CRITICAL LEARNING AND TEMPERED RADICALISM: AN EXPLORATION OF THE ROLES AND DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY CAREER ACADEMICS

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INTRODUCTION

The current chair of the CMS division states the hope that 'CMS will continue to remain an ally of the oppressed, and a thorn in the flesh of both the exploiter and of the theorist who represents such exploitation as "business as usual".' This paper explores how and to what extent incoming members of the CMS community are able to rise to this call within a context in which university and business school governance is driven by efficiency and excellence in increasingly narrowly defined terms.

We draw on the stories of 30 early career academics (ECAs) who currently identify with CMS, establishing academic careers either within their Alma Mater or moving on to more challenging and in some cases hostile environments. Taking the starting assumption that these ECAs are having to work within and between different and competing positions between a subfield (CMS) and a wider field (management studies), both influenced in different ways by wider social changes, we apply a Bourdieusian lens to understand the development and maintenance of practices within these fields or subfields. We discuss whether entering the field in challenging times (both as PhD students and then ECAs) has in fact formed CMS ECAs as a specific type of critical scholar (with a specific critical habitus), and in so doing we turn to the concept of 'tempered radicalism' (Meyerson and Scully 1995) which allows us to explore the ambivalent position of CMS academics and what strategies they develop for surviving and thriving in their dual roles.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

The backdrop for this study is the increasing managerialist governmentality within UK universities (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Butler and Spoelstra, 2012; Clarke et al., 2012; Deem and Brehony, 2005) with their emphases on evaluations, accreditation, research rankings and the knock-on effects on performance management and career development (Anderson 2008). CMS ECAs are working within a Higher Education system increasingly characterised by the institutionalisation of the 'rationalised myths' of neoliberalism, new managerialism, performance management, and excellence (Butler and Spoelstra, 2012; Deem and Brehony, 2005; Willmott, 2003) . The contextual changes in the system over the past decade or so have attracted a sustained critique in terms of their impact on academic work and identity (Hayes and Wynyard,

2002; Strathern, 2000), and their homogenising effects on the academic field of management, with adverse implications for CMS agendas (Butler and Spoelstra 2014; Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Grey, 2010). Debates continue over the extent and the forms of academic resistance to these changes (Anderson, 2008; Clarke et al., 2012; Trowler, 2001; Willmott, 2013).

Within this literature, few systematic efforts have been made to account for the different roles, experiences and practices of academics at different stages of their careers. Junior academic faculty are presented as, on the one hand, 'the most vulnerable group in the science system [that] are therefore the first to suffer from the stress that has befallen this system' (Laudel and Gläser, 2008: 388), but, on the other hand, as hardly 'blank sheets' upon which neoliberal approaches to Higher Education can be cleanly and easily inscribed (Archer, 2008). We however consider ECAs a crucial group in shaping the way forward for the profession generally (Laudel and Gläser, 2008), and for CMS specifically as the future protectors of a subfield whose values go against many current dominant societal values, and so it is important to understand how ECAs respond to the demands placed on them in all aspects of their work, but specifically in teaching and research, which are increasingly affected by this culture (Strathern, 2000; Hayes and Wynyard, 2002).

Given that the ethos of CMS (Fournier and Grey, 2000) implies the questioning of managerialism (Alvesson et al., 2009), CMS ECAs are often painfully aware of the conflicts and contradictions involved in being a CMS academic in the neoliberal business school and, as organisation scholars, are often finely attuned to issues of power and domination. They are therefore well-positioned to develop ways of reworking and reshaping the competing pressures (as evident in the reflexive accounts by early-career and doctoral CMS scholars of their experiences of the socialisation processes and their attempts at resistance: see Bristow 2012, Prasad 2013). We consider the agency of members of this group to develop and practice in ways which help them to establish, maintain and safeguard critical practices crucial to the preservation and development of the integrity of the CMS academic profession and community.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

We turn to Bourdieu's conceptual architecture of habitus, field and forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986, 1991), which allows us to focus on the individual (through the concept of habitus) and their relationship with the social space (field) and how they position themselves within it in relation to what is valued within that space (forms of capital). In the current study there are potentially two fields (or a subfield within a field) in play: namely, critical management studies and the neoliberal university/business school. This means that CMS ECAs have to learn to negotiate effectively between the two, learn the rules of the game for both and acquire forms of capital, predominantly cultural in this case, that are valued in both fields. This capital might be constituted by the same tangible object, for example, a journal article, but it will be judged differently in each of the two fields: that is, what counts is *what it is saying* and *what it aims to do* in one (CMS) and *where it is published in the other* (audit culture HE). The habitus which the ECA needs to develop therefore involves learning a complex set of practices in order to enact and maintain their dual roles.

In order to understand how such a set of practices could be learnt and enacted by individuals in such a dual role we turned to the concept of 'tempered radicals' (Meyerson and Scully 1995), defined as: 'individuals who identify with and are committed to their organizations and are also committed to a cause, community or ideology that is fundamentally different from

and possibly at odds with the dominant culture of the organization' (p586). Meyerson and Scully argue that such individuals can be called radicals 'because they challenge the status quo, both through their intentional acts and also just by being who they are, people who do not fit perfectly' (p586) and because of their adherence to a specific cause, there is a potential clash of values between the organisation they find themselves in and other aspects of their professional or personal lives which are held dear.

A strong emergent theme from Meyerson and Scully's research is the ambivalent position such people experience. The research highlights how this ambivalence presents these individuals with challenges but also opportunities which help them to be able to reflect on and develop appropriate strategies for living with this ambivalence in their day-to-day professional lives. Such strategies are not just about coping and dealing with the difficulties of their position, but also that their position of ambivalence can be used as a source of strength and a springboard for action: 'While frustration may be inevitable individuals can effect change, even radical change, and still enjoy fulfilling, productive, authentic careers' (p586). Although the concept of 'authentic careers' may now be contestable, this statement somewhat echoes the 'bittersweet' nature of academic careers as described in recent studies of business and management scholars (Knights and Clarke 2014; Bristow 2012; Clarke, Knights and Jarvis 2012).

CMS ECAs AS TEMPERED RADICALS

An initial analysis of our interviews with CMS ECAs revealed the marginal position some experience within their own schools: 'I'm all alone here', and 'I'm seen as weird'; while at the same time others reported deliberately cultivating an 'outsider' position through various activities such as organising and signing petitions, innovating their academic roles through charity work, engaging in and gathering support for researching radical topics, working with 'undesirables' and introducing provocative questions and critical theoretical perspectives into 'mainstream' teaching.

At times the ambivalence of position comes over very clearly, as in the example this participant, coming from a different academic background, gives of his/her experiences of joining a management PhD programme:

'At that time the thought of being in a business school was very alien to me and I was very skeptical because I was broadly and still am leftwing and not exactly pro capitalist and here I was considering going into a school of management. If I had ever thought of management at all it would have not been very positively'

We wondered how the ECAs in our study dealt with the ambivalence of their positions and so initially turned to Meyerson and Scully's findings, using them to help us question our own data in this respect. We demonstrate that the CMS ECAs we interviewed do, to a greater or lesser extent, act as tempered radicals both in experiencing the challenges of the position and in displaying most of the strategies identified by Myerson and Scully (1995).

Meyerson and Scully highlight four challenges: 1. *perceptions of hypocrisy:* 'I find frustrating that I don't always believe in what I am teaching. And there is such a gap between our research and our teaching'; 2. *isolation:* 'I don't really know where I belong anymore. I am not sure where I would fit or even what I want to focus on'; 3. *pressures of co-optation:* 'Through a slow process of voluntary adherence to these external norms and criteria of success, I was going in a different direction'; 4. *emotional burdens* (of maintaining a dual position): 'The dual pressure of research and teaching is really felt. I am really getting tired! I don't want to do this

anymore! This teaching, this research, it is boring! I am writing papers that no one is going to read. I am not interested in the stuff I am writing.'

Although this might paint a rather bleak picture for tempered radicals and their ability to maintain this position long-term, on the other hand this ambivalent position (Meyerson and Scully argue) does have advantages in that the challenges it creates also force tempered radicals to develop strategies which help them 'to effect change and simultaneously sustain their ambivalent identities' (p594). These are *small wins:* 'My self-preservation strategy is that I try to change things that I feel I maybe can change, and concentrate on those'*; local, spontaneous authentic action:* 'What I am trying to get across is that it doesn't require super-human strength or amazing intellectual capabilities to pursue what you are interested in'*;* the use of *language styles:* 'I carry the CMS identity for good or ill. Some people look more radical; I try to look presentable. I look conventional but do unconventional things'; and *affiliations:* 'I am working with people who have got more experience. They are good at framing arguments, and getting papers into journals.'

Our study also allows us to add to the concept of the tempered radical by adding some additional strategies and behaviours to those already identified. The first of these is what we term *identifying the bottom line,* which relates to working out what is really important for the individual to defend at all costs and consequently what can be let go, which is an important factor in deciding which battles to fight. This is a process of identification arguably learnt through the disciplines of the PhD process: 'I think one thing you learn through the PhD and early academic life is working out what is important. Examples of bottom lines relate to personal autonomy and personal feelings of contentment: 'my aim was to find a way to be happy and still have a career in academia.' They also reflect a strong commitment to CMS values: 'I would never write something that is top down managerial, I just couldn't do it'.

Knowing what is important and where to draw the line is connected to our next emergent theme, *finding balance*: 'I think even though the game gets tougher, you get more skilled at playing the game and that is where the autonomy comes from. You get progressively better and hopefully you still move up the path and get more autonomy than you had before despite the system being harder, you learn how to balance things'.

The next important theme is that of *strategic networking and/or critical friendship.* There is some consensus amongst CMS ECAs that this double game of reconciling their own academic motivations and agendas with institutional demands is a very difficult game to play on their own, even as, in the case of many, they feel relatively isolated in their home institutions. In very conscious ways therefore they perhaps go beyond Meyerson and Scully's concept of *affiliations* in that ECAs develop strong support networks to help them in various ways, including with understanding organisational politics, as in the following example:

'We talk a lot which helps with some anxieties. We realise that sometimes we are vulnerable compared to other people but at the same time we are not confident enough to stand up and say, do this or that'.

There is also support with the demands of publishing, as demonstrated in this second example: 'We do try to encourage each other and continue publishing and send articles and attending conferences'.

Drawing on others to help them navigate the competing demands of their dual role leads to the next practice which we call *learning political savviness*: 'doing the PhD in the department was good experience and I had very good mentoring and was exposed quite early to the politics and so on'. Another participant describes this as a process of 'growing up', first through

observation and then through gradually trying things out and taking things on: '…like watching one of those wildlife programmes, watching the lion club learn to hunt'.

Underpinning these other practices is what we term *'critical reflexivity'*: the ECAs are extremely aware of the role of the external environment on their practice and of the possible impacts of their own actions on this environment, as well as being very cognisant of the limitations of their actions. Some advocate the need for a constant stepping back and questioning how they respond to institutional demands, for example for a certain type of research published in a certain type of journal: ' I think the world would be much better if people were a bit more conscious of how they are playing it a step too far and what would happen if they hesitated before making these decisions or if they hesitated before crumbling under the demands of senior editors or heads of school or research directors.'

Others show how it is important to justify their research decisions to themselves, in line with their own motivations and interests rather than just externally to their employers: 'I still choose the journals I really love and where I find my voice situated… It doesn't matter if they are top journals or not. The main priority for me is they should fit my interest…'.

DISCUSSION

How far does the concept of tempered radicalism take us in understanding the nature of the experience of CMS ECAs in our current specific context? The interview data quite easily maps to the strategies identified by Myerson and Scully demonstrates that there are certainly some synergies between their tempered radicals and our CMS ECAs in that they experience similar pressures and challenges in sustaining a dual position and developing similar strategies do support their dual endeavours. What our research adds is the use of a defined sample in terms of career stage which emphasises and the sense of learning, progress and development. The specific time in history in which our study took place is also important: firstly, it took place towards the end of a decade of radical change within the UK university system and, secondly, at a time of heightened managerialism, specifically as regards research outputs in the run up to the 'REF 2013' research evaluation exercise. The five additional strategies we have identified are, we argue, not just tied to the CMS ECAs' dual positions, but also arise from having to learn how to operate at a very difficult time where hard choices have to be made and strategic alliances need to be formed in order to protect what is most important to this group in their professional practice. This, we argue leads to the development of what we take to be a reflexive habitus (incorporating a very well-developed political sensitivity, possibly similar to that of the corporate dissidents discussed in Kerr and Robinson (2009), and which could lead, on the one hand, to effective critical scholarship, but also, on the other, to the development of successful practices of tempered radicalism in terms of effecting or indeed resisting change within their own institutions.

CONCLUSIONS

What then might a (CMS) 'critical habitus' look like? What are the important practices here and what forms of capital are necessary for survival and success within these two fields? Certainly cultural capital is important in terms of being able to talk the talk within both CMS and the wider field, but also in displaying deep knowledge of and commitment to a specific area of study in order to gain acceptance and produce other forms of (symbolic) capital expected by the

field – most obviously high quality journal submissions but also high teaching evaluations and so on. In addition, the importance of social capital comes through very strongly in terms of the role played by peer support, mentors, the role of ex-supervisors and the help of the wider CMS community.

This raises questions as how this group can be supported and nurtured both through the wider governance system of CMS and also through their own agency. The question we therefore pose is: how can the CMS community create conditions which allow the in-coming members of this community (or sub-field) to acquire these forms of capital partly at least through their association with CMS, since, as we have demonstrated, they often struggle to acquire these within their own institutions?

In other words what might our own 'small wins' look like? Firstly, perhaps we could find ways of eliciting from the ECAs themselves what support systems they would find helpful. Certainly making space for explicit discussion in doctoral programmes, within conferences, discussion lists and so on of the challenges for CMS academics and sharing examples of how these can be navigated would be a good starting point.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS