December 1999

Towards a Critical Framework for IS Research

Stephen Probert
Cranfield University, UK

Follow this and additional works at: http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis1999

Recommended Citation
http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis1999/58
Towards a Critical Framework for IS Research

Stephen K. Probert, Cranfield University, U.K., s.k.probert@rmcs.cranfield.ac.uk

Abstract

Both positivist and interpretive approaches are, in some ways, relevant to aspects of IS research, owing to the nature of the IS discipline as being concerned with both the social and technical aspects of organisations and computer systems. However, the approaches are generally seen as being based on different research “paradigms”, and are therefore mutually exclusive (Burrell and Morgan, 1979, Hirschheim, et al., 1995); whereas the discipline of IS studies (or, arguably, should study) the intertwining nature of social and technical actualities and possibilities. Research described herein shows how aspects of Adorno’s critical theory may be utilised to develop a richer interpretation of IS practice and research.

Adorno’s approach

Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969) grappled with the issue of developing research approaches for situations in which social and technical aspects are intertwined. Below are listed, cryptically, some reasons why the work of Adorno is methodologically relevant to IS research: however, the approaches are generally seen as being based on different research “paradigms”, and are therefore mutually exclusive (Burrell and Morgan, 1979, Hirschheim, et al., 1995); whereas the discipline of IS studies (or, arguably, should study) the intertwining nature of social and technical actualities and possibilities. Research described herein shows how aspects of Adorno’s critical theory may be utilised to develop a richer interpretation of IS practice and research.

1. Adorno has recently been described as, “[T]he most brilliant and versatile member of the Frankfurt School.” (Inwood, 1995, p.7). Habermas, a “second generation” member, has attracted quite a few followers in information systems (e.g. Lyytinen and Klein, 1985). If respectable information systems work can be based on the work of Habermas then a fortiori it can be based on the work of Adorno.

2. Adorno was concerned with power, social structures, cultural issues, etc. These issues are generally accepted as being of importance for IS research. However, his views on these matters were intertwined with considerations on epistemology, ontology, existentialism, and various other aspects of philosophy in a holistic manner.

3. Adorno was also concerned with (and developed theories about) the role of technology in modern societies. In fact, a great deal of Adorno’s whole philosophical approach is based on his arguments about the role of technology in modern societies, however these arguments are subtly different from the more typical or standard arguments about the role of technology in society.

However, it should not be thought that Adorno’s ideas can be straightforwardly employed to develop IS research methods; numerous dangers would lie in store for a researcher taking such a simplistic approach, as Crook has argued, “The nature and extent of Adorno’s claim to attention must always be contingent on the degree to which his work can illuminate contemporary developments in culture, polity and society... an assessment must identify core themes in Adorno’s analysis which continue to merit attention and to warrant further development.” (Crook, 1994, p. 18). Work has been developed by the author along these lines, and other researchers’ works are relevant to the work outlined herein, as some important contemporary researchers have emerged embodying (various degrees of) the “Adornean” tradition. Sloterdijk (1987) has written about the cynical condition (which in some ways links the concerns of Foucault to those of Adorno). Jameson (1990) has argued that Adorno’s work is as relevant now as it ever was (if not more so). Indeed, Jay (1996) argues that, given the current enthusiasm for “postmodernism”, “Adorno’s anticipatory refusal of postmodernism … is derived from his stubborn reluctance to give up on the questions of social justice and truth … or forego any hope for finding a political means of finding them,” (Jay, 1996, p. xix). As IS is essentially a practical discipline, which (nevertheless) has far-reaching implications for wider society, it would seem at best to be somewhat irresponsible for IS academics to abandon questions of social justice and truth.

Economic realities

As it is not appropriate to attempt to provide a synopsis of Adorno’s key ideas here (but Jay, 1984, has provided a general introduction); merely the essence of Adorno’s epistemic considerations will be outlined below. Adorno considered (as, no doubt, do IS professionals) that the world of economic activity is very real. As Yeates, et al. argue, “Somebody pays for what analysts and designers deliver. New systems have to be justified by the benefits that they deliver. It is easy to use terms like “the users” and “user management” … and forget that they are subtitles for “the customer”.” (Yeates, et al., 1994, p. 2). The economic activities which generate systems development projects have a key role in determining the analysts’ foci of attention in the projects that they are involved with; in that what is considered to be relevant and worth “analysing” is partly determined by the economic realities inherent in a given situation. The gist of (one important aspect of) Adorno’s epistemic approach can be summed up in this quotation, “While our images of perceived reality may very well be Gestalten [Weltanschaunngen - in Soft Systems Methodology jargon], the world in which we live is not; it is constituted differently than out of mere images of perception.” (Adorno, 1977, p. 126). Whilst some aspects
of the economic facets of a situation will yield to a positivistic research approach being taken, and whilst some aspects of the actual responses made by the users and managers (etc.) will yield to an interpretive approach, the two halves will not make a whole. The economic aspects and the subjective responses are intertwined so intimately that a unified approach to research is required. The same is true of the technological and “professional” aspects of most potential sites for IS research.

Mark Poster summarises the “economic/epistemic” problem for IS research thus, “Since computers are useful objects to industry and government, computer “scientists” are especially sensitive to the question of the epistemological purity of their discipline. Louis Fein, writing to the Communications of the Association for Computing Machinery, insistently articulates his distress with the ambiguous status of his field: ‘like other sciences, our science should maintain its sole abstract purpose of advancing truth and knowledge. It is not clear to me that an organisation can play simultaneously the role of a profession, of an industry, and of a science.’” (Poster, 1990, p. 147). Although Poster is actually discussing Computer Science I would argue that these remarks also apply to IS.

But IS encompasses all three elements (a profession, an industry, and a sort of pseudo-science), and IS practice will always be a matter of “trading-off” between these tensions. Furthermore, there is another crucially relevant factor: the IS professionals themselves. Whilst it is true that IS professionals can be considered to be role-occupants, they are individual people also, as “[O]ne tends to mask one’s own genuine self with different masks (personae) and to play various roles and personalities until the mask and one’s self become inseparable... But in the crucial moments that require definite and significant decisions and action, we are more capable of discerning who we genuinely are. There is no one but ourselves to condemn or appreciate our behaviour.” (Golomb, 1995, pp. 24-25). Although it should be noted that Adorno (1973) expressed strong doubts about the (critical) utility of the notion of authenticity, it has been found to be useful in understanding the actions of (e.g.) educational professionals (Cooper, 1983). IS professionals (it is conjectured) do, indeed, sometimes encounter situations in which “there is no one but themselves to condemn or appreciate their behaviour”, i.e. situations which mobilise their own demands for personal authenticity. Therefore IS research needs a research method that can bring about a holistic understanding of all four of these aspects in a given situation, i.e.:

1. The demands of the IS profession (e.g. adherence to IS methodological precepts or ethical codes).

2. The (economic) demands of industry (e.g. the need to observe externally imposed quality methodologies, or to deliver computer systems “on time and within budget”).

3. The causal effects of the scientific aspirations (or, indeed, pretensions) of the computing industry (e.g. the legitimation of undesirable social consequences on technical grounds).

4. The values and attitudes that (authentic) IS professionals themselves bring (via their personal lives) to the practice of IS.

Put simply, what is needed are techniques for analysing the actual relationships that intertwine between the subjects undertaking IS development projects, and the objects in the study (see fig. 1 overleaf). Here, ‘objects’ should be understood as meaning all the various items (and impersonal “forces”) that need to be analyzed (or have an effect) in the organisation (the term is not used here in the sense that it is used by the advocates of “object orientation”).

It has long been recognised that the interventions (made by systems analysts) themselves alter “the current system” in some way or other. What is currently lacking are the critical means to frame our understandings of these situations; owing to the tendency to adhere to a “binary-opposition” view of IS research methodologies as being “positivistic” or “interpretivistic”. The problem with this “binary” view is that neither approach is adequate for critically analysing the actuality of IS practice, as experienced by IS professionals. The positivistic approaches do not give sufficient emphasis to the active role of the analyst-as-intervener, as the analyst is considered to be “detached” from personal concerns with the situation being analyzed. The interpretivistic IS research methods have their history rooted in the “phenomenological” epistemological stance (usually associated with Edmund Husserl, see Bernet et al., 1993, for details); in which the very appearance of being immersed in a conflict-ridden situation is often reduced to being purely a matter of the IS practitioner’s own internal perceptions – rather than being the result of the three other external influences in Figure 1 above, plus the IS practitioner’s own perception of the situation. Consequently a “way out” of this impasse is clearly required. Although we are (often) totally immersed in organisational situations, nevertheless we are all sometimes able to see problems with the actually existing set of arrangements (i.e. we are capable of critically analysing - and capable of transcending, in thought - the current set of arrangements).
Conclusion

The methodological shortcomings of the positivistic/interpretivistic dichotomy have been discussed, and work of Adorno has been introduced as providing a possible way forward for the endeavour of improving IS research methods. By generating a philosophically robust technique for developing critical analyses of current IS practices, some greater clarity and precision might be brought to our understanding of those practices, and consequently the possibilities for improving current IS practices would be better informed.

References


