



Modes of organization

Lisa Conrad, Rowland Curtis and Christian Garmann Johnsen

Introduction

In this editorial introduction to the *ephemera* open issue 2021, we return to the perennial question: ‘What is organization?’. *ephemera* has of course always been dedicated to exploring alternative ways of understanding organization, while taking influence from diverse disciplines of inquiry and otherwise neglected organizational forms. For a journal dedicated to exploring ‘theory and politics in organization’, the responses we make to this question will also be appreciated in their political significance: not least for the ways in which they may inform particular approaches to organizational contestation and struggle. Yet, as we will argue in this editorial, the question ‘What is organization?’ is itself charged with ontological presuppositions of its own.

To draw out these presuppositions and their significance, we engage here with Agamben’s (2015) critique of Aristotelian metaphysics. This allows us to do two things: firstly, we find in Agamben a fundamental critique of the form of the question ‘What is...?’ – a critique that has ramifications for the way we think about organizations and organizing (cf. Frost, 2016; Beltramini, 2020); and secondly, we consider the value of mobilising an alternative ontology – a *modal* ontology – that may enable us to think differently about the theory and politics of organization.

Through such modal ontology we describe a relationship to questions of organization that dispenses with any reference to an underlying essence or continuity of organization (the ‘what’), but instead exercises a pluralistic thinking of organization as existing purely in its modifications (the ‘how’). As we explore further below, this is distinctive to more classical traditions in philosophical ontology where organization in its particularity (existence) would be understood as the manifestation of an underlying generality (essence), and which essence would serve as the continuous basis for its manifest transformations.

Our brief engagement with modal thinking here can be located within a wider ‘ontological turn’ in the social sciences, and which in organization studies has encompassed such areas as critical and speculative realisms (e.g. Fleetwood 2005; Campbell et al., 2019), process philosophy (Helin et al., 2014), science and technology studies (e.g. Czarniawska, 2009), posthumanism (e.g. Johnsen et al., 2021), affect theory (e.g. Karppi et al., 2016), object-oriented-ontologies (e.g. Letiche et al., 2018), infrastructural thinking (e.g. Kemmer et al., 2021) and experimental ethnography (e.g. O’Doherty & Neyland, 2019).

While ontological assumptions may have conventionally have been treated as the philosophical *grounds* for organizational inquiry, defining in generalised terms the nature of its objects of inquiry (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; cf. Willmott, 1993), what has arguably been distinctive in the more recent turn to ontology has been a relationship to ontological themes and questions as features of the very problems of organization with which we are engaged – including the discursive mobilisation of such ontological conceptions within everyday organizational practices and relations (e.g. Mol, 2002; Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017).¹

As we will be exploring further below, this renewed ontological interest has also included a related concern with the potentials for philosophical inquiry, not to legislate the ontological grounds for our inquiries, but to hold open the

¹ In so doing, such ontologically-oriented approaches would thereby offer an important contrast with more conventional empiricist organization studies that would (seek to) maintain a constitutive, dualistic separation between the ‘subject’ and ‘object’ of research practice, thereby to render both ‘organization’ and ‘theory’ manageable and in their allocated places.

conceptual spaces within which such ontological plurality may be both navigated and sustained (e.g. Latour, 2011, 2013; cf. Sørensen, 2003). An important precursor to such inquiries in organization studies can be seen in the writings of Robert Cooper, the subject of an early special issue of *ephemera* (Böhm & Jones, 2001), whose philosophically-informed writings served to invite students of organization into the adventure of more 'open' ontological fields of organizational inquiry (e.g. Cooper, 1976; see also Spoelstra, 2005).

Through the concept of modes, we will seek to reflect on the contributions to this open issue by suspending the assumption that organization may be only one thing, or that organization might be engaged as a 'thing' with an essence as such. Through a reading of the recent modal investigations of Agamben, in the next section we will take up a question of the plural and divergent *modes* through which what we call organization may exist and persist, and which, in the concluding section, will offer us a means by which to consider both the plurality and singularity of the contributions to this open issue.

How is a mode? Agamben contra Aristoteles

In *The Use of Bodies*, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben develops what he calls a modal ontology. This modal ontology takes its point of departure from what Agamben characterizes as 'Spinoza's radical ontological thesis': 'Nothing exists except substance and modes' (Spinoza, 2002: 224; cited in Agamben, 2015: 159). The radicality of this thesis, Agamben maintains, is that the substance does not exist independently of its mode, because the mode is inseparable from the substance. A mode, in Agamben's view, is a 'form-of-life', understood in the sense of 'life indivisible from its form' (2005: 206). Consider, for example, a seemingly simple form like a chair. From a modal ontological perspective, a chair does not have a specific 'essence', defined as the common characteristics of all chairs, that would precede the thing itself. Thus, the chair does not have to comply with a set of generic characteristics in order to qualify as a proper chair. Rather than being restricted to a single function (e.g. a chair can only be used for sitting), the mode of the chair is its possibilities, which can only be explored by using the chair for different purposes. In this way, Agamben seeks to liberate things from an ontology that

restrict them to a generic form, and thereby to explore through use what things can become.

The importance of Spinoza's ontological thesis that only substance and modes exist, as Agamben elaborates, lies in its ability to render inoperative the Aristotelian ontological apparatus that has defined so-called Western thinking since its inauguration. What is at stake in Aristotelian metaphysics is to clarify the relationship between essence (general form) and existence (particular things). In the Aristotelian tradition, the essence of things enjoys priority over singular existences: for example, the existence of a singular person is subsumed under the essence of humans in general (defined as animals with reason). This view raises the question, however, of what mediates the relationship between existence (this particular person) and essence (the common form of human beings). How can the essence of human beings be transmitted into a single person? This question sparked much debate in scholastic theology that remained inspired by the philosophy of Aristoteles.

For Aristoteles, this problem is resolved by introducing a distinction between the potential (form) and the actual (matter). The form is understood here to be the potential that lies inherent in any matter. For example, the seed has the potential of growing into a tree or a child has the potential to become a grown-up. Yet, despite this attempt, Agamben argues that the passage from the potential to the actual remains 'problematic' (2015: 157), since the relationship in Aristotelian metaphysics is ambiguous. Thus, the connection between what a thing is (matter) and what it can become (form) remains unresolved. This then is the problem of 'individualization': how the actual and the potential would relate to one other.

Agamben does not seek to resolve this problem within the confinement of Aristotelian metaphysics, but instead looks towards the fundamentally different ontology of Spinoza. Rather than grounding his ontology on either a sharp distinction between potential and act, or being and becoming, Agamben argues that Spinoza's conceptions of substance (or what he calls 'being') and modes represent an important break with Aristotelian metaphysics. This is the case, for Agamben, because being and modes are not understood to exist independently of each other.

However, Agamben insists that we should look for neither identity nor difference between being and modes. On the contrary, we should understand that being and modes operate on the basis of ‘coincidence, which is to say the falling together, of the two terms’ (2015: 165). Agamben elaborates: ‘Being does not preexist the modes but constitutes itself in being modified, is nothing other than its modification’ (2015: 170). For example, a particular thing, such as a chair, is therefore nothing but a specific modality of being, and, as such, it feeds back on being itself, constituting it. Being is a chair. A mode is not a static state, such as reaching an end goal wherein the being has realised its potential (the perfect chair, with no further designs needed). Instead, the way a mode is modified – that is, the way that the mode expresses being – serves as the basis for change (the question of how to sit and what kind of devices are helpful for sitting will be asked and answered again and again). Agamben writes: ‘In a modal ontology, being uses-itself, that is to say, it constitutes, expresses, and loves itself in the affection that it receives from its own modifications’ (2015: 165). A mode equips being with a capacity for expression. In this relation, the practice of use, for Agamben, is a process of transformation. For example, when children play with objects, they find new ways of using them; a legal document is suddenly transformed into a paper airplane (Agamben, 2007).

While describing a radical departure from Aristotelian metaphysics, Agamben nevertheless finds inspiration in Aristotle’s thinking:

Modal ontology has its place in the primordial fact—which Aristotle merely presupposed without thematizing it—that being is always already said: *to on legetai* . . . Emma is not the particular individuation of a universal human essence, but insofar as she is a mode, she is that being for whom it is a matter, in her existence, of her having a name, of her being in language. (2015: 167)

The fact that her being matters for Emma opens up an ethical dimension. A mode is not restricted to a description of what is, but rather emphasizes a concern for the ‘form-of-life’ that the mode expresses. Thus, Emma, in Agamben’s example, is a mode (assigned a name, having an existence, etc.), but by virtue of that mode, she has a capacity for changing herself, since her being is a concern for her. This concern is a concern for *how* Emma is. For this reason, Agamben writes: ‘Modal ontology, the ontology of the *how*, coincides with an ethics’ (2015: 231). Agamben therefore refuses that such an ethics

would operate through a mode's (actual) realisation of some predefined goal (potential); quite the opposite: Agamben attempts to break free of a thinking that restricts things to what may otherwise be considered their inherent potential, such as the chair's potential as a tool for sitting. This is what Agamben calls the procedure of 'inoperativity', which consists in 'liberating living human beings from every biological and social destiny and every predetermined task' (2015: 278).

On the one hand, we can see that Agamben does not view being as a general term that is actualized into particular modes because being does not exist prior to its modification. For this reason, contrary to Aristotelian ontology, there is no being which is not always-already modified in a specific manner. Being and mode are therefore two sides of the same coin. On the other hand, it is also important to note that being and modes are not organized in an ontological hierarchy (cf. Fleetwood, 2005). Neither being nor modes are understood to have a primary ontological status. Quite the opposite, being and modes are seen as intrinsically connected, because being can only exist insofar as it is modified in a specific manner.

To further explain the relationship between being and modes Agamben evokes the concept of rhythm, citing Plato for his acknowledgement that 'order in movement is called "rhythm"' (2015: 172; cf. Davies, 2019). Agamben thereby explains that we should think of modes as expressing a specific rhythm, involving a flow that follows a specific pattern. If we look at how a mode entails rhythm, then we can see that a mode is therefore neither predetermined by a fixed orderly scheme nor in a constant state of flux. Both of these extremes fail to acknowledge how order and movement are mutually dependent upon one another. A rhythm has order, but it is an order that transpires through movement. We cannot talk about the movement of a rhythm without order; nor does it make sense here to talk about order without movement. Hence, movement and order are intrinsically intertwined within a rhythm. Viewed from this perspective, it does not make sense to state that either organization or change has an ontological priority over the other: instead for Agamben there is no change without organization; no organization without change.

The problem here then is not to discover the relationship between change and organization, but rather to explore how this relationship is *modified*. To grasp this, for Agamben, we are therefore led to reformulate the problem of ontology. If we ask the question ‘What is...?’, then we are inevitably led into a distinction between essence and appearance. As we have already seen, formulating the question ‘What is organization?’ immediately calls for us to explore what organization basically ‘is’ by looking for its essential characteristics and differentiating them from mere appearance. Because the form of the question carries such presuppositions, Agamben encourages us to radically reformulate the problem of ontology: instead of asking ‘What is...?’, Agamben proposes we instead ask ‘How is...?’. We can thereby see how this shift of perspective may have profound implications for our thinking of the relationship between change and organization. The question ‘How is...?’ does not require us to search for a hidden essence underlying the appearances of things. Instead, the question requires us to explore how being is ‘expressed’ (2015: 166). Thus, we should ask: How is organization happening at this specific point in time, in this singular instance? And also, relatedly: How is change expressed here in relation to this organization?

Agamben’s modal ontology therefore suggests important implications for organization studies. When we explore organizations on the basis of such a modal ontology, following Agamben, we would not evaluate organization according to a generic ‘essence’ – such as a hierarchy or structure – according to which its status as ‘an’ actual organization may be confirmed. Instead, such modal thinking would be attentive to the singular ‘form-of-life’ that each organizational form expresses. Such ‘forms-of-life’, in Agamben’s terms, ‘are never simply *facts* but always and above all *possibilities* of life, always and above all potential’ (2015: 207, italics in original). We are thereby led towards engagements with organization that are moved by a concern for the singular ‘forms-of-life’ which they express, and which may only become apparent in use.

Modes of organization

Our theme of modal organization thereby allows for a distinctive set of reflections on the contributions to this open issue. This is an ‘open’ issue, and

the issue of openness signals the tracing of a plurality, rather than a movement towards editorial closure. While we will explore some thematic connections across the different contributions to this open issue – such as academic labour, growth and degrowth and the production and mobilisation of data in organizational life – through such modal thinking we will also seek to maintain an appreciation of the singularity of the individual contributions and the particular movements in the ‘how’ of organization that they track.

Anja Svejgaard Pors and Eva Pallesen’s article ‘The reorganization of the bureaucratic encounter in a digitized public administration’ (this issue) focuses on a citizen service centre in a Danish municipality subject to a restructuring programme with the intention of turning its citizens into savvy and dutiful users of digital self-services. Pors and Pallesen use Max Weber’s description of the bureaucratic ethos by way of contrast to the ideal images of the public sector worker that are mobilised in the transformation programme: instead of suppressing affection, enthusiasm and individuality, as in the bureaucratic model, the staff are given the task of generating enthusiasm for digital self-service: among both its potential users and the staff themselves. In contrast with the classic public-private split, furthermore, the municipality’s staff are also called upon to integrate digital solutions into their private lives. A rearticulation of bureaucratic modes of organization is thereby traced by the authors, including the clerks’ adaptation to these new forms of professional ethos. Rather than pursuing a question of what bureaucracy ‘is’ then, the study can instead be seen to investigate such projects of technological administration for the particular modifications they undergo.

Where Pors and Pallesen focus on the modification of boundaries in the public sector, Giacomo Poderi (‘On commoners’ daily struggles: Carving out the when/where of commoning’) (this issue) considers another kind modification in the organizational work of commons projects. With the help of data gathered from interviews with ‘commoners’ in the context of open-source software (FOSS), Poderi contends with the ‘serendipity, contradictions, mundanity, and everyday messiness’ of the collective participation of commons projects. Poderi engages with commoners’ lived experience of sustaining their commoning practices, as ‘carving out the when/where of commoning’, described as a situated and relational type of boundary work.

Over time, this boundary work is shown by Poderi to be strenuous: constantly having to re-perform the commitment to commoning can turn into ‘a relevant source of alienation from commoning itself’. Thus, the sustainability of commoning is seen to be threatened by these tensions between modes of organization (voluntary civic work; wage labour; care work) and their different forms of expression.

While commoning practices may provide one rich example of a distinctive experiment in organizational practice, Claudia Firth’s article ‘Reading groups: Organisation for minor politics?’ (this issue) offers a ‘history from below’ of reading groups in their significance as experiments in organizational form. The article reflects on a range of different historical examples, considering the specificity of the practices of mutual learning and critical knowledge production which they have supported and in which they consist. In developing these interests, the article draws on Deleuze & Guattari’s notion of a ‘minor’ politics as a means of reflection on reading groups as sites of difference or differentiation within wider political milieux. We are thereby led to an appreciation of such groups as expressing their particular modes of organization through interrelation with wider practices and formations of social and political organization.

Annika Kühn’s article ‘Infrastructural standby: Caring for loose relations’ (this issue), meanwhile, draws upon an ethnographic study of Hamburg’s cruise ship terminals to consider the significance of planned pausing. As a supplement to the recent themed issue of *ephemera* on modes of organizational standby, for Kühn such pausing in shipping and docking infrastructures provides an example of an organizational mode of ‘un-participation’ that entails a simultaneous, paradoxical quality of un/availability. The serial character of such pausing in the shipping terminal is seen by Kühn to hold potentials for adjustment in each episode, as occasions for (re)composition, and which may be compared with Agamben’s interest in rhythm, introduced above, as entailing relations of both order and movement. In exploring these themes, the article makes imaginative connections between sociomaterial studies of infrastructure and aspects of feminist theory to consider such moments of infrastructural balancing as a kind of *caring* for loose relations and spaces. The tracing of such moments is thereby seen to demand qualities of care which involve a concern for the

vulnerability and fragility of such infrastructures and the intervals and procedures upon which they are based. Such investigations are thereby seen by Kühn to occupy the threshold of an affective plane of infrastructural looseness, poised in a liminal space between precarity and boredom.

As another investigation into contemporary infrastructures – here the infrastructures of data production and management in the monitoring of air quality – Vanessa Weber (‘Filtering data: Exploring the sociomaterial production of air’) (this issue) engages with informational ‘data’ as ‘neither raw replications of the world nor available instantaneously’ but as instead manufactured through sociotechnical practice. Practices of filtering are thereby seen to take on a central role, not only in the data generated by citizens’ grassroots initiatives in their concern for air pollution, but also in the production and handling of data through the project’s own empirical investigations. Thus, filtering (‘letting pass and blocking’) shows up in multiple organizational framings: the legal prescription of particular filters within pollution management; the filtering in the production of scientific accounts of air composition; and the intricate process of filtering involved in the production of Weber’s empirical accounts. In this regard, the filtering of data becomes inseparable from its production, such that a valuable ‘condensate’ may be achieved. Rather than the ‘what’ of data then, through this investigation into such modes of filtering, we may instead find ourselves caught in the ‘how’ of data through its different moments of movement and modification.

An interest in data production and its relation to wider organizational forms can also be seen in Tereza Østbø Kuldova’s article ‘The cynical university: Gamified subjectivity in Norwegian academia’ (this issue), which considers the increasing use of numeric indicators to measure and govern academic work. This trend, Kuldova argues, fosters a ‘gamification’ of academia in which academics learn to play competitive games of publication and research income. Using the case of Norwegian academic life, Kuldova explores the figure of the ‘cynical academic’ who maintains a critical distance towards such numeric accounts, but yet pragmatically engages in such activity as a means of perseverance in the game. In tracing the outlines of the fantasy which is understood to constitute this figure of the cynical academic, Kuldova calls for a contrasting *degamification* of academia, involving a strategy of refusal rather

than accommodation, and inspired by a concern for alternative modes of academic life that may be in decline.

Where Kuldova's article considers contrasting modes of being in the 'gamified' academy, in 'Giving an account of one's work: From excess to ECTS in higher education in the arts' (this issue), Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt's note explores how the organizational modes of life in higher art education are being modified through the so-called Bologna process. To ensure that educational activities are inscribed within this process, students in the bachelor programme 'Dance, Context, Choreography' at the Inter-University Centre of Dance in Berlin are required to record their self-study time at home, thereby serving a performative function in rendering leisure time as study time. Schmidt finds a dual dynamic in her analysis of the protocols written by students, however: on the one hand, a problematic neoliberal regime of self-measurement and surveillance; on the other, the new forms of visibility of artistic work which may previously have been left unseen. By applying a feminist critical lens, Schmidt identifies means of resistance within such emergent modes of accountability and visibility, 'as naysaying to an obscured economy within the arts and an insistence on time without work – for friendship, healing and caring.'

Kuldova and Schmidt's concern for prevailing modes of life within contemporary academia is complemented by Phil Hedges' note 'Deserting academia: Quitting as infrapolitics' (this issue), which explores the politics of academic employment through a contrasting focus on the confessional blog posts of those who have already departed the sector. In conversation with Francesca Coin's (2017) *ephemera* contribution 'On quitting', the note draws on the ideas of James C. Scott to consider the genre of 'Quit Lit' as part of a broader terrain of 'infrapolitical' resistance and struggle, both within and without the neoliberal university. In so doing, Hedges reflects on the methodological challenges presented by the study and their relevance to wider questions of disengagement and concealment in organizational life. We might thereby sense echoes here of the concept of 'unparticipation' mobilised by Kühn, above, in terms of the distinctive demands such absent presences may make on the researcher.

While Hedges' focuses on academics who may have acted on a sense of having already had more than enough, in their note 'Enoughness: Exploring the potentialities of having and being enough' (this issue), Gabriela Edlinger, Bernhard Ungericht and Daniel Deimling consider how it may only be through reflection on our experiences of having-and-being enough that we may find ourselves able to inhabit modes of post-growth economy and society. In exploring these ideas, the authors consider the quantitative doctrine of 'moreness' that they find dominant in contemporary life. They thereby consider its role in displacing the qualitative dimensions of experiences of 'enoughness', as developed through reflections on a recent empirical study of corporate policies oriented to financial growth. By engaging experiences of good measure as opposed to right measure, and which they associate with experiences of connectedness, presence and immersion, the authors offer a broader reflection on such modes of valuation within wider social and economic life and the potentials for a more affirmative embrace of having had *just enough*.

As with Gabriela Edlinger's note on enoughness, Roberto Sciarelli's review article ('Pleasure as a political ethics of limits') also reflects upon questions of limits, value and degrowth through a combined review of recent books by Paolo Godani and Giorgos Kallis. With regard to the Kallis text, Sciarelli finds a reading of Malthus' theory of natural limits and scarcity which offers confirmation of Malthus' reactionary reputation in its naturalisation of scarcity and class inequalities, rejection of projects of redistribution and overriding commitment to concerns of economic growth. Kallis is seen instead to turn to classical Greek thought as the basis for a more affirmative relationship to such limits to growth as the conditions for an abundance that is shared. Meanwhile, Sciarelli finds in Godani's reading of Epicurus a kind of subtractive relationship to pleasure, whereby the removal of pain gives chance 'to the innate condition of pleasure, which does not require anything more'. Where Poderi, above, reflects on the struggles involved in the maintenance of an organizational commons, Sciarelli finds in these texts an affirmation of the shared passions of a life in common as a valuable counter to contemporary modes of over-consumption.

Where Sciarelli's review looks to classical Greek thought as a source of alternative ethical modes of life, the final two contributions consider the

contemporary turn to theological traditions and modes of thought as means to make sense of our socio-economic present. Enrico Beltramini ('Economic theology: Is economy a subfield of theology?') (this issue) offers a thoughtful review of Stefan Schwartzkopf's (2019) edited collection *The Routledge Handbook of Economic Theology*, locating economic theology within the wider contemporary field of political theology, while exploring the ways these fields have navigated intersections in the social sciences between faith and secular modernity. In reply to Beltramini's review, Schwartzkopf offers responses on the collection's editorial framing, the relationship of its contributions to Western liberal market norms and questions of theological commitment. Where Beltramini evokes the figure of the apologetical theologian, who, in their effacement of the word of the Almighty God, ends up defaulting to some finite oracle, Schwartzkopf offers a reminder of more expansive notions of theology without a God, as associated with Georges Bataille's notion of 'atheology' or acephalous theology.

Conclusion

In this editorial article we have drawn on the theme of modes of organization as a means to explore both the collectivity and singularity of the contributions to this open issue. Agamben's discussion of modal ontology, and the contrast he draws with more classic approaches to ontology, has allowed us to begin to draw out some characteristics typical of such modal conceptions and their possible value for organization studies: including its problematization of essentialist thinking; its shift from questions of the 'what' to a concern with the 'how' of organization; and a relationship to organizational transformation where order and movement are seen as complementary rather than oppositional. As we have indicated above, this modal way of thinking has allowed us some fresh perspectives on the diverse contributions to this open issue, while enabling reflection on the very notion of an open issue: as a form which allows an exploration of lines of convergence between the different contributions while also maintaining the 'how' of the contributions in both their singularity and plurality. We have also begun to situate such modal thinking within a wider ontological turn in organization studies, as a gesture towards the openings and modifications which such thinking may yet provide for *ephemera* and the theory and politics of organization.

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the editors

Lisa Conrad is a member of the editorial collective of *ephemera*.

Email: lisa.conrad@lephana.de

Rowland Curtis is a member of the editorial collective of *ephemera*.

Email: r.curtis@qmul.ac.uk

Christian Garmann Johnsen is a member of the editorial collective of ephemera.
Email: cgj.mpp@cbs.dk