

# Critical Management Studies and Moving Towards Hope: A Dialogue

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## Texte d'opinion

# Critical Management Studies and Moving Towards Hope: A Dialogue

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In spring 2021, the joint chairs of the Critical Management Studies (CMS) division at the Academy of Management (AOM), Amon Barros and Fernanda Sauerbronn, selected Martyna Śliwa to deliver the division's Plenary Address at the forthcoming AOM Annual Meeting. Rather than delivering a traditional Plenary Address, Martyna expressed to Amon and Fernanda her desire to deliver the Plenary Address through a dialogue. At that point, Ajnesh was approached to chair the Plenary Address and contribute to the dialogue. Over the summer months leading up to the AOM Annual Meeting—which for a second consecutive year was scheduled virtually as a result of the ongoing pandemic—Martyna and Ajnesh spoke on several occasions to discuss pressing issues encountering CMS as a scholarly field as well as a community-of-practice—and signs and opportunities for hope. As both Martyna (Jeanes *et al.*, 2019; Johansson & Śliwa, 2014; Śliwa & Johansson, 2014a; 2014b) and Ajnesh (Fernando & Prasad, 2019; Prasad, 2013; 2015; Prasad *et al.*, 2019) had been publishing on the experiences of (CMS) researchers in academia—including a recent joint editorial (Prasad & Śliwa, 2022)—the conversation was certainly an engaging one.

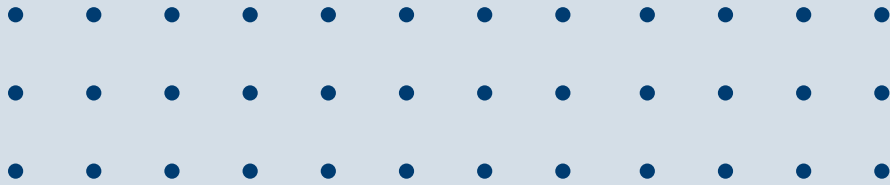
The conversation between Martyna and Ajnesh—entitled *Critical Management Studies and Moving Towards Hope*—took place virtually on July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021. The conversation was audio- and video-recorded and, subsequently, transcribed into verbatim text. In what follows, select excerpts from the conversation are offered.

**AP: I'll begin by posing a question to you as to why, when you were invited to deliver the Plenary Address, you suggested that we go with a conversation format for this session. I'm curious to know why you opted for it to be conversational, rather than a typical presentation.**

**MS:** I was wondering what format this should take because we have now had a year and a half of online conferences and seminars, and we've become so accustomed to this one-way, very remote mode of delivery, where the speaker just can't see the audience and can't judge the atmosphere in the room because

everybody's in a different space. With such formats, we can't actually build rapport with the audience members. And the audience members are given the role of passive recipients of what the speakers have to tell them, and more than this, of what the speaker has to show to them via a PowerPoint presentation. And there is this tendency of people to basically hide behind the PowerPoint on Zoom because that's what the technology does for us, and taught us and everybody else. So I'm absolutely delighted that the organizers and you in particular, have allowed me to do it my way, and that you have agreed in that sense to co-author this event with me as this also gives me the courage not to hide behind the PowerPoint presentation, but actually say, "Well, here I am, I have some things to say. I would love us to be there in a real room face to face, but since we can do this, let's do it this way and let's try to make it dialogical". Because so many things have been so wonderful in many ways, but we've been spending so much time either talking at other people or listening, or maybe restraining ourselves from saying anything. And part of the message that I'd like to convey today is about the need to hear others and the need to be heard, about pursuing the CMS community in that more relational, more dialogical way. And I'd like to, now, from the beginning, to really invite everybody who is here in the session right now—and I can see we have in total 42 participants—to share their comments, reflections and questions as we go along. I know that people are only able to, to put things in text, but still, it will be possible to engage in this way. And there will be time later on to really address all questions, reflections, and to also more collectively talk about things, I hope. I've also been asked to make sure that the content of this plenary session, although it is not meant to be directly based on my own research, on any specific piece of research, it draws on the work that I have done over the years as a researcher and educator and an academic citizen. Now, one of the first pieces of collaborative work that I ever did, as an academic, I was co-organizing a conference at Essex 15 years ago, back in 2006, and the topic was "Polyphony and Dialogism as Ways of

Remerciements : We thank Amon Barros and Fernanda Sauerbronn for inviting Martyna Śliwa to deliver the CMS Plenary Address and asking Ajnesh Prasad to chair the session. We are grateful to Anshuman Maru for transcribing the conversation.



Organizing”. And then there was a co-edited special section of Organization Studies that came out in 2008 and I thought, well, it’s only appropriate that as I’m reflecting in this session on my own professional trajectory, along with the trajectory of CMS that I have observed, and being part of that, I actually tried to enact as much as I can some of those concepts, ideas that have shaped me as an academic, a person, and a researcher. And if we do take a concept such as polyphony and dialog seriously, then we want to understand organizational practice as a multi-centered, nonlinear, intersubjective activity. Now, how do we do this on Zoom? Now this is the closest way that I think we can do this and I hope that this way, we will be more likely to engage and invite others to contribute to the session, and to try to create some sense of multi-voicedness in this session. So, let’s try to have this event as an exercise in performing polyphony or at least a dialogue between us, Ash.

**AP: The aim of the CMS division’s Plenary Address is to offer attendees the opportunity to hear from an established highly accomplished scholar. Our division has been fortunate to have some very well-regarded scholars delivered the Plenary Address in past years, including R. W. Connell, Ann Cunliffe, Cynthia Enloe, and Nancy Harding, to name just a few. You certainly fit in among this illustrious group. So, I’m just going to post this very open-ended question. How did you get here?**

**MS:** Thank you Ash. This is a wonderful list of past speakers and it is slightly intimidating. And of course, I have to think, “well do I really fit the bill?” Since I’m here, perhaps I do, according to some of you, at least, I do. I will be able to share some reflections on first being a CMS academic and navigating both the academic and the specific political and socio-economic environment that I have been part of over the past two decades. Second, I will offer some of my thoughts about the present and future of CMS.

In response to the question: “how did I get here?” there are three things which I think explain best how I’ve got to the place where I am in my professional life. And these three things are first naivety, especially early in my career, which verged on ignorance. Second, a combination of the privileges I have had, including the support I have received from others, which I hope to talk about more throughout the session, as well as, of course, certain disadvantages that I have experienced. And third, the persistence in doing things, and maybe even stubbornness in doing

things, my own way. I’m really delighted to be able to talk about these things, and I’m chuffed that you are willing to listen, because it’s a very special time for me to reflect on my professional experience, my experience in academia, because I’m exactly in my 20th year of academic employment. And, I can see that the CMS community faces a lot of challenges today. But, I also believe that the CMS project is more relevant now than ever. And that’s why I believe that there is hope for critical scholarship and for all the aspects of work and activism of CMS academics and I see my professional trajectory as part of this hope.

I would like to speak from the perspective of someone who has been able to be a successful CMS academic, whilst also being a woman, a foreigner, a Central European, in fact, a Polish person in the UK. I came to the UK in 1999 as an exchange student and my own personal project of studying and experiencing the culture of a different country was very much connected to the European Union’s project of student mobility, people’s mobility, workforce mobility. When I completed my masters in 2000, I wanted to do a PhD in the UK, but I didn’t have funding. So, I decided to do my PhD part-time. At that time, the University of Northumbria, where I was doing my PhD, wanted to increase the number of staff who are qualified at the doctoral level. Meanwhile, business management education was growing, with more and more people wanting to study in business schools. And this meant that business schools were expanding, and they still are expanding. And that’s another part of that hope. And back then, even though I had only started my PhD, I was able to get a full-time job as a lecturer from January 2002. This is a big part of how I got there, I managed to get my first job as a part-time PhD student in a teaching-oriented university. I had two master’s degree, but I didn’t have a PhD, having only started one. I was teaching many hours a week; I was working on my PhD in the evenings, and on the weekends and during holidays. And in hindsight, I can say that the decision shows how naive I was about what it takes to do a PhD, and how I underestimated how demanding it would be to work full-time and do a PhD at the same time. I was also very naive about my place in the labor market. I didn’t perceive myself at all, as a woman, as a migrant, as a Polish woman. It didn’t cross my mind back then that this might, in any way, have an impact on my ability to secure an academic position. And that naivety, that ignorance, was a huge advantage back then. I would say to everybody that sometimes it’s better not to know things too

much and not to analyze them too much because we are able to take perhaps braver decisions than we would have otherwise.

I was also very privileged to meet some wonderfully supportive people along the way, many of whom were CMS scholars. And I'll talk about this a little bit more later. Another privilege, that I have had for these 20 years, and that's why I also see a lot of hope for CMS, is that I've been able to do things my own way really. My research interests, which I have pursued over the years were all somehow interconnected. I have researched things that I thought were important. But there wasn't one clear focus, one topic, one theme, there were different things that I was looking at. I believe that part of that hope is, if you think your research is important, if you think that the topic that you are interested in is relevant, then chances are that it is and that it is worth pursuing—and it will become important. So, there is no need to constrain yourself. And I don't believe that we need to constrain ourselves as a CMS community in order to pursue the intellectual projects that we want to work on. To me being part of CMS has been fantastically helpful, because this is a community which genuinely values interdisciplinary scholarship, and the ideas and topics that may seem unexpected for business school academics, as well as thinking that is politically and ethically informed.

Obviously, there is a very strong autobiographical theme in my research trajectory. For me, it always works like that when I start a new research project—that the idea needs to resonate with me somehow, with my experiences. I need to feel it at the affective level and feel that this is somehow intriguing, important, so that personal and intellectual interests always have to meet and merge. That has been part of my story about how I've got to where I've got to. The personal and the intellectual have always been there, and they have given me a kind of persistence to keep going and to engage in things in in-depth ways, at least as much as I've been able to.

Another aspect of the persistence is that I've always tried to work with different people and wanted to get on with different people. This doesn't mean that I have got on with everybody. But just like many of us do, I always put a certain amount of emotional labor and investment and time into relating to people, into building relationships. I think this is what many, many people in CMS do because we are really so aware of the importance of relationships and that is, again, where I believe that hope for CMS lies.

**AP: Brilliant. This response really speaks to both your intellectual fortitude and diligent work ethic, which has allowed you to successfully undertake both the doctoral program and a full-time lectureship concurrently.**

**I want to pick up on the point about research passions and research output. My question for you now is: How have you managed to balance both the institutional pressures for certain forms of research output with pursuing your own research passions?**

**MS:** Well, it's fair to say that I tried to follow my passions and I have tried to contribute to community building and engage in work that is anti-instrumental. At the same time, I'm very much aware of what the institutional pressures and expectations are. In the UK, I think we are very acutely aware of these institutional pressures; there is a contractual relationship with the employer. And, I have always made sure to fulfill my part of that contract. Perhaps this is part of this migrant mentality, mentality of someone who entered adult life in a country where, at that time, there was 20% unemployment when I was starting university degree. I have been doing my best to be a good teacher, a good supervisor, and a good organization citizen who contributes to the running of the universities that I've worked for. I have also tried to be a valued researcher. And now, in the UK, the contractual relationship around what research is valued, is connected to the Research Excellence Framework (REF audit system) and since I became part of that system, I have put a significant amount of energy into fulfilling its expectations.

And I have to say it very openly and honestly, those institutional pressures, in fact, aren't at all somehow separate from CMS, we are not outsiders. I remember a few years ago, going to a job interview and not getting the job, and afterwards receiving feedback saying, "well, you need to publish more in certain journals, you know, high quality journals." This feedback was given to me by the chair of the appointment panel, who was also a CMS scholar. And there is no doubt, of course, that my ego was affected by these comments. And so, I took those expectations seriously, as our ability to have our livelihoods depend on them. These expectations have certainly influenced me on a number of occasions, the choice of journals I've made in terms of where I submit my manuscripts to, for example. With that said, these considerations have never influenced the subject matter or the methodological approach or the things

that I wanted to say. I've never said things in any of my published work because I wanted to publish them.

But you're right, Ash, that being serious about publication expectations has opened different doors for me. At the beginning, there was a lot of naivety, which was helpful to me because I didn't actually know about journal metrics. I knew very little about performance management processes. So, for the first few years, I wasn't aware that certain forms of output are valued more than others. Again, that was a privilege when starting out 20 years ago with a job while doing my PhD as it meant that I didn't have to find out what I needed to do as a PhD student to be able to secure a job at the end of it.

What's also important to understand is how everything we do contributes to the final outcome, and there is no clear distinction between things that help and things that don't; things that meet institutional pressures and things that don't. So, for me, an example of this would be my involvement in the journal *ephemera*. Many people see *ephemera* as a journal that isn't part of the mainstream institutional order, and it isn't. But the sense of belonging my editorial involvement in the journal has given me; the intellectual stimulation, learning to think like an academic, meeting and spending time with like-minded people, I mean, these have been invaluable in negotiating institutional pressures that I've encountered. So, my advice to all of us in academia is: don't be too instrumental because you might be missing out on something that's very, very important to your own development.

Now, there is, of course, a much darker side as well to how I've managed institutional pressures—and there is nothing romantic about it. Part of the balancing act of passions and pressures has been, for many years, the lack of any meaningful work/life balance, working long hours, working weekends, not taking holidays, taking very little time off. I'm not proud of it and I'm not advising anybody to pursue this path, but this has been the reality of my career. And there are also things which don't constrain me, but do constrain other people; being a foreigner away from my family, not having any caring responsibilities, not living close to my parents, for example, as they are aging, not having children. These are aspects of my personal life, which affect me in some ways but in terms of the ability to focus on academic work; there is a privilege in not having caring responsibilities, and I'm very conscious that this will differ for different people. Having a healthy, strong, young, and resilient body also helped.

For many years, I didn't look after my mental and physical health. I would work myself all the way to burnout and illness. Should we call it the balancing act? Or, should we call it foolish? And I'm really pleased that a lot of scholars, especially within CMS, are now researching and writing about well-being in academia and we definitely need more of this. So, this is a complex answer. And thank you for asking how to balance and how I have balanced these things. I'm glad I've managed but this is how it's always been happening.

**AP: Fantastic. Thank you for that. And I think that's a point that really resonates with a lot of folks within academia: there's a need to not only balance institutional pressures for research output with your own research passions, but also not overworking ourselves. For example, it's okay if we don't answer the email within the very hour that it was sent and received. So thank you for that.**

**I'd like to now turn the conversation slightly and consider more forward-looking statements. So, my next question for you is: How do we organize ourselves in the face of some of the most pressing challenges facing members of the CMS community today?**

**MS:** I believe that before we start talking about challenges for CMS, we need to articulate the challenges for the world more broadly because the challenges for CMS cannot be separated from what we are seeing and experiencing in the world. The challenge for CMS is really a response to all crises that are going on in the world.

We need to organize ourselves in the way in which we believe the world should be organized. If we want to make the world a better place, we need to pay attention to the way we do things ourselves, and pay attention to the consistency of the means and the ends. CMS represents a global community of scholars, and we definitely have a role to play in organizing the type of world in which we want to live. So, let's organize ourselves according to the values that we would like to see in the world.

In this sense, CMS needs to engage in alternative formats that are democratic and, of course, a lot of that is happening already. For example, this CMS track at the AOM conference is definitely part of what I am calling for. The conference program looks fantastic, with a variety of formats that offer participants different types of engagement. Looking back at the last two decades, I remember going

to my first CMS conference, it was a very male dominated space and a very white, British space. Seeing how far things have come, I feel hope.

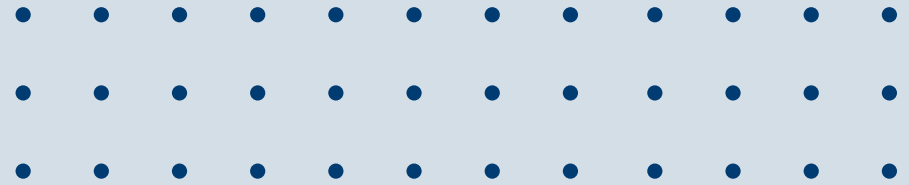
I mean if I was able to make it in CMS coming as I was from the outside without any connections, and doing my Ph.D. part-time, in a place with wasn't seen as a prestigious university, it means that we are actually a very supportive community. I have met a lot of very supportive critical scholars when I first started at Northumbria, Professor Heather Höpfl was there. And when she moved to Essex, she invited me to apply for a job at Essex, which was transformational for me and for my career. I also met other critical scholars who supported me such as Steffen Böhm, for example, who invited me to become part of ephemera collective, which, as I have already said, came to shape my thinking, and it became my academic home for me for many years. And over the years, there have been other wonderful people who have inspired me and supported me and whom I admire and from whom I'm learning a lot. And that's, that's the CMS community. And that's the hope within that community. And there have been mainly strong women, most of whom are part of CMS, such as Emma Bell, Alessia Contu, Sarah Robinson, obviously, Alison Pullen. Their support has given me so much positive energy. Of course, I've also had the privilege to know and take inspiration from other Polish women in our fields such as Barbara Czarniawska and Monika Kostera.

Things have definitely changed over these past 20 years in the CMS community. What was once a community that was very hierarchical and exclusionary, today it is not so. There is more diversity now. There are people from different countries, women in CMS have much stronger positions than they used to have. I believe are now much better equipped than we were 20 years ago to question certain practices. There is of course, the VIDA Association, to which by now, hundreds of CMS women academics belong and have it as a mutually supportive space. Online events emerging over the pandemic has further enabled the inclusivity of the CMS community. Online events showcasing journals that publish critical work have done so much to democratize the community and to make it more inclusive. In my mind, CMS has come a long way. And the question is: Now, where can it go and continue to have deeper impact? How do we ensure that we are an inclusive community? Is there more to be done?

And, of course, we need to look at our own practices. And I believe within that there is a huge task for established scholars. Do we always reflect the collective democratic ethos of the CMS project? How do we give voice to different people or different types of people? How do we ensure that they are listened to, and who do we collaborate with? Who do we support and mentor? Do we tend to collaborate mainly with people who look like us and who think like us? And, is it easy for others to access and become part of our network? I think it's a useful exercise from time to time, for example, to look at the list of our own publications and to scrutinize them from the perspective of diversity and inclusivity—whether we are collaborating with diverse people, and from different career stages. I think there's a lot of room, especially for established academics, to create changes in the system that we often write about, but don't necessarily practice. Overall, I've had very positive interactions in CMS based on my own experience, and I'm hopeful based on the kind of changes that I have seen in the community.

**AP: Thank you for that, Martyna. I'm going to pose my final question to you, which again picks up on one of the three challenges that you had identified earlier related to the pressing issues facing members of the CMS community? What might the impact of engagement with the external community look like for a CMS researcher?**

**MS:** Yeah, I think, you know, so that I don't repeat myself that the different external bodies that I see, of course, are our business schools, universities, there is the world of editing, journal editing, there's the world of other institutions, I believe that there is a lot that we can also do with organizational practices, and engaging with organizations of all kinds. And it's, like I said, I want to elaborate on some of the things I've already said, but the main message is: Connect. You know, connect to those spaces, be open to people that perhaps we wouldn't normally see as those kinds of conversation partners, be open about our images of who managers are, actually even acknowledging that, you know, some managers might be more "woke" and more progressive than we are ourselves. And, you know, pay attention in all those different spaces. I was reading Simone Weil, recently, and this idea of attention being the rarest and the purest form of generosity. You know, she was an extreme type of character in her own life. And probably we are now living in more extreme times. And it's



probably worth thinking about this kind of message of what attention paying to everybody, to every “other” would mean, in all those different contexts. And I believe there is very much scope for this within CMS exactly.

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