

9 THE CRISIS OF RELEVANCE AND THE RELEVANCE OF CRISIS: Renegotiating Critique in Information Systems Scholarship

Teresa Marcon

University of Western Ontario

Mike Chiasson

University of Calgary

Abhijit Gopal

University of Western Ontario

Abstract

Information systems as a discipline has recently been under pressure to justify its existence as a core subject within the management curriculum. There has also been recent pressure about the relevance of the IS research agenda. These are pressures felt at the more general level of business education as well, and calls have been made for business scholars to take a more holistic approach to scholarship as well as to make more explicit links to the practice of business. We take the position in this paper that the pressures can be addressed in one way by renegotiating the notion of scholarly critique. Specifically, we reconnect the idea of critique to that of crisis and attempt to show how crisis has the potential to reengage the IS scholar with praxis and help bring the often disparate projects of research, teaching, and consulting into an integrated scholarly enterprise.

Keywords: Critique, crisis, praxis, relevance

1 INTRODUCTION

The information systems discipline appears poised at a critical juncture. Given recent market trends and a back-to-basics mentality, most IS scholars are familiar with the skeptical attitude in business schools, among both colleagues and students, toward the discipline and its relevance to business education (Avison 2003). Coupled with

recent angst within the field about the questionable relevance of IS research,¹ we might venture to say that the discipline faces a crisis of sorts. The referent world which defines us, the world of business practice, appears not to feel a reciprocal attachment. It certainly consumes in copious quantities the kinds of services we offer—education, research, consulting—but often does not obtain these from us. All in all, the situation appears to merit more than passing attention from the IS community at this time.

Why does the skepticism arise and why is it restricted to the IS discipline? Richard Mowday's (1997) presidential address to the 1996 Academy of Management meeting suggests that the problem applies to business scholarship in general. According to the Faculty Leadership Task Force of the AACSB (cited in Mowday 1997), business faculty lack real world experience, are slow to adopt new technologies, and are resistant to change. The result is a perception that business academics are increasingly irrelevant to the business world.

The practice of business is clearly the *raison d'être* of both business and IS scholarship. As Keen (1991) points out, IS research "is intended to influence action in some domain." Indeed, following Mowday, we might say that business (and IS) scholarship is practically oriented in all its guises, including teaching, research, and consulting. The unique confluence of IS with rapid changes in technology and business practices clearly makes a lack of practical engagement untenable. But how do we address this issue?

We believe that a familiar device, made unfamiliar, has considerable potential for us in this regard: scholarly critique. Critique has developed increasingly specialized connotations in our field and a recovery of its wider meanings might help us reengage with the practical world. Moreover, we believe that critique, conceived in this light, allows us to address in a holistic way our entire scholarly enterprise across the increasingly separated domains of research, teaching, and consulting. What we suggest in the following pages is an altered frame of mind, a rethinking, that might help us address the crisis of relevance we now face.

2 THE MEANING OF CRITIQUE IN IS

Our interest lies in examining the ways in which critique is presently understood in IS and the ways in which other possible understandings have been obscured. We attempt to disturb the obviousness of current conceptualizations of critique to encourage a rethinking that expands the range of possibilities for scholarly critique and to bolster the call for a widespread engagement with praxis in IS scholarship. We describe two principal ways of understanding critique that currently dominate the IS field: critical social theory (CST) and methodological critique. We explore these approaches to critique not to challenge their legitimacy or value but to uncover alternative ways of understanding and engaging in critique.

¹We are not revisiting the rigor-relevance debate. We do not see the two terms here as being in opposition. We are pointing only to the clear importance that the idea of relevance to practice has within our field.

Critique in IS is most often associated with the theoretical approaches of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory and particularly the work of Jürgen Habermas (Brooke 2002). This tradition bears the distinctive mark of the Enlightenment, privileging the rise of reason over metaphysics and embodying the modernist belief that reason will light the way to a more just society (Collins 1994). It yields a critique of human practices formulated on the basis of an ideological position that reflects the Enlightenment values of rationality and equality and the goal of promoting social change through emancipation. The goal of emancipation, in particular, is central to current conceptions of CST in IS (Boudreau 1997; Howcroft and Truex 2001). Indeed, the CST movement, which relies heavily on Habermasian perspectives, has largely become synonymous with the critical in IS.

A second way in which the term *critical* is commonly understood is as methodological critique. Critique in this sense encompasses the scholarly practice of systematically and objectively evaluating existing research to build upon the work of previous researchers. It does so by identifying opportunities for expansion or refinement at the theoretical or methodological level. The critical review of existing literature sets the stage for further exploration and provides the motivation for new research. Additionally, through discussion of potential problems and limitations, scholars are encouraged to cast a critical eye on their own efforts, reflecting on methodological limitations and exploring alternative explanations. Commonly regarded as good scholarship, such critical reflections and the practice of writing critical reviews of the literature are skills that are considered central to IS scholarship (e.g., Webster and Watson 2002).

While methodological critique retains an important role in scholarly practice,² members of the IS community have recently attempted to expand the common understanding of critique beyond its traditional associations. In the title of the leading article of the June 2002 issue of the *Journal of Information Technology* on critical IS research, Carole Brooke poses the question: “What does it mean to be critical in IS research?” Brooke argues that, until recently, our interest in critique has been limited to Habermas’ theory of communicative action. She warns us against becoming “locked into a Habermasian discourse” and proposes that “IS research must continue to push beyond this thinking in order to enrich our work” (p. 49). Brooke argues for a Foucauldian perspective as one possible avenue to critique. Similarly, Doolin and Lowe (2002) conclude that “the definition of ‘critical’ used thus far in IS research is too limiting” (p. 69). They make a case for recasting this notion in broader terms as an act of revelation: “to reveal is to critique” (p. 74). They point to the critical potential of actor-network theory (e.g., Latour 1999) which, in exposing the contingency of the world, reveals “how things could have been otherwise” (p. 75). These efforts broaden the accepted view of critique by encompassing post-structuralist theories that eschew an explicitly emancipative aim or the articulation of a particular ideological position as an alternative to the current order.

²This is not to say that methodological critique could not be questioned as leading, for example, to rather formulaic applications of critique. However, a critique of methodological critique is beyond the scope of this paper.

Expanding the critical playing field along such lines might be seen as a radical departure from the explicitly transformational intent of CST (Boudreau 1997; Howcroft and Truex 2001). Yet, this is not a new idea. Indeed, a decade before Brooke, Lyytinen (1992) proposed a need to supplement a Habermasian approach in IS with the work of other critical theorists (p. 176) such as Foucault and Giddens. Within the neighboring field of organization studies there is also evidence of a movement toward a more encompassing view of critical research. Kincheloe and McLaren (2000) and Alvesson and Deetz (1996), for example, have sketched the continuity of thought and purpose, and also the differences, between Frankfurt School theories and critical discourses centered on feminist, post-structuralist, and postmodernist positions. This broadening of the concept of the critical pursues similarities and complementarities among a range of approaches from neo-Marxism to deconstruction.

Efforts to push beyond current thinking and to cast critique in a different light within IS and related fields are certainly valuable in our view. But has this questioning gone far enough? And have these voices been heard? Despite the emergence and reemergence of calls for expanding the theoretical bases for critical research and despite the strength of the theoretical apparatuses that have been brought to bear, the idea of the critical in IS has remained in large measure tied to the central tenets of the Frankfurt School (e.g., Orlikowski and Baroudi 1991). Perhaps because of the central position it has historically occupied in the IS field and particularly in the CST scholarly community, critical theory of the Frankfurt School variety has become the standard against which other approaches are measured and deemed as either *critical* or *not critical*. Efforts to expand the range of theoretical approaches suitable for critical IS research often measure themselves against this standard and demonstrate congruent, if not identical, aims. For example, Brooke explores how certain post-structuralist approaches fit into a broadly emancipative project in her argument for the relevance of a Foucauldian approach to the project of critique.

While such considerations are important and even necessary, tethering the idea of critique to particular theoretical positions, even if to an expanding list, may stand in the way of a deeper appreciation of the idea of the critical. Recent arguments in favor of post-structuralist approaches to critique run the risk of producing yet another static division that might well lull us into some unexamined conclusions. Is it the case that only some theoretical choices afford the opportunity for critical engagement (e.g., Walsham 1993)? Are critical theory, post-structuralist, or postmodernist methodologies critical, whereas interpretivism and functionalism are not? We believe that such efforts at anchoring the idea of critique in selected methodologies and delimiting what *counts as* critique tend to obscure possibilities and limit further engagement with critique as a broader orientation to IS scholarship.

Whether a theoretical approach or a particular piece of research is critical is a question that merits consideration in its own right. Marcon and Gopal (2003), for example, have argued for the critical potential of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967) based on how this approach “seeks to reveal the way in which *taken for granted* social practices maintain the appearance of things” (Rawls 2002, p. 54). Despite this critical potential, ethnomethodology is generally regarded as falling under the umbrella of interpretivism (Burrell and Morgan 1979). While the classification of ethnomethodology within the interpretative tradition is open to challenge (e.g., Lemert 1979), the case of

ethnomethodology illustrates the danger in attempting to demarcate the territory of the critical by relying on broad classifications of research traditions such as critical theory³ or poststructuralism. While such labels may be useful at times, we believe it is important to retain an awareness of the diversity of positions they encompass and of the differences and similarities between research approaches that are subsumed or lost in such broad divisions. Limiting the possibility of engaging in critique based on particular theoretical approaches or prescribed definitions of what counts as critique (e.g., Howcroft and Truex 2001) turns our attention away from a broader conceptualization of critique as a common orientation toward IS scholarship.

Similarly, when critique is restricted to the identification of theoretical lacunae and opportunities for methodological improvement in existing research, as is perhaps more common in functionalist work, we risk disengaging from the idea of the critical as a common praxical project concerned with human activities and with knowledge of the practical world. To consider critique merely as an aspect of sound scholarship that allows us to build cumulative traditions (Keen 1980) focuses our gaze inward, and overlooks the potential for turning our critical gaze outward toward the human practices around IS that find expression in organizations, and our own crucially important reflexive engagement with this world.

Rather than adding to the list of theories that might be considered critical or limiting the critical to methodological reflection, our own project follows a different path. We attempt to expand the concept of critique by exploring its broader meanings. We seek to rediscover broader understandings of critique that have informed critical scholarly work across research, teaching, and consulting. Such understandings allow for an ongoing and widespread engagement with the everyday world of human practice, raising the potential to meaningfully inform the practices of the people for whom IS research is produced and those of our own scholarly community. In particular, we explore the connection between critique and *crisis* and attempt to show how the production of crises through critique may serve to guide our scholarly efforts toward a common, reflexive, and intellectually fruitful engagement with the world of practice.

3 CRITIQUING THE MEANING OF CRITIQUE

In our discussion, we have explored the manner in which the term *critical* is understood in IS, privileging its denotative meanings within the field. Although these conceptions of the critical may have the appearance of the obvious or natural, denotation is only one way in which language functions to give shape to interpretation. As Barthes (1974) notes,

denotation is not the first meaning, but pretends to be so; under this illusion, it is ultimately no more than the last of the connotations (the one which seems both to establish and close the reading), the superior myth by which the text pretends to return to the nature of language, to language as nature (p. 9).

³We could argue that the name critical theory itself is a black hole—it sucks all critical light into it through its label.

What appear as the obvious meanings of critique in IS reflect the specialized ways in which the term has come to be understood in the field. Such meanings can be overlaid with a web of connotations, those relations and connections within and between texts that form “nebulae of signifieds” (p. 8), allowing for a spreading out and a broadening of interpretation of what it means to engage in critique.

To expand the idea of the critical, we begin with notions of critique in academic circles and in popular culture. Consider, for example, the association of the practice of critique with the literary critic, the social critic, or the film critic. In *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Williams (1985) notes that criticism is related to the Greek word for “judge” and thus has carried the primary meaning of “passing judgment.” In particular areas of art and literature, Williams argues that the term has relegated the critic to the role of an expert with the ability or *taste* to differentiate good from bad. This restricts critique to the realm of opinion or acculturated taste, associated with necessarily individual values and ethics. In considering the usage of the term critical across disciplines and over time, Williams also notes that

judgment depended, of course, on the social confidence of a class and later a profession. The confidence was variously specified, originally as learning or scholarship, later as cultivation and taste, later still as sensibility... .At various stages, forms of this confidence have broken down, and especially in [the 20th century], attempts have been made to replace it by objective...methodologies, providing another kind of basis for judgment. What has not been questioned is the assumption of “authoritative judgment.”

This latter movement provides a link to the practice of methodological critique in the social sciences and points to the implicit authority granted to those who strive for an objective scholarship in a society that has in large part placed its faith in science and relegated critique to local and subjective opinion.⁴

Dictionary definitions of the term critical encompass a plurality of popular and specialized meanings. As Barthes suggests, these definitions reflect both denotative and connotative aspects. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2000), for example, defines the term critical as

1. Inclined to judge severely and find fault.
2. Characterized by careful, exact evaluation and judgment: a critical reading.
3. Of, relating to, or characteristic of critics or criticism: critical acclaim; a critical analysis of Melville’s writings.
4. Forming or having the nature of a turning point; crucial or decisive: a critical point in the campaign.
5. a. Of or relating to a medical crisis: an illness at the critical stage.

⁴This perceived difference between ideologically based and methodological (or objective) critique has been challenged in epistemological reflections which collapse the differences between fact and value (e.g., Bohman 1993).

- b. Being or relating to a grave physical condition especially of a patient.
- 6. Indispensable; essential: a critical element of the plan; a second income that is critical to the family's well-being.
- 7. Being in or verging on a state of crisis or emergency: a critical shortage of food.
- 8. Fraught with danger or risk; perilous.

The emphasis on critique as judgment, and particularly negative judgment, is evident in the first of these definitions which relates criticism to finding fault, reflecting the “oppositional” approach sometimes associated with the project of social critique (e.g., Grey and Mitev 1995, cited in Burrell 2001, p. 14). The negative connotations of the term critique also become evident when we consider antonyms in popular usage which oppose critique to verbs like encourage, flatter, and praise (*Merriam-Webster OnLine* 2003). Yet, another set of antonyms opposes the critical to that which is “cursory, shallow, superficial” (*Merriam-Webster OnLine* 2003), shifting the focus to the potential for depth and discernment that is contained in critical reflection.

Other ways of understanding the term critical point to the most salient, decisive, or urgent moments in particular events, evoking images of conflict, harm and impending danger (definitions 4 to 8 above). A recurrent idea in definitions of the term critical is the turning point, a moment when someone's fate hangs in the balance and outcomes possibly involving life and death are decided (definitions 4 and 5 in particular). Arriving at a turning point suggests a progression toward a moment of danger, a point where resources are low and options few as in the case of a state of emergency (definition 7) or where necessity rather than choice sets the terms for action (definition 6). Such meanings of the word critical highlight a different set of connotations which unite the idea of critique with a companion notion: crisis.

While crisis is inevitably only one of the many possible connotations of the term critical, we single out this aspect to explore its potential as a device to rethink critique in IS. Critique and crisis stood in a proximal relation to each other in ancient Greece when the term crisis encompassed both terms, meaning “discrimination and dispute, but also decision, in the sense of final judgment or appraisal” (Koselleck 1988, p. 103). The word crisis derives from the Greek word *krinein*—to separate, decide and judge (*The Houghton Mifflin Canadian Dictionary* 1982).⁵ Over time, critique and crisis did separate, acquiring distinct meanings as usage evolved and was transformed at the intersections between fields. Crisis assumed specialized meanings, for example in medicine, where it came to denote the turning point in a serious illness. Criticism, a practice originally associated with revelation in religious texts, was transported into

⁵In evoking an etymological thread, it is not our intent to return to the root of the word crisis in order to hone in on the essential or original meaning of critique. Theorists from Saussure (Culler 1976) to Derrida (1972) and Foucault (1970) have taught us that the meaning of words is neither stable nor definite, but rather embedded in systems of opposition and relations that are subject to constant shifts, translations, and reinterpretations over time. Rather, our purpose is to reunite critique and crisis as a way of thinking about the practice of critique and bring a unity of purpose to all aspects of scholarly practice.

other disciplines and enrolled in support of reason in the early 18th century (for an excellent history, see Koselleck 1988). Current scholarship across the social sciences tends to distinguish critique from crisis. Whereas crisis, the “economic crisis” or the “crisis of capitalism” (O’Connor 1987), for example, has acquired a largely autonomous or even deterministic status that suggests the inevitability of natural disasters (e.g., a hurricane), critique has been largely relegated to the realm of the subjective, ethical, or moral, as in the practice of ideological critique, or to methodological critique as objective judgment. Resonances with such understandings of the critical can be found in the broader societal realm where critique is often associated with opinion (Williams 1985) and sometimes also technical skill, as in critical thinking (Thayer-Bacon 1998).

The connection between critique and crisis implicit in current usage surfaces in more explicit form in the writings of Continental philosophers. Continental philosophy is a rich and complex tradition that spans several centuries and distinct strands of thought that cannot comfortably be collapsed into a unified position (Critchley 2001). As an undercurrent to this tradition, we can conceive of Continental philosophy as a style of thinking that, in its deep concern with praxis, relates critique to the present “through the consciousness of crisis” (Kompridis 2000, p. 40). The theme of crisis assumes various forms in the work of Continental philosophers from German idealism to the present: for example, in Marx’s crisis of the capitalist state, Husserl’s crisis of the European sciences, Heidegger’s forgetfulness of Being, and Foucault’s and Derrida’s crises of the human sciences. Within this seemingly disparate assortment of theoretical perspectives, from historical materialism to phenomenology and deconstruction, the production of crisis through critique marks the path to the touchstone of Continental philosophy: praxis (Critchley 2001).⁶

In praxis lies the promise of an IS scholarship that addresses the needs and interests of the academic community and of those who attempt to understand and use information systems and information technologies in action. The connection between critique and crisis which we have attempted to make evident in exploring the history and connotations of the term critical may serve as a device to help us rethink critique in the context of IS scholarship and to renew our connection with praxis. Following the tradition in Continental philosophy that set the philosopher to the task of “promot[ing] a reflective awareness of the present as being in crisis” (Critchley 2001, p. 73), we suggest that, through critique, the work of IS researchers might aim to engender crisis in its various audiences (including itself), a sense of “instability or even discomfort that is a distinctive feature of genuine intellectual undertakings” (Kingwell 2002, p. 7). In the following section we explore the relevance of crisis to the IS academic enterprise and the unity of purpose that it may engender across the academic practices of research, education, and consulting.

⁶The term *praxis* has been associated with a variety of meanings from the time of the Greeks to the present (for a brief history, see, Bottomore 1991). We use the term in its broadest sense of signaling a (not indifferent) concern with the realm of ongoing practice and the human activities in which ordinary people engage.

4 THE RELEVANCE OF CRISIS

What is the relevance of engendering crisis through critique? In considering this question, we must account for the role of and the benefits to both IS researchers (the authors) and their audiences (the readers).⁷

In focusing on the production of crisis, academics seek to foster an *awakening* among those for whom they write: managers, employees, students, and members of their scholarly community. When such attempts succeed in producing crisis in the audience, they bring into play the possibility of genuine engagement and the opportunity for a fruitful exchange. Awakening goes beyond attempts to present new perspectives that “stimulate critical thinking” or “restructure the mental models managers [and students] apply in their practice” (Benbasat and Zmud 1999, p. 5), although such aims are part of the process. Much has also been said about the need to communicate research findings through appropriate publication channels and teaching materials that are accessible and of interest to practitioner audiences (e.g., Benbasat and Zmud 1999; Lyytinen 1999). Although such suggestions are certainly valuable and even necessary, engendering crisis shifts the focus from research and teaching that can be communicated and implemented to research and teaching that are compelling because of their ability to disturb the obviousness of *what everybody knows* (Garfinkel 1967). Crises create a sense of immediacy, urgency, and even peril that admits the possibility of insight, of an “open[ing] to light” (Heidegger 1993).

The possibility of insight applies also to IS academics. As we engage our audiences through the crises we attempt to produce, we need to remain open to the possibility of being informed by them. Often, a combination of dialogues across research, teaching, and consulting allows us to identify enduring issues. The compelling call of crisis fosters our own engagement with the problems we choose to tackle and the audiences we address.

Beyond the possibility of a genuine dialogue, the production of crisis may serve as a device to orient the efforts of IS academics in their research, teaching, and consulting toward areas of practice of significant interest to practitioners, students, and fellow academics, being at the center of their concern, anxiety, and discomfort and thus perhaps most in need of and in readiness for critical attention. Considering the ability to engender crises in their audiences through writing, teaching, and consulting may guide IS researchers toward the “deep, substantive, prototypical problems” (Weber 2003, p. iv) faced by academics, managers, or users of information systems and provide a process to tackle what Weber in his recent *MIS Quarterly* editorial statement has labeled a “dark art” (p. vi): the problem of choosing research problems.

⁷As Michel de Certeau (1984) has aptly noted, the reader is not a passive recipient. The distinction between author and reader could easily be dissolved, given the multiple connections between researchers, the people they study, teach or interact with in their consulting role. Consider, for example, the extent to which subjects in a research setting inform and shape the writings of academics. We merely draw a distinction between authors and readers as an analytical device to assist us in exploring the various facets of the practice of producing crises through critique.

Perhaps most importantly, when critique engenders crisis, the awareness of crisis compels IS scholars to reflect on the directions and outcomes of their intervention in the world. When uncoupled from the notion of crisis, critique runs the risk of being unreflexive at the level of engagement with the wider world in which it is embedded. Walzer (2002) has argued that “criticism is most properly the work of ‘insiders,’ men and women mindful of and committed to the society whose policies or practices they call into question—who *care about* what happens to it” (p. xi). The “caring critic” (p. xii) is someone who assumes the stance of the independent observer (to the extent to which this is ever possible) while avoiding indifference (Lynch 1997) and maintaining a genuine and sustained interest in the successes and failures of the community s/he studies and seeks to inform.

A critical scholarly practice that seeks to engender crisis does not come to an end with the publication of the research report or the delivery of a lesson in the classroom. Rather, when critique engenders crisis and leads to practical outcomes, it calls for an evaluation of its effects (Davenport and Markus 1999) and also of the researcher’s and instructor’s practices. As members of the IS academic community, we can learn from our successes and also our failures. If, through the production of crises, we succeed in our efforts to alter practice and foster new understanding and practices through teaching, we must attend not only to the desired effects but also to the unintended consequences (Giddens 1984) of our interventions. Similarly, failure to engender a crisis should lead us to question our assumptions, our choice of problems, and the manner in which we have framed and communicated these: “critique entails the mutual transformation of both subject and object—entails changing oneself as well as the world. By engaging in critique we are engaging in self-critique” (Kompridis 2000 p. 43).

Seeking to engender crisis is relevant also to critical dialogue within the IS research community. Indeed, the information systems literature contains several examples of critical commentary that have left the IS community feeling discomfort and doubt, if not yet in crisis. Among such works are classic pieces from the early years of IS scholarship, for example, Ackoff’s (1967) critical reflections on the manner in which management “misinformation” systems are put to use in the world of practice and Churchman and Schainblatt’s (1964) detailed exploration of the unexamined assumptions that have (mis)guided attempted collaboration between MIS researchers and practitioners. More recently, Orlikowski and Iacono (2000), in reminding the IS community that the IT artifact—purportedly at the core of the discipline—is rarely engaged by scholars, have indeed succeeded in engendering a crisis in the field, as suggested by the inclusion of a discussion panel on theorizing the IT artifact in the 2002 International Conference on Information Systems (Boland 2002).⁸

We might also suggest that the practice of engendering crisis through critique in empirical research has in some measure coexisted, although in relative obscurity, with

⁸Contrast this form of critical engagement with a body of research with the practice of the critical review of literature, which has as its principal target the movement toward a cumulative tradition. The former is a form of critical reflection that is not uncommon in the information systems literature and yet rarely labeled as critical, another indication of the restricted manner in which critique is understood in the IS community.

dominant conceptions of critique in IS. For example, the theme of crisis is salient in Montealegre and Keil's (2000) in-depth case study of the de-escalation of a highly visible and ambitious IT project at the Denver International Airport. The crisis playing out in the lifeworld provides Montealegre and Keil with a compelling setting with substantial economic and political significance and an altogether good story, full of twists and turns and practical lessons. Yet, a second crisis is also interwoven in their paper which frames de-escalation in terms of a human "commitment to a failing course of action" (p. 418). IT failure unfolds in the context of a crisis in the life of the manager who is unwillingly caught up in a series of decisions and external contingencies moving toward an unfavorable outcome. Although, in our view, Montealegre and Keil do not make extensive use of crisis but limit their concluding remarks to promoting a form of reflexive monitoring among managers to avoid a sunk-cost syndrome, their work stands as an example of a critique of human practices that contains within it an inherent pathos and dramatic tension. This lived crisis calls both authors and readers to a sympathetic engagement with the participants in the situation.

Across the multiple sites of contact between academics and their audiences, the production of crises has the potential to open up debate, discussion, and the exchange of ideas. Most importantly, we see crisis as a device that, through its compelling call to reflexivity, may promote an academic practice that maintains a continuous engagement with the world in which it takes place. Crisis fosters a reflexive scholarship that considers its own achievements, not only according to the methodological and publication standards of the academy (e.g., Applegate and King 1999), but also in light of its accountability to the participants in the research setting, the consulting relationship, or the classroom and in terms of the practical outcomes it engenders or fails to achieve.

It is, of course, entirely possible to set out to engender crises without an enduring commitment to a continuing engagement with praxis. Yet, a genuinely reflexive and caring critique based on the production of crises would seem to ask more of us. A reflexive and caring critical scholarship demands a commitment to work toward understanding and the articulation of alternatives or solutions (although perhaps temporary, partial, local, and imperfect ones). This commitment cannot be comfortably circumscribed, including particular activities such as research, while excluding others, such as teaching. A commitment to praxis through a reflexive, critical orientation demands that we attend to all of our activities with a unity of purpose and engagement that derives its energy from a genuine concern. Beyond mere words, integration across all of our activities keeps our gaze focused on the world of practice and is a manifestation of a genuine and enduring commitment to making a difference.

5 CONCLUSIONS

There are two senses of crisis in the title of our paper. In the first sense, the crisis of relevance, we encounter crisis as an unintended consequence: the appearance of a crisis in the IS community that it had not set out to produce—even if its appearance has everything to do with how the community has conducted itself in the past. To help address that crisis, we have turned our attention in this paper to crisis itself—the second sense in our title, the relevance of crisis—as an intentional means of informing and

influencing praxis. We (re)unite crisis with the established scholarly practice of critique to invigorate that practice and to recover its potential as a means to provoke change. The premise we adopt in juxtaposing these two senses of crisis is that while the first sense is the one that dominates the use of the word, the recovery of crisis (in the second sense) as a companion notion to critique might arm our scholarly endeavors with the potential for real—and ongoing—change.

We also see crisis as the means to evaluate critique, to assess its praxical influence. Seen in this way, it should be evident that for an account to “be critical” it need not adhere to particular epistemological, ontological, or axiological tenets as much as it needs to be intentional (in Husserl’s sense), directed to some definable end. The relevance sought by the IS community flows from the world of practice and we offer critique/crisis as a device that establishes an umbilical connection to that world, a means to evaluate whether our critical commentaries on practice achieve their intended consequences while allowing us to reflexively monitor and reorient the critique that falls short of its mark in a dialogical (and dialectical) relationship with that world.

Here we must confront what would amount to a most embarrassing critique of our own position, if it were to hold true: that what we have posited is nothing more than common sense, that scholarly IS critique is already result-oriented and that the means to achieve results through critique are amply clear; in other words, that our position contributes little if anything. We offer three reasons, based on what we note above, why this argument might not hold. First, as the notion of crisis within our field is decidedly one-sided, connoting the unintended consequence, the idea of intentional crisis emanating from critique is rarely, if ever, articulated. One might argue that it does not need articulation, that crisis is always already implicit in critique, that critique is by definition provocative. While we can certainly agree that critique is geared toward disturbing the status quo and inciting change, there is little evidence within the IS community that such disturbances within the field of practice are monitored, evaluated, and aligned; our aim has been to visit this very issue and propose a tangible means—crisis—to make the implicit *explicit* as a means to reflexively monitor the intended consequences of critique.

Second, we have tried to show the relevance of critique—in tandem with the outcome orientation of crisis—to scholarship in a broad sense rather than restricted to research alone; that is to say, as a coordinated means to address research, teaching, and consulting activities by imbuing all of them with a common result orientation. The crisis of relevance in our field is not confined to research alone and any meaningful attempt to confront the crisis will need an initiative appropriately coordinated among these three activities.

Third, and perhaps most controversially, we have tried to show how critique coupled with crisis can take critical work beyond the confines of CST in the IS field. This is not to say that CST is less than suited to carrying the banner of critique or even that critique from this direction has failed to achieve its purpose. Indeed, critical theorists might well be in the best position to incorporate a crisis-orientation in their repertoire, given their inherently reflexive stance and their attention to history. What we are advocating here is that the larger IS field consider critique—the very device that the critical theorists realize is invaluable—and its companion notion, crisis, for the value they offer within the firmament of business academia.

We see the above three factors both as pointers to what we hope to have accomplished in this paper and as our means of distinguishing ourselves from an orientation based exclusively on CST. By drawing on the idea of crisis, we have tried to bring back into play within the critical project an orientation that has long informed the Continental philosophical tradition in general (Critchley, 2002). This orientation is, in fact, evident in other fields—the work of Shiva (1993) and Bourdieu (1990) provide ready examples of scholars who have used a variety of points of engagement to sustain a critical dialogue with their focal worlds. These examples point to the possibilities in our own field to forge a more enduring and even symbiotic connection to the world of praxis on which we thrive.

Where and how, then, can crises be fruitfully engendered? We offer, below, some broad suggestions that we believe might start us in the direction of bringing critique/crisis into play in our academic practice.

- Taking a holistic view of our scholarship rather than viewing research, teaching, and consulting as compartmentalized activities that do not inform each other. This allows us to seek a synthesis that begins with a rich and fertile ground of exposure to the real life concerns of practitioners and students.
- Learning from our failures. We might argue that our inability to engender a crisis is almost as instructive as the successful production of a crisis. Failure to touch a nerve alerts us to a lack of connection, a point of disjuncture which might require reframing or reconsideration of our choice of problem.
- Deliberately using crisis as a rhetorical device, a means of drawing the reader into a dialogue in which a genuine two-way exchange of ideas might take place and new insights arise. This is applicable to the classroom, to the conversation with a client, and to written discourse.
- Committing to a long term interest in the organizations we study and the problems we try to solve. Maintaining an ongoing engagement after the initial research project is over, for example, can alert us to unintended consequences which may evolve over time.
- Engaging in critical dialogue in our journals though a crisis engendering critique that calls us collectively to reflect on our assumptions and practices. Such reflection could be facilitated by journal policies that invite responses and debate after a crisis engendering article is published.

We do not intend these suggestions as prescriptions but rather as ideas that might help spark consideration of the ways in which different contexts of praxis might be approached when we adopt a result-oriented critical perspective, as well as the ways in which we might meaningfully conduct the conversations that follow the crises we are able to engender. To illustrate the kind of crisis and its follow-up to which we refer, we return to the work of Orlikowski and Iacono (2000), who were able to create crisis within the IS community by pointing out how the IT artifact had become obscured in research in the field. They made members of the community look up and pay attention to the profound contradiction brewing in their midst: the drift away from what they had set out to study in the first place. They then participated in conversations (at ICIS 2002) with community members from diverse subfields to consider ways in which academic

practice could be changed. We will let their effort stand as a good if (inevitably) imprecise example of the critique/crisis nexus that we have sought to articulate.

REFERENCES

- Ackoff, R. L. "Management Misinformation Systems," *Management Science* (14:4), December 1967, pp. 147-155.
- Alvesson, M., and Deetz, S. "Critical Theory and Postmodernism Approaches to Organizational Studies," in S. R. Clegg, C. Hardy, and W. R. Nord (Eds.), *Handbook of Organization Studies*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996, pp. 191-217.
- American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (4th Ed.). Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000 (accessed online at <http://www.dictionary.com>, January 10, 2004).
- Applegate, L. M., and King, J. L. "Rigor and Relevance: Careers on the Line," *MIS Quarterly* (23:1), March 1999, pp. 17-18.
- Avison, D. "Information Systems in the MBA Curriculum: An International Perspective," *Communications of the Association for Information Systems* (11), 2003, pp. 117-127.
- Barthes, R. S/Z, R. Miller (trans.), New York: Hill and Wang, 1974.
- Benbasat, I., and Zmud, R. W. "Empirical Research in Information Systems: The Practice of Relevance," *MIS Quarterly* (23:1), 1999, pp. 3-16.
- Bohman, J. *New Philosophy of Social Science: Problems of Indeterminacy*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993.
- Boland Jr., R. J. "Taking the IS Artifact Seriously in IS Research: Theory Development From Multiple Perspectives," in L. Applegate, R. Galliers, and J. I. DeGross (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 23rd International Conference on Information Systems*, Barcelona, Spain, 2002, pp. 910-911.
- Bottomore, T. (Ed.). *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Basic Blackwell Inc., 1991.
- Boudreau, M.-C. "Report on the Discussion Panel on Assessing Critical Social Theory research in Information Systems," 1997 (available online at <http://www.people.vcu.edu/~aslee/Philadelphia-CST.htm>, accessed January 15, 2004).
- Bourdieu, P. "In Other Words. Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology," Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1990, pp. 123-139.
- Brooke, C. "What Does it Mean to be 'Critical' in IS Research?," *Journal of Information Technology* (17), 2002, pp. 49-57.
- Burrell, G. "Ephemera: Critical Dialogue on Organization," *Ephemera: Critical Dialogue on Organization* (1:1), 2001, pp. 11-29.
- Burrell, G., and Morgan, G. *Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis*, London: Heinemann, 1979.
- Churchman, C. W., and Schainblatt, A. H. "The Researcher and the Manager: A Dialectic of Implementation," *Management Science* (11:4), February 1964, pp. B-69-B-87.
- Collins, R. *Four Sociological Traditions*, New York: Oxford University Press, New York, 1994.
- Critchley, S. *Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Culler, J. D. "Saussure's Theory of Language," in *Saussure*, Hassocks, England: Harvester Press, Hassocks, 1976, pp. 18-52.
- Davenport, T. H., and Markus, L. M. "Rigor vs. Relevance Revisited: Response to Benbasat and Zmud," *MIS Quarterly* (23:1), March 1999, pp. 19-23.
- de Certeau, M. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984.

- Deetz, S., and Kersten, A. "Critical Models of Interpretive Research," in L. L. Putnam and M. E. Pacanowsky (Eds.), *Communication and Organizations: An Interpretive Approach*, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1983, pp. 147-171.
- Derrida, J. *Positions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.
- Doolin, B., and Lowe, A. "To Reveal is to Critique: Actor-Network Theory and Critical Information Systems Research," *Journal of Information Technology* (17), 2002, pp. 69-78.
- Foucault, M. *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, London: Routledge Classics, 1970.
- Garfinkel, H. *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967.
- Giddens, A. *The Constitution of Society*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984.
- Grey, C., and Mitev, N. "Management Education: A Polemic," *Management Education* (26:1), 1995, pp. 73-90.
- Heidegger, M. "The Question Concerning Technology," in D. F. Krell (Ed.), *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1993.
- The Houghton Mifflin Canadian Dictionary of the English Language* Houghton Mifflin Canada, Markham, Ont., 1982.
- Howcroft, D., and Truex, D. "Editorial Statement," *The DATA BASE for Advances in Information Systems* (32:4), 2001, pp. 14-18.
- Keen, P. G. W. "MIS Research: Reference Disciplines and a Cumulative Tradition," in E. R. McLean (Ed.), *Proceedings of the First International Conference on Information Systems*, 1980, pp. 9-18.
- Keen, P. G. W. "Relevance and Rigor in Information Systems Research: Improving Quality, Confidence, Cohesion and Impact," in H-E. Nissen, H. K. Klein, and R. Hirschheim (Eds.), *Information Systems Research: Contemporary Approaches and Emergent Traditions*, Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1991, pp. 27-49.
- Kincheloe, J. L., and McLaren, P. L. "Rethinking Critical Theory and Qualitative Research," in N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000, pp. 138-157.
- Kingwell, M. *Practical Judgments. Essays in Culture, Politics, and Interpretation*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002.
- Kompridis, N. "Reorienting Critique. From Ironist Theory to Transformative Practice," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* (26:4), 2000, pp. 23-47.
- Koselleck, R. *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*, New York: Berg, 1988.
- Latour, B. *Science in Action*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Lemert, C. C. "De-Centered Analysis," *Theory and Society* (7:3), May 1979, pp. 289-306.
- Lynch, M. "Silence in Context: Ethnomethodology and Social Theory," *Human Studies* (22), 1997, pp. 211-233.
- Lyytinen, K. "Empirical Research in Information Systems: On the Relevance of Practice in Thinking of IS Research," *MIS Quarterly* (23:1), March 1999, pp. 25-28.
- Lyytinen, K. "Information Systems and Critical Theory," in M. Alvesson and H. Willmott (Eds.), *Critical Management Studies*, London: Sage Publications, 1992, pp. 159-180.
- Marcon, T., and Gopal, A. "Irony, Critique and Ethnomethodology: Fundamental Tensions," Paper Presented at the Third Critical Management Studies Conference, Lancaster, UK, 2003. *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary and Thesaurus*, 2003 (available online at <http://www.m-w.com>; accessed October 1, 2003).
- Montealegre, R., and Keil, M. "De-Escalating Information Technology Projects: Lessons from the Denver International Airport," *MIS Quarterly* (24:3), September 2000, pp. 417-447.
- Mowday, R. T. "Reaffirming Our Scholarly Values," *Academy of Management Review* (22:2), 1997, pp. 335-345.

- O'Connor, J. *The Meaning of Crisis. A Theoretical Introduction*, Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1987.
- Orlikowski, W. J., and Baroudi, J. J. "Studying Information Technology in Organizations: Research Approaches and Assumptions," *Information Systems Research* (2:1), 1991, pp. 1-28.
- Orlikowski, W. J., and Iacono, C. S. "Research Commentary: Desperately Seeking the 'IT' in IT Research—A Call to Theorizing the IT Artifact," *Information Systems Research* (12:2), 2000, pp. 121-134.
- Rawls, A. W. "Editor's Introduction," in H. Garfinkel, *Ethnomethodology's Program. Working out Durkheim's Aphorism*, Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2002, pp. 1-64.
- Shiva, V. *Monocultures of the Mind*, Penang, Malaysia: Third World Network, 1993.
- Thayer-Bacon, B. "Transforming and Redescribing Critical Thinking: Constructive Thinking," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* (17), 1998, pp. 123-148.
- Walsham, G. *Interpreting Information Systems in Organizations*, Chichester, England: John Wiley & Sons, 1993.
- Walzer, M. *The Company of Critics*, New York: Basic Books, 2002.
- Weber, R. "Editor's Comments: The Problem of the Problem," *MIS Quarterly* (27:1), 2003, pp. iii-ix.
- Webster, J., and Watson, R. T. "Analyzing the Past to Prepare for the Future: Writing a Literature Review," *MIS Quarterly* (26:2), 2002, pp. xiii-xxiii.
- Williams, R. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Teresa Marcon is a doctoral student at the Richard Ivey School of Business, University of Western Ontario, Canada. Her interests fall at the intersection of contemporary theory and information technologies in society. Her current work attempts to explore this nexus in conceptual and empirical directions. She can be reached at tmarcon@ivey.uwo.ca.

Mike Chiasson received his Ph.D. in information systems and his postdoctoral in health promotion from the University of British Columbia, Canada. His research is increasingly focused on agency-structure issues in the development and implementation of information systems, in both traditional and nontraditional (e.g., entrepreneurial, professional, and legal) contexts. His specific IT areas include Web-based systems for e-commerce and knowledge management systems. He is currently investigating the effect of emerging IS on entrepreneurial organizations, criminal and civil cases involving e-commerce and software development, and knowledge management systems in law firms. Mike can be reached at chiasson@ucalgary.ca.

Abhijit Gopal received his Ph.D. from the University of Georgia. He is an associate professor at the Richard Ivey School of Business, University of Western Ontario, Canada. His interests lie in the interstitial and peripheral locations of information systems use with particular emphasis on the manner in which information technologies shape and are shaped by political and social conditions and considerations. He has published both in leading journals in the field and in marginal ones. Abhijit can be reached at agopal@ivey.uwo.ca.