

# 2nd Conference of Practical Criticism in the Managerial Social Sciences

*University of Leicester, 8<sup>th</sup> - 9<sup>th</sup> January, 2009*

## Call for Papers



*Picture of I.A. Richards, the pioneer of Practical Criticism, writing during the period when he completed "Principles of Literary Criticism" (1924)*

### Background

Occasioned by a sense that there has occurred an atrophy of the critical function in the academic study of management, the First Conference of Practical Criticism in the Social Sciences of Management (PC Conference) was held at the University of Leicester School of Management in January 2008. The gathering was considered very successful by those who attended; the presentations and debate being of a high standard and very enjoyable. A selection of the papers from that first conference is available in the University of Leicester Research Archive at <https://lra.le.ac.uk/handle/2381/3591> and refereed versions, together with any replies received from those authors whose work was criticised, are to be

published in *Ephemera* towards the end of 2008. Thus encouraged, we invite submissions for a Second Conference to be held on the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> of January, also at University of Leicester School of Management.

## **Rationale**

As the strong programme in the sociology of science reminds us, there are centripetal tendencies at work in any formally-open field of enquiry. Where careers are made on the basis of 'becoming an authority', that authority is routinely exercised through the various instruments of what Bourdieu called 'professorial power'. So it is that examinerships, appointments committees, editorships and the advisory boards of grant-giving bodies are used to favour loyalists and infiltrate them into positions of influence. Thus consolidated through a network of alliances, professorial power is in a strong position to suppress any interrogation of its academic basis.

Coexisting with these authoritarian tendencies the social sciences of management have also undergone a kind of Balkanisation. The uncertain and contested relationship between management research and practice, has made it possible for the energetic and determined scholar to fashion 'new' fields of knowledge as an alternative to an apprenticeship of conformity and deference. Once institutionalised, academic authority in these new fields is able to consolidate itself through the mechanisms of censorship and self-censorship already described.

The result of this dialectic of differentiation and conformity is a deformation of the critical process in management research. There is criticism a-plenty between the quasi-independent fiefdoms into which the field has fragmented but little of it within them. Between academic regimes, there are exchanges of critical position-statements but there is little detailed re-appraisal of particular pieces of research except insofar as they embody the approach of a particular school. Experience suggests that criticism of the first type ('paradigm wars') is largely ineffective, possibly because it poses no threat to authority relationships within the academic regime at which it is directed. Criticism of the second type, on the other hand, is fundamental to academic production, if only because what stands in the literature can be legitimately cited in argument. It is, however, very much the exception, because of the threat which it poses to academic authority. On the assumption that their refereeing and editorial procedures are a sufficient guarantee of what they publish, journals appear to operate a kind of double jeopardy rule, wherein what has survived the refereeing process is normally exempt from subsequent criticism. The notes of dissent which occasionally accompany some articles are only an apparent exception since these ordinarily originate in the refereeing process itself. Thus insulated from criticism, the standing of the authority-figures within particular academic regimes becomes both self-confirming and self-perpetuating. Their standing as academics is attested by a mass of publications certified by a refereeing process which simultaneously refracts their own authority and protects it.

Observing similar processes of collusion around the manufacture of reputations in the literary London of the 1920s, the critic F.R. Leavis coined the evocative term 'flank-rubbing'. In these terms, the Leicester Conference of Practical Criticism is directed against flank-rubbing

and its products in the social sciences of management. Its principle means of doing so are modelled on the close-reading techniques of practical criticism pioneered by Leavis' mentor I.A. Richards. Particular works by academics who are prominent within their fields of study are subject to a detailed examination in respect of the arguments they make, the evidence and the representations of previous scholarship on which they are based and the validity of their claims to have made important and original contributions. What is to be scrutinised, in other words, are the standards of scholarship which are being implicitly promulgated through the influence-networks of managerial social science.

That said, the form which contributions might take is flexible. Some contributions to the first conference critiqued the processes of refereeing and reputation-building in themselves, sometimes in general terms, sometimes with reference to particular cases. Others were aimed at a revision of our view of the corpus of scholarship on management, seeking to resuscitate scholarly contributions which have been obliterated by the contemporary noise of reputation-building. What matters is that contributions should be aimed at opening up the process of academic production to critical scrutiny where presently it is closed.

## **Submission and Selection of Papers**

Papers will be selected by a committee which includes Peter Armstrong, Campbell Jones, Simon Lilley, Geoff Lightfoot and Martin Parker of Leicester University and Cliff Oswick of Queen Mary, University of London.

Please send abstracts, of around 600-800 words, via e-mail to [p.armstrong@le.ac.uk](mailto:p.armstrong@le.ac.uk) by 31<sup>st</sup> July 2008. The abstracts should include details, where appropriate, of the work(s) to be criticised and the grounds of criticism.

Successful submissions will be notified by 31<sup>st</sup> August 2008. Complete papers should be received by 30<sup>th</sup> November 2008.

## **Publication**

We will invite presenters to make their papers widely accessible through the Leicester Research Archive.