

COMMENTARY

# What could critical theory have done to help my father? (Absolutely nothing)

Ramon J. Aldag\*

University of Wisconsin–Madison

\*Corresponding author. Email: [ray.aldag@wisc.edu](mailto:ray.aldag@wisc.edu)

In these times of poisonous division, outgroup hatred, and arguments reflecting selective and subjective perception, confirmation bias, and extreme polarization, it is troubling to focus on antiperspectives such as the “antimanagement perspective” of critical theorists. It seems time to speak to trust and conciliation rather than solely to highlight struggle. Nevertheless, I would like to respond to Professor Mumby’s (2019) polemic and to first thank him for offering such an extreme and unvarnished perspective.

Mumby’s (2019) arguments are simple and straightforward: Capitalism is evil and oppressive; capitalists care about nothing but profit and exploit workers for that end; and any actions taken by capitalists that appear to help workers are in fact reinforcements in their arsenal of oppression. I will respond to Professor Mumby’s polemic with six key points: (a) work has many demonstrable benefits for workers and society; (b) critical management studies (CMS) is based on limiting, arbitrary, sometimes demonstrably false, zero-sum metaphors and assumptions; (c) the picture drawn of alienation and turnover associated with Ford’s moveable assembly line is taken out of context and misleading; (d) claims to read the mind of the capitalist are unreasonable; (e) CMS prides itself on its focus on the plight of lower level workers but offers them neither agency nor hope; (e) attempts by industrial and organizational (I-O) psychologists and management scholars to improve workers’ lives are dismissed by CMS scholars as merely serving as instruments for capitalist oppressors. I am certainly aware that abuses occur in organizations (I regularly serve as a reviewer for the Academy of Management’s Dark Side Case Competition), but I do not confuse exceptions with exemplars.

My views reflect my personal experience as an organizational behavior researcher for almost 50 years, an active member of key professional organizations, and—most important for this essay—my father’s son.

## What is work good for?

So, what is work good for? A snide response to Professor Mumby’s query would be, “So, why do *you* work?” A more basic answer might be, “Without work, nothing would be done and we would all die” (but until then, we would have a lot of free time!).

Because I-O psychologists and management scholars fully understand that jobs provide many critical intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, I will not dwell on such benefits here. Briefly, intrinsic rewards, including a sense of accomplishment, the opportunity to develop and use valued skills, pride in task completion, and garnering of respect and status, are increasingly important (Aldag & Brief, 1979; Hackman & Oldham, 1976). These lead, for instance, to increased work and life satisfaction, reduced life stress, and enhanced organizational citizenship behaviors. Extrinsic rewards do more than just satisfy “lower order” needs. They may, in fact, provide the means for pursuit of

valued extra-work activities, foster social relationships, and facilitate and promote subjective well-being (Brief & Aldag, 1989).

We can observe the value of work in its absence. For example, Zhou, Zou, Woods, and Wu (2019) tracked unemployed workers after reemployment and found that “recovery of subjective well-being following reemployment is fast, complete and enduring, even when individuals take less favorable employment options to return to work” (p. 1195). They add that, “possessing a job provides unique manifest and psychological benefits that may not be easily obtained from non-work related activities.”

### Metaphors and assumptions

Gareth Morgan in *Images of Organization* (1986) presented eight metaphors for organizations (machines, organisms, brains, cultures, political systems, psychic prisons, flux and transformation, and instruments of domination), encouraging their exploration. Critical theorists tend to adopt the darker of those metaphors, including political systems, psychic prisons, and instruments of domination.

It is valuable to triangulate, challenge, and seek understanding of work and life by pursuing multiple, sometimes complementary, sometimes clashing, metaphors. It is, though, tempting to pursue just a narrow set of metaphors and view life through that constrained lens. Metaphors and associated assumptions are powerful but dangerous. They cause us to act without proper vigilance, and we should challenge them. In the case of CMS, when all one has is a dark hammer, everything looks like a noir nail.

### “Fordism”

Mumby (2019) casts Henry Ford as a seminal villain in his imagined epic, ongoing struggle, and he refers to the last 100-plus years as post-Fordism. He cites Ford’s turnover rate in 1913 is as a reflection of “the level of alienation experienced by workers on Ford’s assembly line.” In fact, those figures were from October 1912 to October 1913. Although 400% is clearly a remarkably high turnover rate, it had many potential causes. Most important, 1913 was the year of Ford’s introduction of the moveable assembly line, a dramatic, disruptive technological change.

Although Ford’s subsequent moves may now appear paternalistic, they were nevertheless impressive. The year 1914 saw Ford’s introduction of \$5 daily pay (including wages and bonus). Inflation adjusted to 2019, that \$5 daily wage is \$125.62 a day or \$15.70 an hour—above the current popular pay goal of \$15 an hour. Daily work hours were cut from nine to eight, disabled workers were hired, arbitrary firings were proscribed, and profit sharing was implemented. Henry Ford’s moves resulted in remarkable declines in turnover—from the cited 400% in 1913 to 23% over the following 12 months, coupled with an increase in worker efficiency of 44%. With the wage increase, a worker could buy a Model T with 4 month’s pay (Fisher, 1916). Wall Street decried such largesse; *The Wall Street Journal* admonished Ford for its “blatant immorality” in introducing “biblical or spiritual principles into a field where they do not belong.”

### The mind of a capitalist

Mumby (2019) tells us that, “In other words, capitalists do not care about what they produce as long as it realizes exchange value and hence profit” (p. 432). As executive director of our Weinert Center for Entrepreneurship—a breeding ground for capitalists—for a dozen years, I saw dedicated young women and men pouring their passions into new ventures such as kite-driven wind energy for off-the-grid African locations; a wearable, disposable insulin drug pump/patch that

operates independent of a battery; and the nation's largest alternative fuel station and car-share database. These were *all* about the products and services and the missions they promote.

It is true that organizations have historically sought profit maximization; that was their legal responsibility. Such a perspective echoed Milton Friedman's (1970) view that "The business of business is business." Consistent with that view, since 1997 the mission statement of the Business Roundtable (2019), a nonprofit association based in Washington, DC whose members are chief executive officers of major U.S. companies, declared that "the paramount duty of management and of boards of directors is to the corporation's stockholders. The interests of other stakeholders are relevant as a derivative of the duty to stockholders."

However, on August 19, 2019, the Business Roundtable published a new, two-page "Statement on the Purpose of a Corporation" (MacLellan, 2019; Murray, 2019). Signed by almost 200 CEOs, it said, "We share a fundamental commitment to *all* of our stakeholders" and expressed duty to "delivering value to customers, investing in employees, dealing fairly and ethically with suppliers, supporting local communities, and generating long-term shareholder value." Whether such a proclamation translates into action awaits evidence, but at least the language is changing and such proclamations are no longer viewed as heretical.

In line with the view of management as oppressor, Mumby (2019) dismisses anything potentially benefiting management as somehow valueless to workers. This takes an unfortunate zero-sum view, assuming purely distributive bargaining. Such a vitriolic, "political sites of contestation" (Mumby, 2019, p. 431) perspective becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. It ignores integrative bargaining and its possibilities for joint gains. Whether practices such as job enrichment (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), open-book management (Aldag, 2019), job crafting (Bindi, Unsworth, Gibson, & Stride, 2019), self-management (Breevaarta, Bakker, & Demerouti, 2014), and flexible work arrangements (Root & Young, 2011) aid management, they clearly also help workers. In presenting his case, Mumby (2019) paints a dark, merciless scene reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch, even at the cost of accuracy. As an example of his distorted, dystopian image of the callous organization, he claims that "Rarely are questions asked about the politics of emotion management . . ." (p. 434). In fact, a Google Scholar search on "emotional labor" reveals 43,600 hits. Emotional labor is a key area of concern and research.

CMS scholars appear to be focusing on light from distant stars, viewing a remote past. More recent observations would reveal B corporations (Kim, Karlesky, Myers, & Schifeling, 2016), employee ownership (O'Boyle, Patel, & Gonzalez-Mulé, 2016), flexible scheduling (Beers, 2000), the triple bottom line (Alhaddi, 2015), and other major, progressive developments.

### CMS and low-level workers

Mumby (2019) asserts that critical theorists, with whom he identifies, take the perspective of the low-level worker rather than the manager. That certainly seems admirable. But how do critical perspectives really benefit the low-level worker? That perspective is apparently concerned with just observation, not assistance. Professor Mumby cites three goals of his focal article, none of them suggestions for how lower-level workers may benefit from CMS perspectives.

My father was certainly a low-level worker. He did not complete grade school and had few work skills. He spent his entire employed life at the Rouge Plant of the Ford Motor Company, primarily carrying fenders on assembly lines; I spent many evenings waiting at the gate of the smoke- and fire-belching factory to drive him home. He sometimes told me about bad days, even horror stories of mistreatment by supervisors. His anger, though, was directed toward that abuse, not capitalists. He was grateful for the support of his union, but he had no ill-will toward the company. My father's work (and general) identity was strong and clear, and it was tightly and proudly linked to Ford. Asked about himself he would reply, "I am a Ford man." He was fiercely loyal to Ford and would never consider buying any other car.

Without a Ford Motor Company Fund scholarship (a private Ford scholarship, not from the Ford Foundation), I could not have attended a 4-year university, let alone achieved a chaired position at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where I have spent (so far) 47 years. Earlier, before becoming an aeronautical engineer working on Apollo missions, I spent summers on jobs in shipping and receiving, and on production lines as a member of the Teamsters.

My father's decades on the assembly line, and my own experiences, drove much of the motivation for my research. What can be done to make jobs richer and more satisfying? How can we reduce work-related stress? How can we help workers acquire the skills necessary for proactivity? How can we manage conflict, discourage organizational politics, and promote nurturing organization cultures?

So, what could critical theory have offered my father? Apparently, absolutely nothing. It would seem to grant him no agency and little hope. CMS scholars apparently see workers as passive, impotent victims of management greed but provide no guidance on how they can attain voice or power. In *Star Trek*, Starfleet personnel dispassionately observed alien civilizations at a distance and followed the Prime Directive of Noninterference: “no identification of self or mission; no interference with the social development of said planet . . . no references to . . . advanced civilizations.” CMS scholars appear to accept and pursue this prime directive, looking down from above, smugly observing workers' struggles while avoiding intervention.

### I-O and OB interventions as instruments of oppression

Mumby (2019) asserts that, “. . . the workplace under capitalism has evolved to adapt to worker struggles against the demands of capital” (p. 430) and “The goal, then, was not so much to revolutionize work but to short circuit any revolutionary tendencies that an organized workforce might develop . . .” (p. 434). Is there *anything* organizations can do that seems to help workers that would not be met by such visceral disdain?

This dystopian view is akin to a conspiracy theory (Douglas, Sutton, & Cichocka, 2017), espousing “secret plots by powerful and malevolent groups” (p. 538). How are capitalists coordinating this massive oppression? One conjures images of secret meetings in the basement of a Washington, DC pizza parlor, plotting tactics to crush lowly workers into submission.

In sum, I reject the dark metaphors, the presumptuous claims of insight into capitalists' minds, the arguments by assertion, the selective presentation of facts, and the lack of guidelines for improvement of workers' lives. I can find nothing that would have helped my father.

### References

- Aldag, R. J. (2019). Open-book management. In R. Kolb (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of business ethics and society* (Vol. 5, pp. 2542–2544). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Aldag, R. J., & Brief, A. P. (1979). *Task design and employee motivation*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company.
- Alhaddi, H. (2015). Triple bottom line and sustainability: A literature review. *Business and Management Studies*, 1(2), 6–10.
- Beers, T. M. (2000). Flexible schedules and shift work: Replacing the “9-to-5” workday. *Monthly Labor Review*, 33–40.
- Bindi, U. K., Unsworth, K. L., Gibson, C. B., & Stride, C. B. (2019). Job crafting revisited: Implications of an extended framework for active changes at work. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 104(5), 605–628.
- Brief, A. P., & Aldag, R. J. (1989). The economic functions of work. In K. M. Rowland & G. R. Ferris (Eds.), *Research in personnel and human resources management* (Vol. 7, pp. 1–23). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Breevaarta, K., Bakker, A., & Demerouti, E. (2014). Daily self-management and employee work engagement. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 84, 31–38.
- Business Roundtable. (2019). Business Roundtable redefines the purpose of a corporation to promote ‘An economy that serves all Americans.’ <https://opportunity.businessroundtable.org/ourcommitment/>
- Douglas, K. M., Sutton, R. M., & Cichocka, A. (2017). The psychology of conspiracy theories. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 26(6), 538–542.
- Fisher, B. (1916). Reducing the labor turnover. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, May, 144–154.
- Friedman, M. (1970). The social responsibility of business is to increase its profits. *The New York Times Magazine*, 173–178.

- Hackman, J. R., & Oldham, G. R.** (1976). Motivation through the design of work: Test of a theory. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, **16**(2), 250–279.
- Kim, S., Karlesky, M. J., Myers, C. G., & Schifeling, T.** (2016). Why companies are becoming B corporations. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2016/06/why-companies-are-becoming-b-corporations>.
- MacLellan, L.** (2019, August 19). Nearly 200 CEOs just agreed on an updated definition of “the purpose of a corporation”. *Quartz*.
- Morgan, G.** (1986 [1997, 2006]). *Images of organization*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Mumby, D. K.** (2019). Work: What is it good for? (Absolutely nothing)—a critical theorist’s perspective. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, **12**(4), 429–443.
- Murray, A.** (2019). America’s CEOs seek a new purpose for the corporation. *Fortune*, August 19.
- O’Boyle, E. H., Patel, P. J., Gonzalez-Mulé, E.** (2016). Employee ownership and firm performance: A meta-analysis. *Human Resource Management Journal*, **26**(4), 425–448. doi:[10.1111/1748-8583.12115](https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12115).
- Root, L. S., & Young, A. A., Jr.** (2011). Workplace flexibility and worker agency: Finding short-term flexibility within a highly-structured workplace. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, **638**(1), 86–102.
- Zhou, Y., Zou, M., Woods, S.A., & Wu, C.-H.** (2019). The restorative effect of work. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, **104**(9), 1195–1206.