapes as geometric “circles” even though it is probable that no perfect “circles” exist in nature.

Given the classical appreciation that many of the mathematical and philosophical concepts that inform our thinking do *not* have a sensory existence it was inevitable that positivist philosophies would find idealist rivals. Undoubtedly, the most far-reaching of these idealist philosophies – and for that very reason the one of least utility - was that of the English cleric, George Berkeley (1710 /1996, p. 36), who argued that the *only* thing of which we can be certain is our own consciousness. In Berkeley’s view, our sense of there being a material world is due solely to the fact that “ideas of sense are more strong, lively, and distinct than those of the imagination.” Of far more significance than the work of Descartes, Vico or Berkeley, however, is German philosophical idealism; a school whose influence on modern postmodernism has been most notable. The profound influence of German idealist philosophy is perhaps best understood by tracing *back* the intellectual influences on Derrida and Foucault. In the case of Derrida (1967 / 2001, p. 60), his core concept of “trace” – which suggests that past expressions of existence and being can be deconstructed from written texts – was drawn from Martin Heidegger and the earlier work of the French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas; Derrida (1967a / 2001, p. 101) declaring the power of the latter’s thoughts was such as to “make us tremble”. In turn, Levinas (1957 / 1987, p. 103) drew his ideas from the German idealist philosopher, Edmund Husserl; Levinas completing his PhD on Husserl’s philosophy in 1930. Husserl’s ideas were also seminal to Heidegger’s thinking, the latter advising in the opening pages of his key work, *Being and Time*, that: “The following investigation would not have been possible if the ground had not been prepared by Edmund Husserl”. According to Husserl (1913 / 1983, pp. 35, 149-150), empirical research – with its emphasis on science and rationality – was a source of grave error; error caused by an unwillingness to recognize that “pure consciousness” is the true wellspring of human endeavours. As a series of lectures given by Heidegger in 1975 makes clear, Heidegger’s (1975 / 1985) ideas were also profoundly influenced by Schelling’s (1809 / 2006) *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*. All of these interwoven strands of thought owe, moreover, a considerable debt to Johann Fichte, arguably the true founder of modern German idealist philosophy. For Fichte (1799 /1910, p. 7), nothing was more important than the spiritual essence that pervades every form of existence, it being the case that “every existence” signals within it “another existence”; ideas that prefigure Derrida’s (1967a / 2001, pp. 254-255) central concept of *déférence* (difference), where the presence of one form of existence always exists alongside an absent existence. Emphasising the primacy of consciousness over sensory perception, Fichte similarly declared “that all reality ... is solely provided through imagination” (Fichte,

1794 / 1889: 187). There are, in short, no absolute truths that can frame our thinking. Rather our thinking should be guided by awareness of individual identity, consciousness and being.

The Foucauldian strand of postmodernism is also deeply rooted in German idealist thought. As Hayden White (1973a, p. 50) indicated, Foucault's ideas represent "a continuation of a tradition ... which originates in Romanticism and which was taken up ... by Nietzsche in the last quarter of the nineteenth century." Like Nietzsche (1886 / 1989, pp. 31, 27), who declared that through acts of will it is always possible to break the "invisible spell" of societal mores (Nietzsche, 1886 / 1989, pp. 31, 27), Foucault (1966 / 1994, p. xx) believed that we can break free of the "fundamental codes" of "culture" through acts of will. Like Nietzsche (1889/1990, pp. 59-60) - who argued in his *Twilight of the Idols* that all causal explanations (morality, economics, religion) should be rejected as "false causality", it being the case that only the exercise of will should guide behaviour and explanations – Foucault rejected causal explanations (White, 1973a). By leaving "causes to one side", Foucault (1966 / 1994: xiv, xviii) declared in *The Order of Things*, one is able to better focus on "transformations" that "shatter" and "destroy" existing understandings. In terms of intellectual heritage, this Foucauldian / Nietzschean emphasis on consciousness and will – and the commensurate dismissal of other factors – owes a clear debt to Schopenhauer's (1859 / 1969) *The World As Will and Representation*. Like Foucault and Nietzsche, Schopenhauer (1859 / 1969: 67-68) dismissed "the application of the law of causality" to human affairs. For the problem with the "law of causality", Schopenhauer (1859 / 1969, pp. 99, 275) concluded, was that it can "never get at the inner nature of things"; the inner sanctum where one finds "the will-in-itself, the inner content, the essence of the world." Schopenhauer's emphasis on "will" as the key determinant of the human condition draws, in turn, on Fichte (1799 / 1910, p. 154) who argued that the key "principle of this our life" is the "absolute freedom of the will". Power in society, in short, stems primarily from "representations" and the "invisible" codes of culture, not from the material circumstances of production, marketing and exchange; representations whose power can be broken through the exercise of free will.

It should be evident from the preceding discussion that Derrida and Foucault – and through them the wider bodies of postmodernist and critical thought – share with German idealism the understandings that we comprehend the world through highly subjective "representations"; that nothing is more important than identity and being; and that the world can be forged anew through consciousness and will. Seen from this perspective, oppression and domination are not principally associated, as they were with Locke and his empiricist or positivist colleagues, in the "usurpation" of the *societal protections* that were the "great and chief end" for citizens "uniting ... themselves under government" (Locke, 1689 / 1823, p. 192). Instead, organizations and their associated cultures become the *cause* of psychic and cultural

domination. For Derrida (1967b / 1976, pp. 3, 10) it is the “ethnocentrism” of Western phonetic-based writing and language that is the primary mechanism for oppression. For Foucault, the mechanisms of oppression are described variously – the primary explanation shifting from one to the other across the course of this career – as the “the ordering codes”, the single allowable *episteme* “that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge” in “any given culture” (Foucault, 1966 / 1994, p. 168), the dominant “discourse” through which “power and knowledge are joined together” (Foucault, 1976 / 1978, p. 100). Similarly, Derrida, in accordance with the premises of German idealism, believed that psychic and social oppression was best countered through the “deconstruction” of phonetic language and the assertion of difference (*deference*). For Foucault (1976 / 1978, p. 96), resistance to oppression was found in alternative discourses that cause the “fracturing” of social “unities”. Seen from such perspectives the central objective that Copernicus had spelt out in his defining work – that research must always be informed by the “endeavour to seek the truth in all things” – becomes inconsequential. Instead, history, language and knowledge all become mechanisms of power, be they mechanisms for domination or resistance. Articulating this sentiment in unabashed form, Hayden White (1973b, p. 371) declared that historical writing – and by inference, other forms of research as well – should seek to create an “illusionary world, outside the original world of pure power relationships”. By so doing, White (1973b, p. 371) supposed, researchers initiate “a process in which the weak vie with the strong for the authority to determine who this second world will be characterized”; a solution that accords with Nietzsche’s (1895 / 1990, p. 187) belief that, “Ultimately the point is to what *end* a lie is told” [emphasis in original].

Truth, Freedom and the Postmodernist Rabbit Hole

If we consider the two concepts that are arguably central to the social sciences, truth and freedom – concepts that have lain at the heart of religious belief as well as scholarship since time immemorial – than it is obvious that postmodernist canon (like German idealism before it) places total emphasis on the latter, while denying (in greater or lesser degree) the former. In relation to understandings of verifiable truths, we read in the work of currently active researchers in organizational studies and business / management history that all “meanings” are “fictively constructed” (Munslow, 2015, p. 136), “that every story we could possibly tell is contestable” (Jacques and Durepos, 2015, p. 97), that we can build research on “grounded fictionalism” (Suddaby and Foster, 2017, p. 31), that corporate historians have “an obligation” of “forgetting” when it comes to narratives of past business success (Taylor, Bell and Cook, 2009, p. 162), that the “writing of history, sociology, or economics” is “rhetorical discourse” (Godfrey et al., 2016, p. 599); that as a “postmodernist” one “does not believe in the concept of truth” (cited Bowden, 2018, p. 247). Even if we look to expositions from ANTi-History, which

concedes an excessive “relativism” in postmodernist theory, it is still the case that each and every “body of knowledge” is perceived as “relational”, i.e. it reflects “the interests and values of those who produce it” (Jacques and Durepos, 2015, p. 105). Conversely, when we look to the same bodies of research we are constantly advised of the need to write with “emancipatory” and “liberationist” intent (Durepos, and Mills, 2012, p. 189), to blur “the boundaries with regard to what management could be” (Cummings, et. al., p. 332), that our work should provide “a bottom-up, pluralist antidote” to “managerialism” (Maclean, Harvey and Clegg, 2016, p. 627), that to free those trapped in the psychic prisons that are modern workplaces we must “decentre” the “manager-as-author” (Munslow, 2015, p. 140).

There is no doubt that the “emancipatory” claims of postmodernist-informed research does much to explain its success; a success that stems in large part from Foucault’s (1975 / 1991, pp. 304, 308) claims that modern societies – in each and every facet of their being – are psychic prisons, “carceral” networks that rest on “institutions of repression, rejection, exclusion, marginalization”. With Foucault, power and oppression are no longer attributed, as they were with Marxism, to capitalism *per se*. Instead, inequality and repression are exercised wherever power arises, oft found in systems of “micro-power”, be they in the work office or he family household. “Never have there existed”, Foucault (1976/ 1978: 48-49) proclaimed, “more centres of power”, each characterized by “infinitesimal surveillances”. In his lectures on “Governmentality”, Foucault (1978 / 1991, p. 102) also argued that advanced economies had witnessed a shift from a “society of sovereignty” – i.e. one based on police, courts etc. – to a “disciplinary society”, whereby people internalised oppressive understandings.

Of ostensible appeal, and of apparent universal applicability, a Foucauldian opposition to all power imbalances appears postmodernism’s greatest strength. In truth, it sends all those who adhere to its tenets down an intellectual rabbit hole from which there is no escape whilst they remain trapped within its intellectual confines. As a self-declared opponent of oppression and inequality, postmodernism in all its guises suffers two fatal problems. Most significantly, postmodernism suffers from the fact that it is the intellectual child of German idealist philosophy; a philosophy much concerned with “representation”, “consciousness”, “freedom”, “will” and individual being, and little concerned with matters related to material existence: economics, demography, logistics, production costs and profits, wage rates and the like. Rather than being embraced, economics – the life-blood of every society that shapes the material limits as to what is possible – is regarded with hostility by Foucauldian exponents of organizational and business history; exponents who advise total abstinence from the “imperialism of economics” (Godfrey et al., 2016, p. 595; also, Rowlinson and Carter, 2002). The second fatal error of postmodernism, stemming from the first, is to give weight to abstract understandings of “power”, “repression” and “oppression” without giving serious thought, as

the founders of British empiricism did, to the necessary institutional frameworks that protect individuals and groups from the tyrannous and potentially violent behaviour of their fellows. Now, no doubt those of a “critical” inclination who read this article will argue that *any* form of authority, domination or control should be resisted, and that domination and inequalities of power are characteristic features of liberal democratic societies as well as authoritarian regimes. Any such observation, however, leaves an unresolved question: Are there societal constraints that need to be imposed on “freedom” in the common good? For if we think of “complete freedom”, as Schelling (1809 / 2006, pp. 33, 36) did, as the capacity to move beyond socially-imposed constraints, then it necessarily follows that expressions of an individual’s “ideal nature” is found (in part at least) in acts of “evil”. It is after all, Schelling (1809 / 2006, pp. 36, 40) continued, humanity’s capacity for acts of “rational” evil that distinguishes our species from others; it being the case that a propensity for evil is not an aberrant condition but rather a “universal” characteristic. If we accept this premise, then it logically follows that any societal constraints on evil limit the full development of an individual’s (and a society’s) creative and destructive potential. If, however, one wishes to reject Schelling’s conclusion – and those of his disciple, Friedrich Nietzsche (1883 / 1970, p. 299), who observed in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that “evil is man’s best strength” and that, “Man must grow better and more evil” – than we need to accept that institutionalized restraints on acts of evil (i.e. laws, courts, educational institutions, etc.) are an *essential* feature of social existence. Once we reach this point it logically follows that “freedom” is not an abstraction but rather a social construct that can *only* exist in association with institutionalized systems of rights and responsibilities; systems that provide socially agreed constraints on certain forms of behaviour, as well as systems of checks and balances. Arguably, liberal democracies achieve this balancing act better than other social and economic orders; an outcome that suggests whatever the epistemological failings of the founders of positivism (Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Burke) their insights into the nature of power and individual freedom remain an enduring strength.

Although one can argue that postmodernist-informed understandings of power and knowledge are misguided they are not attributable to ideological wilfulness. Instead, they *primarily* reflect the underlying philosophical idealism of postmodernism and an inherent distrust of any attempt to confine human understanding within either socially-endorsed institutional constraints or epistemological tenets that underpin accepted “truths”. In line with the dominant traditions of German idealism, postmodernists see evidence as fluid “representation” rather than as objective realities. As the Dutch postmodernist, Frank Ankersmit (1989, p. 144), observed, “postmodernists from Nietzsche up to and including Derrida want to extend aestheticism over the entire domain of the representation of reality ... Style, not content is the issue ... Content is a derivative of style”. Foucault (1969 / 1972, pp.

8-9), in particular, expressed hostility to understanding history through the use of “long series” (i.e. demographic, economic and organizational databases), the use of which he associated with a denial of individual consciousness and being.

Now in refuting such idealist premises that severely limit our methodological and conceptual scope – and arguing as Kant (1783 / 1902, p. 102) suggested “that there is something empirical ... something real without us” – we need to avoid lapsing into a crude positivism that places absolute faith in empirical observations. As Karl Popper (1935 / 2002, p. xxii) accurately observed, “the most important and most exciting problems of epistemology must remain completely invisible to those who confine themselves to analysing ordinary and common-sense knowledge.” Instead, we need to frame our thinking in terms of conceptual understandings and thesis testing, Popper (1935 / 2002, p. 23) noting that in terms of epistemology it was Kant who was “the first to realize that the objectivity of scientific statements is closely connected with the construction of theories”. The limitations of empirical observation are evident if we consider even the most basic business operations. If a farmer, for example, wishes to grow wheat they need to consider not only the direct demand for wheat but also its *derived* demand (i.e. for bread-making, pasta, biscuits). Given that certain types of wheat are well-suited to some purposes but ill-suited to others, conceptual awareness as to the peculiarities of derived demand is key to wheat farming; an activity that also requires understanding of other complexities i.e., freight companies experience *joint* demand for their services (i.e. they transport goods other than wheat), output in distant regions can make even a “successful” harvest unprofitable, etc. In short, empirical observation shorn of conceptual framework is of little practical or theoretical utility.

If Popper was astutely aware of the limitations of unadulterated empiricism it is also the case that his own well-known antipathy to the use of inductive (rather than deductive) logic provides another unnecessary limitation on the scope of our inquiries. In Popper’s (1935 / 2002, p. 31) estimation, inductive logic – where one develops theories from observation – was justifiable in the natural sciences but not the social sciences, where he believed that the only useful theoretical frameworks were those which could be falsified or verified through the use of deductive logic. Now it is certainly the case that most of the concrete problems that we confront in life *are* indeed amenable to deductive logic, including all of the problems I identified in relation to wheat farming in the previous paragraph. We should also not exaggerate the problems that stem from a reliance on deductive logic as Woiceshyn and Daellenbach (2018, p. 185) do when they query “where do the theories come from in the first place if they are not induced from empirical observations?” For it is in the nature of research that the falsification of one theory produces an alternative proposition that can be subject to falsification (or verification) in turn. When, for example, Copernicus proposed that the sun was at the centre

of the solar system his conclusion stemmed from the falsification of the earlier thesis that the earth occupied the central place. Where deductive logic reaches its limits in the social sciences is when one goes beyond the “piecemeal” social “tinkering” that Popper (1944, p. 120) favoured, to explore wider historical or sociological trends; explorations which Popper famously condemned as “historicism”. That research constantly leads us to questions that go beyond the scope of logical deduction – i.e. the historical role of charismatic individuals, the factors behind the Industrial Revolution, the loss of dynamism in the post-1991 Japanese economy, etc. - was highlighted by Max Weber, arguably the most logical thinker that the social sciences has produced. For, as Weber (1904 / 1949, p. 92) concluded, “One thing is certain under all circumstances, namely, the more ‘general’ the problem involved ... the less subject it is to a single unambiguous answer on the basis of the data of empirical sciences”. In dealing with such problems the best we can hope for, Weber (1904 / 1949, p. 92) continued, is evidence that a hypothesis or outcome is “objectively possible” rather than being empirically verifiable. If, for example, we are considering whether or not a particular leader in business or politics is “charismatic”, a negative finding does not cause us to reject the validity of the concept. Rather it emphasises how we continue to organize our world in accordance with “ideal” types or representations – circles, charismatic individuals, authoritarian leaders, free-market societies, democracies – that do not have a physically verifiable existence.

Paradoxically, the suspicion of inductive logic and grand historical narratives is a common feature of *both* postmodernist thought (rooted as it is in philosophical idealism) and of positivism (rooted as it is in philosophic empiricism). In expressing a view totally loyal to the tradition of Hume – who observed that all “events” are “loose and separate”, at best “conjoined” in their relation to each other “but never connected” (Hume, 1748 / 1902, p. 74) – the noted Anglo-German historian, G.R. Elton (1967 / 1969, p. 42), advised readers of his *The Practice of History* against any vain “search for laws” in history. In expressing a similar conclusion, albeit from very different epistemological principles, Keith Jenkins (1997, p. 10) informed the readers of his *The Postmodern History Reader* that, “In postmodern terms, nothing connects”. Postmodernist hostility to “metanarratives” is also indicated in Munslow’s (1997, p. 17) *Deconstructing History*, which declares that it “now seems quite incredible that anyone could have ever believed in the hierarchy of master narratives like liberalism, science, Marxism, socialism.” The inherent problem with this empiricist / postmodernist opposition to “metanarratives” is that it restricts our attention to what Braudel (1980, 10) referred to as the “fleeting spectacle” of life, to the “events” that capture the population imagination (elections, wars, organizational crises, industrial strikes, political crises, etc.). Left in abeyance are the “bigger” questions of humanity’s historical experience that cannot be readily explained through reference to consciousness, will, ideas and individual and collective action, i.e. the causal

factors that produced the Industrial Revolution and European economic and cultural domination of the globe. It is in considering these “bigger” issues that the epistemological problems identified as key in the introduction to this article – time and the capacity of individual consciousness and will to reshape history – are moved to the fore. These two factors – time and individual activity – it needs to be emphasized, are connected, rather than being separate. We cannot consider one without thought to the other. For it is our periodization of time that shifts factors related to individual consciousness and will to either the foreground or the background. If, for example, we think of humanity’s experiences over the last five years than issues such as Brexit and the election of Donald Trump to the United States’ presidency appear central; issues that appear to make individual and collective activity the decisive factor. If we consider the events that have reshaped the human experience since 1945, however, Brexit and Trump appear inconsequential when set against the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of new economic superpowers in Asia, most notably China and Japan. If we consider human history across the last 300 years even these latter events appear inconsequential when set against the rise of industrial capitalism, a form of economic activity that has prevailed in virtually every region of the globe. As humans living in the present and facing the future, these different temporal dimensions to the modern condition exist simultaneously, rather than separately. How then do we give appropriate weighting to individual activity and will when set against inherited material conditions of existence? Perhaps the most succinct guide is that offered by Marx (1869 / 1951, p. 225) in the opening sentences of his *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, where he observed that individuals “make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.”

Useful as Marx’s formulae is in emphasizing the need to give due weight to *both* long-term historical conditions and the human capacity to change their conditions of existence (within circumscribed limits), it nevertheless does little to clarify the epistemological principles through which we can best understand the human experience. On this plane we confront the same problems that previously concerned Plato, Copernicus, Hume and Kant: how do we perceive the physical and social world, and in what ways do we best make sense of our observations? With regard to both problems it is useful to return to Kant’s refutation of Hume’s (1748 / 1902) empirical scepticism; a scepticism that denied human reason the capacity to discern cause and effect relationships. In countering this scepticism, Kant placed the human propensity for abstract conceptualization to the fore, both in terms of perception and theoretical explanation, arguing in his *Critique of Pure Reason* that, “all knowledge requires a concept, however obscure and imperfect that concept may be” (Kant, 1787 / 2007, p. 137). In common

with Plato and idealist schools of philosophy, Kant held that we perceive the world indirectly, through mental images and representations rather than through direct sensory sensation. Unlike idealist schools of thought, however, Kant (1787 / 2007, p. 348) also believed that “the real, or material” world does exist “actually and independently of all fancy”. According to Kant’s principles of philosophic realism it is only by grouping our representations of reality into generalized concepts (desk, chair, work, movement, etc.) that we are able to make sense of the world; a capacity denied infants who have powers of sight, hearing and touch but who are as yet devoid of sufficient conceptual scaffolding. Kant’s most important contribution to human knowledge, however, stemmed from the ways in which he placed the problem of cause and effect at the centre of his thinking. Whereas Hume (1748 / 1092) had argued that causal explanations can *only* come from observation and experience, Kant (1783 / 1902, p. 73) argued “a completely reverse model”, whereby human inquiry is driven by a primeval search for causation. In other words, there *is* an objective, verifiable world independent of our imagination, but the discernment of causal relationships within that world is a unique product of human inquiry and its capacity for testing evidence against explanation.

If one had to provide, in summary, a single word to describe postmodernist canons of thought, heirs as they are to the traditions of German philosophic idealism, it would be “myopic”. Concerned as it is with matters relating to consciousness, will, identity and power, postmodernism is temporally ill-suited to analysis that extends into the distant or even near past, Foucault (1969 / 1972, p. 24) declaring that, “Discourse must not be referred to the distant presence of origin, but treated as and when it occurs”. As we have noted continually throughout this article, postmodernist traditions of thought are also ill-suited to the task of determining causal relationships, Foucault (1969 / 1972, p. 202) advising that he had “no great liking for interpretation”. Hostility to the use of long-term demographic or economic series also makes postmodernist methodologies ill-suited to economic analysis, thereby marginalizing postmodernist influences in many of the key debates of our time. A propensity for “deconstruction” and “decentring” also rules out a capacity to identify unifying trends in the historical experience. Unlike the leading exponents of German philosophic idealism, most particularly Schelling and Nietzsche, postmodernism has also given scant thought to the nature of “freedom” and the ways in which any form of “complete freedom” must embrace acts of evil as well as of good. To what then can we ascribe its evident and continuing appeal? Clearly its claim to intellectual and social credibility is found in claims to be the preeminent post-Marxist “critical” school of thought; a school of thought that stands, in the words of the leading office-bearers of the Critical Management Studies Division of the AOM, for “the expression of views critical of established management ideologies and practices, the taken-for-granted social or economic orders surrounding organization and business” (Cumings and

Prasad, 2018, p. 12). Unfortunately for adherents to such critical understandings, the methodological and conceptual limitation of postmodernism make it peculiarly ill-suited to such intended goals.

Conclusion

In his most significant work - a work that profoundly influenced Nietzsche and, through him, Foucault, White and wide bodies of postmodernist thought – Arthur Schopenhauer (1859 / 1969, p.4) recorded that “this world is, on the one side, entirely *representation*, just as, on the other, it is entirely *will*” [emphasis in original]. Arguably, these 18 words sum up the entire philosophy of what we have come to think of as postmodernism. For in these formulae, as Foucault (1976 / 1978, p. 100) subsequently expressed it, “power and knowledge are joined together”. Power rests in the hands of those whose representations of reality are accepted by others as intellectually and socially legitimate. By acts of will, these dominant representations can be challenged and overthrown by social dissidents. As Nietzsche (1889 / 1990, p. 60) put it, through “the act of willing” we can break the bounds of economics, religion and every other social bond and become the “causal agents” for societal and / or organizational transformation. Similarly, in the same line of reasoning, we can – as Foucault (1966 / 1994, p. xx) suggested - break free of the “fundamental codes” of our cultures. What counts in such battles are not abstract notions of truth – which are, after all, only the “representations” of the socially dominant – but rather the use of alternative “representations”, “discourses” and “narratives” as weapons of change.

Given its scepticism of material evidence it is hardly surprising that critiques of postmodernist-informed research tend to focus on its patent disregard for the forms of evidence that positivist scholars hold so dear. In a recent article in *Accounting History*, for example, Tyson and Oldroyd (2017, p. 31) lament the tendency to “wilfully distort or omit key factual information” so as to bolster “a moral stance”. Such criticisms hardly dent the postmodernist armour, however, constructed as it is around a skeleton of philosophic idealism that has long questioned the very existence of the material world. When one is dealing with matters relating to individual consciousness and will, moreover, it is highly probable that perceptions will vary markedly from one individual to the next and from one social grouping to another. It is thus, this article has argued, not the postmodernist emphasis on consciousness, identity and being *per se* that is the problem. These are, after all, legitimate areas of inquiry, it being the case that any explanation of the human condition that does not find room for such factors provides only a partial explanation. Rather, the central problem with postmodernist-informed research is found in the limited range of methodological and conceptual tools in its kitbag; limitations which, we have suggested, produce a myopic view of social reality. As an idealist school of thought, postmodernist-informed research pays scant regard to the material

conditions of existence as exemplified by the disciplines of demography, economics and logistics. Concerned primarily with representation, power and will, postmodernism also pays little heed to that most important of determinants: time. By restricting rather than extending our temporal view, the postmodernist-informed emphasis on current forms of discourse and representation invariably ignores the fact that, as Braudel (2009, p. 182) observed, “The time of today is composed simultaneously of the time of yesterday, of the day before yesterday, and of bygone days.” Invariably deconstructionist rather than constructive in focus, postmodernism is also of limited utility when it comes to devising concrete reform proposals. In bemoaning this tendency, Bruno Latour (2004, p. 246) – the seminal figure in “amodernism” and Actor Network Theory – pointedly observed that, “The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles”. For many exponents of postmodernism, no doubt, such failings are preferable to either Marxism, an ideology that placed excessive emphasis on the material conditions of existence, or positivism; a theoretical framework long associated with rationality, science and the harnessing of knowledge to economic growth. The inherent problems of postmodernism are of such a scale, however, as to circumscribe the endeavours of even the brightest minds who operate in accordance with its premises.

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