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# Journal of Management Inquiry

## Can it? On Expanding Institutional Theory by Disarming Critique

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Keyword:	Institutional Theory, Organization Theory, Commitment
Abstract:	No abstract. This is an invited response to a piece authored by Jaco Lok that has been accepted for publication. Nelson Phillips has accepted this response and asked me to upload it.

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Manuscripts

Review

## Can it? On Expanding Institutional Theory by Disarming Critique

A long silence. Suddenly: a flash, a rumble, a deluge. Does the Lok downpour revive institutional theory or swamp it?

I am grateful to Professor Lok for his thoughtful, careful response to my intervention. (Actually, my debt is less to “Professor Lok” than to “Jaco” [trans. ‘he who supplants’], my erstwhile PhD student who I count as a friend – up until now, at least!). I immediately apologize for this indiscrete deviation from the scholarly mystique of dispassionate impersonality. In a gesture of entente, requiring the loose talk of critical analysis to be restrained by the buttoned-up norms of institutional theory, I will avoid any further improper, overly transparent declarations.

In many ways, Professor Lok’s ‘Why (And How) Institutional Theory Can Be Critical’ expresses my core argument more cogently and forcefully than I did. He also gently chides me for claiming and perpetuating the distinctive, emancipatory monopoly of critical analysis that he associates with its ‘continued marginalization’ (*all single quotes are taken from Lok, 2017 in press*). I

I am urged to ‘resist’ and ‘traverse’ the fantasy of ‘wholeness’ by contributing to ‘creat[ing] the conditions of possibility for a more productive symbiotic relationship between (small ‘c’) critical institutional theory and (big ‘C’) Critical [T]heory’. My initial response is to say that I eagerly await the development of this ‘symbiotic relationship’ as I strain to discern signs of such a mutation and,

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2  
3 relatedly, struggle to detect evidence of such 'productiveness' amongst  
4  
5 exponents of the (North American) Hydra-like variant of institutional theory (IT)  
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7 that is the focus of our exchange. In what follows, I offer a response to Professor  
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9 Lok's counter-proposition - that Institutional Theory (IT) *can* be critical. I  
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11 broadly follow the sequence of his essay but adopt a streamlined format, and  
12  
13 keeping references to a bare minimum, in order to make the most of the  
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15 available space.  
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21 1. *Grand Challenges*. Institutional theorists have indeed widened their range  
22  
23 of concerns to address "grand challenges" - such as income inequality and  
24  
25 poverty alleviation. However, many approaches, conservative as well as  
26  
27 radical, examine such "grand" issues. Attentiveness is not a persuasive  
28  
29 indicator of a commitment to critique and/or to facilitate a  
30  
31 transformation of relations of domination, oppression, exploitation, etc.  
32  
33 Recent interest in "grand challenges" by exponents of IT might be more  
34  
35 plausibly attributed to other concerns - such as a desire to make IT less  
36  
37 irrelevant and/or (even) more all-conquering.  
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- 40  
41 2. *Conservative Pedigree*. In common with critical forms of analysis (e.g.  
42  
43 radical Weberian, neo-Marxist, post-structuralist, etc.), IT has diverse  
44  
45 intellectual debts. That said, it is difficult, to identify any roots of IT that  
46  
47 are nourished by anything other than a conservative or liberal intellectual  
48  
49 tradition. To re-cycle Professor Lok's well-chosen epithet, IT has a  
50  
51 '*conservative pedigree*' (my emphasis) that, I suggest, frustrates or  
52  
53 compromises any aspiration by well-intentioned efforts to make IT  
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55 critical. To argue that the 'onto-epistemological assumptions [of IT] are  
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3 not necessarily an impediment' to this venture, or that 'a primary interest  
4  
5 in the operation and effects of power itself is not a necessary  
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7 precondition' of IT becoming critical, is to underestimate the most  
8  
9 daunting obstacle to such a development: the ethico-political commitment  
10  
11 inscribed within IT's 'conservative pedigree'. Urging a leopard to change  
12  
13 its spots is unlikely to yield the desired mutation.  
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17 3. *Reflection.* The tradition of IT places limited value upon reflection,  
18  
19 including reflection upon its own development and limits. IT may show  
20  
21 how 'institutional processes constrain and naturalize the ways in which  
22  
23 people come to know themselves in relation to organizational or societal  
24  
25 practices'. But exponents of IT rarely turn this attention on their own  
26  
27 practices. Consequently, there is little recognition of how, by sparing IT  
28  
29 from such critique, its self-satisfaction and pervasiveness operates to  
30  
31 maintain the established order. This conservative effect is both  
32  
33 underpinned and justified, as Professor Lok notes, by a subscription -  
34  
35 whether naive or cynical - to 'a neo-positivist myth of impartial, detached,  
36  
37 politically neutral science' - a myth that IT 'uncritically reproduces in its  
38  
39 journals of choice'. Perpetuating this myth may bestow some spurious,  
40  
41 legitimacy upon IT. But it inhibits, if it does not entirely 'preclude',  
42  
43  
44 'institutional theorists from becoming more critical in their work'.  
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49 4. *From Denaturalization to Domination.* Denaturalization, which recalls the  
50  
51 socially constructed nature of taken-for-granted realities, is a necessary  
52  
53 yet insufficient condition of critical engagement. Where IT facilitates  
54  
55 denaturalization, it may potentially enable 'people in society [to] realize  
56  
57 how they can unwittingly contribute to their own domination and  
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3 oppression'. However, *this* (radical) interpretation of the significance of  
4  
5 widely institutionalized (common)sense-making practices requires an  
6  
7 additional element: the engagement of an alternative, critical form of  
8  
9 analysis. As Professor Lok acknowledges, the notion of "domination" or  
10  
11 "oppression" is largely absent from the prospectus and vocabulary of IT,  
12  
13 an absence that is not, I wager, accidental.  
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17 5. *Scientific Objectivity and Neutrality*. IT's investment in the neo-positivist  
18  
19 myth of impartiality and detachment does not make it 'well equipped' to  
20  
21 foster critical self-reflection on the scientific ceremonial of its  
22  
23 scholarship (ironically enough, given the focus on ceremony in a seminal  
24  
25 text of IT). On occasion, there may be some 'acknowledgement of the role  
26  
27 of the researchers in the interpretation of the data, and the resulting  
28  
29 historical, partial, and/or fallible nature of qualitative analysis'. But it  
30  
31 seems to make little difference to how IT research is undertaken and  
32  
33 presented. Where do we find the implications of the recognition of  
34  
35 partiality or fallibility drawn out with regard to their ethico-political  
36  
37 significance? There is, it seems, great resistance to confronting how 'the  
38  
39 authority...and the related academic status [of IT] appear to rest primarily  
40  
41 on the legitimacy of the myth of scientific objectivity and neutrality'. A  
42  
43 plausible reason for such resistance is the risk of critical reflection  
44  
45 'nullifying the positive social impact institutional theorists increasingly  
46  
47 desire to make though their work, because it could undermine its  
48  
49 authority in, for example, the public policy realm by exposing how  
50  
51 institutional theory is itself politically constructed'. Here Professor Lok  
52  
53 valuably debunks IT's 'neutrality' or, better, points to how its ostensible  
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3 'objectivity' is '*politically constructed*' (emphasis added) but he stops  
4  
5 short of explicating the features and implications of IT's political  
6  
7 construction. Instead, he seems to retreat into the IT closet from where he  
8  
9 entertains the fantasy of 'facilitate[ing] effective emancipatory  
10  
11 interventions in society based on the authority and legitimacy [the]  
12  
13 dominance [of IT] lends' to such 'emancipatory interventions'. What  
14  
15 conceivable kind of 'emancipatory intervention' can derive legitimacy  
16  
17 from an association with IT?  
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21 6. *Smoke and Mirrors*. It is argued that the Goffmanesque presentation of the  
22  
23 IT-self as 'value free' and 'politically neutral' is a 'stylistic choice' that does  
24  
25 not convey the personal preferences or political views of IT exponents  
26  
27 but, rather, reflects the 'dominance of the top American journals'.  
28  
29 Somehow, there is a forgetting of how the sadomasochistic discipline  
30  
31 imposed by 'top journals' is self-inflicted and enforced through  
32  
33 labyrinthine processes of *peer* review. Since it is the practitioners of IT  
34  
35 that evaluate and regulate each other's work, the enemy of transparency  
36  
37 about values and politics lies within. More specifically, disingenuousness  
38  
39 is embedded in 'institutionalized academic careerism...[that] is  
40  
41 responsible for the systemic effect of crowding out, and thus rendering  
42  
43 mute, alternative approaches as soon as any particular theoretical  
44  
45 approach becomes dominant'. By jumping onto the capacious IT  
46  
47 bandwagon, a comfortable career protected from any de-stabilizing  
48  
49 contact with critical analysis.  
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55 7. *A Question of Commitment*. My cursory and occasionally waspish  
56  
57 responses (1-6) to Professor Lok's essay may perhaps be read as a  
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3 confirmation of the desire 'to affirm the superiority of...more "genuine"  
4 and/or "radical" and/or "pure" critical commitments over those of  
5 institutional theorists'. I accept that my initial provocation (Willmott,  
6 2015) and my responses here are intended to highlight the difficulty, and  
7 indeed the improbability, of IT becoming critical. The scare quotes placed  
8 by Professor Lok around the terms "genuine" and "pure" in relation to  
9 'critical commitments' indicate, plausible enough, that all forms of  
10 theorizing are an impure amalgam (see point 2 above); and also that they  
11 invariably affirm their "other"(s), even as the "other" is found wanting. In  
12 the case of critical analysis, "superiority" (the elevation of this/self over  
13 that/other) is, I suggest, associated with the depth of commitment to  
14 being critically self-reflective - such that critical analysis becomes "other"  
15 to itself, albeit in an incomplete and imperfect form. As Professor Lok  
16 notes, being 'open' to the 'other(s)' requires the harboring of sufficient  
17 doubt and humility about one's own standpoint - by, for example, giving  
18 'the benefit of the doubt' to others' espoused interest in facilitating  
19 emancipatory change. The difficulty, however, resides less in the  
20 intention, or interest, of the scholar, or even in the receptivity of "the  
21 target audience". Instead, at issue is the fitness of the chosen analytical  
22 vehicle for undertaking critique and enabling emancipatory change. IT  
23 can apparently be made "critical" simply by equating an attentiveness to  
24 "grand challenges" with being critical. That is to evade what, for me, is the  
25 central question which is: how can the (conservative) pedigree of IT make  
26 it 'well equipped' to *become* critical in a form that is congruent with the  
27 ethico-political commitment of critical analysis to emancipatory change.  
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3 8. *Critical v. critical approaches*. Professor Lok relies heavily upon a  
4  
5 distinction between Critical and critical approaches. Critical approaches  
6  
7 are held to refer to ‘the post-Marxist tradition including post-  
8  
9 structuralism’ whereas critical approaches are ‘aimed, possibly implicitly,  
10  
11 at exposing, disrupting, or changing institutional arrangements in society  
12  
13 for the betterment of humanity by engaging with issues of domination,  
14  
15 oppression and/or inequality without necessarily following in the Critical  
16  
17 tradition’. I have a number of difficulties with this distinction. First, I  
18  
19 disagree with Professor Lok that the C/c distinction is ‘similar’ to the one  
20  
21 that I deploy between traditional and critical theory. I distinguish critical  
22  
23 theory from traditional theory by its rejection of the assumption of  
24  
25 separation between the subjects and objects of research and the  
26  
27 subscription of traditional theory to “value free” science. Second, and  
28  
29 relatedly, the C/c distinction is confusing as a common and perhaps  
30  
31 defining thread of diverse forms of critical analysis is a commitment to  
32  
33 the generation of scientific knowledge that is guided by an emancipatory  
34  
35 intent, irrespective of whether it is “post-Marxist”, “post-structuralist” or  
36  
37 whatever. Finally, and as a prickly aside, I note that Professor Lok  
38  
39 ascribes the fantasy of ‘wholeness’, or fullness, to what I have termed  
40  
41 critical analysis, but he employs the unitary and totalizing notion of  
42  
43 ‘Critical’ to characterize such analysis.  
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50 9. “*Radical Constructivism*”. I question the ascription of a ‘radically  
51  
52 constructivist epistemology’ to my position (and, perhaps, to Critical  
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54 theory). I do not subscribe to the understanding that ‘[W]hat we call  
55  
56 reality(...) is wholly our construct’. Yes, I am doubtful that our knowledge  
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3 is likely to 'reflect or represent what philosophers would call an  
4  
5 "objective" reality ' because I believe all knowledge to be conditioned by,  
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7 as well as constitutive of, the (particular and contested) interpretive  
8  
9 frames deployed by communities of researchers when generating and  
10  
11 evaluating their propositions, including their claims about ontology.  
12  
13 However, that does not mean, or imply, that reality is equivalent, or  
14  
15 reducible, to our accounts of it. To the contrary, the partiality of our  
16  
17 accounts is recurrently dis-closed by the "constitutive lack" – the Real, in  
18  
19 Lacanian terms - that unsettles or "queers" claims to objectivity – notably,  
20  
21 by the (often unwelcome) recognition that scientific knowledge is, as  
22  
23 Professor Lok puts it, 'politically constructed'. I therefor find it  
24  
25 implausible to ascribe to me the view that "'Reality" may be real enough,  
26  
27 but this is of little relevance to Critical analysis; the nature and effects of  
28  
29 our knowledge construction about "it" is what is important'. Nor,  
30  
31 relatedly, do I consider analyses based upon a realist ontology or, for that  
32  
33 matter, the uses of quantitative methods in research, to be necessarily  
34  
35 "uncritical" or conservative. As noted above (Point 2), I define critical  
36  
37 analysis by reference to its emancipatory interest and effects, and not by  
38  
39 its ontological or epistemological assumptions, whilst also recognizing  
40  
41 that the existence of this interest is contested, and that its enactment can  
42  
43 have contradictory consequences. I do believe, nonetheless, that ethico-  
44  
45 political commitments are key – because it is they, rather than Reality or  
46  
47 Method, that inform and justify such assumptions about reality and  
48  
49 knowledge. Critical analysis is self-consciously political in the sense that  
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51 *inter alia* it advances and/or critiques the performative nature and effects  
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3 of knowledge, including IT and critical analysis, in reporting and  
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5 reproducing, or challenging and transforming, the status quo. Such critical  
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7 analysis is exemplified by, but not limited to, the disruptive and  
8  
9 transformative effects of, say, radical feminist thinking/activism.  
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14 In conclusion, I fully concur with Professor Lok that my intervention/  
15  
16 provocation/ polemic has 'fallen on deaf ears', are at least has not prompted any  
17  
18 noticeable response prior to Professor Lok's extended commentary – perhaps  
19  
20 because, politically, it is considered astute to deprive critical analysis of the  
21  
22 "oxygene of publicity". Muteness is also an adroit form of passive-aggressive  
23  
24 non-affirmation. Lack of engagement with the tradition of critical/emancipatory  
25  
26 scholarship is perhaps the most eloquent indicator of disinterest in making IT  
27  
28 critical, at least in a form that is recognizable as critical analysis. More charitably,  
29  
30 the reticence to speak up may be symptomatic of the difficulty of realizing a  
31  
32 latent, closeted interest by "coming out" as critical.  
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39 So, on a more optimistic note, perhaps my intervention is a "slow burn", with  
40  
41 Professor Lok's response facilitating some sustained reflection on the purpose of  
42  
43 IT, fostering disenchantment with perpetuating a conservative form of analysis,  
44  
45 and anticipating an embrace of emancipatory, radical change-oriented  
46  
47 scholarship. Well, perhaps.  
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For Peer Review

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