KNOWLEDGE AND CRITIQUE - A FOUCAULDIAN PERSPECTIVE

Martin Messner[a]
Silvia Jordan[b]

[a,b]Department of Finance,
University of Innsbruck, Austria
[a] martin.messner@uibk.ac.at
[b] silvia.jordan@uibk.ac.at

Session B-1

Abstract

In the literature on organizational learning and knowledge, one often finds reference to the pivotal role of critical reflection. While critical reflection is much talked about, it seems that less attention is given to critical practices in general. We argue that critique should not be reduced to critical reflection, as this might unduly limit our understanding of the actual effects of critical practices. In the paper, we resort to the work of Michel Foucault to illustrate, first, the intrinsic connection between power and knowledge and, second, the ambiguous role of critique as both a practice of opening up power/knowledge systems and as an effort to govern the actions of others. Rather than to make a prescriptive plea for more critique and critical reflection, we suggest that organization theory should try to understand the manifold effects that critical practices can bring about in organizations.

Keywords: Critical practices, critical reflection, organizational learning, Foucault, power/knowledge.

Knowledge and Critique. A Foucauldian Perspective

Martin Messner
Silvia Jordan

Department of Finance
University of Innsbruck, Austria
{martin.messner, silvia.jordan}@uibk.ac.at

Abstract

In the literature on organizational learning and knowledge, one often finds reference to the pivotal role of critical reflection. While critical reflection is much talked about, it seems that less attention is given to critical practices in general. We argue that critique should not be reduced to critical reflection, as this might unduly limit our understanding of the actual effects of critical practices. In the paper, we resort to the work of Michel Foucault to illustrate, first, the intrinsic connection between power and knowledge and, second, the ambiguous role of critique as both a practice of opening up power/knowledge systems and as an effort to govern the actions of others. Rather than to make a prescriptive plea for more critique and critical reflection, we suggest that organization theory should try to understand the manifold effects that critical practices can bring about in organizations.

Keywords: Critical practices, critical reflection, organizational learning, Foucault, power/knowledge

Suggested track: B - Epistemology of Knowledge

1   Introduction

Knowledge is good, critique is better. This is at least what critical scholars would agree on when discussing the question of scientific progress. Karl Popper (1959) has expressed the importance of critical questioning of knowledge in methodological terms. According to his "critical rationalism", scientific progress cannot be achieved by verification of existing theories but rather by their critique and falsification.

Critical perspectives have also featured prominently in the study of organizations and management, drawing upon different epistemological and ideological backgrounds, such as Marxism or Postmodern philosophies (for an overview see Alvesson & Deetz, 1996). The meaning attached to the term *critical* thereby depends upon the chosen framework of interpretation (Willmott, 1997, p. 161). In general, a critical attitude of those who do scientific work seems to be acknowledged as desirable and is associated with the self-reflective character of the scientific endeavour (Mouritsen, Larsen, & Hansen, 2002).

Critique, however, is not restricted to the scientific realm. It is also, as Popper (1971a; 1971b) cogently argued, the basis of a democratic and open society and, as we may add, an important element of most organizations within such a society. Organizational life exhibits various forms of critique, ranging from critique raised in personal communications to its more institutionalized forms such as auditing, evaluation or quality control. What these practices have in common, and what thus makes them *critical* in the broadest sense, is that they - intentionally and/or effectively - challenge other organizational practices with their underlying rationalities.

Within the vast literature on organizational learning and knowledge, several authors have pointed to the importance of critical reflection as a trigger for knowledge creation and learning. They contend that a critical attitude towards established routines and ways of thinking is crucial for achieving the state of a 'learning organization'. However, while critical reflection is much talked about, it seems that less attention is given to critical practices in general. We argue that critique should not be reduced to critical reflection, as this might unduly limit our understanding of the actual effects of critical practices. To equate critique with critical reflection contributes to a somewhat one-sided picture of critique. In particular, one might easily forget that critical practices are inherently ambiguous. In questioning established knowledge and accompanying power relations, critique itself will need to resort to power. It is thus far from being an objective, unproblematic practice, as the very term 'reflection' might suggest.

The central aim of our paper therefore is to highlight the inherent ambiguity that critical practices possess. In section 2, we review how critical practices have been touched upon in the organizational learning and knowledge literature and argue that this body of work only draws a limited picture of critique. In section 3, we therefore introduce an understanding of critique based upon the writings of French philosopher Michel Foucault. In relating Foucault's notion of critique to his concept of power/knowledge, we intend to highlight the close affinity between power and critique that lies at the centre of the ambiguity of critical practices. Finally, in section 4, we broadly outline how such a Foucauldian perspective could be used to study critical practices in organizations and argue why this might be of particular relevance for the discourse on organizational learning and knowledge.

2 Knowledge, learning and critique

2.1 Converging discourses

It has become a truism to say that knowledge is the most important asset in today's economy. Likewise is it generally accepted that individuals and organizations need to engage in an ongoing process of learning to be able to compete in such a knowledge economy. It is therefore far from surprising that the notions of knowledge and learning have occupied a prominent place within organization and management studies. While the interest in learning in organizations can be traced back to the 1950s (e.g. March & Simon, 1958) and started to flourish in the 1980s, the discourse on knowledge management became popular in the 1990s only (Easterby-Smith, Crossan, & Nicolini, 2000). The different development paths of these two discourses are also mirrored by a difference in focus and orientation. Academics and practitioners writing on knowledge management have dominantly taken a rather technical view and have offered models on how to manage best an organization's knowledge. The discourse on organizational learning, on the other hand, has been more concerned with finding out how learning processes in organizations occur and has given less attention to the management of knowledge or learning. However, recently, one can witness a certain convergence of these strands, as "there is renewed interest in the extent to which the social aspects of organizational learning might be combined with the more technological views of knowledge management" (Easterby-Smith et al., 2000, p. 790). Some authors have even suggested that "[k]nowledge management can be seen as an umbrella term for a wide spectrum of academic orientations. These include information systems and organizational learning but also strategic management and innovation" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2001, p. 996).

A driving force for such a convergence has certainly been the increasing interest in the social and political environment in which learning and knowledge is situated. Criticising the mainstream literature on knowledge management, some authors have moved away "from the normative conceptions that have dominated to date, seeing knowledge not as something valuable in and of itself, but as fragile, politicized and dialectical" (Swan & Scarbrough, 2001, p. 921). Even more pronounced is such a shift within the discourse on organizational learning, where practice-based approaches highlight the connection between learning and acting (Gherardi, 2000).

Nevertheless, in many writings on knowledge and learning, there still prevails a rather functionalist perspective. In such a view, knowledge and learning are assumed to be a good thing per se and the actual content of knowledge that is learnt is not subject to

discussion (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2001; Contu, Grey, & Örtenblad, 2003). "The problem is that 'knowledge' is not necessary functional, useful, and a generally good thing. [...] In addition to the problems of the claimed objectivity of knowledge, it could be argued that it sometimes creates problems, through imprinting a norm of what things should be like and indicating a gap between current imperfections and the ideal. [...] Knowledge enables and constrains" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2001, pp. 999-1000). Thus, we are called to recognize that certain knowledge can become a hindrance for an organization and that to learn can simply amount to adding more of the same to this stock of knowledge. To challenge the notion that knowledge is necessarily beneficial thus means to draw attention to those practices which contribute to question existing assumptions, beliefs and mindsets. We want to call these practices 'critical practices'.

2.2   Critical practices

We use the term 'critique' in a very broad sense, such that it encompasses practices that are often not associated with each other. We may speak of critique if, for example, a person challenges the actions of another person, be it by means of discussion, resistance or counter-action. Likewise, individuals are often critical with respect to their own thoughts and actions, when they (critically) reflect upon what they have done in the past or intend to do in the future. We may thus witness a variety of critical practices in organizations, some of them even being institutionalized, as in the case of personnel evaluation, quality control or internal audits.

Critical practices are important triggers for learning processes, as "without contention there is no internal stimulus for change" (Brown & Starkey, 2000, p. 111). By challenging established ways of thinking and acting, they provide for a certain dynamic within the organization and can bring about a 'new quality' of learning. Critique does not encourage consolidation and confirmation of existing knowledge, but rather aims at opening the organization for new perceptions and actions. It has been suggested that such a type of learning might be called 'unlearning'. Hedberg (1981) defines unlearning as "a process through which learners discard knowledge. Unlearning makes way for new responses and mental maps" (p. 18). Unlearning thus seems to precede or closely relate to what Argyris and Schön have called 'double-loop learning', i.e. "learning that results in a change in the values of the theory-in-use, as well as in its strategies and assumptions" (Argyris & Schön, 1996, p. 21). As Hedberg contends, unlearning is often triggered by problems or crises which force the organization to question its established routines (1981, p. 19). More actively, organizations can stimulate processes of unlearning by listening to dissent,

complaints and warnings, by introducing new perceptions and experimenting with existing practices (Nyström & Starbuck, 1984; March, Sproull, & Tamuz, 1991).

Reflection is an important enabler of learning processes. As mentioned above, the individual reflection upon one's own thoughts and actions can be considered a 'critical practice'. Critique, however, is not completely absorbed in reflection. In many cases, reflection will be the response to a critical stimulus. In other words, the chain of causality that leads to learning does not start with reflection, although a reflective stance will be crucial for learning to take place.

We would contend that in the existing literature on knowledge and learning, there is a tendency to focus on the modus of critical reflection and to pay less attention to other critical practices. This, in turn, may prove problematic as the very term reflection does have a dominantly positive and somewhat objective overtone. Thus, when the challenging of established routines is equated with critical reflection, there is a risk of covering some of the effects that such a challenge can bring about. In particular, it is the close affinity between critique and power that might get lost when critique is dominantly conceived of as a reflective practice. Before we discuss this affinity in more detail, we briefly want to show how selected authors have alluded to the idea of critical reflection.

2.3   Critical reflection

Processes of (critical) reflection have been the focus of the writings of several authors. Preskill and Torres (1999), for example, consider reflection as one element in their conception of 'evaluative enquiry'. "Evaluative enquiry requires that organization members critically consider what they think, say and do in the context of the work environment. [...] It implies both thought and action, as well as cognitive, behavioural, and affective processes that influence the way we make decisions, solve problems, adapt to change, and meet learning and performance challenges" (p. 92). In order to create a truly learning organization, reflection needs to be accompanied by several other core processes of enquiry. It is, for example, crucial for a learning organization to identify and challenge basic values, beliefs and assumptions and by that create opportunities for changing established routines. Moreover, there is a need of increased dialogue to allow ideas and experiences of individuals to be shared and challenged within the organization. In short, with their concept of 'evaluative enquiry', Preskill and Torres highlight the importance of reflection, dialogue and critique in triggering and sustaining learning processes in organizations.

From a somewhat different perspective, Reynolds (1998) calls for a more prominent role of critical reflection in management education and development. He criticises that the bulk of management literature portrays managing as a "neutral, disinterested process of developing the most effective and efficient means through which to achieve prespecified ends" (p. 184). In such a perspective, reflection is simply an element of problem-solving. Critical reflection, he argues, is different in so far as it "involves an analysis of power and control and an examination of the taken-for-granteds within which the task or problem is situated" (p. 189). Reynolds stresses the social dimension of critical reflection and by this distances himself from the more individualized perspectives such as proposed by Schön (1983). Drawing upon Critical Theory and its application to educational theory, he also points to the emancipatory interest that follows from his view and that interprets management practice as being concerned with ethical decisions.

What is apparent in Reynolds' work is the focused consideration of power relations as a target of critical reflection. While the literature on organizational learning and knowledge has overall paid little attention to issues of power and politics (Easterby-Smith & Araujo, 1999), recently these issues have gained some momentum (see e.g. Coopey, 1995; Blackler & McDonald, 2000; Vince, 2001). In his study of a change initiative in a Welsh company, Vince (2001) illustrates how established power relations and emotional ties limit learning and change on an organizational level. He uses the term 'establishment' to point to the connection between emotion and power that results from processes of organizing and that over time can act as a self-limiting dynamic. While individual learning may take place within such an establishment, Vince contends that "organizations are learning when the 'establishment' that is being created through the very process of organizing can be identified and critically reflected upon" (p. 1326). In an extension of this case study, Vince (2002) outlines four examples of reflective practices that can act as a suitable vehicle for such a process of critical reflection: peer consultancy groups, organizational role analysis, communities of practice and group relations conferences. With the focus on how critical reflection can be institutionalized, such an approach to learning is designed to increase collective reflection and engagement across the organization.

Vince's (2001, 2002) work is important as it explicitly considers power relations as the background against which critical reflection and learning take place. For him, the "power of reflection" (Hammer & Stanton, 1997) lies in questioning the establishment, in "making power relations, emotions and organizational dynamics visible in order to create new mental and structural models for organizing" (Vince, 2001, p. 1347). This will not always be easy. Learning provokes anxiety, as people are reluctant to give up the ontological

security (Giddens, 1984) that established routines provide. Thus, critique and reflection might actually prove to be far less powerful than normatively stated. On the other hand, it is important to avoid the idea that practices of critical reflection are extant to the existing power relations and that they allow a distanced and objective view on what goes on. As argued above, the very term 'reflection' might promote such a view, giving the impression that the questioning of the establishment is a dominantly cognitive activity. What gets lost in such a perspective is the fact that reflection itself is often triggered by complaints, warnings, disagreements or other critical actions (Nyström & Starbuck, 1984, p. 60).

In the next section, we will highlight the power effects of critical practices and argue that critique is an inherently ambiguous activity.

2.4 The power of critique

While authors such as Reynolds (1998) or Vince (2001, 2002) point to power relations as a target for critical reflection, they do not discuss the power effects of actual critical practices. When questioning the established *order of things* (Foucault, 2002), critique exerts power, since if critique were not powerful, it could not bring about change. But once critique is associated with power, the question arises what critique distinguishes from power, such that it cannot be reduced to 'pure' power.

Drawing upon Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Alvesson and Willmott state that even if a practice begins critical in the sense of "opening up understanding or facilitating reflection", it might "end up locking people into fixed, unreflexive thinking" (1996, p. 175). Thus, in its endeavour to render power relations visible, an alleged critical practice may over time grow into an unquestioned routine and hence become invisible in terms of its own power effects. In fact, it has been suggested that organizational practices of evaluation, inquiry and even empowerment could or should be considered as disciplinary practices in the sense of Foucault (1995) (Barker, 1993; Townley, 1993a). A key element in such disciplinary practices is visibility. "The perfect disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly" (Foucault, 1995, p. 173). Thus, while transparency is often considered a key requirement for learning (M. Popper & Lipshitz, 2000), it does also provide the basis for discipline and control. Critical reflection upon existing power relations usually carries a rather positive and emancipatory connotation. The ambiguous character of critique becomes apparent, however, if one associates with critique the practices of observation, examination and discipline that can be employed to subject organizational members to critical scrutiny.

In what follows, we will use the work of Michel Foucault to broaden out the rather narrow focus on critical reflection and provide a sound theoretical basis for our claim that critical practices are inherently ambiguous. We therefore discuss how Foucault conceives of the notion of critique and relate the latter to his ideas on power, knowledge and technologies of government. Overall, we want to point to the insights that a Foucauldian perspective can bring for the study of critical practices in organizations and thus for issues of knowledge creation and learning.

3   Broadening out: Foucault on power, knowledge and critique

3.1   The nexus of power/knowledge

The work of Michel Foucault has attracted much attention within organization and management studies, particularly with respect to an understanding of power and knowledge in organizations. Foucault has always been interested in the relationship between the subject and truth (Foucault, 1997a). In his historical analyses on the asylum, the clinic, the prison or sexuality, he has looked for the ways in which subjects become subjected to certain games of truth, either by coercion or by forms of self-disclination. In the study of such games of truth, the notions of knowledge and power are of central importance. Knowledge (*savoir*) "refers to all procedures and all effects of knowledge (*connaissance*) which are acceptable at a given point in time and in a specific domain". Power "covers a whole series of particular mechanisms, definable and defined, which seem likely to induce behaviors or discourses" (Foucault, 1997e, p. 51). What Foucault says about the relationship between power and knowledge might be "the most radical dimension" of his work (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982, p. 114). He claims that power and knowledge are not external to each other, but that they operate in a mutually generative fashion, as "nothing can exist as an element of knowledge if [...] it does not possess the effects of coercion" and as "nothing can function as a mechanism of power if it is not deployed according to procedures, instruments, means, and objectives which can be validated in more or less coherent systems of knowledge" (Foucault, 1997e, p. 52). Thus, rather than to study knowledge and power separately, is is the "nexus of knowledge-power" that needs to be described in order to grasp the acceptability of the knowledge-power system (p. 53). One needs to analyze the connections between power and knowledge to find out why a certain "regime of truth" has become acceptable at a given historical moment.

Foucault has alluded to the nexus of power/knowledge throughout all of his writings, but perhaps most prominently he took up this theme in *Discipline and Punish*. The central

thesis of *Discipline and Punish* is the idea that the way power is executed has changed fundamentally between the eighteenth and the nineteenth century. In parallel with the displacement of sovereign power by the power of the people, the art of punishment undergoes a decisive shift. The abolition of martyrdom and the rise of the prison as the primary place for executing penal power result in a new "technology of power" (Foucault, 1995, p. 23), where punishment goes hand in hand with a political investment of the body (ibid., p. 25). Foucault shows in great detail how the change from corporal to disciplinary punishment at the end of the 18th century is accompanied by a discovery of the human body as an object of power and knowledge. As both a condition for and a consequence of the control and behavioral transformation of the inmates, the formation of knowledge about them becomes a cornerstone of the new disciplinary power (ibid., p. 125). Power is exercised and knowledge created by subjecting the individual to a meticulous system of surveillance and normalization. Training and examination are the central techniques used to form docile bodies. They thus exert a power that does not come from above, but operates on the micro level. More generally, power is to be understood as a grid of continuously working relations, an ongoing battle with numerous points of confrontation and agitation, where relations of power are always on the verge to get inversed (pp. 26-7). Power might thus be considered an ubiquitous phenomenon of modern society that cannot be escaped. "Power is everywhere", says Foucault (1998, p. 93), however, "not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (ibid.). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault does not only illustrate this agonistic character of power (cf. Foucault, 1982, p. 222) but also stresses that power must not be conceived as something negative or repressive. Relations of power need to be distinguished from states of domination. While the latter immobilize relations of power (Foucault, 1997a, p. 283), power itself is not negative in principle, but rather productive. Power produces regimes of truth, the individual and his knowledge being the product of this production (Foucault, 1995, p. 194).

Highlighting the nexus of power and knowledge, Foucault's genealogy of the prison serves as an example for the more general formation of the modern individual as an object of disciplinary technology and normative science (cf. Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982) that Foucault wants to expose and that has enticed him to speak of a "disciplinary society" (Foucault, 1995, p. 209). This characterization of modern society and the individual has been challenged by many critics (e.g. Taylor, 1986; Honneth, 1999) as being too one-sided and portraying the subject as a fully manipulable creature. In his later works, Foucault himself has qualified the role of disciplinary power mechanisms by stating that

discipline "is only one aspect of the art of governing people in our societies". Of similar importance are "techniques that permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, happiness, purity, supernatural power". These techniques Foucault calls "technologies of the self" (Foucault, 1997d, p. 177). They need to be considered in the broader context of Foucault's notion of 'government'.

3.2 Power, government and freedom

Foucault argues that from the 15th century on, "there was a veritable explosion of the art of governing men", making the question 'How to govern?' a central concern of politics, pedagogy and economics (Foucault, 1997e, p. 27). This concern is not something radically new, but a successor of the art of governing introduced to the Western World by Christianity. According to Foucault, it is the Christian pastoral that introduced to us the "activity that undertakes to conduct individuals throughout their lives by placing them under the authority of a guide responsible for what they do and for what happens to them" (Foucault, 1997c, p. 67). This is why Foucault calls this form of power "pastoral power" (Foucault, 1982, p. 215). And while this type of power had for centuries been linked to the Christian religion, it later spread out into the whole social body, becoming an "individualizing 'tactic'" that found support by a multitude of modern institutions, such as the police, the family, medicine, and education (ibid., pp. 214-5).

As to the modus of power, it is important to see that these forms of government do not represent acts of *domination*. Rather, they are based on the freedom of the individual and urge the latter to govern him- or herself to produce their "own" truth. In Christianity, this is mainly achieved through the practice of confession, a form of self-examination through permanent verbalization of thoughts. "Western man has become a confessing animal" (Foucault, 1998, p. 59). And while confession has been intimately linked with a renunciation of the self in Christianity, modern forms of examination have made a decisive break in this respect. "From the eighteenth century to the present, the techniques of verbalization have been reinserted in a different context by the called human sciences in order to use them without renunciation of the self but to constitute, positively, a new self" (Foucault, 1988, p. 49).

All this suggests that pastoral power is akin to disciplinary power as there seems again little scope for a concept of deliberate agency. The individual subject again seems to be determined by a dominant discourse urging the subject to behave in a pre-determined

manner. However, Foucault argues that the form of self-government first imposed by Christianity is a historically contingent construct. It is not a general law, but rather a certain regime of power/knowledge that can be breached. To illustrate this argument, Foucault compares the form of self-government dominating in Christianity with the aesthetics of existence that characterized the Greco-Roman life.

He sets forth that there was a marked difference between the care for the self as practised in antique Greece and the technology of self brought about by Christianity. While both developed an idea of self-discipline and ascetics, Greek thought lacked the tendendy for universality, normalization and codification that featured Christian doctrine (Foucault, 1992, pp. 249ff.; Foucault, 1997b). This is mirrored by the rising concern with the dangers of sexuality in Christian thinking and with its tendency to associate sexuality less with active engagement but with passivity (Foucault, 1997b, pp. 258-9). Foucault thus takes the history of sexuality to illustrate how the subject's relation to itself has become increasingly problematized, how "sex gradually became an object of great suspicion" (Foucault, 1998, p. 69). He then goes on to suggest that this has fundamentally changed the notion of morality and the ethical subject. While in the Greco-Roman world, the care of the self was central to the idea of an ethical life, during Christianity, the concern with oneself was unmasked as a form of selfishness that stands opposed to the interests of others. For the Greeks, there was no such opposition, as it was taken for granted that in order to act ethically responsible towards others, one has to master the relation to oneself first. This care for the self takes place in the realm of freedom, freedom being the "ontological condition of ethics" (Foucault, 1997a, p. 284). Although the dangers of sexuality were recognized in the Greco-Roman world, these dangers were not associated with a sinful activity. Rather, reflection on sexuality had as its objective "to develop a technique of existence" which should help to create "the possibility of forming oneself as a subject in control of his conduct; that is, the possibility of making oneself like the doctor treating sickness, the pilot steering between the rocks, or the statesman governing the city - a skillful and prudent guide of himself" (Foucault, 1992, pp. 138-9).

It is in this context that the concept of power has to be reconsidered. Power relations are far more complex than their institutionalization in disciplinary regimes might suggest. Having recognized the subject's capacity for stylization of conduct, it is necessary to view power relations as acting on this very capacity, making use of it, directing it, transforming it. "Power", Foucault says, "is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free" (1982, p. 221). Within the realm of power, people act upon each other's actions, trying to lead others (*conduire d'autres*) at the same time as struggling to conduct

themselves (*se conduire*) in a field of possibilities (ibid., pp. 220-1). This field of possibilities is both constraining and enabling, as in giving subjects certain options to pursue, it excludes other options from being acted upon. Foucault chooses the term government (or governmentality) to capture this "whole range of practices that constitute, define, organize, and instrumentalize the strategies that individuals in their freedom can use in dealing with each other" (Foucault, 1997a, p. 300). Government thus covers the disciplinary power mechanisms Foucault has concentrated on in his earlier writings as well as the practices of freedom featuring his later works. Rather than interpreting these modes of government as discrete types of power relations, one should think of them as points on a continuum, or even as different perspectives on the same issue, as strategies "to structure the field of possible action" (Foucault, 1982, p. 221) and thus as practices that make a difference with respect to the actions of others.

It is also in the context of practices of government, where one needs to look for a conception of critique.

3.3   The art of not being governed quite so much

Refering to the surge in the arts of governing that occured between the 15th and 16th century in Western Europe, Foucault identifies a specific cultural form that accompanied the increasing governmentalization. At the same time when politicians, economists and pedagogues posed the question of how to govern, there was the birth of an attitude that can be described as the "art of not being governed quite so much" (Foucault, 1997e, p. 29). This attitude Foucault calls *critique*. Critique faces the arts of governing "as an act of defiance, as a challenge, as a way of limiting these arts of governing and sizing them up, transforming them, of finding a way to escape from them" (ibid., p. 28). In the 15th and 16th century, this critical attitude was directed towards three main authorities. People increasingly challenged the authority of the Church by questioning the truth of the Scriptures, put forth natural rights and thus expressed their resistance against unjust laws and demanded valid reasons for accepting what the authorities presented as the truth. These historical anchoring points suggest that the core of this kind of critique is the relationship between power, truth and the subject (ibid., p. 32). And while the arts of government converge in a "movement through which individuals are subjugated in the reality of a social practice through mechanisms of power that adhere to a truth", critique as the counter-movement can be described as "the art of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected intractability" (ibid.).

Foucault points out that this definition of critique is akin to the definition Kant chose for *Aufklärung*. Kant suggested that Enlightenment be understood as "man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity", immaturity meaning the lack of courage to use one's understanding without the guidance of another (Kant, 1923). As opposed to the term *Aufklärung*, Kant used the term *critique* to refer to the definition of the limits of one's knowledge. And although these two critical endeavours are closely related (cf. Foucault, 1997f), Foucault stresses that the two projects were not pursued with the same intensity in the following centuries. Beginning with Kant, the critical attitude seems to have shifted towards an analytical investigation into the legitimacy of our knowledge, culminating in philosophies such as those of Dilthey or Habermas (ibid., p. 49). What Foucault suggests is to reverse this movement towards epistemology and to reactivate the project of Enlightenment, by concentrating less on the problem of knowledge than on the connections between power and knowledge. Rather than "attempting to find out what is true or false, founded or unfounded, real or illusory, scientific or ideological, legitimate or abusive", the mode of critical thinking proposed by Foucault asks for the "connections that can be identified between mechanisms of coercion and elements of knowledge" and thus for the "interplay of relay and support developed between them, such that a given element of knowledge takes on the effects of power in a given system where it is allocated to a true, probable, uncertain or false element, such that a procedure of coercion acquires the very form and justifications of a rational, calculated, technically efficient element" (ibid., p. 50).

Critique, as the "art of not being governed quite so much" (Foucault, 1997e, p. 29), will need to focus on the nexus of power/knowledge and on the fixities that concrete formations of knowledge and power can bring about. By showing the contingency and arbitrariness of a system of practices, critique can open up the realm of power and avoid that power relations become states of domination. Methodologically, such a critical endeavour needs to go beyond criticising or opposing singular acts of power or elements of knowledge. It will need to go beyond the fact of acceptance of power/knowledge and discuss the system of acceptability that allows for the positivities to exist. Considering Kant's characterization of the Enlightenment, Foucault proposes that we reactivate the philosophical ethos of Enlightenment and engage in a "critical ontology of ourselves" (Foucault, 1997f, p. 319). By this, he means a practice that "will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing or thinking what we are, do, or think" (ibid., pp. 315-6). It is thus a reflection upon the limits

that are taken for granted to filter out and question those that are "singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints" (ibid., p. 315).

From the discussion of the ubiquity of power relations, it should be clear that Foucault does not construe the practice of critique as *opposed* to power. As a society cannot exist without power relations (Foucault, 1997a, p. 298), the aim of critique cannot consist in an effort to overcome power relations. Rather, when stating that the critical ontology of ourselves "is seeking to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom" (Foucault, 1997f, p. 316), Foucault seems to conceive of critique as a practice designed to move power relations away from their potential for domination and disciplination towards a freer field of possibilities. Critique would then contribute to play the games of power "with as little domination as possible" (Foucault, 1997a, p. 298). "For to say that there cannot be a society without power relations is not to say that those which are established are necessary, or in any case, that power constitutes a fatality at the heart of societies, such that it cannot be undermined" (Foucault, 1982, p. 223).

For Foucault, critique therefore clearly has to do with emancipation, not in the sense of overcoming power relations in general, but of opposing certain forms of power to achieve a state of less coercion, and thus more freedom. However, instead of describing actual forms of such critical practices, Foucault's elaborations on critique have a dominantly prescriptive character. Although he refers to the historical forms of critique as opposed to the arts of government, Foucault actually describes his own *ideal* of critique when he calls for a "critical ontology of ourselves" (Foucault, 1997f, p. 319). That is not to say that such an image of critique is utopian or implausible. On the contrary, the way Foucault conceives of power relations suggests that it makes sense to think about critique as an effort to intervene in the field of power. In the case of critique, such an intervention does not have the purpose to dominate others, but to expose a perceived imbalance of power that brings about certain restrictions the critic does not want to accept. In this sense, critique can be thought of as a practice that involves a reflection upon power relations *as* power relations.

However, such a conceptualization that stresses critique's potential for opening up the field of power has its risks. Particularly, it risks to portray critique as a practice that acts in a realm different to that of power, looking at power relations from an external position. This would be strongly misleading and it seems that Foucault at times promotes such a view by taking too normative a stance. When talking about freedom, resistance or critique, Foucault "slips out of analysis into a prescriptive discourse in which he assumes the moral

authority to recommend a particular course of resistance" (Knights, 1990, p. 323). But rather than focus on these aspects of Foucault's work, it is more fruitful for an understanding of critique to look at the places in his writings where a descriptive conception of critique is denoted. For it is there, where we will find support for the idea that the relation between critique and power is an ambiguous one. While critique aims at challenging established power relations, it has to resort to power itself in order to be able to govern the actions of others.

3.4 Critique and ambiguity

In discussing the historical roots of critique, Foucault has clearly seen that critique is not simply an adversary to the arts of government. As he remarks, it is also a "partner" (Foucault, 1997e, p. 28) that - historically - has established "a line of development of the arts of governing" (ibid., p. 29). In other words, the art of critique is in some sense also an art of government. Given the broad meaning that Foucault attaches to the notion of government, this is not very surprising. It is even more plausible if we bring to our mind that it lies in the very idea of critique to govern the actions of others. Critique is an action upon other actions insofar as it is a problematization of these actions. Critique is thus itself an element in the game of power, it is a specific form of power.

We would tend to say that this aspect of critique - the idea that critique involves participating in the power relations it wants to expose - is somewhat neglected in the reception of Foucault's work, perhaps because it is not so prominently depicted by Foucault himself. However, for the basis of a descriptive approach to understanding critique (in organizations), the power effects of critique are of high importance, not at least because they allow to go beyond those dualistic conceptions that portray critique as a distant and somewhat heroic practice. In the final section, we will explain what the Foucauldian perspective on critique as described above implies for a descriptive study of critical practices in organizations.

4 Studying critical practices in organizations

4.1 A descriptive approach

Studying critical practices will be a difficult task if one does not define in advance the meaning of critique. Following a Foucauldian approach, we can, from the above discussion, juxtapose two aspects that are defininig characteristics of critique. First, critique carries with it a connotation with emancipation insofar as it is a practice deemed to open up the field of power and to foster practices of freedom. There is, however, no

objective criterion for what constitutes emancipation and certainly Foucault does not conceive of emancipation as a task to overcome power relations in general. Practices of emancipation are rather practices of government that try to influence the actions of others, not in order to dominate others, but to expose the power effects of their actions. The second moment of critique is therefore its inherent connection with power. Rather than being separate from the realm of power in a position of distance and objectivity, critical practices are part of the power game they want to expose. Critique aims at governing the actions of others and it can achieve this only by resorting to power.

For the study of critical practices in organizations, we think that it is necessary to consider both aspects of critique with the same attention. Organizational practices could thus be studied with two main questions in mind. First, does the practice in question exhibit signs of emancipation in the sense that somebody tries to open up the existing system of power/knowledge? Second, how powerful is the practice in question in terms of its influence on the actions of others? Given this framework of analysis, one could both uncover the power effects of alleged critical practices and the critical aspects of practices we would not associate with critique at first sight. And in doing this, one might conclude that while some practices are more powerful than critical, others are without much effect because they are critical without exerting power. Such an analysis of practices is not prescriptive in the sense of making a plea for more critique in organizations. Instead of defining what critique is all about and then comparing whether actual practices come up to the chosen definition, a descriptive approach to studying critical practices, as proposed here, would put the fragility of the definition at its centre by highlighting the inherent connection between critique and power.

The scope of practices that could be analysed in this respect is broad. As stated earlier, critique can be an important internal trigger for learning and knowledge creation. This suggests that to study critical practices might be of particular value to scholars working in the field of organizational learning and knowledge.

4.2 Studying practices related to learning and knowledge

Critique can be an important trigger for learning processes. This means that it can be useful for organizations to find ways to institutionalize and channel critique in order to help employees learn and improve on their performance. Performance appraisals have become a highly relevant technique in this respect. In giving employees feedback on their strenghts and weaknesses, appraisals can initiate learning processes and contribute to clarify training and development needs which may support learning (Anderson, 1992,

p. 205). To give critical feedback, however, is far from unproblematic. For both the appraiser and person appraised, such a situation can be quite unpleasent. Neither is it easy for the manager to issue critique without appearing as a 'judge', nor does the employee easily accept critique without feeling being judged. The power effects of performance appraisal have been particularly stressed by authors who relate the techniques of human resource management to Foucault's notion of disciplinary power. Appraisal is thus seen as "an example of the operation of power/knowledge, rendering aspects of existence visible, calculable, and thus manageable" (Townley, 1993b, pp. 235-6). Knowledge is produced and power is exercised at the same time, turning the critical feedback into an ambiguous practice. On the one hand, the knowledge that is generated in the appraisal process can help the employee break with established routines in order to better manage his or her work in the future. On the other hand, it is this knowledge that enables the manager to exert power and that urges the employee to improve on the criticised performance. Thus, although critique is an important trigger for learning processes, this should not lead to a neglect of its inherent ambiguity as both a practice of opening up (the employee's established behaviour) and of directing (his or her future behaviour). To study practices of human resource management with this ambiguity of critique in mind would allow "for a recognition of the negative *and* the positive in *all* practices and an evaluation of their effects. Through this we can begin to understand the simultaneous production of empowerment and repression, commitment and control" (Townley, 1998, p. 207).

The mindset of critique as presented here can also enrich the understanding of the more technical ways by which knowledge is managed in organizations. Information systems are widely used in organizations these days, as they allow for a convenient way of storing and distributing information across the organization. Studying the social practices surrounding such information systems can offer interesting insights into the ways individuals create knowledge and by that can exert power. An empirical case of the introduction of a new computer system can illustrate the ambiguity of empowering and disciplining effects that such practices bring about. Cowton and Dopson (2002) discuss an organizational change process implemented in a British automotive distributor, *Motorparts*. The change process consisted, among others, of the introduction of a new incentive scheme for branch managers. While these had formerly only cared for their sales figures, the new incentive system urged them to pay attention to five targets, namely sales, costs, profit margins, stocks and debtors (ibid., p. 199). To support monitoring of these targets, a new computer system was introduced as well. Cowton and Dopson argue that performance

measurement and the computerization together created a new visibility and thus changed organizational reality at Motorparts. "The computer significantly increased the visibility of operations and exposed to routine surveillance many aspects of branches' operations, rendering financially visible many things that were previously dealt with in predominantly physical terms" (ibid., p. 205). While this caused some managers to feel constrained in their autonomy and flexibility, others pointed to the benefits the new system brought about. "The computer not only rendered branch managers' business routinely visible to those within the corporate hierarchy, but it also gave them control over important elements of their job to an extent which was previously not possible" (ibid., p. 209). For the authors, this ambiguity of feeling more controlled on the one hand, and being more empowered on the other, suggests that the Panopticon is a misleading metaphor for the effects of the accounting system. But while they resort to structuration theory to account for the alleged deficiencies of the Foucauldian framework, we would suggest to use Foucault's own insights to grasp the ambiguity presented in the case study. The information system can be regarded as a technology of government that enables actors drawing upon this system to structure their field of possibilities. It can thus be the basis for both discipline and critique. While discipline does imply an imposition of order and a closing off of the imposed power relations, critique is more akin to an opening up of power relations, to a questioning of existing knowledge and existing ways of doing things, in short – to a problematization of the existing *order of things*.

Considering practices of knowledge management in general, one could argue that knowledge will always be accompanied by some form of critique. So, if we are interested in how knowledge is (or should be or could be) managed in organizations, we have to remind ourselves not only that critique is a form of government, but that to govern is the very essence of management. Thus, it will not only be reasonable to ask for the ways in which critique is practiced within organizations, but also to pose the question whether and how in the management of the organization and its knowledge, practices of critique are deployed, promoted, covered or even suppressed.

5   Conclusion

It has been a central aim of our paper to point to the ambiguous role that critical practices play within organizations. Being manifested in a variety of organizational practices, critique does intentionally and/or effectively challenge established routines and their underlying rationalities. From a Foucauldian perspective, it is the nexus of power and knowledge that is productive of these routines and that thus makes up the *order* of an

organization. Criticizing this order means to question knowledge and to open up the concomitant power relations. But in order to do this, critique itself has to resort to power. The power of critique lies in its ability to govern the actions of others and thus to structure the field of possibilities in a certain way.

We suggest to put this ambiguity at the center of the study of critical practices. Rather than to make a prescriptive plea for more critique and critical reflection in organizations, researchers might find it helpful and illuminating to use the notion of critique and its inherent ambiguity as a "mindset" (cf. Weick, 2001) for the analysis of organizational practices.

References

Alvesson, M., & Deetz, S. (1996). Critical Theory and Postmodernism Approaches to Organizational Studies. In S. R. Clegg, C. Hardy & W. R. Nord (Eds.), *Handbook of Organization Studies* (pp. 191-217). London: Sage.

Alvesson, M., & Kärreman, D. (2001). Odd Couple: Making Sense of the Curious Concept of Knowledge Management. *Journal of Management Studies, 38*(7), 995-1018.

Alvesson, M., & Willmott, H. (1996). *Making Sense of Management. A Critical Introduction*. London: Sage.

Anderson, G. (1992). Performance Appraisal. In B. Towers (Ed.), *The Handbook of human resource management* (pp. 186-207). Oxford: Blackwell.

Argyris, C., & Schön, D. A. (1996). *Organizational Learning II: Theory, Method, and Practice*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Barker, J. R. (1993). Tightening the Iron Cage: Concertive Control in Self-managing Teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 38*, 408-437.

Blackler, F., & McDonald, S. (2000). Power, Mastery and Organizational Learning. *Journal of Management Studies, 37*(6), 833-851.

Brown, A. D., & Starkey, K. (2000). Organizational Identity and Learning: A Psychodynamic Perspective. *Academy of Management Review, 25*(1), 102-120.

Contu, A., Grey, C., & Örtenblad, A. (2003). Against learning. *Human Relations, 56*(8), 931-952.

Coopey, J. (1995). The learning organisation, power, politics and ideology. *Management Learning, 26*(2), 193-213.

Cowton, C. J., & Dopson, S. (2002). Foucault's prison? Management control in an automotive distributor. *Management Accounting Research, 13*(2), 191-213.

Dreyfus, H. L., & Rabinow, P. (1982). *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics. With an Afterword by Michel Foucault*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Easterby-Smith, M., & Araujo, L. (1999). Organizational Learning: Current Debates and Opportunities. In M. Easterby-Smith, L. Araujo & J. Burgoyne (Eds.), *Organizational Learning and the Learning Organization. Developments in theory and practice* (pp. 1-21). London: Sage.

Easterby-Smith, M., Crossan, M., & Nicolini, D. (2000). Organizational Learning: Debates Past, Present and Future. *Journal of Management Studies, 37*(6), 783-796.

Foucault, M. (1982). The Subject and Power. In H. L. Dreyfus & P. Rabinow (Eds.), *Michel Foucault. Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (pp. 208-226). New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Foucault, M. (1988). Technologies of the Self. In L. H. Martin, H. Gutman & P. H. Hutton (Eds.), *Technologies of the Self. A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (pp. 16-49). Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press.

Foucault, M. (1992). *The Use of Pleasure. The History of Sexuality: Volume 2* (R. Hurley, Trans.). London: Penguin Books.

Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). New York: Vintage Books.

Foucault, M. (1997a). The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom. In P. Rabinow (Ed.), *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (pp. 281-302). London: Allen Lane.

Foucault, M. (1997b). On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress. In P. Rabinow (Ed.), *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (pp. 253-280). London: Allen Lane.

Foucault, M. (1997c). Security, Territory, and Population. In P. Rabinow (Ed.), *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (pp. 67-72). London: Allen Lane.

Foucault, M. (1997d). Sexuality and Solitude. In P. Rabinow (Ed.), *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (pp. 175-184). London: Allen Lane.

Foucault, M. (1997e). What is Critique? (L. Hochroth, Trans.). In S. Lotringer & L. Hochroch (Eds.), *The Politics of Truth: Michel Foucault* (pp. 23-82). New York: Semiotext(e).

Foucault, M. (1997f). What is Enlightenment? In P. Rabinow (Ed.), *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (pp. 303-320). London: Allen Lane.

Foucault, M. (1998). *The Will to Knowledge. The History of Sexuality: Volume One* (R. Hurley, Trans.). London: Penguin Books.

Foucault, M. (2002). *The Order of Things. An archaeology of the human sciences.* London and New York: Routledge.

Gherardi, S. (2000). Practice-based Theorizing on Learning and Knowing in Organizations. *Organization, 7*(2), 211-223.

Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hammer, M., & Stanton, S. A. (1997, 24 November). The Power of Reflection. *Fortune Magazine, 136,* 291-296.

Hedberg, B. (1981). How organizations learn and unlearn. In P. C. Nyström & W. H. Starbuck (Eds.), *Handbook of Organizational Design. Volume 1: Adapting Organizations to their Environments* (pp. 3-27). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Honneth, A. (1999). Foucault und Adorno. Zwei Formen einer Kritik der Moderne. In A. Honneth (Ed.), *Die zerrissene Welt des Sozialen. Sozialphilosophische Aufsätze* (2 ed., pp. 73-92). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Kant, I. (1923). Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung. In I. Kant (Ed.), *Kant's gesammelte Schriften. Band VIII* (pp. 33-42). Edited by the Königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Berlin and Leipzig: de Gruyter.

Knights, D. (1990). Subjectivity, Power and the Labour Process. In D. Knights & H. Willmott (Eds.), *Labour Process Theory* (pp. 297-335). Houndmills: Macmillan.

March, J. G., & Simon, H. A. (1958). *Organizations*. New York: Wiley.

March, J. G., Sproull, L. S., & Tamuz, M. (1991). Learning From Samples of One or Fewer. *Organization Science, 2*(1), 1-13.

Mouritsen, J., Larsen, H. T., & Hansen, A. (2002). 'Be critical!' Critique and Naivete - Californian and French Connections in Critical Scandinavian Accounting Research. *Critical Perspectives on Accounting, 13*, 497-513.

Nyström, P. C., & Starbuck, W. H. (1984). To Avoid Organizational Crises, Unlearn. *Organizational Dynamics, Spring*, 53-65.

Popper, K. R. (1959). *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. London: Hutchinson.

Popper, K. R. (1971a). *The Open Society and Its Enemies. Volume 1: The Spell of Plato*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Popper, K. R. (1971b). *The Open Society and Its Enemies. Volume 2: The High Tide of Prophecy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Popper, M., & Lipshitz, R. (2000). Organizational Learning. Mechanisms, Culture, and Feasibility. *Management Learning, 31*(2), 181-196.

Preskill, H., & Torres, R. T. (1999). The Role of Evaluative Enquiry in Creating Learning Organizations. In M. Easterby-Smith, J. Burgoyne & L. Araujo (Eds.), *Organizational Learning and the Learning Organization. Developments in theory and practice* (pp. 92-114). London: Sage.

Reynolds, M. (1998). Reflection and Critical Reflection in Management Learning. *Management Learning, 29*(2), 183-200.

Swan, J., & Scarbrough, H. (2001). Editorial. Knowledge Management: Concepts and Controversies. *Journal of Management Studies, 38*(7), 913-921.

Taylor, C. (1986). Foucault on Freedom and Truth. In D. C. Hoy (Ed.), *Foucault: A Critical Reader* (pp. 69-102). Oxford: Blackwell.

Townley, B. (1993a). Foucault, Power/Knowledge, and its Relevance for Human Resource Management. *Academy of Management Review, 18*(3), 518-545.

Townley, B. (1993b). Performance appraisal and the emergence of management. *Journal of Management Studies, 30*(2), 221-238.

Townley, B. (1998). Beyond Good and Evil: Depth and Division in the Management of Human Resources. In A. McKinlay & K. Starkey (Eds.), *Foucault, Management and Organization Theory. From Panopticon to Technologies of Self.* (pp. 191-210). London: SAGE.

Vince, R. (2001). Power and emotion in organizational learning. *Human Relations, 54*(10), 1325-1351.

Vince, R. (2002). Organizing Reflection. *Management Learning, 33*(1), 63-78.

Weick, K. E. (2001). Improvisation as a Mindset for Organizational Analysis. In K. E. Weick (Ed.), *Making Sense of Management* (pp. 284-304). Oxford: Blackwell.

Willmott, H. (1997). Critical Management Learning. In J. Burgoyne & M. Reynolds (Eds.), *Management Learning. Integrating Perspectives in Theory and Practice* (pp. 161-176). London: Sage.