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Processing The Body: A Comment on Cooper*

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abstract   This paper seeks to give a summary of Robert Cooper's process perspective by investigating two of his most significant articles: 'The Open Field' and 'Organization/Disorganization'. The paper, which was motivated by a more general attempt to bring the body into organization theory, ends by asking where the body is in Cooper's process perspective.

> As social scientists, we are probably less attentive than we should be to the wavering balance between structure and process in understanding human action. (Robert Cooper, 1976: 999)
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> [...] we map the world in terms of significant differences, selecting certain features and excluding others. (Robert Cooper, 1990: 169)

In philosophy, the greatest offence is to accuse one's colleague of not doing philosophy. In organization theory, the same rule does not seem to apply. Indeed, someone like Robert Cooper might feel more offended by attempts to label him an organization theorist than by people who refuse to accept his texts as works of organization theory. The fact of the matter is that Cooper, whose graduate training was in the borderline discipline of social psychology, much prefers to be seen as a social theorist, or even better, as a social philosopher.

In this paper, I dare not accuse Cooper of not doing philosophy, or social philosophy for that matter. But I shall, despite Cooper's dissatisfaction with the narrow research agenda of *mainstream* organization theory, treat his work as an exercise in organization theory. After all, it is in this discipline that Cooper finds the vast majority of his readership and

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it is to this discipline that his contribution has been most significant. Moreover, during the last few years organization theory and its related fields have experienced a growing interest in his work. In November 1997, Eric Lefebvre organized an international conference entitled 'Uncertainty, Knowledge and Skill' at the Limburg University Centre in Belgium dedicated to Cooper. The following year, Robert Chia (1998a, 1998b), a former student of Cooper's, edited a two-volume festschrift with articles written in his honour. Contributors to these volumes included, in addition to Chia himself, Jannis Kallinikos, John Law, Rolland Munro, Haridimos Tsoukas and Hugh Willmott. This rather impressive amount of already existing commentary on Cooper does not, however, mean that his work is drained as a topic of investigation. On the contrary, the celebratory feel of previous work suggests that a more critical engagement with his texts is long overdue, and it was this task that I, like the other papers in this edition of *ephemera* dealing with Cooper, initially attempted to embark upon. But given my own respect and admiration for his work, this has not been easy.

Somewhat ironically, the paper is a result of my own ongoing interest in issues of embodiment and my own attempt to bring the body into organization theory. Throughout my doctoral research of the past four years, I have tried to understand how different strands of the field did – or did not at all – deal with the problem of the body and the ability of bodies to disrupt the boundaries of organization. It was with this in mind that I started to investigate Cooper's process perspective and the concept of organization emerging out of it. More specifically, this led me to investigate two of Cooper's most significant articles: 'The Open Field', which was published in *Human Relations* in 1976, and 'Organization/Disorganization', which was first published in *Social Information* in 1986 and republished in Hassard and Pym (eds.) in 1990. Before proceeding, I should point out that my references to 'Organization/Disorganization' are to the 1990 edition, and I should warn the reader that this paper, which seeks to deal systematically with Cooper's argument in both 'The Open Field' and 'Organization/Disorganization', might read more like a summary than a fully fledged critique. Where the body is in Cooper's work is initially an open question to which I shall return in my concluding section.

The Open Field

Though inscribed in a highly gendered and male-centred language,[1] Cooper's paper 'The Open Field' is an unusually creative piece of work. Creativity is not, however, a guarantee for clarity and rigour, and Cooper's argument is, as we shall see, sometimes opaque and under-developed. Perhaps this is the inevitable result of five years of

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1   This is obvious in his references to 'man' and 'he', which renders the female subject absent (e.g. Cooper, 1976: 1001; 1005). My own use of the terms 'the human', 's/he' and 'her' do not reflect Cooper's language, but is a minor attempt to de-masculinize Cooper's writing.

thinking during which Cooper enjoyed a Baxi Fellowship at Liverpool University and at the end of which he published 'The Open Field'.[2]

With 'The Open Field', which is not explicitly concerned with the concept of organization, Cooper not only becomes the first writer within organization theory to think radically differently about human action, but in doing so, he also comes to mark the beginning of a whole new trend in organizational theorizing which is to complement, but more importantly contradict mainstream organization theory. In order to understand what is going on in 'The Open Field', it might help to get an insight into Cooper's own retrospective reflections. Looking back on this article in an interview with Chia and Kallinikos conducted more than twenty years after its publication, Cooper aligns his own project at the time with that of Weber:

> The concerns addressed by 'The Open Field' were […] related, I felt, to Max Weber's critique of the modern world's pre-occupation with rationality and purging of magic from the world' (Cooper in Chia and Kallinikos, 1998: 153).

More generally, what Cooper tried to do with this piece was "to open up social science to neglected and excluded possibilities, to draw attention to its dereliction of intellectual duty, to its lack of vision, to its limiting positivism and its squeamish obeisance to the mundane" (Cooper in Chia and Kallinikos, 1998: 152). Although Cooper's social psychology background is reflected in 'The Open Field', this concern led him to study intellectual developments in the humanities and the natural sciences, including controversial ideas within philosophy, poetry, physics and mathematics.

It is what Cooper calls "the wavering balance between structure and process" that marks the starting point for his analysis of human action in 'The Open Field'. This, he argues, is something that "As social scientists, we are probably less attentive [to] than we should be". Whereas "Structure is the invariant pattern of relationships among functional points in a system, […] process is the continuous emergence of new elements from those already existing." And as becomes clearer throughout the paper, it is the privileging of structure (*qua* stability) above process (*qua* change) that typically leads social scientists to pay insufficient attention to the balance between the two. The problem according to Cooper is that "Though seemingly in contrast, structure and process complement each other both as concepts and in the real world" (Cooper, 1976: 999).

From this starting point, Cooper proceeds first by pointing to the limitations of structuralist approaches to human action and perspectives showing a structuralist bias in understanding process, and second by developing a more genuinely processual perspective of human action. Dissatisfied with the initially interesting but teleological conceptualization of process in systems theory, Cooper (1976: 1001) decides to break

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2   In order to appreciate Cooper's early work, it is also worth noting that he in 1974 published the fairly standard textbook *Job Motivation and Job Design* written in a style and expressing a set of ideas that stand in some contrast to his later publications. Moreover, the kind of ideas that Cooper was engaged with at that time were not exposed (to my knowledge) in any publications prior to 'The Open Field'.

out of "social science proper" in search for "a conceptualization appropriate to the process view of man." This involves two things. First, adopting the Whiteheadian view that "man and environment [are] mutually immanent in a unitary field." In other words, recognizing that humans are neither passive reflectors nor dominating actors but a node in a larger network of 'to-and-fro influences'. And second, adopting Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*, which implies that the human is ever open and unfinished; as humans we experience ourselves and our world as an 'open field'. But since concepts pin down and freeze processes, simply defining the open field is insufficient. The really important task is to enact it. In the main part of this paper he is therefore concerned with (i) discussing the conditions of process that enable the open field, and (ii) outlining a methodology for how process can be used on a personal level for the creation of an open field. Cooper identifies five such conditions: *unstructured action, chance, projectability, the situation* and *the abstract field*.

First, Cooper examines *unstructured action* or 'the primacy of action', which involves the creation of 'pure action', that is the liberation or independence of action from some guiding image or purpose that would normally put certain constraints and requirements upon action. Here, he highlights three 'mechanisms of change' through which action intervenes into the social world. These are (i) the open model form of planned change, (ii) crisis, and (iii) rupture. Exemplified by action research and broad-aim programmes in community development, *the open model form of planned change* is a type of change programme that starts from a broad conception of what change is desired and avoids privileging specific strategies and solutions from the outset. *Crisis* is an externally generated experience that "destroys or radically questions" core values in ways that human actors lose control and leaves humans with no ready means of coping. And *rupture*, which Cooper relates to Surrealism[3] and the May 1968 French Revolution is "a self-generated break with established structures" whereby the human actor may be liberated from oppressive living and working conditions (Cooper, 1976: 1003). This emphasis on rupture places Cooper in relation to the *coupurism* of twentieth century French philosophy, exemplified in the works of Bachelard (1984, 2000), Canguilhem (1989, 1994) and Foucault (1970, 1972, 1979). But like Canguilhem, whose support towards the events of May 1968 was limited – after all, Canguilhem had worked to consolidate the very institutions under attack (Macey, 1998) – Cooper's prescription of rupture is in some contrast to his own personal attitude towards May 1968. Having once had to break off a lecture he was invited to give at one of the Parisian academic institutions around 1970, Cooper has not been too comfortable with the activities of student protesters.

Second, Cooper (1976: 1003) discusses the nature and importance of *chance*, i.e. "when the unexpected coincide." Since it is through chance that human actors start interacting with possibilities, it is chance that augments our capacity for 'spontaneous growth'.

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3   Relating back to my brief point about Cooper's malestream language, one could dwell on his apparent interest in Surrealism, whose male front figures regarded women primarily as objects of masculine desire or fear (cf. Caws, Kuenzli and Raaberg, 1991). However, given the focal and spatial constraints of this paper, such a discussion would have to be developed elsewhere.

According to Cooper, the experience of chance and the capacity for spontaneous growth can be realized through two strategies: (i) suspended purpose and (ii) induced disorder. *Suspended purpose,* which is a matter of enhancing the mind's awareness of the world, means that the mind must give up its right to control. *Induced disorder* is the way in which the human actor can challenge herself through self-imposed chaos – either by disordering herself or the outside world. This may in turn enable her to enter into another beginning of creative renewal. These are however private acts, and enabling humans to remake themselves, they must be developed into "a principle of social design" if human beings are to remake each other. For Cooper, this is similar to Richard Sennett's (1971) "vision of urban life where the 'brute chance' of spontaneous social intrusions becomes a major means of personal and interpersonal growth" (Cooper, 1976: 1005).

Third, Cooper directs his focus on *projectability,* which he defines as (i) "the power of men to project their unconscious forces into the external world", and (ii) "the power of external forms to draw out and give substance to the unconscious content." As such, "Projectability is […] a quality that pervades the total field" (Cooper, 1976: 1005). Cooper establishes the project, or "that which is 'thrown forward' to modify the future", as the instrument for projectability. As a process moves between projection (i.e. the "*coming into being* of […] inner content") and construction (i.e. "the *form* taken by the projection in the external world"), the project may either move 'naturally' from projection to construction or 'epigenetically' from construction to projection. The management of individual products and the relations between individual products are central to the former type because the relations between products and the continuous emergence of new products necessitates an ongoing redefinition of any individual product. The latter type of project, which is "impatient to be realized" (Cooper, 1976: 1006), realizes a form in the outside world before having a content with which to fill that form. Consequently, it is the elaboration and expansion of the project's repertoire of structures that enables it to change. Unfortunately, Cooper does not confirm whether in this context structure is a matter of form or content or both.[4] However, attacking him for reintroducing a structuralist bias here would be to misunderstand his intentions. As I noted above, Cooper does not want to replace structure with process. In an attempt to move away from the structuralist bias, he shows how structure and process contradict and complement one another. Rather than reaffirming the stability of structure, his emphasis on process in the context of the project undermines any such stability.

Fourth, Cooper examines *the situation,* which is "the immediately perceived field of actualities (objects, events), i.e. the concrete context in which we carry out our lives" (Cooper, 1976: 1006). Concreteness is a key dimension here because the situation "is full of definite objects and events which strike our perception in definite ways" and give us power to act as well as a target at which action can be directed. Further on, since the

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4   It seems that structure is initially a matter of form, which in turn writes itself onto the content filling that form. Hence, it could be argued that in spite of the project's ability to expand and elaborate its structures, its content (i.e. what it actually can do) is bound by its outside form. But as we shall see below, Cooper's understanding of form is more radical than that.

situation is a matter of difference and autonomy, it necessitates "a theory of discontinuous and heterogeneous experience" (Cooper, 1976: 1007). It is this that enables us to view as individually active the multiple parts constituting the situation. And it is this that enables us to understand that it is its local and variable nature that makes the situation unique. The situation is about the here-and-now. Avoiding viewing the thing in terms of abstracted images, Cooper insists that situational experience must focus on the things themselves and their interactions. Indeed, the thing must neither be separated from itself nor from activity. This leads Cooper to two conclusions. First, the somewhat confusing point that the situation follows "the logic of discursive action" rather than "the logic of linear structure", which is his way of saying that "things can and do happen according to their own impulse and action." Appreciating Cooper's point about impulsiveness and self-direction, what I find confusing here is simply Cooper's use of the term '*discursive* action', as there is not necessarily anything about the 'discursive' which is nonlinear. If it were, Cooper would have to explain this.[5] Cooper's second conclusion is more interesting, however; things are both cause and effect. They both act and are acted upon, and as a result, the human cannot merely be understood as a creative being. Whatever is created by a human being "turns back and creates him" (Cooper, 1976: 1008). This is a particularly interesting point, as it decentres the human subject and undermines the anthropocentrism of conventional social science and philosophy.

Fifth, Cooper discusses what he terms *the abstract field*, or what Whitehead would call an 'extensive continuum' and Bergson and Deleuze would refer to as 'the virtual'. As it stretches beyond the situation, it is through the abstract field that process is given a larger meaning, 'the many become one', and the world becomes one big and united cosmic Whole. Relationship is the central dimension here. Relationship as connection is the basis of meaning; relationship is what unites the many into one; and "the combinatorics of relationship" is what enables the many to combine in an infinite number of various ways, thus producing "a unity of difference" (Cooper, 1976: 1008). Moreover, it is through the processual cosmology of the abstract field that the development of individuals is connected to the evolution of the world as a Whole. This world is however both noumenal and phenomenal, both abstract and literal, and Cooper insists that it is only through the latter that the human can grasp the former. That is, the human can only make sense of the noumenal abstract field insofar as s/he is firmly grounded in the phenomenal literal field of spatially and temporally discrete and denotable things and events. This is because the abstract field is a continuity of not-yet-realised forms. But sense-making and the search for facts and reason is not really what is at stake here. First and foremost, what Cooper seeks to show, is that the abstract field enables the human to live amongst uncertainties and in a condition of indeterminacy that expands and diversifies the area in which human action can take place.

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5   Moreover, even the emphasis on self-*direction* might undermine the simultaneous emphasis on impulsiveness, and perhaps Cooper's point could have been more directly made if he stressed a sense of unpredictable *multi*-directionality.

In the final section of this paper, drawing upon ideas from the structuralist anthropologist Gregory Bateson, the American poet Charles Olson and yet again Whitehead (whom we also know as an affiliate of the Harvard Pareto Circle that in the 1920s and 1930s laid down the grounds for what later became mainstream organization theory), Cooper seeks to envisage how the open field, being the condition of process, can be used rather than just analyzed. Use involves two endeavours: 'to find out' and 'to make'. 'To find' out means to acquire knowledge or information about a process. This is achieved by placing oneself within and experiencing the process, and by carefully drawing upon other people's experiences of the process. Information in this respect is (i) difference (in the cybernetic sense, which means that one piece of data is compared and contrasted with another) and (ii) "what goes into form, i.e., [that which] in-forms" (Cooper, 1976: 1012; emphasis omitted). In other words, "difference is the key to form" and "to find out is to be in form" (Cooper, 1976: 1012). In conclusion, knowing oneself more fully requires knowing oneself in the world and not as separate from the world. 'To make', on the other hand, is to present the content you have found within an adequate form that enables you to express the diverse nature of process (Cooper, 1976: 1012). But as well as enabling expression, 'to make' is a moral act of impression that has an effect upon the outside world. Consequently, it is clear that 'to find out' is also a moral act: "the more you find out, the more you can make" (Cooper, 1976: 1012).

Finally, Cooper discusses the challenge of inventing a set of practical mechanisms that may enable people to actually use the open field and suggests four starting points from which a practice of process can be developed and activated: *force, medium, form* and *meaning. Force* is central to all processes because process involves the transfer of force from an agent to an object, and because force – being the energy of process – is what makes action possible. Force can be applied in two main ways, either as a means to resolve, complete and bring a process to an end (by which one finally loses force), or (and this is the approach suggested by Cooper), it can be applied continuously as a means to get involved with and stay in a process without terminating it. The human is her own *medium* for process. For process to be possible, however, s/he must perceive through her senses rather than through her ego. It is this decentralized kind of perception that enables the human to open up towards the rest of the world and become attentive to difference. *Form* refers back to Cooper's notions of the abstract field and information discussed above. Rather than forcing content into a categorical form, one must enable form to contain difference and recognize that form is a unity of difference and not unity as such. Consequently, form is an 'unfinished business' that continuously changes with the content that dwells inside it. Finally, Cooper argues that *meaning* resides in individuated wholeness, i.e. the process by which the psyche realizes itself. The paradox is that whereas individuation means separation, wholeness means integration. The challenge here is therefore to remain united and differentiated at the same time.

What this boils down to is the self-management of all our activities. In order to develop a processual practice for the open field, one must start with oneself, change how one uses oneself and from there move into and change the outside world. Since they work through institutions, Cooper argues that Marxism and democracy do not allow sufficient space for our 'real selves'. "Democracy is not enough" (Cooper, 1976: 1016). Instead, we are encouraged to recreate everyday life. One might ask what audience Cooper

invites and encourages to do so. It is unlikely that just anyone and everyone would be attracted by his invitation. First, given the theoretical bias, density and complexity of his argument, it runs the risk of becoming an appeal confined to a small intellectual elite. Second, given his malestream language, it is more likely to appeal to a male readership than a female one. And third, one might question the politics implied in 'The Open Field'. Cooper's (almost one-sided) emphasis on process leaves little feel for the permanency of social relationships and the boundaries that obstruct resistance and prevent things from changing.[6,7]

Organization/Disorganization

Having sought "to define an epistemology of process as a basis for the development of expressive and creative action" within a world that he understands as an open field (Cooper, 1976: 999), Cooper (1990) returns to the problem of process in 'Organization/Disorganization'. But whereas 'The Open Field' seeks primarily to develop a processual understanding of the world and a processual strategy for creative human action, 'Organization/Disorganization' applies processual thinking to a rather different problem, which is more strongly related to the concerns of organization theory and the concept of organization. Here, Cooper emphasizes the point that organizational processes order social life within and more importantly without organizational entities.

The starting point of this text is the concept of organization in mainstream, or more specifically structural-functionalist organization theory, which according to Cooper is biased towards the formal-functional aspects of organization. More specifically, this means that this conceptualization of organization, if not exclusively, is at least primarily concerned with organizational entities. This bias amongst organization theorists is specifically due to their preoccupation with systems. When seeking to understand the relationship between systems (such as an organization) and their environments, the main focus remains with the system. Little attention is given to the drawing of boundaries that makes the system possible in the first place.

Taking systemic boundaries for granted has important consequences for how we understand systems, environments and the relationship between the two. First, this leads to the privileging of systems above environments and the viewing of the boundary as an attribute of the former rather than the latter. Consequently, the boundary is not imposed upon the system from the outside, but is instituted by the system to separate it from its environment. Separation is made possible because this boundary is stable and complete. This also means that the system is regarded as a stable entity enjoying a unity and order that stands in stark contrast to the disorder associated with its outside environment. The

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6   It is these problems *inter alia* that have been the focus of much work in labour process theory, exemplified by the joint writings of Knights and Willmott (1985, 1989, 1999).

7   Unfortunately, the focal and spatial constraints of this paper once again mean that an in depth consideration of these points would have to be developed elsewhere.

trouble with this position, Cooper explains, is that a boundary is neither stable, complete nor simply an attribute of the system. Instead, boundaries serve the dual function of both separating and joining systems and environments. They are an attribute of system and environment. And as such, a boundary is a complex and ambiguous structure "around which are focused both the formal and informal organizing processes of social life" (Cooper, 1990: 169). In other words, organization is not just a matter of formal entities, but also a matter of processes residing at the boundaries by which systems are joined with and separated from their environments. In order to understand organization, we should therefore not limit our inquiry to systems such as formal organizations, but pay more attention to the role of boundaries. Cooper does not say it here, but I would like to add that by taking 'boundary' as our centre of attention, it is possible to understand how organization operates both within formal organizations and as processes of ordering in the environment outside organizational entities.

Cooper elaborates on the role of boundaries, both by problematizing the way in which studies of social and other systems subsume boundaries to systems, and by offering an alternative understanding of boundaries. As in previous paragraphs, what he finds particularly problematic about social science research is that it tends to understand the social world in terms of reified objects and artefacts without showing much appreciation for the medium that actually constitute them. Social scientists do not know the world directly, but typically acquire knowledge about it by distinguishing and differentiating between phenomena. Whereas certain phenomena are selected and included into a particular concept and seen to belong to a particular object, other phenomena are excluded. Consequently, the concepts and objects that emerge are largely homogeneous; when studying systems, one finds unity. In the words of Cooper, "Systemness relies singularly on a conception of unity" (1990: 169). This means that typically, what lies inside a system's boundaries is assumed to be orderly and organized whilst what lies outside is assumed to be less orderly, less unitary and less organized. And insofar as social scientists privilege the study of systems, what does not belong to a particular system is devalued.

Further on, Cooper argues that boundary-maintenance is seen as a key dimension in the study of systems. In order to maintain its order, a system needs to protect itself from the outside and maintain its boundaries against the environment. Again, he shows that systems are privileged above boundaries and environments. Boundary-maintenance is an activity of the system and not of the environment. In the same paragraph, he deals briefly with the notion of boundaries and boundary maintenance in relation to the now common distinction between closed and open systems. Despite the general recognition that boundaries are more or less perforated and that systems are more or less closed or more or less open, this has done little to remove the binary distinction between system and environment, and systems are still privileged above environments and above the actual boundaries that join and separate the two. The implications of this are somewhat paradoxical. Whereas "the social system", Cooper explains, "is defined as a pattern of relationships, the concept of relationship is its least systematically analyzed feature" (Cooper, 1990: 170). Since the relationship between system and environment is constituted by a frame or a boundary, the lacking attention to boundaries inhibits an adequate understanding of this relationship.

Cooper's alternative is to view boundary as an attribute of both system and environment. Since this view acknowledges that boundaries perform a function on behalf of systems and environments, it allows a non-static understanding of boundary. But before outlining this in further detail, he critiques a social systems view typical of and influential in organization theory: that of Parsons and Blau. According to Cooper (1990: 171), Parsons (1951), whom he claims to represent the traditional systems view within the social sciences, understands the system boundary as a "container which holds the system parts together and thus prevents their dispersal." Furthermore, Parsons not only conceives of systems as bounded entities. By viewing systems as ordered structures, he also imposes a boundary upon how the system is to be understood. Cooper directs a similar critique on Blau's (1974) work on formal organization, which shares Parsons' structural-functionalist foundations. More specifically, Cooper argues that Blau's concept of differentiation in organizational structure, which merely refers to the internal divisions of labour and authority in organizations, presents a static view of differentiation. Preoccupied with the instrumental order of static differences in role and status, Blau ignores the very process of differentiation that makes such differences and such order come about in the first place. And consequently, he regards the social organization within which formal organizations are seen to exist as "already formed" (Cooper, 1990: 172).

If one were to focus on boundary and conceive of differentiation in processual terms, one would end up with a fundamentally different understanding of organization; neither as bounded entities characterized by a static internal order nor as an already formed division of social life, but as a process of differentiation that works to transform "an intrinsically ambiguous condition into one that is ordered" (Cooper, 1990: 172). And since organization is not about already established differentiation and order, it is always caught up with its disorderly and contrary state, which Cooper calls disorganization. Cooper seeks to demonstrate that this constant opposition between organization and disorganization has serious implications for how one is to understand social organization and social action.

Given Cooper's emphasis on process, it may seem ironic and confusing to find that the term structure figures centrally in his definition of social organization:

> Social organization may be defined as a structure which relates people to each other in the general process of managing nature and themselves. (Cooper, 1990: 172)

But even though some emphasis is removed from the way in which social organization works as a process and put on the way in which it has the consequence of involving people in "the general process of managing", Cooper's reference to structure has not become less dynamic than it was in 'The Open Field'. His somewhat unfortunate wording does not lead him to reaffirm the static concept of organization presented by structural-functionalism. Like information, which Cooper also defines as both a process and a structure that makes form out of non-form by dividing matter into sets of binary terms, organization creates order by drawing boundaries between elements in social life such as social actors. Furthermore, the binary division that Cooper associates with information and organization is not a simple binary structure that limits focus to the parts lying on each side of the binary divide. Instead, it directs focus on the division itself, which puts simultaneous attention on the parts and the whole that these two parts

constitute. In conclusion, the binary divide or boundary that Cooper talks about not only separates, but also joins, and it cannot be subsumed to one part.

Cooper then discusses the undecidable nature of boundary, first in light of Saussure's structuralist linguistics and Bateson's structuralist anthropology (focusing on Saussure's system of signs and on Bateson's system of difference), and then in light of Derrida's poststructuralist concept of *différance*. Cooper invokes Saussure's (1974) *Course in General Linguistics* to show that on the level of semiotic systems (i.e. systems of signifiers and signifieds) the signifier is not simply a static carrier of meaning. Meaning is never given by a particular signifier, but is an outcome of differences between various signifiers. Semiotic systems are constantly caught up in processes of signification by which different meanings are attributed to a certain signifier depending on the semantic context in which it finds itself. In other words, since the meaning of a signifier depends on which other signifiers it is surrounded by, and since signifiers are constantly moving between different semantic contexts, the meaning of a signifier is always deferred and unfinished and the process of signification is never brought to an end.

In Bateson's (1972) *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Cooper finds ammunition to the view that the world is not experienced in terms of reified objects and events, but in terms of differences:

> To talk about things in the mind is to commit the intellectual sin of reification. There is even a problem talking about *the* mind since this gives the impression of a localable place, a thing which contains other things. (Cooper, 1990: 175)

Difference, on the other hand, is not "locatable" because "it is dimensionless" (Cooper, 1990: 175). That is to say, difference cannot be localized because unlike reified objects it has no spatial dimensions such as length, height, width and depth. Instead, following Bateson, Cooper views difference as some kind of process that guides how we experience the world. Earlier on, Cooper (1990: 170) referred to the boundary as a frame that includes certain phenomena and excludes others. With Bateson's term 'framing', the processual nature of frames and boundaries is more clearly recognized.

Derrida's (1982) concept of *différance*, which is influenced by Saussure's thinking on language as a system of differences, can be seen as an even more explicit attempt at thinking about the undecidability of boundary. But *différance* is not simply about differing in space. It is also about deference or deferral, i.e. the postponement of something in time. More specifically, this means that a word or concept that is invoked to represent a thing currently absent from us can never do so. Not only does the word differ in space from the thing (the word is present, the thing is absent). Since the word succeeds the thing, the word is also a presence deferred in time. Moreover, Derrida's concept of *différance* implies that the meaning of a word is deferred, just as in Saussure's conception of difference, Cooper argues. Consequently, *différance* is the "ever-active play" of differences that "cannot be located in any particular place" (Cooper, 1990: 179). This heterogeneous nature is obvious with regards to the concept of *différance* itself, which can refer to two different things but never at the same time. But it is also how other words must be understood, according to Derrida, who demonstrates this by deconstructing the Greek word *pharmakon* in his text 'Plato's Pharmacy'. Deconstructing or subjecting *pharmakon* to a process of *différance*, he

shows that the word entails two different and deferred meanings (remedy *and* poison) that both cannot be grasped at the same time or in the same place. And it is this that not only invests any and every word or phenomenon with undecidability, but also underlines the undecidability of *différance*, difference and boundary.

According to Cooper, all three ways of thinking difference bring out the undecidable nature of boundary. And as such, they bring out the undecidable nature of the relationship between social systems and environments as well as the undecidable nature of social systems *per se*. In other words, social systems are not as unitary, ordered and organized as one is led to believe by conventional ways of thinking. Instead, as results of ambiguous processes of framing, boundary drawing and differentiation, they "reveal their essentially precarious foundation", a foundation that is constantly resisted by what Cooper calls processes of disorganization or the "zero degree of organization" (Cooper, 1990: 182). Thus, Cooper's understanding of disorganization is far more radical than that suggested by Tsoukas (1998), which reduces disorganization to a matter of organization.

Cooper (1990: 182) defines the zero degree of organization as "a process of undecidability that pervades all social organization." Having no specific order, organization or direction, the zero degree of organization can be understood as "an excess to order or meaning". Drawing on Derrida, Cooper (1990: 184) argues that the zero degree of organization is that which falls outside of and has "no founding source or centre". And similarly, drawing upon Simmel's inside/outside distinction, he argues that this is the outside that is excluded from the inside, thus lacking what the inside has. In conclusion, "Zero-degree is […] a theoretical condition of no meaning, no form, of absolute disorder which one might call the primary source of form or organization" (Cooper, 1990: 187). This does not mean, Cooper insists, that zero-degree is "an absolute origin which [is] itself organized", but simply that it is "The disorder of zero degree […] which energizes and motivates the call to order or organization" (Cooper, 1990: 187).

From this discussion, Cooper moves on to consider organization itself, arguing that "If zero degree is an excess […], then order and organization must necessarily be a reduction" (Cooper, 1990: 187). In a quest for order and organization, social systems seek "to deny the existence of undecidability by erecting systems of 'logical' and 'rational' action" (Cooper, 1990: 187). Utilizing Marcuse's (1964) reading of Weber, Cooper adopts the view that rationality is not simply a matter of calculable efficiency, but "a form of unacknowledged political domination which serves to privilege the interests of particular groups" (Cooper, 1990: 187-188). This means that rationalization depends upon the ability to control, master and dominate the excess of disorganization or zero-degree that roams all social systems. According to Cooper, such control is specifically aimed at what he calls the 'metastructure' and the 'metalanguage', and without explaining these terms, he turns to discuss the issue of communicational domination in an example from Herman Melville's (1970) novel *Billy Budd, Sailor*. From this discussion, however, Cooper concludes with Marcuse (1964) that the management of language, the elimination of undecidability and the solidification of boundaries is "a significant process in the creation of systems of technical rationality" and "formally organized systems" (Cooper, 1990: 191). In other words, if one is to

create formal systems of rational organization, one needs to reaffirm the boundary between disorganization and organization.

In the final section of the paper, invoking Canguilhem's (1978) analysis of the concept of organization, Cooper deals with what he calls "the normalizing function" of organization (Cooper, 1990: 193). Canguilhem's study, Cooper argues, "showed how the concept of organization developed in the nineteenth century through the normal-abnormal opposition" (Cooper, 1990: 195). Requiring the elimination of the abnormal or the pathological across all fields (the social, the biological, the psychological, the linguistic, etc.), organization was a matter of normalization. More specifically, the development of normalization was based upon the institution, formalization and following of rules and norms. In nineteenth century France this did for example take place through the establishment of a new grammar conveying formal rules for the correct use of language and the institution of the metric system. According to Cooper, the norm had two functions: first, to restore normality by eliminating deviance, and second, by "providing an order of knowledge" that enable particular systems to conceptualize themselves. Although Cooper does not say this, I would like to add that such an order of knowledge is exactly what gives self-reflexivity to systems, thus enabling them to adjust when necessary and make possible the normative order that they seek to institute.

Canguilhem's conceptualization has serious implications for the concept of organization, even for what one might choose to refer to as formal organization. The component features of formal organization – be they a hierarchical division of labour, administrative centralization, standardization or rational planning – are not simply the innocent inventions of modern administration. Instead, Cooper insists, they must be understood as "instruments of a process of technological normalization motivated by a therapy of power" (Cooper, 1990: 196; emphasis omitted).[8]

What, then, can thus far we take with us from this highly dense text by Robert Cooper? The emphasis on *boundary* and *process* is obvious. Cooper pursues the challenging idea that boundary, i.e. that which differentiates between a system – such as an organization – and the environment does not finalize or stabilize the relationship between the two. As they separate *and* join organizations and environments, boundaries are continuously engaged in processes of differentiation. Hence, they define and redefine not only organizations and environments, but also the relationships between them. In other words, boundaries produce and reproduce organizations and environments, becoming processes of organization and disorganization themselves, and turning organization as well as disorganization – as the zero degree of organization – into processual rather than static matters. And as such, the notion of disorganization developed by Cooper is to some extent capable of recognizing the ways in which the boundaries of organization are disrupted and destabilized.

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8   Though not straightforward, Cooper's reference to 'therapy of power' simply underlines the point that therapies (of normalization) are not just concerned with the solving of problems, but always embedded in the politics of what is normal and what is not.

Cooper's final point concerns the social sciences and organization theory more specifically. The production of organization is not merely an ordering process that inscribes itself onto the social world, producing formal organizations *inter alia*. As a research object, formal organization is also the result of intensive processes of knowledge production taking place within organization theory. And by constructing organization in a particular way through a particular concept of organization, organization theory also *organizes* organization, thus "making it impossible to disentangle the content of organization studies from the theory or methodology that frames it" (Cooper, 1990: 197). Although Cooper does not spell this out explicitly, the consequence is that the production of the concept of organization is not only the result of political decisions about the constitution of organization as a research object. As the concept of organization is constituted and used in a particular way by the majority of organization theorists, it will also have certain implications for the events and people who are and are not studied by this organization theory. But Cooper's contribution here lies not only in his problematization of the concept of organization. Having complexified and disrupted the boundary relations between organization and environment by replacing stasis with process, he has also upset the boundary relations between organization theory and its neighbouring fields. Not simply by drawing heavily on thinking about organization from other disciplines, but more importantly by re-producing and re-organizing the concept into a research object that, with its precarious and processual nature, is fundamentally different from the concept of organization implied by classical and mainstream organization theory.

Despite the title of his paper, Cooper does not place as much emphasis on the concept of organization as one might expect, but does instead coin at least the first part of his discussion around the concepts of system and environment. Moreover, given that he attempts a processual understanding of organization, it may seem ironic that so much of his discussion revolves around the terms system and structure. Dismissing his argument on such grounds would however be to invoke a highly dualistic reading, and it is exactly such dualism he seeks to avoid. Cooper neither argues for the stability of system, structure and organization, nor does he argue that systems, structures and formal organizations do not exist. Instead, he seeks to undermine any static underpinnings of these terms and rid them of the stable reified nature so typically attributed to them by mainstream organization theory and social science.

The Missing Body

Cooper's efforts to destabilize and undermine the static underpinnings of the concepts we use to make sense of the world is an impressive one, and it is this theme that joins 'The Open Field' and 'Organization/Disorganization'. No matter what status Cooper enjoys as a philosopher, there is little doubt that he has had a leading impact on recent thinking in the outskirts of organization theory. Most importantly, his epistemic privileging of organizational process above organizational entity has produced a discontinuity in organization theory – between the conventional mainstream that takes for granted a concept of organization limited to formal organizational entities and problems having to do with the organization of production and the more radical

periphery that problematizes the concept of organization by studying the processes that organize our acting and thinking and social life as a whole – within and without formal organizations. Organization theorists whose work – more or less easily – seems to fall within this tradition include Gibson Burrell (1984, 1988, 1997), Barbara Czarniawska (1996), Jannis Kallinikos (1995, 1998; cf. also Cooper and Kallinikos 1996), John Law (1994a, 1994b, 1998; cf. also Cooper and Law, 1995; Law and Mol 1998), Rolland Munro (2001; cf. also Hetherington and Munro 1998), Martin Parker (1992, 1998; cf. also Parker and Cooper, 1998), Haridimos Tsoukas (1998) and Robert Chia (1995). It would be to overemphasize Cooper's influence to say that these organization theorists are simply followers of a 'Cooperian' paradigm in organization theory. It seems fair, however, to say that Cooper has inspired and/or provoked these and others to adopt a processual or generic focus in the study of organization and to do so through serious engagement with thinkers outside organization theory (e.g. Foucault, Derrida, the Frankfurt School, Whitehead and Bergson). In my opinion, it is this that is Cooper's main contribution to organization theory. Beyond this, Cooper – through 'The Open Field' and 'Organization/Disorganization' – has also gone beyond organization to an extent that has been little recognized by organization theory. In addition to recognize how social life is organized outside the boundaries of formal organizational entities, his appeal for creative action and his concept of disorganization draw attention to the fragile nature of any organizational project.

There is however no mention of the body in either of these articles, which seems to be quietly processed as a non-topic. Cooper is consciously neglectful of feminist research, which means that the stream of thought that has been most significant in turning the body into a research object in the social sciences and humanities is apparently unknown or of no interest to him. And when Cooper and Burrell (1988) (in an article mostly written by Cooper) and Cooper (1998) mention the body twice in an interval of ten years, it is only as a very side-lined issue of which little discussion is provided. Insofar as Cooper has had any influence on the embodiment of organization theory at all, it seems more accurate to say that this has been merely indirect. By putting organization theory in touch with poststructuralism, he has opened up the discipline to a stream of thought in which the body figures as a key dimension. And second, by conceptualizing organization in terms of processes rather than entities, he has developed a way to think about organization that later organization theorists concerned with the body have taken on board (e.g. Brewis and Sinclair, 2000; Dale and Burrell, 2000; Dale, 2001).[9]

The absence of embodiment is not necessarily a fundamental problem with Cooper's work, and the reader might question *why* the body should be brought into the realm of a process perspective on organization in the first place. In my opinion, inattentiveness to issues of embodiment means that one misses out on an important opportunity to think critically about how organizational processes operate throughout social life. It is

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9   Cooper's (1998) notion of raw matter and his discussion of the ways in which raw matter is turned into distinct, reified and manageable things by processes of information and organisation does not directly deal with the body and has not, as far as I know, been utilised by organisation theorists interested in the body (cf. Cooper 1998).

necessary for example to introduce the body if wanting to study the ways in which an organizational regime such as public health seeks to organize how we live our lives on an everyday basis. Constructions and experiences of health and wellbeing, disease and illness are most certainly embodied. And it is at least problematic to dissociate the activities preoccupying public health – such as eating, drinking, sex and exercise – from the organization and conduct of the body within and without formal organizations. On a more general level, one should also note that the epistemic organization of the world to which Cooper (1976, 1990) pays so much attention covers only a part of how social life is organized – through the discursive arrangements of language. Whilst it is possible to see how language and discourse might organize the body indirectly, it is also necessary to study how the body is actually organized in social life – according to dress codes, expectations about body language, medical notions of what a body is and what a body can do, and socio-cultural norms of how particular bodies should behave and move in particular contexts – at work, at home and in public space. Finally, and insofar as the body is an unruly and messy matter of flesh and blood, bones and tissue, pains and pleasure, habits and desires, it also poses a fundamental problem for organization in a way that underlines the processual, dynamic and unfinished nature of the latter. Because the body disrupts, undermines and escapes the purposive and boundary-drawing processes of organization, these processes are never brought to an end in a complete state of affairs. Even if it might be possible to study the disruption of organization through more general terms such as Cooper's (1990) concept of disorganization as the 'zero degree of organization', the carnal body described above may give a very concrete insight into the forces that disrupt the boundaries of organization. These are three reasons why it is important to bring the body into a processual organization theory keen to study organizational processes across modern social life, within and without formal organizational entities. More specific strategies as to *how* the body can be brought into an organization theory concerned with organizational processes must be addressed elsewhere. It might be useful, however, to provide a brief – obviously simplistic – suggestion as to how this can be done.

From a feminist starting point, Karen Dale (2001) has employed the thought of Merleau-Ponty and Foucault in an attempt to embody organization theory. Whereas Merleau-Ponty enables Dale to focus on the embodied nature of experience and subjectivity, Foucault enables her primarily to investigate what organization does to the body – within and without formal organizations. This is complemented by a feminist reading (based on Irigaray and Butler *inter alia*), which emphasizes bodily difference; that bodies of different sex, gender and sexuality (etc.) (i) experience life differently and (ii) are subjected to organization in different ways. But this may also be complemented by a Deleuzian and DeleuzoGuattarian perspective that more explicitly, through notions such as the body without organs and the Spinozist body, recognizes how bodies may live independently of organization (e.g. Deleuze, 1992; Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). Thus, bodies are not necessarily organized and embodiment is not merely a matter of organization. Rather, bodies are penetrated by forces so creative, unpredictable and unmanageable that they may disrupt, undermine and escape the boundaries of organization.

Postscript

In a recent review in *Organization Studies* of Hassard, Holliday and Willmott's (2000) edited essay collection *Body and Organization*, Yiannis Gabriel (2001: 518) ridicules the genre to which he claims this book belongs: i.e. '*X and Organization*'. Admitting his own contribution to such volumes, Gabriel argues that the general formula of these books is to criticize the rest of organization theory for having completely ignored X and for not having realized how important this subject matter is for the further development of the discipline. As one can see from the first two quotes above, Gabriel could have accused Cooper (1976, 1990) of the same. And he could have made similar accusations against this paper too, as it bluntly, and perhaps naively, have asked where the body is in Cooper's process perspective. But with Cooper's otherwise inspiring work, this is the key thing I see missing.

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