



You can do things with words: Considering the performativity of performativity of economics

Sine Nørholm Just

review of

Boldyrev, I. and E. Svetlova (eds.) (2016) *Enacting dismal science: New perspectives on the performativity of economics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. (HB, pp. iv-206, 119,59, ISBN 978-1-137-49210-4)

‘And then I discovered, you can do things with words!’ This enthusiastic exclamation marked the turning point of an academic career as it was once narrated to me at a conference dinner. The narrator had been trained in mainstream economics, but as he moved on from his PhD (a very complex, very sophisticated piece of quantitative research, I was given to understand) a certain uneasiness with the dogmas of the dismal science began to trouble our protagonist. Accordingly, he went on a quest to broaden his disciplinary horizons and had his eureka moment when stumbling upon J. L. Austin’s seminal work on speech act theory. Now, with the zeal of the convert, he eagerly preached the good word to anyone willing to lend an ear – or polite enough not to leave the table.

I was reminded of this anecdote when reading *Enacting dismal science: New perspectives on the performativity of economics*, both because the book demonstrates how far theories of performativity have come from such simple (if earnest) assertions of the power of speech and because it shows how important it is to continuously revisit and refine the fountain of speech act theory, even as we explore and expand the purview of its empirical application. Thus, the book offers

two main contributions: First, it considers theoretically what it might mean to say that economics is performative, linking back to and providing careful considerations of the heritage of performativity studies. Second, it offers novel investigations of the performativity of economics, thereby moving the discussion of the empirical applicability of this theory decisively forward.

Enacting dismal science is explicitly billed as a follow-up to ground-breaking work such as Donald MacKenzie's *An engine, not a camera* (2006) and the edited volume *Do economists make markets?* (MacKenzie, Muniesa and Siu (eds.), 2007). As such, it asks how performativity matters 'after-the-turn'; once it has been established that economic theories *are*, indeed, performative, then what? What does a research program that takes this insight as its baseline look like? And what are the main points of contention within this program today? The contributions to *Enacting dismal science* all offer (parts of) answers to these questions.

Being an edited volume, it seems inevitable that some chapters will be of greater interest than others – or rather, that different readers will find that different chapters resonate better with them. When one seeks to present something for every palate, not everything will be equally palatable to everyone. That said, this collection is commendable for actually doing what it says it does; presenting different views on the theoretical discussions and empirical developments that define performativity of economics today – it is just that some of these discussions and developments are more interesting to me (as one individual reader with a particular set of tastes) than others. The following, then, is first and foremost an expression of my preferences, not only in relation to the individual chapters of *Enacting dismal science* nor the book as a whole, but also as regards the broader perspective of performativity of economics. This may sound idiosyncratic, but it could also be read as an explication of the speech act that is 'a review': an appraisal conducted from a certain perspective and with a particular agenda.

Critical/performative

As mentioned, *Enacting dismal science* explicitly positions itself within performativity of economics and, hence, will find a particularly engaged audience among scholars who identify with this perspective – and field. However, the volume also broaches discussions of broader interest, not least to (critical) management and organization scholars who currently are embroiled in lively debates about the performativity of their own discipline (see inter alia Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman, 2009; Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Cabantous et al.,

2016). To summarize this debate ever so briefly – and, hence, crudely – the issue at stake is whether or not ‘critical performativity’ is a contradiction in terms. That is, does being critical require detachment? And, conversely, does performativity hinge on engagement? Within critical management studies, the starting point is one of radical anti-performativity, of refusing to become involved with the subject of one’s critique so as to remain pure in one’s criticism (Fournier and Grey, 2000; Spoelstra and Svensson, 2016). Being almost overly sensitive to the possible performativity of their work, and to the implications this might have on their critical ethos, such scholars have only recently begun to consider whether and how to engage with practitioners (Contu, 2017; Butler, Delaney and Spoelstra, 2018).

I present the discussion around critical performativity in these somewhat simplified terms so as to better contrast it with the developments within performativity of economics. Here, the all-consuming focus of attention, as Ivan Boldyrev and Ekatarina Svetlova, the editors of *Enacting dismal science*, argue in their formidable introductory chapter, has been the production of knowledge and, more particularly, economic knowledge. Interestingly, this endeavour to reveal the performativity of one discipline, economics, is undertaken without much reflexivity; i.e. while striving to prove how economists produce what they claim to observe, there has been no serious concern with the performativity of performativity of economics, with the knowledge produced while claiming to observe economists’ knowledge production. Ironically, then, the perspective that aims to uncover the performativity of allegedly descriptive economic theories is itself overly descriptive; attentive to economic phenomena as economists make them – and not to how they *could*, let alone *should* be made.

The contrast is clear: whereas critical management studies are typically too critical to be performative, performativity of economics has been too performative (or, more precisely, too carefully attentive to the performativity of others) to be critical. Now, however, there are movements within each field that open up avenues for dialogue and mutual inspiration. *Enacting dismal science* provides a solid starting point for those wishing to familiarize themselves with the state of the art of performativity of economics, e.g. as a basis for moving the perspective further in critical/practical directions. That is, the volume mainly stays true to the traditional focus on the performativity of economics, focusing on how economists influence the economy, but at least it asks the question of how performativity of economics might itself become performative. As such, it provides impetus to the discussion of how research may become both critical *and* performative.

Monetary theory makes the world go ‘round

For readers who are mostly interested in the affinities between organization and management studies and performativity of economics, this will be *Enacting dismal science*'s main selling proposition: get an overview, move on (e.g. to Beunza and Ferraro's (2018) notion of performative work or to Parker and Parker's (2017) concept of agonistic organizing). For readers with a more particular interest in the theoretical foundations and empirical applications of performativity of economics, however, the book offers a wealth of knowledge – both theoretically and empirically.

As mentioned, *Enacting dismal science* begins from the assumption that economics is performative of the economy, referring anyone who might doubt this point to the pioneering work of MacKenzie and his associates. The most important source of inspiration, however, is arguably Michel Callon whose concepts of socio-technical assemblages and performance are directly relevant to empirical studies of how economic theory performs economic reality. Here, the move from performativity to performance implies a focus on the tensions, dynamics, and openness of the performative process, on the *struggles* in and through which ideas materialize (Callon, 2007; see also Just, 2015). And socio-technical assemblages (or *agencements* as they are often called, suggesting that the specifics of the original French term are lost in translation) are the contingent and contested, momentary and malleable, results of such struggles:

...economic knowledge does not merely ‘construct’ its own reality; it is not simply the construction of the mind prior to its sociotechnical embodiment. Rather, many intermediaries and hybrids are at work in the process and the struggles of performance; it is a complex interaction of human and non-human technical entities that makes it possible for economists to act as social engineers and for economics to perform itself [5]

As the editors note, this position adds both nuance and depth to the explanations offered by performativity of economics, but as they (and their contributors) are also keenly aware, it complicates the matter of causality: ‘...theories and models are not always and automatically performative exactly because they are a part of the non-linear contexts of their application’ [16].

Recognizing such causal complexity may lead to either empirical investigations of specific performative practices or nuanced theoretical considerations of general performative conditions. As mentioned, the volume contains both in their pure form – and, importantly, several of the contributions point to possible combinations of theory and practice. Here lies the road ahead.

Experimenting with performativity

Having established the general starting points, ambitions, and merits of the anthology, it seems now might be a good time to go into more depth with the individual contributions. However, this might also be the time at which my idiosyncrasies show themselves most clearly. As a whole, the book has its strength in presenting a ‘performativity buffet’. As a reviewer, I am limited by my existing tastes and, hence, have sampled some dishes with glee and others more reluctantly.

Elements I particularly like include the sustained consideration of how performativity of economics may benefit from encounters with other theories of performativity. In particular, I am interested in the rapprochement between Judith Butler’s concept of performativity and that of performativity of economics (see Butler, 2010 and Callon, 2010 for initial establishment of points of contention and possible reconciliations). In this vein, contributions such as Guala’s, Roscoe’s, and Svetlova’s (chapter 2, 6, and 8, respectively) move performativity of economics forward by considering how various conceptualizations of the illocutionary and perlocutionary dimensions of performativity may help explain how performativity works. The question of whether saying *is* doing or doing is an *effect* of saying merits further attention, and these three contributions, with their different answers, help us zoom in on the relevant discussions. To Roscoe, any utterance is always and necessarily performative – even description is doing, it *describes* and, hence, performs a function in and through the very illocution. Descriptions are never innocent; they give a name and, thereby, bring something about. Guala and Svetlova are more interested in the effects of the performative utterance, privileging perlocution over illocution. That is, some utterances may bring about that of which they speak, but most utterances fail to do so; in fact, such felicitous speech acts may be the exception rather than the rule. What, then, turns illocutionary force into perlocutionary effect? Conventions, Guala says, and such conventions (or institutions), Svetlova argues, not only support performative enactment, but are themselves enacted performatively; they *become* real because we ‘make believe’ that they *are* real.

This leads to another important and recurrent question of the book; that of causality. Here, Herrmann-Pillath’s (chapter 3) and Pahl and Sparsam’s (chapter 7) contributions stand out in focusing on performative mechanisms and policy devices, respectively, as intermediary concepts that may explain the move from theory to reality more thoroughly. When an economist forwards a theory, this theory does not necessarily become influential, and even if it does take hold within the academic community, it does not translate directly into empirical

reality. Rather, theories are signs that may (or may not) be interpreted in certain ways in specific contexts. While the introduction of intermediary concepts leaves the particularities of specific processes open to interpretation, only to be identified and explained in the particular case, at least it provides the contours of a general process that may be fleshed out – empirically and theoretically – in further work.

These two contributions, as well as Svetlova's chapter, also deal with the central issue of the stability and/or change of the economy as a social system – or institution in Svetlova's account. Böhme and Muniesa (chapter 4 and 5, respectively) focus on the concomitant, and equally interesting, question of the stability/change of economics as a scientific discipline. Böhme addresses this issue through an ethnomethodological study that shows how economic experiments are performed in such a way as to become self-fulfilling prophecies, providing empirical backing to economic theories not because the theories describe empirical reality objectively, but because participants in the experiments are made (enticed/disciplined) to behave in accordance with the theories. Muniesa conducts a series of (thought) experiments of his own, designed to expose economics to its own performativity. Both chapters convincingly show that economists veer towards disciplinary stability, thereby providing an empirical example of the performativity of economics (Böhme) and a theoretical explanation of economists' inability to see (or unwillingness to accept) this performativity (Muniesa).

The gift that keeps on giving

One further issue runs through the book, but more like an undercurrent than an explicit theme: the inability of performativity of economics to influence economists. In the words of the introduction: 'To be sure, economists themselves, unlike management scholars, sociologists, anthropologists, or cultural theorists, pay little attention to the idea of performativity' [17]. It is time, however, for proponents of the performativity of economics to move beyond complaints that economists do not pay attention to them to address the reasons for this, the non-performativity of performativity of economics. The problem is not only that economists are unwilling to listen, but also that performativity of economics has not had much to say. That is, as long as performativity of economics mainly aims to explain the workings of economists, the economists may shrug and say 'so what? We knew this all along...' That is, orthodox economics readily accepts the conflation of 'reality' and 'speculation' (see Konings, 2018), and if performativity of economics wants to make an impact it has to move beyond pointing out the obvious. As the volume recognizes, but

refrains from tackling; performativity of economics has been too concerned with explaining the knowledge production of others and too little geared to exploring the critical potential of its own knowledge production.

Here, the parallel with critical management studies is, once again, apparent: ‘mere’ description and ‘pure’ critique are equally inefficient modes of engagement. However, they are not inconsequential and, hence, must take responsibility for their own failures. Just as critical management scholars are taking on the ‘risky business’ of critical performativity in practice (Butler, Delaney and Spoelstra, 2018), so performativity of economics must become actively involved with economics and, hence, the economy. This is not only doable, it is also necessary; even non-performativity is a form of performativity – and a problematic one at that. After all, you cannot *not* do things with words! *Enacting dismal science* makes this clear, but also leaves much to be done. Hence, it is time to pass on the gift of performativity to...performativity of economics itself; to consider how this perspective might become more performative as a theory *and* a practice.

references

- Alvesson, M. and A. Spicer (2012) ‘Critical leadership studies: The case for critical performativity’, *Human Relations*, 65(3): 367–390.
- Beunza, D. and F. Ferraro (2018) ‘Performative work: Bridging performativity and institutional theory in the responsible investment field’, *Organization Studies*, DOI: 10.1177/0170840617747917.
- Butler, J. (2010) ‘Performative agency’, *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 3(2): 147–161.
- Butler, N., H. Delaney and S. Spoelstra (2018) ‘Risky business: Reflections on critical performativity in practice’, *Organization*, DOI: 10.177/135058417749737.
- Cabantous, L., J. P. Gond, N. Harding and M. Learmonth (2016) ‘Critical essay: Reconsidering critical performativity’, *Human Relations*, 69(2): 197–213.
- Callon, M. (2007) ‘What does it mean to say that economics is performative?’, in D. MacKenzie, F. Muniesa and L. Siu (eds.) *Do economists make markets? On the performativity of economics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Callon, M. (2010) ‘Performativity, misfires, and politics’, *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 3(2): 163–169.
- Contu, A. (2017) “...The point is to change it” – Yes, but in what direction and how? Intellectual activism as a way of “walking the talk” of critical work in business schools’, *Organization*, 25(2): 282–293.
- Fournier, V. and C. Grey (2000) “At the critical moment”: Conditions and prospects for Critical Management Studies’, *Human Relations*, 53(1): 7–32.
- Just, S. N. (2015) ‘The negotiation of Basel III. Postliberalism in the making?’, *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 8(1): 25–41.
- Konings, M. (2018) *Capital and time*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

- MacKenzie, D. (2006) *An engine, not a camera. How financial models shape markets*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- MacKenzie, D., F. Muniesa and L. Siu (eds.) (2007) *Do economists make markets? On the performativity of economics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Parker, S. and M. Parker (2017) 'Antagonism, accommodation and agonism in critical management studies: Alternative organizations as allies', *Human Relations*, 70(11): 1366-1387.
- Spicer, A., M. Alvesson and D. Kärreman (2009) 'Critical performativity: The unfinished business of critical management studies', *Human Relations*, 62(4): 537-560.
- Spoelstra, S. and P. Svensson (2016) 'Critical performativity: The happy end of critical management studies?', in A. Prasad, P. Prasad, A. J. Mills and J. H. Mills (eds.) *Routledge companion to critical management studies*. New York: Routledge.

the author

Sine N. Just is a professor of strategic communication at the Department of Communication and Arts, Roskilde University. She heads the AlterEcos project, which explores alternatives to currently dominant forms of economic organizing. In this capacity, she probes the performativity of theoretical *and* socio-political imaginaries of diverse economies.

Email: sinenjust@ruc.dk