

# Critical innovation: The untapped potential of innovation for performative Critical Management Studies

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## Abstract

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How could innovation contribute to performative Critical Management Studies? Through an analysis of the literature, this theoretical article considers the tendency in performative Critical Management Studies (CMS) to not put innovation forward. This ‘absence’ is surprising given that performative CMS are currently struggling with their implementation. My analysis details how performative CMS and innovation may share a project of practical engagement with the world to bring about change, and it considers seminal works that have highlighted the possible usefulness, for performative CMS, of innovative organizational practices. I present two possible explanations (a strong association of innovation with the mainstream and the business world, and a possible tendency of the mainstream to reintegrate critically-oriented innovations) for this relative absence. In response, I introduce the concept of ‘critical innovation’ defined as innovation that is compatible with performative CMS. I also detail possible ‘components’ of critical innovation to operationalize it and consider its potential for performative CMS, before suggesting a research agenda on the concept. Overall, I argue that innovation has an untapped potential for performative CMS. Thus, my article contributes to the literature on performative CMS as it offers a possibly fruitful way to implement them in the face of the many challenges that are involved when doing performative CMS.

**Keywords:** ‘critical innovation’, performative CMS, critical performativity, innovation, theoretical article

**Résumé :** Comment l’innovation pourrait-elle contribuer aux études critiques en management performatives ? Au travers d’une analyse de la littérature, cet article théorique considère la tendance dans les études critiques en management (CMS) performatives à ne pas mettre en avant l’innovation. Cette « absence » est surprenante étant donné que les CMS performatives ont actuellement des difficultés avec leur mise en œuvre. Mon analyse détaille comment les CMS performatives et l’innovation pourraient partager un projet d’engagement pratique avec le monde afin d’amener du changement, et elle considère les travaux séminaux qui ont souligné la possible utilité, pour les CMS performatives, des pratiques organisationnelles innovantes. Je présente deux explications possibles (une forte association de l’innovation avec le *mainstream* et le monde des affaires, et une possible tendance du *mainstream* à réintégrer les innovations d’orientation critique) à cette absence relative. En réponse, j’introduis le concept d’« *innovation critique* » défini comme l’innovation qui est compatible avec les CMS performatives. Je détaille aussi de possibles « composants » de l’innovation critique afin de l’opérationnaliser et je considère son potentiel pour les CMS performatives, avant de suggérer un programme de recherche sur le concept. En somme, j’avance que l’innovation possède un potentiel inexploité pour les CMS performatives. Ainsi, mon article contribue à la littérature sur les CMS performatives car il propose un possible moyen fructueux pour les mettre en œuvre face aux nombreux défis qui sont impliqués lorsque l’on pratique les CMS performatives.

**Mots-clés :** « innovation critique », CMS performatives, performativité critique, innovation, article théorique

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## **Critical innovation: The untapped potential of innovation for performative Critical Management Studies**

### **INTRODUCTION**

How could innovation contribute to performative Critical Management Studies? For years, many scholars have considered the numerous organizational and societal challenges of our time. Arguably, ‘we are today witnessing epochal changes, which are fundamentally redefining the social, economic, political, and environmental realities we live in in unforeseen and unimaginable ways’ (Zanoni, Contu, Healy, & Mir, 2017: 575). With the relative centrality of organizations in our lives and this need for social, economic or environmental newness, two different search endeavours have emerged. *Innovation* is a global phenomenon with positive and negative outcomes (Godin & Vinck, 2017) that has become instrumental in this search: it can play a key role ‘in the face of globalisation and environmental challenges’ and is ‘not restricted to business organizations’ (Baregheh, Rowley, & Sambrook, 2009: 1324). *Performative Critical Management Studies* (CMS) offer a rather progressive and action-oriented agenda for critical scholars within business schools (Contu, 2019). This movement results from the introduction of ‘critical performativity’ more than ten years ago. It suggested that CMS could tackle contemporary challenges through a more active and subversive intervention into managerial discourses and practices (Spicer, Alvesson, & Kärreman, 2009). Within performative CMS ‘[...] ‘critical’ is related to a particular stance toward society. At heart, critical performativity assumes that we are not stuck with the social world at hand’<sup>1</sup> (Huault, Kärreman, Perret, & Spicer, 2017: 6).

These two endeavours – performative CMS and innovation – could be considered to share a concern for actively tackling worldwide challenges based on the assumption that it can be improved. Yet, they have so far not really communicated intensely with each other. Within performative CMS, innovation is almost absent. Most empirical studies on the ‘practice’ of performative CMS study unusual forms of organizations and management – and have documented challenges often related to an emergent coexistence of critical elements with less critical ones – but not so much to consider innovation (Esper, Cabantous, Barin-Cruz, & Gond, 2017; King, 2015; King & Land, 2018; King & Learmonth, 2015; Leca, Gond, & Barin Cruz, 2014; Paranque & Willmott, 2014; Parker & Parker, 2017; Reedy & King, 2019; Reinhold,

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<sup>1</sup> I should mention that, while this quotation is interesting for my theoretical arguments, the authors in the original paper introduce it in order to compare ‘performativity’ and ‘critical performativity’.

2017). Except for a set of theoretical works that have considered the potential of existing innovative practices in so much as they differ from the mainstream (Edwards, 2017; Hartmann, 2014), the presence of innovation in the literature on performative CMS remains the exception. Thus, I set out to consider the place of innovation in performative CMS, in face of this potentially fruitful and meaningful yet relatively non-existent association.

In the following parts, I start with an analysis of works on ‘performative CMS’ to present the theoretical dilemma: why is innovation rather absent in performative CMS? I introduce two possible explanations: innovation tends to be strongly associated with the mainstream and the business world; critically-oriented innovation risks being reintegrated by the mainstream. This guides me towards the search for what I refer to as ‘*critical innovation*’, in so much as I suggest that what is needed is innovation that is compatible with performative CMS. I offer a definition of what critical innovation could be, before considering its potential and offering a possible research agenda. Therefore, my article explores how innovation can contribute to performative CMS. It suggests that, even though part of what innovation is seen as possibly conflicting with performative CMS, innovation has an untapped potential for this movement. Beyond complementing the search for empirical relevant supports of performative CMS, I contribute to the debate on performative CMS (see, in particular: Cabantous, Gond, Harding, & Learmonth, 2016; Contu, 2019; Huault et al., 2017; Learmonth, Harding, Gond, & Cabantous, 2016; Spicer, Alvesson, & Kärreman, 2016) and to the development of ideas in face of the shared challenges that we are currently facing.

## **1. THE SURPRISING ABSENCE OF INNOVATION IN PERFORMATIVE CMS**

In this first part, I consider the place of innovation in performative Critical Management Studies (CMS). I detail how this latter movement that is part of CMS has structured around a mostly *progressive* endeavour and a desire for *active intervention* in the organizational world. Yet, although its objectives are quite clear and coherent, it still *struggles with practical implementation*. I detail how *innovation* has so far not been given a significant role even though it could resonate with at least some objectives of performative CMS.

### **1.1. PERFORMATIVE CMS AS A PROGRESSIVE BUT CHALLENGING PROJECT<sup>2</sup>**

CMS aggregate many different movements that question the dominant ‘mainstream’ forms of organizations, and that try to denaturalize what is often taken for granted (e.g. Adler, Forbes,

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<sup>2</sup> Although this part offers an analysis of the literature, its first section builds extensively on quotations to best convey the meaning of the original texts.

& Willmott, 2007; Alvesson, Bridgman, & Willmott, 2011). While CMS have historically tended to opt for a relatively detached analytical approach, recent years have witnessed the emergence of a more *performative* movement within them: it ‘starts from the point of addressing and critiquing’ key organizational challenges of ‘greater public significance’ (Spicer et al., 2016: 226). Two related approaches have been introduced alongside the original concept of ‘critical performativity’ that had previously suggested an ‘active and subversive intervention into managerial discourses and practices’ (Spicer et al., 2009: 538). First, ‘subversive functionalism’ is an ‘invitation for CMS to re-think critique and take it out of the box in which institutionalization has increasingly put it’ (Hartmann, 2014: 621). Second, ‘progressive performativity’ is an analytical concept for ‘processes of resignification (i.e. meanings that are open to re-interpretation) that guide managerial behaviour in different and possibly more reflexive directions’ (Wickert & Schaefer, 2015: 109). Performative CMS are thus largely about engaging with the managerial world in order to bring about change.

Performative CMS have tried to determine their aims, logics and means. This movement was initially created based on an argument: ‘[t]he central task of CMS should be to actively and pragmatically intervene in specific debates about management and encourage progressive forms of management’ (Spicer et al., 2009: 537). A key assumption behind performative CMS is thus that the world is not a given: ‘the social world as we know it is understood as [...] constructed through social processes and thus could have developed differently, and ‘critical’ in this context means to problematize the current state of affairs in society at large and in relation to particular cases’ (Huault et al., 2017: 6). This assumption leads performative CMS to focus on action. It is about interventionism to transform organizational practice through critical theory (Reedy & King, 2019: 565 in particular) but the type and scope of interventionism remain open for debate. For instance, proponents of progressive performativity suggested that ‘[t]he term ‘progressive’ connotes the idea of moving forward by actively working towards the incremental, rather than radical transformation of unfavourable social conditions’ (Wickert & Schaefer, 2015: 115–116). For others, performative CMS entail the risk of a possible ‘dilution of radical intent’ which led some to argue for a ‘middle ground’ with balance between opposition to managerialism and accommodation with managerialism (Parker & Parker, 2017: 1366). However, performative CMS agree on the need to intervene in the organizational world to improve it: ‘embodying an academic praxis that is progressive, intersectional, critical and concretely engaged in the service of social, economic and epistemic justice’ (Contu, 2019: 1).

In short, it is not unreasonable to argue that performative CMS are mostly progressive and about ‘normative contestation’ (Elzen, Geels, Leeuwis, & Van Mierlo, 2011). However, while *what* performative CMS want to accomplish is quite clear, the question of *how* this can be accomplished remains problematic.

### **1.2. THE LIMITED ROLE OF INNOVATION IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PERFORMATIVE CMS**

Five ‘tactics’ initially accompanied the concept of critical performativity, for those who wanted to ‘pursue’ performative CMS: affirming ambiguous and mixed metaphors found in organizational discourse, working with mysteries, applied communicative action, exploration of heterotopias, and engaging micro-emancipations (Spicer et al., 2009: 545–546). This insisted from the start on the need to *implement* the concept. Some have tried to do so but it often proves to be a challenge. For instance, trying to be a ‘critical manager’ is far from easy (King & Learmonth, 2015: 539), a ‘constant struggle’ (2015: 353) between aspirations and pressure to use managerial methods. Performing emancipation is complex because some specific forms of emancipations can ‘contradict the normative ideals of critical researchers’ (Leca et al., 2014: 703). Promoting a democratic organization can lead to a democratic rejection of democracy (King & Land, 2018). ‘[C]ritical performativity can be put to productive work to better understand the social world and how to engage with it in progressive ways’ (Huault et al., 2017: 6). Yet, how to successfully implement it remains unclear. Working with existing organizational processes is a possible solution.

The idea that there may be interesting existing alternatives *within* the organizational world is in fact almost foundational in performative CMS. Hartmann noted that usual CMS ‘hardly enable a potential-focused engagement with progressive mainstream practices’ (Hartmann, 2014: 619). He went on (2014: 626; emphasis added) to consider the case of ‘user innovation’ and noted that:

‘Relative to the standards of CMS, user innovation research offers a form of critique that is obviously subdued and falls short of complying with the institutionalized model of CMS research practice. Indeed, innovation researchers rarely use the term critique, nor do they apply the usual perspective of CMS [...]. What is instructive about user innovation theory is that despite its ‘non-critical’ and (for CMS) non-canonical form, it provides an affirmative basis for articulating critique and studying progressive alternatives to mainstream organizations and management. While remaining recognizable to an audience in management practice and the business school mainstream, it de-naturalizes the necessity of management and appeals to the heterotopian, or even utopian, imagination.’

However, *innovation* as so far played a limited role in performative CMS. Some have analysed processes that they relate to ‘social innovation’ (Esper et al., 2017: 677). Another article has considered artists and has mentioned how they ‘are often at the edge of innovation in terms of lifestyle, resistance to norms and creation of meaning’ (Reinhold, 2017: 74). Beyond these seminal insights, much room is left for work directed specifically on the innovative dimension. A last particularly notable exception is a study on Ghoshal’s approaches that argues (Edwards, 2017: 739; emphasis added):

‘If, then, C[ritical] P[erformativity] is interested in micro-emancipation, two points follow. First, it is necessary to think in terms of people’s interests in this goal, and realism offers a means to do so. Second, efficiency, effectiveness and innovation are not necessarily to be rejected. [...] Efficiency, innovation and economic development are, to a degree, in the interests of all parties.’

This suggests that innovation may not ‘fully conflict’ with performative CMS. Indeed, innovation may be challenging (Godin & Vinck, 2017; Liu & Pechenkina, 2019) but it also offers countless benefits. For instance, introducing innovative arts-based (e.g. Purg & Sutherland, 2017) or psychology-based (Petriglieri, Wood, & Petriglieri, 2011) teaching in business education without a doubt enriches how people learn business. Developing innovative forms of organizations and management can provide organizations with durability and ‘delive[r] comparatively secure employment, good working conditions and generous fringe benefits to [permanent staff]’ (Paranque & Willmott, 2014: 628). Overall, we can identify wide ‘implications of innovation in the face of globalisation and environmental challenges’ (Baregheh et al., 2009: 1324).

While defining innovation is beyond the scope of my article, exploring whether and how innovation can play a role in performative CMS requires the introduction of a definition. Innovation has been largely defined in very different ways, and some have built on 60 definitions from literatures related to organizations (i.e. business and management; economics; organizations studies; innovation and entrepreneurship; technology, science and engineering; knowledge management; marketing) (Baregheh et al., 2009: 1326) to reach a ‘multidisciplinary definition of innovation’ (2009: 1334):

‘Innovation is the multi-stage process whereby organizations transform ideas into new/improved products, service or processes, in order to advance, compete and differentiate themselves successfully in their marketplace.’

This synthetic definition illustrates both the *potential usefulness* of innovation for performative CMS (e.g. improve, advance, organizations) and the *potential issues* for their tenants (e.g. compete, marketplace). It may also help us analyse *why* performative CMS – which still struggle with the implementation of the concept – have so far showed limited interest in innovation. There may be two different complementary reasons.

### **1.3. MAINSTREAM-ASSOCIATED INNOVATION AND REINTEGRATION PROCESSES**

The tendency to advocate for innovation is quite recent. Innovation has mostly been put forward over the last 200 years to eventually become a very central concept of our contemporary lives thanks to its many benefits for society and organizations: innovation has ‘acquired a positive connotation because of its instrumental function in the political, social and material progress of societies’ (Godin & Vinck, 2017: 4). It has been noted that ‘[t]he significance of innovation is not restricted to business organizations’, with a ‘widespread and ongoing acknowledgement of the importance of innovation’ (Baregheh et al., 2009: 1324). Yet some argue for the existence of a rather significant ‘pro-innovation bias’ (see Godin & Vinck, 2017: 1). Therefore, innovation has become mainstream and is rather significantly associated to the business world. Spontaneously, innovation does not really seem to qualify as the ideal candidate for the expectations of performative CMS. Both *what* innovation represents and *what it entails* may be subject to caution among critical scholars. First, the relatively rare *critical studies of innovation* suggest that it could be an ‘ideology’ which is in addition very connected to the mainstream and to the business world – as such, it tends to leave out parts of the phenomenon, which are yet important, such as resistance, discontinuance, disinnovation or failures (Godin & Vinck, 2017: 4–5). Not all innovations are ‘mainstream’ – for instance, entrepreneurs can have an almost subversive intention (Bureau, 2013) – but this remains the general tendency. Second, a few studies document pitfalls that result from innovations. For instance, some have described how ‘innovation discourses and processes can be a vehicle for violence in organizations’ as innovations become a form of symbolic capital likely to create struggles of control and compliance among the people involved and ‘shielded from critical interrogation’ (Liu & Pechenkina, 2019: 178). Even innovations that offer progressive initiatives, such as using literary works in business education, can lead to unexpected challenges because people’s different backgrounds are not all ideal to deal with it (Sliwa, Sørensen, & Cairns, 2013). Thus, the current vision of innovation can (at least partly) conflict with key assumptions of performative CMS. Performative critical scholars who argue against any accommodation with the business world may consider that working with innovation is not compatible with their

movement. This may be a first explanation for the relative tendency to not put innovation forward in performative CMS.

In addition to these conflicting perspectives, the capitalistic world that makes constant innovation a necessity tends to ‘reintegrate’ any practice that has potential, which inevitably leads to temper the critique (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2011; Chiapello, 1998). This tendency of business to reintegrate the ‘critique’ – for instance with business ethics – is sometimes depicted as a problem (Zanoni et al., 2017: 577) and sometimes as an opportunity (Edwards, 2017). Reports of possibly ‘innovative’ approaches that tend to lose part of their critical dimension exist in the literature on critical performativity (e.g. King & Land, 2018; King & Learmonth, 2015; Leca et al., 2014; Paranque & Willmott, 2014). It is reasonable to assume that any innovation that would be critical – i.e. not strongly aligned with mainstream objectives – is at least partly reintegrated by the mainstream, not necessarily with an intention but because the resulting ‘proximity’ tends to spontaneously reduce the capacity to critique (e.g., for the critique of management by artists: Chiapello, 1998).

These two explanations – i.e. associating innovation with the mainstream and critically-oriented innovation being reintegrated by the mainstream – are probably not the only possible explanations, but they provide a credible initial understanding of *why* innovation seems to be rather absent in performative CMS. In the next part of my article, I search for the type of innovation that would best suit performative CMS. This is about identifying (or developing) what I refer to as *critical innovation*.

## **2. SEARCHING FOR CRITICAL INNOVATION**

The search for innovation that could contribute to performative CMS entails two questions: *what* would it be and *how* could we find it?

### **2.1. DEFINING ‘CRITICAL INNOVATION’ FOR PERFORMATIVE CMS**

The first question is thus: what is ‘critical innovation’? To answer it, I use two complementary techniques. I build on studies of innovation that have documented elements that resonate with performative CMS as well as on the two possible explanations of the absence of innovation in performative CMS in order to take these into account. In short, the main answer could be that *critical innovation is innovation that is compatible with performative CMS*.

Many innovative practices can integrate aspects that resonate with performative CMS. For instance, the John Lewis Partnership offers an innovation in terms of company ownership and

governance with many elements aligned with critical questions, but the extent to which it is critical-compatible remains open for question (Paranque & Willmott, 2014: 618):

‘JLP scores comparatively highly on the cooperative principles of ‘member economic participation’ (e.g. through bonuses and benefits) and ‘autonomy and independence’ (JLP operates independently of external shareholders). The JLP Constitution confers considerable formal powers on Partners [i.e. permanent staff] and protects them from the control of JLP assets by distant investors. But its Constitution also assumes, or at least leaves unquestioned, the legitimacy and continuation of capitalism as a politico-economic system.’

Other rather innovative organizations or projects generate similar questions (see King, 2015; King & Learmonth, 2015; Parker & Parker, 2017). They are considered worthy of scrutiny among performative CMS because they integrate innovative *components* that are understood as critical-compatible. These components are not necessarily specific to critical innovation in so much as many ‘usual’ innovations – or at least not ‘fully critical’ innovations – may integrate part, to all, of them. Thus, we could approach critical innovations by considering a series of components that offer critical compatibility (in performative CMS terms).

Each component is a *dimension* with a certain *feature*. Dimensions refer to the different aspects of innovation, whatever the ‘type’ of innovation (e.g. critical or technological innovation). For instance, based on the definition of innovation (see Baregheh et al., 2009), we can argue that ‘*focus*’, in the sense of who the innovation is useful for, is a key dimension of any type of innovation. A feature refers to the *distinctive* form of a certain dimension for a certain type of innovation. For example, a focus on ‘*society*’ may be a distinctive feature of *critical* innovation. I in no case suggest that my paper covers all ‘dimensions’ of innovation. In this paper, I only consider dimensions for which my theoretical analysis orients towards a feature that is interesting for critical innovation. Two sets of components can be identified. Each is related to one of the two possible explanations of the relative absence of innovation in performative CMS. The first set of components derives from the rather strong association of innovation with the mainstream and the business world. Three dimensions can be suggested: *focus*, *agenda* and *emergence*. First, the *focus* of critical innovation may be an important dimension. Most innovations would tend to feature a ‘business’ focus (Godin & Vinck, 2017) or a ‘market’ focus (Baregheh et al., 2009) but we can also identify innovative endeavours that have a wider focus (e.g. the John Lewis Partnership). Critical innovation may feature society and not only business as their focus: it is not about ignoring business as a stakeholder of innovation, but about trying to find innovations that can contribute to *more* than business. Second, the *agenda* matters a lot.

The above analysis points at the rather progressive orientation of performative CMS. Not all innovations feature a progressive agenda, but nothing prevents an innovative endeavour from being progressive or transformative in spirit (e.g. sustainable consumption; see Leitner, 2017: 212–213). The synthetic definition of innovation that I used above includes ‘new’, ‘improve’ and ‘advance’ (Baregheh et al., 2009: 1334) that could very well be synonymous of ‘progressive’. Third, critical innovations could probably *emerge* not only from a global pressure to innovate (e.g. Godin & Vinck, 2017; which has practical limitations: Liu & Pechenkina, 2019) but from the unexpected, that is innovative practices that emerged spontaneously and may be deserving of attention.

The second set of components results from the tendency of the business world to ‘integrate’ newness but ‘reintegrate’ any associated critique (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2011; Chiapello, 1998). Four dimensions can be suggested: *integration*, *relation to the critique*, *normative objective* and *logic*. First, *integration* is a key dimension because innovations are understood as requiring people that are interested in them if they are to go beyond the idea stage; and because innovation may belong to the realm of ‘reintegration’ processes, a relatively connected dimension would be the *relation to the critique*. Critical innovations may need to both be integrated (in order to meet those who are interested in them) and avoid having its critique be too reintegrated (in order to remain critical). In other words, the features of critical innovation for these two dimensions would be being *integrable* and critique-tolerant. Many alternative forms of organization and management offer both as they actively belong to the organizational-societal world yet with rather unusual forms (e.g. Esper et al., 2017; Leca et al., 2014; Parker & Parker, 2017). Third, for similar reasons, it is not unreasonable to suggest that critical innovation would carry a specific *normative objective*. This may not reach ‘normative contestation’ (that usually emerges from the actions of outsiders) (Elzen et al., 2011), but a critical innovation may offer *some* challenge to the mainstream; however to a degree that remains acceptable in the mainstream world. Fourth, because most attempts at being ‘fully critical’ seem to fail and because just ‘imposing’ another vision may be contradictory to the spirit of performative CMS (e.g. King & Land, 2018; King & Learmonth, 2015), critical innovation may be seen as building more on a process-oriented *logic* than on a result-oriented logic. Critical innovation would not offer norms to be adopted, but engage in a ‘normalization process’ (May & Finch, 2009). This is largely compatible with the definition of innovation as a ‘multi-stage process whereby organizations transform ideas’ (Baregheh et al., 2009: 1334),

and it is about working with the integration without being fully reintegrated. Table 1 (page 11) summarizes my analysis.

**Table 1. Some likely components of ‘critical innovation’ in face of its challenges**

<i>Challenges</i>	<b>Components of critical innovation</b>	
	<i>Dimension</i>	<b>Feature</b>
Strong association between innovation and the mainstream or the business world	<i>focus</i>	society
	<i>agenda</i>	progressive
	<i>emergence</i>	unexpected
Tendency of the business world to integrate newness and reintegrate its associated critique	<i>integration</i>	integrable
	<i>relation to the critique</i>	critique-tolerant
	<i>normative objective</i>	challenging
	<i>logic</i>	normalization process

This seems to outline a critical-compatible type of innovation, with two obvious limitations: not all components may be relevant and other important ones may not have been included in this mostly exploratory theoretical analysis. This concept has strong implications for the literature on performative CMS.

## **2.2. ON THE POTENTIAL OF CRITICAL INNOVATION FOR PERFORMATIVE CMS**

The authors behind critical performativity stated that ‘the tactics [they] offer are by no means exhaustive’ (Spicer et al., 2009: 545). Critical innovation could very well be part of the tactics of critical performativity and help to implement it. The introduction of the concept of critical innovation is the main contribution of my article. Critical innovation provides a new possible idea for the literature on performative CMS that has been searching for ways to implement them (Huault et al., 2017; Spicer et al., 2016). Because critical innovation is about being critically *integrable* without being reintegrated, it resonates with all the original arguments in favour of critical performativity using an affirmative stance, with an ethic of care, pragmatism, to engage with potentialities in a normative way (Spicer et al., 2009: 546). It also resonates a lot with prior arguments on the need to engage with *existing* organizational practices that satisfy some, or ideally all, of these criteria (Hartmann, 2014) and on the usefulness of approaches that can help to do so (Edwards, 2017). The potential of critical innovation may reside in a relatively high acceptability in the business world and in the movement of performative CMS, because this concept can offer a meaningful approach in both.

Critical innovation is a concept that does not have to rely on *language* to bring about change (even though it is reasonable to assume that language would play a role in a process of critical

innovation). Some suggested that ‘there are key differences between critical performativity and performativity in general’ and noted the usefulness of both (Huault et al., 2017: 6). However, a significant part of the theoretical debate on critical performativity has so far given much room to language-related questions and to conceptual foundations (e.g. Cabantous et al., 2016; Learmonth et al., 2016; Schaefer & Wickert, 2016; Spicer et al., 2016; Wickert & Schaefer, 2015). While my paper belongs to this theoretical debate on performative CMS, it is about looking at potential newness and practices (which is related to the arguments of Edwards, 2017; and of Hartmann, 2014) that could *be* or that could *become* critical innovation. Finally, my article tries to build theoretically on previous results of empirical attempts at doing critical performativity (seen as an engagement with the organizational world to help it consider possible changes; notably: Esper et al., 2017; Huault et al., 2017; King, 2015; King & Land, 2018; King & Learmonth, 2015; Leca et al., 2014; Reedy & King, 2019; Reinhold, 2017) to offer a new concept that can try and put critical performativity into practice.

### **2.3. A RESEARCH AGENDA ON CRITICAL INNOVATION**

The main limitation of this article is its exclusively theoretical nature. My objective is to highlight the untapped potential of innovation for performative CMS, based on the relative absence of innovation in this critical literature. While a theory paper is ideal for this project, an obvious part of a research programme on critical innovation would be its systematic search. This endeavour can build on two complementary approaches that answer our second question: how can we find critical innovation?

First, empirical research would help to refine my theoretical proposition. A question is whether critical innovation already exists and simply needs to be documented, or whether it is a new concept that needs to be implemented (similarly to critical performativity at its start: Spicer et al., 2009). Some research contexts may be likely to offer pre-existing instances of critical innovation. Alternative forms of organizations and management come to mind, with existing evidence of practices that resonate with critical innovation: sustainable financial services firms potentially with ‘a space between being ‘for’ and being ‘against’ that question critical scholars (Parker & Parker, 2017: 1366), employee-owned successful organizations with an unusual governance ‘albeit flawed’ in practical critical terms (Paranque & Willmott, 2014: 606), or alternative projects that have a clear critically-compatible agenda but whose local implementation ‘contradict the normative ideals of critical researchers’ (Leca et al., 2014: 703). Entrepreneurship that challenges the status quo (Bureau, 2013) may also resonate with critical innovation. Another possible approach is to consider academic innovations such as teaching-

learning unusual approaches (e.g. Petriglieri et al., 2011) that sometimes have a rather critical spirit (e.g. Sliwa et al., 2013) even though not necessarily as part of performative CMS. All these examples have potential for the study of critical innovation, and they all share a characteristic: they exist whether the critical researcher is involved or not. We could also consider projects created *by* tenants of performative CMS. Some may exist (King, 2015; King & Learmonth, 2015) but others could also be created from scratch in order to try and implement critical innovation.

Second, this search would benefit from additional theoretical reflections. Although my article offers initial components and a general framing for critical innovation, it only introduces the concept. In the case of critical performativity, a rich theoretical debate has helped to define theoretical foundations and framing (Cabantous et al., 2016; Hartmann, 2014; Learmonth et al., 2016; Spicer et al., 2016), conditions for success or failure (Fleming & Banerjee, 2016), and theoretical questions that stem from empirical cases (see Huault et al., 2017). In the case of critical innovation, a similar approach can lead to identify foundational theoretical elements and possible assumptions.

Finally, it is worthwhile mentioning that although determining *what* critical innovation is, studying related *how* and *why* questions may offer interesting contributions as well. For instance, scholars could set out to implement an innovation that they define as critical and focus on the process of implementation. Other research could try to understand why scholars engage (or do not engage) in implementing critical-compatible innovations.

## **CONCLUSION**

With my article, I have argued that performative CMS and innovation are probably both about engaging with the world to change it for the best, but that there is surprisingly little mix between the two approaches. Both try to solve the many contemporary societal issues and challenges, albeit in different ways. Based on insights from previous research that indicates how difficult it is to implement performative CMS and on the suggestion that non-critical practices could have much potential, I have argued that innovation may offer much to performative CMS but that *critical* innovation may be required. I have thus tried to determine *how* we could reconcile the two, in part by offering an understanding of *why* innovation remains almost entirely absent in performative CMS. My suggestions are that the relatively strong association of innovation with the mainstream and the business world makes it difficult to accept for performative CMS, and that any actually critical innovation may tend to see its critique diluted because of ‘reintegration

processes' (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2011; Chiapello, 1998). In response, I have offered an exploratory definition of critical innovation as innovation that is compatible with performative CMS, and that has specific components. To facilitate the arguably tricky search for critical innovation, I have introduced several possible components of critical innovation based on key dimensions of innovative practices that would have specific features.

My main contribution is to shed light on what I believe is an untapped potential of innovation for performative CMS, at a time when we may need more new ideas than ever to address the many current social, economic or environmental challenges. Considering innovation as a potential source of alternative for performative CMS is about building on the suggestion that '[...] CMS does not have a monopoly on alternatives' (King, 2015: 263) and about considering how innovation could contribute to the world on a large scale (e.g. Godin & Vinck, 2017). It is about making connections between two domains whose agendas may very well partly converge for the best. I hope that my article will help the two progress and inspire future research for many.

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