

ephemera: theory & politics
in organization

Landscapes of political action

What is *ephemera*: theory & politics in organization?

ephemera is an independent journal, founded in 2001. *ephemera* provides its content free of charge, and charges its readers only with free thought.

theory

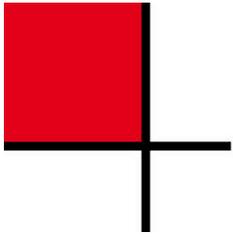
ephemera encourages contributions that explicitly engage with theoretical and conceptual understandings of organizational issues, organizational processes and organizational life. This does not preclude empirical studies or commentaries on contemporary issues, but such contributions consider how theory and practice intersect in these cases. We especially publish articles that apply or develop theoretical insights that are not part of the established canon of organization studies. *ephemera* counters the current hegemonization of social theory and operates at the borders of organization studies in that it continuously seeks to question what organization studies is and what it can become.

politics

ephemera encourages the amplification of the political problematics of organization within academic debate, which today is being actively de-politized by the current organization of thought within and without universities and business schools. We welcome papers that engage the political in a variety of ways as required by the organizational forms being interrogated in a given instance.

organization

Articles published in *ephemera* are concerned with theoretical and political aspects of organizations, organization and organizing. We refrain from imposing a narrow definition of organization, which would unnecessarily halt debate. Eager to avoid the charge of 'anything goes' however, we do invite our authors to state how their contributions connect to questions of organization and organizing, both theoretical and practical.



ephemera

theory & politics in organization

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Landscapes of political action

Christian Garmann Johnsen, Lena Olaison
and Justine Grønbæk Pors

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Front cover: Still from Pilvi Takala: *The Trainee* (2008). *ephemera* wishes to thank the artist for kindly allowing us to use the photo.

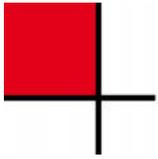


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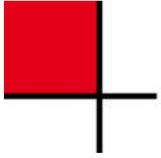
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Landscapes of political action*

Christian Garmann Johnsen, Lena Olaison and Justine Grønþæk Pors

Introduction

This issue offers a selection of contributions submitted to the *ephemera* open call for papers. The contributions address a variety of organizational issues and engage with diverse theoretical perspectives. However, despite their apparent differences, they all share a concern with the relationship between organization and politics and thus revolve around how processes of organizing intertwine with political issues like power, neoliberalism, gender and climate change. To provide a frame for this open issue, in this editorial we will revisit the question of how to theorize the relationships between organization and politics, approaching the matter by briefly discussing Arendt's threefold distinction between labour, work and action, as well as its relevance to organization studies. Following this discussion, we will reflect on how the artistic intervention *The Trainee* by Finnish artist Pilvi Takala evinces the intrinsic connection between politics and organization. We will then outline the contributions.

In her seminal work *The human condition*, Hannah Arendt introduces a tripartite distinction between labour, work and action, all of which are needed to achieve what she calls a 'vita activa' – that is, an active life that allows humans to flourish. Labour, Arendt explains, refers to 'the biological process of the human body' (1958: 7). For example, our existence depends on our harvesting, preparing and eating food. In contrast to the temporal nature of labour, work denotes the creation of 'an "artificial" world of things' (*ibid.*: 7), such as the production of durable objects, including tools, artworks and buildings. Distinct from both

* We would like to thank Matthew Allen, Stephen Dunne and Katie Sullivan for their editorial work with this special issue. We would further like to thank Susan Ryan for her work with turning our writing into readable academic prose.

labour and work, action refers to the existence of humans in plural – in other words, our political coexistence – or, as Arendt puts it, ‘the political activity par excellence’ (*ibid.*: 9). Action is thus the precondition of politics through which humans can make a new beginning, take the initiative to do the unexpected and reveal themselves to others. The unique feature of humans, Arendt contends, is their capacity to create the conditions for their own existence. Hence, humans are simultaneously influenced by and able to influence their natural and social surroundings. While labour and work can be performed without the presence of others, action is inherently social and therefore political.

The emergence of the modern age turned Arendt’s concern to the ‘instrumentalization of action’ (*ibid.*: 230), whereby political action is reduced to a means-end relationship and therefore in her analysis assumes the features associated with work. Arendt represents this instrumentalization with the ‘homo faber’, a figure convinced that ‘every issue can be solved and every human motivation reduced to the principle of utility’ (*ibid.*: 305), maintaining that work has thus gradually replaced action as the highest order of the ‘vita activa’. Paolo Virno takes Arendt’s distinction between labour, work and action as a starting point, but argues that the conditions for political action have changed since the post-war period. He proposes that the advent of what he calls post-Fordist production has served to yet again reconfigure the relationship between work and action. What we once commonly recognized as politics may have been reduced to work, but new forms of work, he insists, will also reveal new forms of political action. Thus, Virno reverses Arendt’s concern about the relationship between work and action, arguing that some of the work done in contemporary organizations has ‘acquired the traditional features of political action’ (2004: 51). In other words, he asserts that some forms of work performed today open up spaces for human interaction that may assume the character of politics. According to Virno, the current ‘crisis of politics’ is not that political action in our time has diminished, but rather that there is ‘already too much politics in the world of wage labor’ (*ibid.*: 51).

Taking both Arendt’s concern about the absence of political action in the modern age and Virno’s rereading of that concern as points of departure, we now return to the question of how to theorize the relationship between organization and politics today. We suggest that many of the activities undertaken in contemporary organizations come another step closer to constituting political action, insofar as they involve creating the social conditions of our lives. In fact, following this line of thinking, we can position organizing as a political activity, for humans configure social settings, arrange relations between people and govern society in ways that are always based on contingent choices that can in principle be altered. As such, organization always entails a political element. Taking such an element

seriously, Parker, Cheney, Fournier and Land claim that organization is fundamentally ‘politics made durable’ (2013: 39), yet they must grapple with the problem that such politics is rarely recognized. Instead, organizational configurations are legitimized as driven by necessity. In the words of Parker et al.:

Our current versions of markets, management, hierarchy, leaders, employees, consumption and so on constitute a particular set of political assumptions. These aren’t necessary and inevitable arrangements, dictated by the structure of our monkey genetics, or the calculus of the invisible hand of the market. Rather than seeing organizing as a technical matter, something to be left to experts with MBAs perhaps, we can understand it as a way of working through the complex ways of being human with other humans and hence a responsibility and possibility for all of us. (2013: 39)

When we start to see organizing as political, we also give ourselves the possibility of critically exploring the built-in conditioning of the (im)possible fields of action that follow from different forms and forces of organizing. This is precisely what *The Trainee*, an artistic intervention performed by Finnish artist Pilvi Takala beautifully set out to do.¹ We cannot do the artwork justice here, so we provide only this rough summary. The artist, introduced as the new trainee Johanna Takala, enters the marketing department at the Finnish headquarters of Deloitte. She comes to work every day for a month, with only very few people knowing the true nature of her presence. Quickly, the new trainee begins to act rather strangely. She seems to be doing virtually no work. She sits at her workstation in the open-plan office space, but her eyes do not gaze at the computer screen in front of her, and her hands are never busy typing or writing emails. Instead, she just sits there with her hands in her lap hour after hour. Her co-workers politely ask if she is waiting for someone or for something to happen, but she kindly replies that, no, she is just thinking. She goes to the tax department library for an entire day, but does nothing there. She spends another whole day riding up and down the elevator without a purpose or a destination (see the cover of this issue).

These actions, or rather the absence of them, slowly make the atmosphere around the trainee almost unbearably intense. Her co-workers find it increasingly problematic to be around her and struggle to find solutions or explain her behaviour. Some sincerely try to understand her bizarre work methods; others display a sort of bewildered amusement. Some simply cannot handle it and request that their superiors remove her from the office space. Emails and phone calls documenting her laziness are sent to top management, along with suggestions that she has mental problems and demands that someone

¹ The intervention is documented in video here: pilvitakala.com/the-trainee/.

do something to resolve the issue. Gradually, the trainee's simple and silent presence becomes intolerable for the other employees.

Observed as a political action, this particular way of intervening in the neoliberal modus operandi of modern-day office spaces evokes a long tradition in performance art of making present in a particular context that which should not be there and thus exposing the rules put in place by certain political orders. In the performance *The Trainee*, the seemingly harmless yet inevitably subversive act of doing nothing in a busy office space strikes at the very core of how the job performance and self-performance imperatives at work today structure and permeate public spaces. Moreover, because the trainee's behaviour lacks a place in the order of things, she unmasks the political imperatives that structure and guide behaviour, roles, relations and self-performance in the office space. Ultimately, as all attempts to meaningfully capture and determine what she is up to fail (e.g., an explanation of mental illness), the heightening intensity cannot be alleviated.

The Trainee masterfully deploys this artistic strategy of politicizing a social space by putting something in it that the tacit rules in place cannot tolerate, thus forcing them to become visible. Perhaps even more powerful to watch, however, is the range of responses triggered by the trainee's presence. Throughout the video, the viewer is astonished time and again by the difficulty the other employees have relating to the presence of an unproductive colleague, and by the numerous tactics people invent to deal with the disturbing presence of an intolerable element. Some people react with laughter, others become aggressive, while still others demonstrate impressive creativity in the strategies they implement to avoid interacting with the trainee. Strange but effective choreographies of ignorance emerge. The video can be seen as a careful ethnographic study of how deeply invested most people are in upholding the status quo of social and political rules – a point, of course, made so eloquently by Goffman (1974). The employees in the Helsinki division of Deloitte, at least, are willing to come up with a wide array of interesting actions intended to prevent them from having to change how they make sense of appropriate behaviour, normality and rules in their organization. Notably, the act of being lazy and thus wasting the company's time and money is not necessarily what one finds so disturbing – every employee probably does that once in a while. Rather, the force of the intervention seems to stem from how shamelessly the trainee flaunts her unproductivity, for it potentially puts into question the way everyone else at the office performs according to corporate expectations.

Thus, *The Trainee* constitutes a form of political action working to transform an ordered social space into a political space. The political power of the intervention

lies in how it problematizes rules and routines, thereby opening up a space of contestation. It becomes painfully obvious how we, as employees, are invested in maintaining the status quo, and how the dynamics of certain practices enable us to avoid and ignore the political and potentially problematic nature of our daily work in organizations.

Contributions

Seeking to offer a range of explorations into new forms of political action, this issue of *ephemera* contains a selection of the contributions to our open call, including nine articles, one note and two book reviews.

In the article ‘Towards an anarchist cybernetics: Stafford Beer, self-organization and radical social movements’, Thomas Swan argues that anarchist theory and practice can be enriched by drawing on cybernetics, in particular the ‘Viable System Model’ developed by Stafford Beer. Despite the apparent discrepancy between the cybernetic emphasis on hierarchy and the anarchist rejection of domination and control, Swan argues that these two traditions are both concerned with the need for decentralized autonomy. The theoretical conflicts between cybernetics and anarchism arise, Swan maintains, because what he calls ‘anatomical hierarchy’ and ‘functional hierarchy’ fail to be distinguished. While anatomical hierarchy operates on the basis of distributing positions, functional hierarchy refers to the order in which decisions are made. In a functional hierarchy, Swan shows, every organizational member can take part in formulating strategies and making decisions. By rearticulating Beer’s organizational model in the context of radical social movements, Swan concludes that such a model can provide a deeper understanding of the social dynamics at play in anarchism.

The social dynamics of political action is further explored in Alessandro Delfanti’s and Johan Söderberg’s article ‘Repurposing the hacker: Three cycles of recuperation in the evolution of hacking and capitalism’, which draws our attention to how political action, in this case hacking, can lose its transformational power when institutions and corporations adopt, adapt and repurpose its practices. Delfanti and Söderberg analyse the evolution of hacking through three interrelated cycles in which they claim this dynamic can be discerned. The first cycle focuses on how industry co-opts hacker technologies or innovations, such as hackathons. The second focuses on how corporate and military cultures and hacking, their counter-culture, are interdependent. The third and final cycle addresses how the critique of capitalism that gets incorporated in capitalism also legitimizes it. Although not intent on degrading

hacking and its potential for political action, the authors nonetheless claim that 'the hackability of organizational practices is a new feature of contemporary capitalism, and hackers are at one and the same time shaped by and contribute to shaping this larger whole' (56). The danger, the authors point out, is that hacking risks losing its subversive power if it only acts within the bounds of such capitalism.

In the next article Lawrence Corrigan and Albert Mills study the Occupy movement as it became manifested in Halifax, Canada, their aim being to provide a dramaturgical understanding of how societal actors produce meaning in the context of the territories they claim. As such, the authors explore political action in relationship to space, recognizing how space implies movement and displacement as well as how it intersects with the dramaturgical concepts of performing regions, performance/audience and stigma. Interested in 'cooperative occupation', they follow a series of events where war veterans' traditional claim to a space in which to commemorate and pay tribute to fallen soldiers competes with the putative home site of Occupy Nova Scotia. The article explores the liminal space that this particular clash produced between the Occupy movement itself and the factors of war and public administration that a desire to commemorate war brought to the space. The authors carefully map the tensions and difficult negotiations, but also the productive frictions between them, with the latter contributing to Occupy Nova Scotia's success in fostering public discussion about the right to the city and, ultimately, in changing the hegemonic narrative of the local political establishment.

In 'New media and the Egyptian revolution: The ironies of mediated communication, the fetishisation of information and the shrinking of political action', Liyan Gao takes a critical stance with regard to the proclaimed emancipatory and consciousness-raising role of new media. Gao claims that online engagement, such as sharing and liking practices, might mobilize political action, but does not in itself constitute political action. What is more, she argues, online engagement might even have the opposite effect of mobilizing action, as engaging in online activities to, say, share information might prompt us to feel that we are doing something important and thus that such activities can replace and displace political action. Using the Egyptian revolution to illustrate her point, Gao shows that while the Western media focused on the role of new media during the Arab Spring, the new initiatives that endured were based on the traditional organizing of people in public spaces rather than on online engagement.

In the article 'Decoding and recoding gender in academic capitalism', Soile Veijola and Eeva Jokinen take issue with the gender inequality that prevails in

contemporary academia, arguing that we are currently witnessing the emergence of ‘coding capitalism’, which builds on the premise that everything must be inscribed in a quantifiable language. Within this regime, women are expected to take care of the social aspects of academic work – what Veijola and Jokinen refer to as ‘hostessing work’ – while men are often expected to ignore such tasks. Nevertheless, this form of work predominantly carried out by female academics fails to be coded in the same manner as other more masculine endeavours are. Thus, practices like making coffee, organizing social and academic events or taking care of personal relations remain unacknowledged, as they are unrecognized by the established management tools, which value other forms of work more highly, such as getting published in highly ranked journals or attracting research funding. However, Veijola and Jokinen argue that building communities is a quintessential support for creative academic work, and that ‘universities cannot cope without care’.

Political action in the form of resistance in organizations comes under scrutiny in Erik Mygind du Plessis’ article ‘Serving coffee with Žižek: On decaf, half-caf and real resistance at Starbucks’. He bases his discussion on the Žižekian distinction between ‘Real’ and ‘decaf’ actions. In the case of resistance, ‘Real resistance’ would be revolutionary and change the social order of an organization, while ‘decaf resistance’ might give the individual a sense of relief but actually stabilizes power relations in the organization. Analysing an online forum where Starbucks baristas discuss their individual responses to the Starbucks code of conduct as well as customer behaviour, du Plessis demonstrates that this either-or distinction is problematic. He argues that since Real acts are per definition rare, almost all acts of resistance can be defined as decaf and thus amassed into one big category. However, acts of resistance are subtle and varied, and are generally neither harmless nor revolutionary, but in du Plessis’ own expression, ‘half-cafed’. The dichotomy of Real and decaf thus fails to take into account the myriad political actions that can exist in an organization at once.

In ‘Managing International Development: (Re)Positioning Critiques’, Fabian Frenzel, Peter Case, Mitchell Sedgwick and Arun Kumar take stock of the current state of critical work on international development. They argue that critical management studies should pay attention to the conditions for international development that have come in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, particularly a strong tendency to impose abstract, universal models that obscure the complex power relations that dominate international development. The authors call for critical scholars to respond to this trend by interrogating the influence of financialization on developing countries, the evaluation and measurement instruments employed in international

development and the prevalence of ‘projects’ as an organizational form. As the approach is critical, they call for scholars to expose the gap between real-world cases and the idealized management models that inform international development.

Antonios Broumas writes about rational choice and neoliberal theories of the intellectual commons, offering a careful, critical analysis of how rational choice and neoliberal theories conceptualize and understand the intellectual commons. Using his analysis, Broumas is able to show how both theories tend to reduce the potential of the intellectual commons in order to improve the dominant, capital-based mode of social reproduction. His contribution demonstrates how this tendency means that both theories strive to conceal their more radical potentialities towards commons-based societies. Arguing that a theory of the intellectual commons should not be confined to the status quo, but instead have solid, normative foundations, Broumas concludes that, in contrast to social democratic and critical theories, both rational choice and neoliberal accounts of the intellectual commons fail to conceive of them outside contemporary capitalism and, thus, to help commons-based societies to emerge.

Although, we often think of Big Tech companies like Google, Apple or Facebook as primarily data-based and thus immaterial, Mél Hogan focuses her article on how global Big Tech increasingly encroaches on ecosystems management to grow its own operations. By focusing on the material and environmental dimensions of Big Tech and drawing on such facts as data centres’ being the largest and fastest growing consumers of electricity and water, Hogan traces how Big Tech is investing in, building or taking over crucial infrastructure like wastewater facilities or forests in several specific geographical locations. The contribution highlights the glaring paradox of Big Tech, which, although often represented as sustainable entrepreneurs, uses tremendous natural resources to develop the very technologies supposed to fight environmental degradation. Moreover, the article compellingly shows that however green data centres become, and however innovative renewable energy may be, a larger media ecosystem undergirds them – a world of limited natural resources. Hogan thus proposes the concept of ‘Big Data Ecologies’ to situate infrastructure at the centre of the discussion on how Big Tech companies drive neoliberal, global transformations with severe consequences for the environment. If not a form of political action in itself, the contribution provides fertile ground for political contestation regarding how Big Tech threatens the possibility of a sustainable future.

Ville Kivivirta, in his note ‘The shock of the Anthropocene and a margin of hope: On possibilities for critical thinking in the Arctic context’ connects two themes

explored in other contributions to this issue, namely political action in the context of climate change as well as within the university. Discussing Serres' concepts of the parasite and the cyborg, Kivivirta examines the potential role of critical scholarship in universities located in the Arctic region. Focusing on the regional conditions and possibilities for critical performativity, Kivivirta demonstrates the importance of seeking to understand how critical scholarship is lived, experienced and practised differently from within particular settings. As such, Kivivirta contributes to the more conceptual discussion of critique and critical performativity in organization studies.

We round off the issue with two book reviews. The first is by Sine Nørholm Just and the second is a collective review by Hugo Letiche, Geoff Lightfoot and Simon Lilley.

Sine Nørholm Just reviews Boldyrev's and Svetlova's edited book entitled *Enacting dismal science: New perspectives on the performativity of economics*. This book deals with the question of how performativity matters 'after-the-turn': in other words, once it has been established that economic theories *are*, indeed, performative, then what? Thus each chapter of the book presents a different view on the theoretical discussions and empirical developments that define the performativity of economics today. As the various chapters unfold, Sine Nørholm Just detects an undercurrent of dissatisfaction with the inability of critical accounts to influence economists. Thus, the book springs from an urge to engage with and discuss the fact that the performativity of studies of the performativity of economics has been greatly overlooked. What do we want critical accounts about the performativity of economic theory to do in the social and material world? Put differently, and in greater alignment with this issue's overall theme, what kind of critical or even political action can such accounts lead to?

Finally, Hugo Letiche, Geoff Lightfoot and Simon Lilley undertake an ambitious encounter with Graham Harman's recent work in no less than a triple book review of *Immaterialism: Objects and social theory*; *Dante's broken hammer: The ethics, aesthetics and metaphysics of love*; and *The rise of realism*, the latter having been co-authored with Manuel DeLanda. As a leading figure in what is known as speculative realism or object-oriented ontology, Harman has produced work that has proved influential in philosophy, art and architecture, but whose impact on organization studies has yet to be seen. Recognizing that leaving the safe confines of post-structuralism is no simple feat, Letiche, Lightfoot and Lilley convincingly argue that management and organization scholars should be interested in Harman's work because the empirical domains of these disciplines are contoured by and studded with a multitude of objects too often ignored, fetishized or black-boxed.

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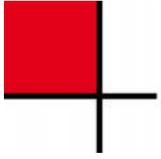
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Towards an anarchist cybernetics: Stafford Beer, self-organisation and radical social movements

Thomas Swann

abstract

In the early 1960s, a number of anarchist writers showed an interest in cybernetics, in which they saw the tools for better articulating radical forms of self-organisation. Discussions on the connections between anarchism and cybernetics did not advance very far, however, and by the 1970s the topic seems to have fallen off the anarchist radar. With an increase in interest in cybernetics over the last few years, this paper picks up where these debates left off and highlights some key points of contact between cybernetics and anarchism that have the potential to advance radical accounts of self-organisation. Based on a theoretical appraisal of the core texts and arguments in the debate around anarchism and cybernetics, the paper shows that the way in which hierarchy is formulated in cybernetic thought has a crucial impact on anarchist theory and practice and aids both academic approaches to social movements and, importantly, anarchist and radical left praxis. In addition, it provides a response to the critique of cybernetics in critical management studies that stands as a barrier to taking cybernetics seriously as a contribution to radical understandings of organisation.

Introduction

In this paper, I attempt to rehabilitate cybernetics, in some form, as a tradition that has the potential to enrich our understandings of radical or alternative forms of organisation. In doing so, I argue for an anarchist cybernetics: a reading of Stafford Beer's organisational cybernetics that lends itself to forms of organisation that aim to limit if not completely reject centralised, top-down command and control in favour of participatory and democratic practices.

Cybernetics has experienced something of a resurgence in recent years with a number of popular science books (Kline, 2015; Medina, 2011; Pickering, 2010) having been followed by a small but significant amount of interest in the subject within academia and beyond. While some of this work is highly critical (e.g., Tiqqun, 2001; Morozov, 2014), there are also more balanced engagements (Collister, 2014; Crnkić, 2013; Duda, 2013; Galloway, 2014). In critical management studies (CMS), cybernetics has not enjoyed much attention. In *Organization*, a leading journal in the field, discussions of cybernetics are few and far between (e.g., Baeker, 2006; Checkland, 1994; Galliers, Mingers and Jackson, 1997). In *ephemera*, cybernetics has received serious consideration in only one paper (Collister, 2014) and very brief mention in a number of others (e.g., de Geus, 2014; Hoofd, 2010). In addition to addressing this lacuna in CMS, this paper aims to contribute to the growing body of work in CMS on radical social movements (e.g. Feigenbaum et al., 2013; Kokkinidis, 2015; Parker et al., 2007; Parker et al., 2014; Sutherland et al., 2014) as well as anarchist organisation more specifically (e.g. Land, 2007; Parker, 2011; Reedy, 2002; see also the recent *ephemera* special issue: *ephemera*, 2014).

On the face of it, anarchism and cybernetics, as I characterise them here, might seem like opposites, at least in terms of their respective accounts of organisation. Anarchists, on the one hand, have championed non-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian forms of organisation that are built on liberation and autonomy. Cybernetics, on the other, in CMS and elsewhere, has been critiqued for being a functionalist and technocratic approach to organisation, offering the kind of blueprints and top-down planning that anarchists and other radicals frequently reject. Contrary to this apparent conflict, I suggest in this paper that a reappraisal of one particular strand of cybernetic thought – the strand most closely associated with UK-based cyberneticians, Stafford Beer chief among them – can in fact enrich an anarchist account of organisation. Through a theoretical appraisal of cybernetics, I aim to show that the ways in which Beer and others have thought about self-organisation, autonomy and hierarchy might provide the foundations for a nuanced descriptive *and* normative theory of how people can organise in ways that maximise collective and individual autonomy. In short, I want to answer the question, ‘What can cybernetics teach us about how anarchists can and do organise?’. In doing so, I intend to propose an ‘anarchist cybernetics’ as a new way of thinking about anarchist organisation.

To this end, this paper will attempt three tasks. Firstly, I begin with overviews of both anarchism and Stafford Beer’s organisational cybernetics, focusing on his Viable System Model. Secondly, I turn to how cybernetics was taken up by several anarchists in the 1960s and 1970s. Thirdly, in order to advance a theoretical development of this meeting of anarchist political theory and the

understanding of control and organisation found in cybernetics, I introduce and discuss the notion of functional hierarchy. In line with this third task, I then attempt to rearticulate Beer's Viable System Model as a way of understanding anarchist organisation. Cybernetics, I argue, has the potential to add crucial nuance to anarchist accounts of organisation and, more generally, to show how social movement organisation can be understood in ways that go beyond often simplistic descriptions of ideal situations of democratic deliberation and decision making. In concluding, I respond to the functionalism critique of cybernetics.

Anarchism

Anarchism has often been associated with chaos and disorder, and so to take anarchism as the starting point for a discussion of organisation may to some seem odd. The depiction of the bomb-throwing anarchist assassin and provocateur left in the public imagination by works of literature such as Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* lingers to this day, and 'anarchist' is often used across the political spectrum to dismiss an opponent's views and actions as nonsensical, immature and, worse yet, a dangerous threat to any and all forms of social organisation. The anarchist tradition, contrary to these dramatic caricatures, is fundamentally concerned with order and with effective organisation. One of the earliest proponents of anarchism as a political position, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon argued that 'society finds its highest perfection in the union of order with anarchy' (1840: n.p.). As Ruth Kinna puts it, 'anarchism is a doctrine that aims at the liberation of peoples from political domination and economic exploitation by the encouragement of direct or non-governmental action' (2005: 1). Anarchism shares with traditions such as socialism and communism the view that people should be free to enjoy the fruits of their labour without exploitation by capitalists and other land and property owners and that they should have the political freedom to associate in whatever ways they please and to explore individual autonomy to the greatest extent allowed by the need for collective organisation. This drive towards collective and individual liberation has seen anarchists over the last almost two centuries resist in various ways, among others, capitalism, the state, organised religion, monarchy, patriarchy, racism and colonialism, homophobia and, more recently, environmental destruction and exploitation of animals.

As Kinna notes, however, one of the things that distinguishes many anarchists from others aligned with socialist and communist traditions is the commitment to direct, non-governmental political action in both enacting this resistance and prefiguring alternative forms of life. Direct action is often conflated with violence, and while many anarchists accept violence as a necessary tactic at

certain moments, direct action is certainly not reducible to it. Benjamin Franks writes that direct action ‘refers to practical prefigurative activity carried out by subjugated groups in order to lessen or vanquish their own oppression’ (2006: 115; see also 2003). Direct action, crucially, involves not petitioning others in order to oppose oppression or exploitation, be those others actors such as governments or political parties or indeed the oppressors and exploiters themselves, but instead taking the steps deemed necessary to solve the problem directly.

Closely tied to direct action is the notion of prefiguration, something only relatively recently coined but a core element of anarchist politics at least as far back as the nineteenth-century anarchist Mikhail Bakunin. Prefiguration as a central plank of direct action means that the means used in resisting oppression and exploitation should reflect and be constitutive of the ends desired (Maeckelbergh, 2009; van de Sande, 2013; Yates, 2014). For anarchists, then, real freedom cannot be issued by a dominating authority but can only be realised through direct action by those who free themselves. It is for these reasons that anarchism is often described as an anti-authoritarian political tradition committed to non-hierarchical organisation, in so far as hierarchies subjugated the many at the bottom of the typical organisational pyramid to the few at the top. One of the ways anarchism has been articulated most over the past two or three decades is through a focus on direct and participatory democratic decision making, often with reference to consensus decision making as a model that provides an alternative to both top-down authoritarian domination and the perceived limitations of representative forms of democracy (Maeckelbergh, 2009; 2012; Seeds for Change, 2013). Important to this contemporary strand of anarchist thought is the notion of networked organisation. Franks (2006), for example, identifies the network or federation approach to organisation as one of those that is most in tune with the autonomy and self-organisation at the heart of the anarchist movement as it has developed in recent years (see also, e.g. Gordon, 2008: 14-17; Graham, 2011; Ward, 1973: 51-52).

Anarchism has received increasing interest among academics in recent years, largely as a result of its more central position in left-wing social movements following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Gordon, 2008; Wilson, 2014). To cite just one relevant example, this very journal published a special issue on anarchism and critical management studies in 2014 (*ephemera*, 2014), which included authors from a range of fields including political theory, economics, philosophy, geography and media and communication studies as well as management and organisation studies.

Organisational cybernetics

The word ‘cybernetics’ has its etymological origins in the Ancient Greek word κυβερνήτης and refers to the art of steering or governing. In the period immediately following the Second World War, Norbert Wiener, credited as the father of cybernetics, defined it as ‘the scientific study of control and communication in the animal and the machine’ (1961 [1948]: 11). Wiener’s work in fact began during the war, working on automated anti-aircraft guns, but after the end of the war he declared himself an anti-militarist and refused funding for military-focused research (Wiener, 1947; see Mirowski, 2002 for an overview of the origins of cybernetics during the war). Cybernetics was intended as an interdisciplinary approach to how systems (organisms, machines, animals and, later, social forms of organisation) use feedback to self-organise and self-regulate (Mead, 1968). Here, I want to focus on one specific strand of cybernetics that developed out of the initial engagement with feedback, self-organisation and control in the 1940s. While cybernetics research shot off in myriad directions, eventually being eclipsed in the hard sciences by information theory (Kline, 2015), the avenue I want to turn to here is the one that is perhaps most relevant when discussing organisation and, as I will show, radical and anarchist approaches to organisation.¹

Of importance here is the work of Stafford Beer (and more broadly the British tradition of cybernetics (Pickering, 2010)) and how he developed Wiener’s cybernetics into the realm of social organisation. Beer began his work with cybernetics as a management consultant after the Second World War and went on to work on a number of projects that took his account of cybernetics outside of the corporate realm in which it started. In the early 1960s he worked in Salvador Allende’s Chile on Project Cybersyn, the attempt by the socialist government to link production and distribution in the country using an electronic network (see Medina, 2011 for a full history of this episode). It was a system that, as many have suggested (e.g. Espejo, 2014), prefigured the internet in the way it aimed at laying down information pathways throughout the country that would allow for real-time coordination of the economy. Crucial to Beer’s

1 The history of cybernetics is intricately interwoven with the history of the Cold War and many of the developments in the field emerged as a result of competition and suspicion between the US and the Soviet Union. Funding for cybernetics in the US after the initial burst of interest in the 1940s came as a direct result of Soviet investment in the field and fears of the Soviet Union overtaking the West in key areas of scientific development. Some of the financial support for cybernetics in the 1950s was even provided by the CIA and has been linked to the mind-control project MKUltra (Kline, 2015: 185-90; Umpleby, 2005). For more in-depth histories of cybernetics, see Hayles, 1999; Kline, 2015; Mirowski, 2002. On Soviet Cybernetics, see Dyer-Witheford, 2013 and Francis Spufford’s 2010 novel *Red plenty*.

cybernetics was the claim that there are certain core principles that can be applied in understanding the organisational dynamics of self-organising systems, regardless of what those systems are. This allowed him to take the practical application of cybernetics beyond electronics, mechanics and biology and into the realm of social organisation.

For the strand of cybernetics I want to discuss here, organisation is understood as a set of lines of communication arranged in a network. Beer describes the organisation of a system in the following way:

The connectiveness of the system can now be introduced into this picture by drawing lines between the dots [...] In this way, we come to look upon a system as a kind of network. [...] [t]he lines depicting the network of our system are in fact its *communications*. (1967: 10-11, italics in original)

This is echoed, for instance, by John Duda, who writes of Wiener's cybernetic programme that 'the very definition of a system lies in the communicative links between its component parts' (2012: 78). So when we think about organisation in the context of cybernetics, we are thinking about a network of nodes linked in multiple ways by lines of communication.² Here we can see a foreshadowing of some of connections between anarchism and cybernetics explored in detail below: both are built upon a networked account of organisation. This is of course a very broad definition of organisation that can apply to any form of sociality and indeed to any form of system, from organic to mechanical, from electronic to social. While this apparent reductionism may seem like stepping onto uncomfortable territory, it is this that has allowed cyberneticians such as Beer to develop a holistic understanding of effective organisation. I do not intend to argue this point here, but for Beer and others, the insights gained from cybernetics apply to any and all forms of system or organisation. The subsequent discussion of cybernetics and the specific elements of Beer's concept of effective organisation, therefore, should be seen as grounded in this general account of organisation as a network of nodes in communication with one another.

There are three core concepts behind cybernetics that are most relevant when discussing organisational cybernetics and its relevance for anarchism: complexity, autonomy and control. As Wiener's definition of cybernetics and the understanding of organisation at the centre of cybernetics suggests, communication is also a vitally important concept, but for the sake of space it is the control element that will occupy a more prominent position in this paper (on cybernetics and communication, see Swann and Husted, 2017).

2 This of course brings cybernetics into a close relationship with systems theory (see e.g. Checkland, 1994).

Complexity is defined in line with the variety of possible states of a system³ and its environment⁴ and the changes that take place in this system-environment coupling. The foundational principle of cybernetics is that for a system (an organism, a machine, an organisation) to remain stable, the system has to be able to change its state to match changes in the environment. This is referred to as Ashby's Law, after cybernetician Ross Ashby (1956), or the Law of Requisite Variety. Successful organisation, according to organisational cybernetics, is about using the information from feedback loops to alter behaviour so that the variety in the system matches the variety in the environment. Scholars of cybernetics Angela Espinosa, Roger Harnden and Jon Walker describe complexity as the process whereby 'the internal dynamics of the organisation and the external niche change in a never-ending dance' (2008: 640). Systems and organisations exist in complex worlds and must be flexible in responding to that complexity. The way they do so is by embracing autonomy.

Autonomy is considered a necessary feature of any system in order that it can respond flexibly to changes. For Beer, a system or organisation that can do this can be described as 'viable': it can continue to pursue its goals while participating in this dance with complexity (Beer, 1994 [1981]: 50). An organisation which is run in a rigidly centralised manner would be too sluggish to be able to respond to change (*ibid.*: 103; see also Leonard, 2013: 17). As Beer writes,

[i]t is clear that large areas of any organisation will and should be autonomous. If every aspect of business, every smallest decision, had to be thought about consciously at the senior management level then obviously the firm would grind to a halt. (1967: 219-220)

Allowing the parts to operate with some level of autonomy increases the potential variety in the organisation's operations, making it easier for it to match the variety in the environment. The different parts of any system must, therefore, have some level of autonomy from the rest of the system and be able to respond to change as they see fit.

While the context of much of Beer's work on organisational cybernetics is in hierarchically-organised companies, the notion of control he utilises has little in common with accounts based on command and control structures, orders and top-down decision-making. Beer is keen to note, for example, that despite pyramidal organisational charts, organisations that remain stable, successfully

3 In line with the definition of organisation relevant to cybernetics, Beer characterises systems as 'anything that consists of parts connected together' (1967: 9).

4 Importantly, the distinction between a system and its environment in cybernetics is only from the perspective of a certain observer and is not objective (see Cilliers, 2001; Espinosa et al., 2008: 639-640).

cope with change and are able to pursue goals do so because their actual operations depart radically from their stated organisational structure. If an organisation were to follow the chain of command set out in its organisational chart – with a leadership at the top and various levels of authority and responsibility arranged downwards as far as those at the bottom who have no authority and are required to follow orders passed down the chain – the response to change at the bottom, where the organisation actually operates in its environment, would be incredibly slow. Those at the bottom would need to pass information about the change in the environment up to the next level and so on until the leadership at the top made a decision and passed that decision down again through each level. By that point, Beer argues, the response would be irrelevant as the situation would have changed again. In avoiding this, the parts of the organisation in contact with the environment in fact embody a degree of autonomy in so far as they can respond to change as they see fit within set limits. They need to be able to do this for the organisation to remain stable in the face of change (1967: 80-83).

Control, on this understanding, is used as a technical notion that refers to the processes at work in systems that regulate the operations of those systems, through autonomous action. It is not about compulsion or being directed through domination. Control refers to the way in which the parts of an organisation operate autonomously in response to change. It is in this sense, then, that systems and organisations can be said to be self-organising: they control themselves through an arrangement between autonomous parts.

Cybernetician Allenna Leonard puts it well:

A cybernetic understanding is not that control that is backed up by coercion [...] It is the control of a skier going down a hill, of balancing this way and that. Or it is the control of a helmsman steering a ship. The one thing that people do not realize about [cybernetics] is that the control is in each function, not top-down [...] That makes cybernetics more of a science of balancing than a science of control. (2013: 16-17)

Similarly, Espinosa et al. write that organisational cybernetics

helps us [...] to create more effective organisation by engaging the energy and intelligence of local constituents in the overall endeavour. The experience of maximum local autonomy is [...] one of the logical requirements for ensuring effective organisation. (2008: 642)

In applying these insights to the practical task of organisation, Beer developed a particular model for understanding how organisation works according to cybernetics: the Viable System Model.

The Viable System Model

The account of Beer's Viable System Model (VSM) I present here is based primarily on how he describes the model in *Brain of the firm* (1994 [1981]).⁵ The VSM is divided into five levels or systems (see Figure 1 below).

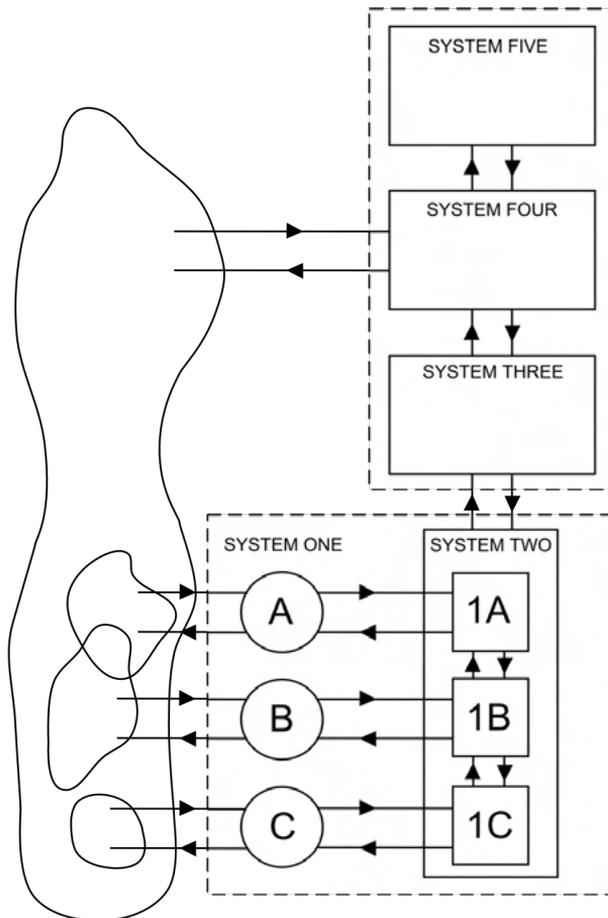


Figure 1: The Viable System Model, showing three System One units (A, B, C) and their interaction with their local niches and one another (1A, 1B, 1C), their coordination under System Two and the strategic alignment of the whole organisation or system at Systems Three, Four (in relation to the whole environment) and Five. The arrows represent flows of information between parts of the model. The dotted lines indicate the two broad sections of the model. (Based on Beer's depiction of the VSM in *Brain of the firm* (1994 [1981]: 128).)

5 For supplementary accounts, see Beer, 1994 [1979], 1985, 1989; Espejo and Harnden, 1989; Espinosa et al., 2004; 2008; Leonard, 1994; Medina, 2011: 34-39; Pickering, 2010: 240-256; Walker, 2006.

System One

The System One units of the model represent the operational parts of an organisation. The System One units operate on specific tasks within the external environment and have the autonomy to respond to changes in their environmental niches as they see fit.

System Two

The second level is a framework within which System One units communicate with one another and coordinate their activities. As Beer writes, System Two 'exists to provide a local interaction between Systems One of all of the subsidiaries' (1994 [1981]: 165). This affords a minimal level of coordination between System One units but does not provide organisational goals. They 'hunt about aimlessly' (*ibid.*: 129) and as yet there is no purpose or overarching goal to their operation.

System Three

In addition to the five sub-systems, Beer divides the VSM into two broader sections. From the perspective of a System One unit, this works such that the first, lower part of the system or organisation 'has to do with recognizing that there are other autonomous divisions than my own' while the second, higher part of the system or organisation 'has to do with recognizing that my own autonomous division is part of a corporation' (*ibid.*: 229). System Three is the first level of that second or higher part of the VSM: it regulates the operations of System One units not in line with each other but in line with the goals of the system or organisation of which they are part.

System Four

The fourth level is where the immediate strategy of the system or organisation is developed. It involves those activities that take in information from System Three about how the lower, autonomous System One units are operating as well as information from the environment about changes and fluctuations and how the system or organisation responds to and affects these. In addition, it is involved in transmitting information between System Three and the planning and longer-range strategic thinking and decision-making at System Five.

System Five

At the top of the VSM is System Five. This level Beer describes as the 'senior management': 'The direction of the enterprise, with its concentration on where we are going rather than where we have come from, with its foresight that is to

say, is the thinking part of the whole organisation' (*ibid.*, 201). This is a rather unfair characterisation as every level of the system or organisation is thinking, but what Beer means is that looking at the system or organisation as a whole, System Five is the part that deals with the long-term planning for the system or organisation.

While a lot more can be said about the VSM, including how it relates to the kind of actual organisations Beer was working with when he developed it, I must leave this discussion for another time. The important thing to grasp from this brief overview is the role the different sub-systems of the VSM play and how they relate to one another. This is of perhaps a level of abstraction many are uncomfortable with, but I will return to a concrete example of what this means in practice below.

It should be noted that the way this operates as a model is different from the notion of a blueprint. Organisation theory in general and Critical Management Studies in particular has shown a scepticism towards blueprints as plans of how organisations ought to be structured, with these plans being applied from above. The VSM, however, is not intended to operate as a blueprint in this way. Beer described the VSM as a 'diagnostic tool' (1994 [1981]: 155) and cybernetician Roger Harnden has similarly discussed its use as a 'hermeneutic enabler' (1989). The point of the VSM is, therefore, not to prescribe organisational structures or practices but to provide the tools those involved in organising can use to better understand the processes in which they are participating. The VSM, rather than outlining the exact structure of a viable organisation is intended to highlight the necessary functions and lines of communication that any organisation, however it is in fact structured, will need to have. In this sense, it is intended as a heuristic of sorts that can assist people in thinking through and responding to questions of organisational structure rather than as a blueprint they ought to follow.

Another point worth covering before moving on is the distinction between description and normativity in Beer's VSM. Beer's account of effective organisation is intended as a descriptive one, in which the functions and lines of communication are defined and made apparent. The normativity of any actually-existing organisational form, according to Beer, comes not from a cybernetic understanding of the functionality of a viable system but from the operation of the organisation itself. Beer notes, for example, that the normative planning and goal-setting happens at sub-system five (1994 [1979]: 354). This is not something built into the VSM as a model but something mapped as a function that will occur in a real-world example of organisation. What the VSM does, through describing effective organisation, is allow those determining the normativity of a

particular organisation to assess where different functions should be located and how lines of communication should be developed.

With these brief overviews, both of anarchism and Beer's cybernetics and his VSM, in place, I want to now build on these descriptive openings in order to advance the argument that there is something about self-organisation that cybernetics can tell us that can enrich anarchist accounts of organisation. First, I want to cover the existing engagements with cybernetics by anarchist writers.

Anarchism and cybernetics

In 1963, the journal *Anarchy* published two papers discussing the relevance of cybernetics for anarchism.⁶ The first of these, by neurophysiologist Grey Walter (1963), focuses on human physiology and early robotics and only briefly touches on political organisation. Crucially, however, Walter notes (1963: 89) that examinations of how the brain is organised reveal that 'we find no boss in the brain, no oligarchic ganglion or glandular Big Brother.' He goes on to say:

Within our heads, our lives depend on equality of opportunity, on specialisation with versatility, on free communication and just restraint, a freedom without interference. Here too local minorities can and do control their own means of production and expression in free and equal intercourse with their neighbours. If we must identify biological and political systems our own brains would seem to illustrate the capacity and limitations of an anarcho-syndicalist community. (Walter, 1963: 89)

This is an instructive passage that is strikingly similar and equally evocative to one from Beer on the form of control at work in cybernetics:

There is no ultimate ganglion in the brain that tells the nervous system what to do. There is no thermostat anywhere in the body with a marker set at the temperature 98.4° F. And the *Book of Proverbs* reminds us that 'the locusts have no king, and yet they go about in bands'. In short, democratic systems regulate and organise themselves without benefit of dictat or ukase. They do not have hierarchies of command. (2009 [1975]: 25)

6 While there has been some minimal discussion of anarchism and decentralised organisation in the literature on and connected to cybernetics e.g. that of Angela Espinosa et al. (2008), Maurice Yolles (2003), Ana Paula Baltazar (2007) and, to a limited extent, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1980), this work does not identify or elaborate on the connections between cybernetics and anarchism that I want to discuss here.

While neither Beer nor Walter were anarchists *per se*,⁷ they both show leanings towards anarchist accounts of self-organisation that draw on the central tenets of cybernetics. The second *Anarchy* paper, written by John D. McEwan (1987 [1963]), goes into greater depth on the relationship between cybernetics and anarchism and is far more explicit in this regard. The starting point for understanding the connection between anarchism and cybernetics is the concept of self-organisation:

The basic premise of the governmentalist – namely, that any society must incorporate some mechanism for overall control – is certainly true, if we use ‘control’ in the sense of ‘maintain a large number of critical variables within limits of toleration’. [...] The error of the governmentalist is to think that ‘incorporate some mechanism for control’ is always equivalent to ‘include a fixed isolatable control unit to which the rest, i.e. the majority, of the system is subservient’. This may be an adequate interpretation in the case of a model railway system, but not for a human society. The alternative model is complex, and changing in its search for stability in the face of unpredictable disturbances. (*ibid.*: 57)

Crucially, McEwan addresses self-organisation in much the same way as it was utilised in the work of Beer. Crucial to this is how the technical notion of control as self-organisation links up with the political notion of self-organisation. As John Duda puts it, moving the notion from the technical understanding of early cyberneticians to the social or political notion used by Beer, self-organisation can be understood ‘as radical democracy and horizontal self-determination’ (2013: 57). McEwan compares his account of cybernetic social self-organisation to a passage from anarchist Peter Kropotkin that speaks of an anarchist society ‘which looks for harmony in an ever-changing and fugitive equilibrium between a multitude of varied forces’ (quoted in McEwan, 1987 [1963]: 52). Cybernetics and an anarchist vision of society both recognise the complexity and variety that is central to organisations and their environments. Furthermore, both focus on the importance of a constantly shifting harmony achieved through autonomous self-organisation. As Kinna writes of cybernetics (2005: 68), ‘[i]n contrast to government control mechanisms, self-organizing systems were controlled from within the organism and could respond to their ever-changing diversity.’

This initial affinity between anarchism and organisational cybernetics is made all the stronger when one takes a closer look at how Kropotkin characterises centralised, top-down forms of government as being not only politically and

7 Walter did come from an anarchist family that included his father Karl who attended the Anarchist Congress in Amsterdam in 1907, his son Nicholas who was a leading figure in the anarchist movement in the UK in the 1960s and his granddaughter Natasha who is a prominent feminist writer and activist. Involvement in radical politics seems to have skipped a generation when it came to Grey Walter, although the passage quoted shows that he certainly retained some anarchist sympathies.

morally objectionable but also ineffectual in dealing with complexity and variety: 'in all production there arise daily thousands of difficulties which no government can solve or foresee' (1927: 76-77). Kropotkin argues that 'production and exchange represented an undertaking so complicated that the plans of the state socialists, which lead inevitably to a party directorship, would prove to be absolutely ineffective as soon as they were applied to life.' As an alternative to centralised attempts at responding to variety, Kropotkin proposes that the workers themselves administer production in an autonomous manner. Political scientist Marius de Geus, who has also highlighted the parallels between Kropotkin's anarchism and what he refers to as 'bio-cybernetics', writes:

[Kropotkin's] vision of an anarchist society strongly resembles relatively modern bio-cybernetic organizational theories and systems of 'self-regulating' modules. In society there exist basic units (individuals, associations, communes, etc.) which have to possess autonomy, and which can co-operate and federate on a voluntary basis with the other units. (2014: 869)

Colin Ward, one of the foremost anarchist writers in the latter half of the twentieth century and editor of *Anarchy*, notes (1966: n.p.) that '[c]ybernetic theory with its emphasis on self-organising systems, and speculation about the ultimate social effects of automation, leads in a similar revolutionary direction' as anarchism. Ward argues that anarchists as early as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon understood that complexity is central to autonomy (1974: 44). Indeed, Ward writes that

[h]armony results not from unity but from complexity [...] Anarchy is a function, not of society's simplicity and lack of social organisation, but of its complexity and multiplicity of social organisations.⁸ (*ibid.*: 50)

He goes on to claim that '[c]ybernetics, the science of control and communication systems, throws valuable light on the anarchist conception of complex self-organising systems' (*ibid.*).

Unfortunately, this seems to be about as far as the connection between organisational cybernetics and anarchism went.⁹ Based primarily on Beer's work it may well be possible to pick up where Ward, McEwan and others left off and show how cybernetics can play a role in an understanding of anarchist organisation. Doing so, I want to argue, will address key gaps in the literature on

8 Echoing this, Murray Bookchin, while not drawing on cybernetics, writes of ecological stability that it 'is a function not of simplicity and homogeneity but of complexity and variety' (1982: 24). Bookchin uses the term 'cybernetics' but does so to refer to high-technology rather than processes of self-organisation (1985).

9 See Duda (2013) for a discussion of two other brief and minimal engagements with cybernetics by anarchist writers Paul Goodman and Sam Dolgoff.

both anarchism and, in turn, Beer's cybernetics. On anarchism, there needs to be more of an attempt at articulating the detailed dynamics of anarchist organisational forms. On cybernetics, more can be done to elaborate on the radical implications of Beer's work. In responding to the research question set out in the introduction to this paper ('What can cybernetics teach us about how anarchists can and do organise?'), I focus below on the third task of this paper, on how Beer's strand of cybernetics leads us to rethink how anarchists might frame hierarchy in organising and what an anarchism VSM might look like. Through examining these two areas in detail, I hope to be able to begin to explore precisely how engaging with cybernetics from an anarchist perspective might be fruitful and what might be gained in doing so.

Functional hierarchy

What seems to be holding back a productive relationship between anarchism and organisational cybernetics is the hierarchy involved in Beer's VSM. While System One operating units do enjoy a level of autonomous decision-making, and indeed this is essential to responding to complexity, any decisions must be made within the parameters set by Systems Three-Five where the planning and regulation of the whole organisation is of concern. The VSM remains, in how it is presented, a centralised affair, even if that centralisation is of a limited scope. As Beer writes,

some part of any viable system does what it likes. But of course the autonomous part of the system remains part of the system, and to do that it must take notice of the central regulatory model. To that extent, then, it does what it is told. (1974: 71)

Autonomy for Beer and cybernetics is not based on a 'fanatical love of liberty' (Bakunin, 1972 [1871]: 261) but on the practical needs of self-organising systems: it is an 'effective freedom' (Beer, 1975 [1973]).

For anarchists, hierarchy is a target in so far as it acts to structure and reinforce domination and coercive control. Despite this apparent clash with anarchist principles, the way hierarchy appears in organisational cybernetics should not be seen as necessarily antithetical to the way anarchists view organisation. As McEwan writes (1987 [1963]: 44), 'the usage [of the term "hierarchy"] is a technical one and does not coincide with the use of the term in anarchist criticisms of political organisation'. To show why this is the case, a distinction needs to be made between two forms of hierarchy: *anatomical hierarchy* and *functional hierarchy*. Like many important ideas, it is small, simple and elegant, and yet it makes a big difference when it comes to an anarchist cybernetic understanding of organisation.

Functional hierarchy has its roots in Gordon Pask's work on cybernetics. Pask writes of the social organisation of the firm:

(I) imagine a busy executive (who acts as an overall controller in the hierarchy) disturbed by *m* callers. Each hour, to achieve stability and get on with his work, he engages a receptionist (who acts as a sub controller) [...] The receptionist [...] is able to perform the selective operation of prevaricating with callers so that, for example, the one who is welcome each hour is accepted [...] In a very real sense, which gives substance to the idea of a 'level', the interaction of sub controllers takes place in an object language (talking about callers), whilst the overall controller has a metalanguage (talking about receptionists). There can, of course, be any number of levels. (1968 [1961]: 61)

While this is framed within a typically-hierarchical organisational structure with an executive and a receptionist, the point Pask is getting at is that the hierarchy is also one of levels of language: the highest level in the hierarchy involves a metalanguage that is used to talk about lower levels, which too have a language to talk about levels lower than them. Although this is clearly a hierarchy such that a level thrice removed from the top, for example, would have difficulty communicating directly with the top and vice versa given the difference in languages, Pask is very clear that this describes a logical hierarchy of orders, not one that is necessarily rooted in a physical or structural hierarchy (*ibid.*: 63). Beer argues similarly and goes so far as to describe hierarchy in systems and organisations as 'a fiction, which may or may not be reified as an organisation or structure' (1975: 130). The hierarchy Pask and other cyberneticians describe is one of higher and lower orders such that decisions, actions, events, meanings, etc. at lower levels are dependent on frameworks set by higher levels. It is a way of understanding different functions within a system or organisation and is not synonymous with any kind of actual structure. Of course, functions may (and often do) operate within a structure, but crucially they can be separated from structure in terms of the roles they play in organisation.

Pask describes the implications of this account of hierarchy for self-organisation:

each member must have the possibility, however small, of inverting the structure without leaving his niche to do so. I do not mean 'the office boy can rise to be manager'. I mean, 'in some unspecified conditions the office boy can take the managerial decisions'. (1968 [1961]: 111)

Key here is the distinction between *the manager* as a position or office and *managerial decisions* as something anyone in the organisation can in theory take should the situation demand it. Within an organisation, then, two hierarchies operate: an *anatomical* one of positions (office boy, receptionist, manager, executive) and a *functional* one of roles or logical orders (office boy tasks and decisions, receptionist tasks and decisions, managerial tasks and decisions,

executive tasks and decisions). The two kinds of hierarchy are quite distinct from a cybernetic perspective.

Anatomical hierarchy refers to what is traditionally understood as hierarchy in political or social organisation; i.e., multiple levels with a chain of command such that each level is subordinate to the levels above it and where the top level has overall control over decision making in the organisation. Functional hierarchy, however, applies to an organisation where 'there are two or more levels of information structure operating in the system' (McEwan, 1987 [1963]: 44). Functional hierarchy involves distinct orders of decision making such that higher order decisions are decisions about lower order decisions. As McEwan writes (*ibid.*), phrasing this in terms of a cybernetic understanding of an organisation operating in an environment, 'some parts may deal directly with the environment, while other parts relate to activity of these first parts.'

Beer is similarly dismissive of the necessity of a hierarchical or centralised structure to how an organisation operates. In the section on the VSM above, I mentioned that Beer divides the model into two parts: one relating to the autonomous operation of Systems One and Two and the other relating to the strategic and regulatory functions of Systems Three, Four and Five. He expresses his distaste for referring to these two parts as 'junior management' and 'senior management' respectively because of the notion of hierarchy and command this connotes (1979: 130). He rejects the notion that the hierarchy in the VSM is 'equivalent to the political supposition that there must be policy bosses'. Instead, the hierarchical relationship between the parts of the VSM 'is a *logical* relationship, whatever social form it is given' (*ibid.*, italics in original). What Beer means by 'logical' here is that the hierarchy of the VSM is a conceptual prop rather than a concrete, structural aspect of any existing organisations. McEwan makes this same point by distinguishing between two broad organisational functions: (a) 'the complex of actual production tasks'; and (b) 'the task of solving the problem of how the group should be organised to perform these first level tasks, and how information about them should be dealt with by the group' (1987 [1963]: 47). The crucial point to grasp in developing an anarchist cybernetics, and what marks it out as not only subscribing to a functional or logical hierarchy but to an explicit rejection or limiting of anatomical or structural hierarchy, is this: the different levels in the functional hierarchy all potentially involve the very same individual participants.

The radical and potentially non- or less-hierarchical organisational form (less hierarchical, that is, than traditional forms of political organisation like political parties and trade unions), that is common to anarchist politics may adhere to a functional form of hierarchy such that certain decisions are considered to be

higher or lower order than others while there are no bodies or individuals that are structurally higher or lower than others. As these are functions or roles as opposed to positions, by switching role depending on the activity at hand, individuals can perform functionally hierarchical tasks while avoiding the institutionalisation of an anatomical hierarchy. This is the concrete promise of anarchist cybernetics and suggests how an understanding of anarchist organisation can be enhanced through an engagement with organisational cybernetics and Beer's VSM.

An anarchist Viable System Model

It ought now to be possible to begin sketching an anarchist Viable System Model. The picture I want to present briefly here is drawn from accounts of the organisational structure of the Occupy camps that took place in public squares across the world in 2011, most notably in New York's Zuccotti Park. Of course, each Occupy camp was different and the extent to which any of them reflected anarchist principles is debatable (e.g. Gibson, 2013; Graeber, 2011; Hammond, 2015). The intention here, however, is not to argue that the Occupy camps were examples of anarchist cybernetic organisation but instead to take inspiration from some of their practices in describing a potential anarchist VSM. In doing so, the account here is informed by descriptions of Occupy by authors such as David Graeber (2011; 2013), Marianne Maeckelbergh (2012; 2014) and Mark Bray (2013) as well as by movement participants (e.g., Khatib, et al., 2012). Importantly, the way Occupy is described here is not intended to suggest that it was a perfect example of well-functioning radical left organisation. There are important critiques of various aspects of the practices involved in the Occupy movement (as the authors cited above discuss) and what is included here is meant as a framework or vocabulary for thinking about radical left and anarchist organisation and not a comment on the actually-existing Occupy camps.

Neither is the proposal of an anarchist VSM below to be considered as a blueprint for anarchist organisation, something anarchists and other radicals have been frequently opposed to (e.g. Wilson, 2014: 36-42). As noted above, Beer's original VSM itself was not intended as a blueprint but as a heuristic device aimed at helping people work through problems of organisational structure. The anarchist VSM, in so far as it aims to outline some necessary functions and lines of communication of radically participatory and democratic organisation, is similarly meant to help guide an understanding of anarchist organisation without prescribing the precise structure in question. How anarchist organisations look in reality differs greatly from case to case and the anarchist VSM does not suggest they all ought to look identical but rather that

they all ought to include certain functions and lines of communication, however these may be realised in practice. The comments below about Occupy, therefore, should be taken with this in mind, not as prescriptions but as examples of how an anarchist VSM could be used to think about organisational structure.

Starting with the System One operational units, then, those parts of the organisation that are tasked with the tactical work of the organisation, these can be seen in the various formal and informal working groups and caucuses as well as in individual activists. These were involved in the day-to-day running of the camps (cleaning, cooking, etc.) as well as planning protests and demonstrations, liaising with the press, organising the camps' own media and many other jobs. These were voluntary organisations and individual activists could be members of different groups. Following the logic of Beer's VSM, System Two would focus on the coordination between these different working groups and would include informal communication (activists chatting over lunch) or more formal communications (in regular working group coordination meetings). System Two is not a structural part of the organisation of the camp but is a function of coordination between System One groups and activists.

As discussed above, the VSM is divided into two sections: the lower part that deals with autonomous coordination and the higher part that deals with framing this autonomous action within the whole organisation. For the anarchist VSM, the higher section would be reflected in the general assemblies that took place regularly in the Occupy camps. System Three involves members of the organisation reflecting on the activities of the working groups in relation to the overall strategy of the organisation. Members of the working groups consider their activities and adjust them if necessary in line with the decided-upon goals of the organisation. Crucially, for an anarchist cybernetics, all activists can, potentially, be involved in the general assemblies and so in these System Three discussions. The same individuals step out of their functional role as working group members and individual activists and into that of reflecting on their practice within the autonomous groups. System Four involves the same individuals again, and also in the general assemblies, reflecting on their activities and those of the organisation as a whole in relation to events in the outside world. Adjustments to both tactics and strategy can be made in light of changes in the environment of which individual groups might not be aware but of which those present at the general assemblies can collectively inform each other.¹⁰

¹⁰ There was, importantly, discussion in Occupy Wall Street around implementing an additional body, a spokescouncil, that would allow for better coordination between working groups. This would not alter the description of the anarchist VSM in any fundamental way, but would point towards System Three and Four functions being

The final level of the account of Occupy I'm presenting here is that which is concerned with the strategy and overall goals of the organisation. This is again a level of discussion and decision-making that is, or should be, open to all in the organisation. It is where decisions are made about the objectives and priorities of the organisation and is ultimately what limits the autonomy of the working groups; but again, this is not a limitation coming from a distinct group of leaders but is something that is agreed upon democratically by all members of the organisation (in practice through consensus or high-threshold majority vote).

As discussed above, the essential distinction in the anarchist form of VSM here is that there is a hierarchy in terms of function or logic but not in terms of structure and it is not a hierarchy that issues commands from one group to another group. Rather, decisions are made democratically by all members of the organisation. Limits are imposed on their autonomy but these are limits that are agreed upon together. By making these crucial distinctions and by delving into the detail of how self-organisation operates according to Beer's cybernetics, I have suggested here that we can better understand precisely how anarchist organisation might be better characterised. For anarchism, a prefigurative commitment to radical, participatory democracy is a key element of how organisation should work. Through cybernetics, and the at-first-sight-contradictory concept of functional hierarchy, I have tried to show how such a form of organisation, built around the necessity of participatory democratic control and the demand for autonomy can be thought through in detail.¹¹

As with the general discussion of Beer's VSM, it is important here to consider the extent to which the anarchist VSM is descriptive and the extent to which it is normative. While Beer's VSM, as I noted above, is intended as a purely descriptive heuristic tool, with the normativity coming from those using it, in the anarchist VSM the normativity is more central to the model itself. This is because instead of the anarchist VSM being proposed as a general account of the

performed in the spokescouncil meetings with delegates from lower order clusters rather than in general assemblies. I leave a more detailed discussion of this change to a future paper.

11 An interesting and potentially important contribution to this account of control might be made by turning to the work of Niklas Luhmann. Luhmann (2012; 2013) objects to the possibility of external steering or control of systems found in some classic approaches to cybernetics, notwithstanding the focus in cybernetics on self-organisation and self-steering. Luhmann argues that direct, top-down steering is impossible given the complexity of the world. While unpacking the possible implications of Luhmann's work for this anarchist reading of cybernetics is beyond the scope of this paper, the way I have characterised self-organisation here and the notion of anarchist cybernetics more generally may benefit from future examination of Luhmann's position on steering and indeed on systems and organisation overall.

functions and lines of communication in any system, it is specifically aimed at explaining the functions and lines of communication in cases of anarchist organisation. As indicated throughout this paper, this means that the model presupposes a normative commitment to resisting all forms of domination and exploitation and to a radically participatory form of democratic decision making. This key difference between Beer's VSM and the anarchist VSM, therefore, comes down to the normative running side-by-side with the descriptive in the model. Rather than focussing purely on effective organisation (the descriptive element of the VSM) and leaving the ethical and political commitments (the normative) to those using the model, the anarchist VSM involves both effective organisation and ethical and political commitment as central drivers of the model.

This meeting of anarchism and cybernetics is perhaps presented as being somewhat neater than a complete overview, more complete than I have been able to provide here, of the tradition of cybernetics might suggest. While, as I have highlighted, there are several points of contact where the understanding organisational cybernetics provides can help advance anarchist accounts of organisation, it should be noted that this is undoubtedly a partial reading of cybernetics and does not take into account the full range of complexity present in the field. It is perhaps no surprise that, with the potential exception of Walter, none of the cyberneticians discussed here were drawn to the participatory democratic practices of anarchism during their lifetimes. True, many were involved one way or another in radical experiments in art, robotics and computing (see Pickering, 2010), but on the whole their politics did not, explicitly at least, stretch beyond a social democracy infused at times with counter-cultural extravagance and spiritualism. At times, the politics of cybernetics spun in quite the opposite direction. Friedrich Hayek, for example, showed an interest in cybernetics in the 1950s and 60s (e.g. Hayek, 2013) and while he never developed this in his work, the notions of complexity and self-organising systems (self-organising through competition rather than cooperation) did influence his account of the free market as a tool for allowing order to emerge from chaos (Cooper, 2011; see also Gilbert, 2005). However, rather than show a direct correlation between all elements of the cybernetics tradition, or indeed even all elements of Beer's work, my aim here has been to point towards some specific insights into self-organisation found in cybernetics that, when elaborated in a certain way, with an attention to limiting authoritarian, top-down control, can be fruitfully brought into conversation with anarchist political theory and practice. Before concluding, I want to turn to a potential critique of this approach to understanding anarchist organisation that potentially calls into question the very foundations of the relationship between cybernetics and anarchism.

Responding to the CMS critique of cybernetics

Much of the response to cybernetics in CMS has centred around rejecting it as a functionalist approach to social organisation. Gibson Burrell and Gareth Morgan (1979) define functionalism according to, firstly, a positivist ontological position that views reality as an objective phenomenon that can be accessed directly through detached, scientific observation and, secondly, a commitment to 'social engineering as a basis of social change'. 'It is concerned,' they write, 'with the effective "regulation" and control of social affairs' based on maintaining an equilibrium or status quo (*ibid.*: 25-26). The critique of cybernetics in the CMS literature focuses on the perceived goal of designing organisational structures according to an objectively true model of how organisations achieve stability and meet set aims. As Hugh Willmott argues, cybernetics is as a 'comparatively sophisticated example of knowledge guided by a technical interest in prediction and control' (1997: 323). This critique is raised outside CMS by Werner Ulrich (1981) who, in reflecting on Beer's economic planning work in Chile with Project Cybersyn (Medina, 2011), highlights the way in which a group of technicians was able to design a communications network that reduced the scope of agency in decision making for workers in factories and managed their activities through commands that came from a centralised control room. 'As an action system', he stresses, 'Cyberstride [the Project Cybersyn computer programme] can impose its autonomy on the allegedly autonomous decision makers' (*ibid.*: 52).¹²

Ulrich goes so far as to describe this approach to knowledge and control as 'managerial fascism' (*ibid.*: 55, following Ivan Illich) and Andrew Pickering writes of how it conjures up 'the spectre of Big Brother' (2010: 31). To the extent that cybernetics can be put to work in an account of anarchist organisation, then, the critique of it as functionalist seems to throw up a serious obstacle. It could well be argued that the anarchist VSM is a prime example of an attempt by someone with (the pretension of) expert knowledge to define a model of organisational structure that should be applied by activists if they want to be successful in achieving their aims.

On the two constituent parts of the CMS critique of cybernetics as functionalist, a response from within cybernetics can be attempted. Rather than being founded on a positivist view of reality and scientific observation, the second-order cybernetics of Beer, Pask and others (see Scott, 2004) has, according to Pickering, more in common with social constructionism and 'a vision of knowledge as *part of* performance rather than as an external control of it' (2000:

¹² For similar critiques, see Medina (2011: 191-192), Kline (2015: 241), Tiqqun (2010) and The Invisible Committee (2014).

25, italics in original). If knowledge is socially constructed and based on subjective interpretation rather than objective observation, and is an active part of doing rather than simply of knowing in a detached way, then the charge of social engineering too has to be reconsidered. Firstly, the knowledge involved in this strand of cybernetics is a knowledge accessible to and held by participants in a certain practice rather than external observers. Secondly, the application of this knowledge is not from the outside and top-down but from within and bottom-up: the participants in a practice apply the knowledge themselves in deciding how to act. This is not to say that that knowledge and the process of performance can never be captured by centralised, top-down structures and processes, but it does reject the assumption that such a centralisation of top-down command is *necessarily* a part of how cybernetics understands organisation. For cybernetician Ernst von Glasersfeld (1991), this 'radical constructivist' approach to cybernetics is less about the top-down control that anarchists are opposed to and more about helping people navigate experiences, practices and relationships.

How then should the anarchist VSM be understood as something applied not by external, detached technicians of social engineering but in a radically democratic and participatory process of socially constructed knowledge used by participants of organisational practices? The key here is to take seriously Beer's description of the VSM as a 'diagnostic tool'. The VSM, as the discussion above pointed out, is not to be considered a blueprint for organisation but should instead be thought of as a guide for identifying important roles, functions and lines of communication. Beer's contention is that however an organisation looks to its members, it will, if it is to be effective in responding to complexity, involve the functions identified in the VSM. Highlighting these functions may allow those inside the organisation to point out where breakdowns in communication or threats to decentralisation, for example, happen and the effect they have on the organisation. The VSM helps explain this and can be used in responding to problems within the organisation, but it does not necessarily dictate how the organisation should be structured. This, however, raises a further question. If the VSM is not a model of organisational structure, what is specifically anarchist about anarchist cybernetics? Why is it not just an application of cybernetics to anarchist organisation that operates in the same way as its application to any other kind of organisation?

While cybernetics underlines the benefit of decentralisation and functional hierarchy in terms of effectiveness in responding to complexity, something anarchist such as Kropotkin prefigured, anarchism adds to this the political or normative importance of decentralisation. For anarchists, decentralisation is not only praised because of its effectiveness but also, perhaps more importantly, because how it supports the political principle of individual and group autonomy

and freedom. Duda (2013: 64) describes the cybernetic approach to anarchism of McEwan as 'a shift away from a moral vision of anarchism, outraged at the scandal of domination' towards a paradigm focussed on the 'superior productivity of anarchist organisational methodology', but I would suggest that it in fact tries to show that anarchism trumps top-down government on both counts, without prioritising one over the other. This crucial element of anarchist cybernetics additionally helps in articulating a non-functionalist approach to cybernetics. While the functionalism critique holds that cybernetics is essentially focused on top-down social engineering, an anarchist cybernetics, with its commitment to decentralisation and self-organisation as radically democratic principles, rejects such an authoritarian imposition. Instead, the insights gained from an application of an anarchist VSM to a particular organisation would be acted on in a democratic and participatory way.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to propose an anarchist cybernetics, as a way of answering the question, 'What can cybernetics teach us about how anarchists can and do organise?'. Cybernetics, specifically the work of Beer on the Viable Systems Model (VSM), details an approach to organisation that involves concepts of autonomy and self-organisation. For this reason, it was attractive to anarchists in the 1960s and 1970s. These germs of an anarchist engagement with cybernetics were, however, never developed and up until recently there has been little discussion of the connections. A return to these initial anarchist engagements with cybernetics suggests that bringing it into debates around alternative and radical organisation can be fruitful. Critical to such an attempt should be a development of the idea of functional hierarchy, introduced by cyberneticians such as Pask and Beer and made explicit in relation to anarchism by McEwan. The anarchist cybernetics and the alternative version of the VSM presented here are intended as the first steps in doing just that. By articulating the hierarchy in the VSM as a functional hierarchy of roles and tasks, organisational cybernetics has something to offer anarchist theory and practice in terms of a way to better understand the dynamics of non- or less-hierarchical organisation. This contributes to emerging work in anarchist studies that recognises the limits of anarchism (Wilson, 2014) and focusses less on the rejection of hierarchy in all its forms and more on an opposition to domination as a core aspect of anarchist politics (Prichard and Kinna, 2016).

This is not to say that there are not a range of problems that need to be brought into any further conversations around anarchist cybernetics. Some of the central ideas discussed here, such as hierarchy and autonomy, may well be far more

complex than their treatment here may suggest (e.g., Böhm et al., 2010; Bookchin, 1995; Freeman, 1972; Wilson, 2014). Work in anarchist studies and CMS, as well as reflections from social movement participants, that problematises some of the foundational elements of anarchist and radical left organising needs to be addressed. More importantly perhaps, it remains to be seen how anarchist cybernetics might operate in activist contexts. Central to this would need to be an appreciation of intersecting oppressions and exploitations such as those that are constitutive of and target class, race, gender and sexuality, and the resistances to them that were a central part of the Occupy example I drew on here. Overall, however, an engagement between anarchism and cybernetics may have the potential to advance understandings of key aspects of the organisational dynamics of anarchist and radical left social movement organisation, as well as provide a contribution to anarchist and radical social movement praxis.

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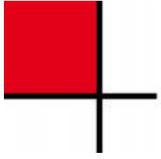
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Repurposing the hacker: Three cycles of recuperation in the evolution of hacking and capitalism

Alessandro Delfanti and Johan Söderberg

abstract

The spread of hacking to new fields brings with it a renewed necessity to analyse its significance in relation to industrial and institutional innovation. We sketch out a framework drawing on the idea of ‘recuperation’ and use it to situate an emerging body of work on hackers. By adopting the concept of recuperation, we highlight how hacker practices and innovations are adopted, adapted and repurposed by corporate and political actors. In other words, hacking itself is being hacked. We suggest three cycles within which this dynamics unfold and can be studied: 1) the life cycle of an individual technology or community, 2) the co-evolution of hacker movements and relevant industries or institutions, 3) the position of hacking within the ‘spirit of the times’, or, differently put, the periodic transformations of capitalism.

Introduction

Back in 2010, when 3D printing was at the peak of the hype-cycle, activists from the Swedish Pirate Party showed up at an IKEA trade fair and solemnly announced that it was only a matter of time before 3D printing would disrupt the furniture industry, just like it happened to the record industry after Napster. The ability to hack furniture would soon be in the hands of the people, and therefore the multinational corporation, with its questionable political history, exploitation of labour, and environmental impact, was doomed¹. Fast-forward to 2018, when

¹ Interview collected by Söderberg.

IKEA started commercialising its Delaktig line of sofas. The new line is meant to be a modular 'platform' which allows customers to perform 'furniture hacking'. The new sofa is arguably inspired by the practices of 'modifications on and repurposing of' IKEA furniture that are fostered by websites such as IKEA Hackers and in dedicated furniture hacking meetings². The example above speaks of the failures of techno-determinism as a political ideology. But the main reason why we offer it here is because it exemplifies how rhetorics, practices and innovations coming from hacker cultures can be adopted by the corporate world and repurposed towards its own goals.

The expansion of hacker practices from software development to digital manufacturing, political activism, open hardware and DIY biology, as well as the creation of hacker- and makerspaces in many cities around the world, brings with it a renewed necessity to explore the political significance and limitations of hacking. The diverse array of practices and communities that go under the name of 'hacking' are unified under the credo that computer technologies can and should be repurposed. In addition, the practice of repurposing is often said to have a liberatory and subversive potential. But it would be problematic, not to say complacent, to take this emancipatory investment in repurposing at face value. Taking a historical perspective, one can find numerous hacker technologies or initiatives that were once said to be subversive, only to then be accommodated within industrial and institutional innovation programs.

Making and DIY practices are often compared with the Arts and Crafts movement in the second half of the Nineteenth century (Dawkins, 2011; Luckman, 2013). The Arts and Crafts movement begun as a reaction to industrialisation, bringing together a social critique of the appalling living conditions of the English working class with an artistic critique of mass manufacturing and consumption. It is the ending of this movement, however, that is the most instructive when making a comparison with present-day hackers and makers. Eventually the artistic critique gained the upper hand over the social critique, and the movement metamorphosed into a distribution network for decorated hand craft. The betrayal of its initial, social aspirations is well captured by William Morris, the portal figure of the movement, although he made the following remark in a different context, namely in a novel situated at the time of a peasant uprising in fourteenth century England:

I pondered [...] how men [*sic*] fight and lose the battle, and the thing they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name. (Morris, 1888: 31)

2 <http://www.ikeahackers.net/about>, accessed October 2017.

Admittedly, it is a bit of a stretch to situate the hacker movement at the far end of an arc spanning two centuries and starting with William Morris. Still, his remark offers us guidance when we follow the ruptures and frictions through which the aspirations of hackers are being passed on from one generation to the next, from one field of engagement to another, and from one geographical center of activity and influence to another. In what follows we adopt the concept of *recuperation* and use it to situate an emerging body of works on hackers. This allows us to highlight how hacker practices and innovations are adopted, adapted and repurposed by corporate and political actors. Hacking often develops in symbiosis with more powerful, institutional and industrial actors with diverging values and goals. Through such processes, critical cultures and oppositional practices are co-opted, diluted, and transformed to serve institutional goals. Indeed, we reflexively ask whether other parties in this symbiotic-but-frictional relationship are no less resourceful in repurposing hacker practices of repurposing. In other words, we propose that *hacking is being hacked*. This pun plays on a proverbial hacker practice, the appropriation, reverse engineering and repurposing of tools and technologies. This practice lies at the core of hacking. It suggests that a superior armory (in terms of money, influence, technology...) matters not. All that can be set on equal footing by the disruptive inventiveness of the hacker.

But an inquiry into hackers must not stop short at this forever-postponed promise of emancipation. The predominant case-based approach to the study of hackers risks falling into this trap. With each new hacker project scrutinised in a case study, from community WiFi networks to self-reproducing 3D printers, a variation of the same promise is being rehearsed. In order to register the systematic way in which this promise fails to deliver, however, we must connect the case studies in a longer time frame. This helps us to see how hacker technologies and organisational practices can be made to serve other ends than they had originally been intended for. With the rolling out of 'open innovation' strategies, companies and governments have refined and generalised the methods for tapping into the time and enthusiasm of hackers (Mollick, 2005). Hackatons are now staged by corporations and universities. 'Civic hacking' sessions are organised by local governments as forms of engagement with technologists and entrepreneurs. Digital fabrication practices adopted by maker cultures are used to position a city or a country within the global hi-tech economy. Do-it-yourself approaches to life science research are labeled 'biohacking' and function within an ecology of biotech companies. Methods are developed to render these processes ever more reliable and cost-efficient. By pointing to such examples, we insist on that the entire life cycles of hacking practices, from initiation to recuperation, must be accounted for. Note to be taken, our proposition is not to produce an exact, empirical chronology over past

events. Rather, what we propose is a general, analytical framework for studying hacker practices as moments in larger processes of transition and change. But change too is differentiated and does not unfold at the same speed everywhere. It is in order to discuss this with more analytical precision that we propose three cycles or time intervals within which hacker practices can be situated. The first one spans the life cycle of an individual development technology or community (the two being closely intertwined); the second accounts for the evolution of the hacker movement taken as a whole or a branch of this whole (such as the open source initiative, the hackerspace movement, etc.); the third locates these two cycles inside the 'spirit of the times' or, differently put, the overall transformations of capitalism. The distinction between cycles that we suggest is always only heuristic, and where the line is to be drawn between one and the other temporality is somewhat arbitrary and can only be decided on a case-by-case basis (Chiapello, 2013). Furthermore, the cycles we describe fold into each other. Short term cycles occur within long term technological and political transformations, and all changes come about within and contribute in shaping the general evolution of capitalism.

Recuperation and historicisation

The theoretical framework that we are sketching here has been developed in numerous intellectual traditions before, albeit under other terms than 'recuperation'. What these approaches have in common is an interest in the question of how men and women make history at the same time as history transforms them. Collective efforts to impose some degree of rationality on the world are inevitably carried away by the maelstrom of change and chance, that is to say, by history. Examples are abundant of how processes of co-optation and transformation have then turned those efforts into the very opposite of what was first intended. An emblematic case is the Russian Revolution, which provided one reference point for Guy Debord's reflections on 'recuperation', the other one being the integration of surrealism and dada in commercial pop-art (Barbrook, 2013). In Gilles Deleuze, and, further down the stream, Antonio Negri, preoccupation with the same traumatic experience can be read out from the notion of 'apparatuses of capture', although the sharp end here is pointing at political parties and trade unions turned self-serving and bureaucratic (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). In many branches of social movement theory, likewise, close attention is given to co-optation and/or institutionalisation processes. The latter tradition, grounded in empirical studies, has an advantage over the more abstract and philosophical approaches, in that recuperation is here understood to be a two-way process. Recuperation is both a subversion of the goals of a social movement, and the means through which those goals can be realised (Meyer,

1993; Hess, 2005). The same ambiguity is foregrounded by the two authors we are leaning on here, Boltanski and Chiapello, in their discussion about the assimilation of critique (2005). Critique, once assimilated, becomes a source of legitimacy in capitalism *and* a constraint on capital's accumulation. It is in this double-edged sense that we want to submit the possibility that hacking is being hacked.

Furthermore, by re-examining hacker claims about having a proactive approach to technology, rebelling against epistemic hierarchies, disrupting established codes of knowledge, and so on, we develop a critique of hackers immanent to their own justifications and interpretative frameworks. From such a perspective we can see that it is not only individual technologies that are regularly being repurposed. It is repurposing as such, as a mode of engaging with the world, and not only with technologies, that has been adopted and cultivated by institutional and corporate actors. Differently put: the very idea that tinkering offers a way to subvert the agendas of the powers-that-be has become a foundational myth of contemporary capitalism. By saying that, we do not deny a real potential in the practices of hackers. The label 'hacking' encompasses a broad and diverse set of subcultures that pursue different, if not opposite, goals and cannot be dismissed as a single entity, hence doomed to be recuperated by its enemies. All that we insist on is that the promises it makes of a democratic computing that counters state and corporate power must be weighed against an anticipated, future recuperation of that same practice. Indeed, what makes the theoretical concept of recuperation so attractive is that it allows us to steer a middle path between, on the one side, debunkings of the techno-fantasies of hackers (Edwards, 1997), and, on the other side, celebratory reiterations of the hacker's own self-understanding (Himanen, 2001).

Hacking has been condemned as 'gentrified', that is, displaced by non-conflictual corporate cultures, leaving little room for its role as an agent of collective and individual liberation (Scott, 2015). Yet we are rather proposing to learn from the defeats of past generations of hackers without concluding in advance that the enthusiasm of present-day hackers is to no avail. Following recent scholarship in the field, we aim at accounting for the contradictions and tensions within hackerdom (Aguiton and Tocchetti, 2015; Coleman, 2013; Maxigas, 2017) as we take measure of the distance travelled between the ethical and political aspirations of hackers, on the one hand, and the realisation of those aspirations, on the other.

We do not suggest that the hacker movement was recuperated in one single stroke, a point-of-no-return when everything turned foul. The question where in time to locate the decisive break with the past can only be answered provisionally.

Crucially, the practitioners do not agree among themselves. Was it the World Wide Web, was it the launch of the Open Source Initiative, was it the announcement of Makerbot Industries that it would abandon open hardware? Collective representations of idealised pasts and desirable futures are always contested, shift in the course of the life cycle of a technology or community. For example, as a technology matures, it tends to grow a market around itself, laws are written to cope with its disruptive effects, and career paths are established in connection to it. In short, the stakes in it grow. External interests put their weight behind internal factions that are perceived to be the most accommodating towards business and/or state authorities. This influence might be so strong that the community loses its autonomy over how it understands and represents itself. It might be that the contest over representation is carried out to the point where the very existence of a conflict line has been rendered unrepresentable. It is for this reason that historicisation is key in an inquiry guided by the concept of recuperation. It takes measure of the distance that has been travelled from one pole, the future as it was imagined by hackers in the past, to the opposite pole, how that past is being represented by hackers today. Finally, the outcome of recuperation processes is not decided in advance, but rather depends on the balance of forces and the unfolding of the struggle between them. Hackers do resist recuperation, and routinely engage in conflicts over the propriety, meaning, and use of the technologies they develop and care about (Hess, 2005).

Hacker cultures in perspective

What is a hacker? While acknowledging the contradictions and the diversity of hacker cultures, at the same time we argue that these multiplicities add up to something singular, a unifying hacker identity (Best, 2003; Coleman and Golub, 2008). We do not pretend to summarise the wealth of recent research on hackers, varying from the governance of free software development (Musiani, 2012; O'Neil, 2009), the performative and aesthetic side of hacking (Bazzichelli, 2013; Coleman, 2013) or the gendered construction of hacker communities (Adam, 2003; Dunbar-Hester, 2010). Yet by pointing at some recurrent cultural traits we recognise the possibility of stringing together a coherent narrative. Opposition to proprietary software or technology and associated intellectual property rights (such as software patents), paired with a rejection of surveillance and censorship are the few concrete points of contestation that hackers unanimously rally behind. It is easy to reach an agreement on these issues, because, as Chris Kelty has lucidly argued, what is at stake are the technical and legal preconditions for the 'geek public' to exist as such. With a term borrowed from the computer world, Kelty describes this kind of politics as 'recursive'. Recursive politics is geared towards strengthening and expanding the conditions

for the geek public to continue to exist and grow, i.e. the very technologies and digital spaces that hackers inhabit (2008). Hackers' struggles over recuperation are aimed at protecting their self-determination and autonomy by fending off communication platforms, intellectual property laws, or business strategies that would integrate hacker products or processes as an appendage of some structure that lies outside hacker control. This looming scenario would invert the autonomy of hackers to its opposite, namely heteronomy.

Attempts to extend the political agenda of hackers beyond recursive issues, to include, for instance, gender equality or solidarity with maquiladora workers producing consumer electronics, can be met with resistance from within the geek public. This is not to say that hackers oppose feminism or workers' rights. However, as those issues are not 'recursive' in the sense described above, many hackers perceive them to be unrelated to what really matters to them the most, computers and internet freedom. The importation of political agendas not of their own making can be received as another threat to their autonomy, and is a source of tension between politically minded hackers, on the one hand, and hackers of an avowedly apolitical persuasion, on the other (Coleman, 2013). In contrast to a traditional social movement, where it is the interpretative framework that the members gather around and have as a common ground, hackers are drawn from diverging, sometimes opposing, ideological backgrounds. Indeed, agnosticism towards questions about values and politics is a prerequisite for managing cooperative development projects involving such a heterogeneous constituency (Irani, 2015b). An exemption is made for recursive politics, however, as here it is zealotry, not agnosticism, that is prescribed. This is only possible because the core issues are being framed as not having to do with politics in the first place. In different words, conflicts do not concern mutually excluding but equally merited value judgements. Opposition to online censorship, internet traffic discrimination or digital surveillance is the common sense viewpoint on how a technical system must work, or, at the least, how it works most efficiently. These factual observations are not open to contestation except by the technically impaired. This paradoxical way of conceiving politics testifies to a strong continuity with a longer history of politicised engineering cultures (Gillespie, 2006; Layton, 1986). The narrative is particularly effective, as it provides an extraordinary springboard for mobilising support and allies around a narrow set of political issues, on the condition that those issues are not framed as 'political' (Söderberg, 2013).

We propose that the imperative to be pragmatic, problem-oriented, and, subsequently, to suppress ideological and value conflicts, makes up an overarching narrative or ideology in its own right. Correspondingly, a row of negative traits, such as being irrational, ideologically driven, and/or self-serving

at the expense of public interests, are assigned to monopoly interests and lobbyists, state authorities and security services, and entrenched bureaucracies both in the public and private sector. More abstractly conceived, these opponents embody instances of a centralised mode of organising all things in society, and they can therefore only be resisted with the help of decentralisation. The importance of this value is obvious in the case of peer-to-peer filesharing. Filesharing offers a near perfect technical implementation of the famous devise coined by the founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, John Gilmore: 'The Net interprets censorship as damage and routes around it' (1993). By substituting the word 'censorship' with 'copyright' in the quote above, we get close to the ideas expressed by filesharing activists.

Decentralisation is valorised as a general movement by which every passage point, on every level in society, is made susceptible to circumvention (Musiani, 2012). For instance, the digital currency Bitcoin is admired for having created a distributed monetary system without any central banking or state power guaranteeing its value (Maurer, Nelms and Swartz, 2013). Bitcoin builds on top of advances made in cryptography. Originally classified under the same trade restrictions as weapons, cryptography has since been diffused to private users and is hailed as a bulwark against excessive state surveillance and control (Levy, 2010). A decentralised mode of production is contrasted, explicitly or implicitly, against the predominant, centralised mode of mass production. What is being decentralised in these cases is the capacity of hackers and individual users to repurpose tools, as an ideal ubiquitous repurposability is the warcry summing up this political program. This provides the means without specifying the ends to which users must commit. Only thus it can be passed off as a neutral rallying point. Repurposing nevertheless has a political and ethical bite, because it is what allows the individual or a network of individuals to circumvent the laws, controls and costs imposed on them by centralised (state and monopoly) power. Taking foothold in the self-understandings and justifications of hackers, we propose a framework for studying the coevolving relation between them and institutional and industrial actors. At stake is the autonomy of the hacker public, both in terms of the legal and technical, recursive preconditions for its continued existence, and in terms of the control it holds over its own self-representations. In our framework for studying the relation between hackers and institutional and industrial actors we make an analytical separation between three time intervals, within which a full life cycle of this evolving relation can be said to run its course.

First cycle: Incorporation of the single technology or community

The first interval by which a case study of hackers can be framed spans the life cycle of an individual development project and associated community, including its evolving relationship to entrepreneurs, start-ups and state institutions with stakes in the undertaking. An adequate understanding of a technical product or innovation must weigh in the whole genealogy of its development, from start to finish, in the course of which project goals and individual motives, not only the technology, undergo transformations (Oost, Verhaegh, and Oudshoorn, 2009). Hacker innovations are routinely used as blueprints for commercial applications. One such example is Internet Relay Chat (IRC), a text conference technology based on an open and distributed architecture and developed since the 1980s (Latzko-Toth, 2014). IRC later inspired contemporary social media like Slack or Twitter, which among other features have adopted the pound sign (#) used in IRC channels to aggregate messages on a specific topic. Yet technological co-optation only represent one phase of a broader and more complex cycle. Resistance to such appropriation is a further point of interest. This resonates with many approaches in social movement theory, where the waxing and waning of popular mobilisations are studied. A synthesis between social movement studies and technology studies offers a promising point of departure for studying hacker practices in this cycle. David Hess has suggested the concept of *technology-oriented and product-oriented movements* to describe civil society mobilisations that pursue social change directed towards building and diffusing alternative technologies (2005). Technology-oriented movements often emerge in entrepreneurial environments and sometimes need to accommodate processes of co-optation by industrial actors as a condition of achieving their goals. This extends a tradition in social movement scholarship of looking at processes of incorporation and co-optation. Hess identifies three phases in the co-evolution between a social movement and the product innovation. Firstly, the goals of technology-oriented movements are articulated in close liaison with entrepreneurs and companies willing to create a market for the new product. Secondly, as the product matures, the design and meaning of the alternative technology are transformed under pressure from market and mass production constraints. Thirdly, this transformation gives rise to ‘object conflicts’ between the movement and its for-profit allies, and among different fractions of the movement. Conflicts revolve around the proper design and/or the adoption of a transformed technology, as measured against the original grievances and values acclaimed by (a fraction of) the movement.

Object conflicts that can be seen as ‘material traces’ of recuperation processes are at the centre of Maxigas’ work, where hackers refuse the latest iteration of a technology or a service (2017). Hackers have written software which enables

them to use 'evil and broken' new technologies like Facebook chat and Twitter through older interfaces; use browser extensions which make it considerably harder and slower to look at websites; and refuse to adopt new generations of mobile phones. Countering the assumption that hackers are all enthralled by the idea of technological progress, Maxigas teases out the Luddite aspect of hackerdom, where ethical and/or aesthetic considerations often triumph over functionality. It is thanks to their technical expertise that they can adopt and adapt new technologies selectively, in a reflexive move aimed at resisting incorporation and transformation practices embodied in commercial objects that are based upon designs and processes originating in hacker cultures. The Ronja project is another example of an object conflict located in the life cycle of an individual product or community. Ronja was a homebuilt hardware device for sending data developed in the Czech wireless community. The project was initiated in 2001 and lasted till 2006. At first, the vision behind it was to create a 'user-controlled technology' and a communication network that would be resistant to eavesdropping and surveillance. As the product matured and market demand for Ronja devices grew, more pragmatic goals became predominant, chiefly the goal to provide cheap and fast internet access. Its obsolescence was inscribed in the rhythm of innovation processes and the market diffusion of industrial development. A rift emerged between those who wanted to make the necessary shift in scale for the technology to keep up with commercial actors, and those who championed the communal and convivial relations that thrived around the original, rudimental device. The opposition between the two cannot be reduced to idealists confronting entrepreneurs, as the rift was reflected in a conflict between, on the one hand, the idea of user-control, and, on the other, the goal of countering surveillance by a maximum diffusion of the Ronja device (Söderberg, 2013). The same dilemma has been registered in media activists as, on the one hand, older technologies such as FM radio are perceived to be more coherent with their values, while, on the other hand, refusal to make the transition to a later platform or technology comes at the price of not being able to communicate those values to a broader public (Dunbar-Hester, 2009). Besides technical products, hackers have furnished corporations with innovative and horizontal organisational practices, as well as with associated cultural values. Lilly Irani has studied local political practices that reconfigure new forms of exclusion and inclusion by incorporating practices such as hackatons (2015b). Through adaptation and integration of this form of collective innovation process into corporate structures, Indian firms exclude the slow time of democratic debate while fostering what Irani calls the 'managed urgency' that defines a new form of entrepreneurial citizenship.

Recognising that innovation is an arena of contestation rather than simply being a resource that can be mobilised, we propose to accounting for the whole life

cycle of a technology. Thus instead of focusing on a single case study as it culminates in an innovation ripe for commercialisation, while setting to the side the community with its rivalling factions, a longer historical framework allows for a deeper understanding of the relationship between alternative technological innovation and the value-driven corporate sector. Alternative technologies are developed in cooperation with private companies, and as the market demand for these products grow, industries incorporate and transform the technology, thus giving birth to conflicts and ultimately to a new wave of technological innovation.

Second cycle: Evolution of hacker cultures

A longer time frame in which hacker studies can be situated is that of the coevolution of, on the one side, the hacker culture, scene or movement taken as a whole, or some branch thereof, and, on the other side, the computer industry and/or relevant (state, military) institutions. While a case study following the life cycle of a single development project or community relates its internal dynamics to the immediate context, a study following one or another aspect of the development of hacker cultures relates this phenomenon to determinate, historical moments. For instance, Steven Levy's classic work *Hackers* identifies several phases in the history of hacking, spanning from the 1960s MIT hardware hackers to the emergence of free software in the 1980s, thus covering scenes and communities with very different ethos, cultural references and political goals (2010). Scholars in the field concur that the 1970s US West Coast is a key historical and geographical juncture for making sense of subsequent co-evolution of hackers and computer industry. By following the life trajectory of Stewart Brand, Fred Turner's book *From counterculture to cyberculture* shows how the former culture branched off into the latter, giving impetus to the nascent personal computer industry in the process (2006). Indeed, the idea of building a small computer to foster free communication practices and new modes of community formation sprang out of the communalist longings of the counterculture (Levy, 2010; Flichy, 2007).

This short background dispels any notion about a pristine hacker subculture that at one moment was corrupted by industry. Hacker countercultures, the industry and the military evolved in tandem from the very beginning. As this relation continues to evolve, the interdependency becomes an object of reflection in its own right and for all parties, and this leads on to new strategies and counter-strategies. On the one side, an industry or a branch of a state puts in place methods and routines to render systematic its interactions with hackers, aiming to increase benefits and reduce uncertainties. On the other side, anxiety over incorporation feeds into the self-representations, community norms and

practices of hackers, accommodating or resisting co-optation processes to various extent. It is typically around this tension that internal fraction lines emerge. This is manifest in ever recurrent debates on how to design free/open licenses (Berry, 2004). The license lays down the criteria under which for-profit interests are sanctioned by community norms to benefit from the collective innovation process. Although individuals and firms are *in principle* entitled to make as much money as they can from the free (as in free beer - i.e. unpaid) contributions of the community, the reciprocal obligation to share information puts a *de facto* limit on profit maximisation. With reference to Boltanski and Chiapello's terminology, we can say that in this setting the open license is the pre-eminent *test* against which firms are being held accountable, serving to both legitimise and constrain capital accumulation. Consequently, the design of a free/open license, and the vigilance by which it is enforced, gives an indication of the strength of the forces at play at a given time (O'Mahoney, 2003).

Another example of this cycle can be found in the political trajectory of one sub-branch of the hacker movement, centred on providing physical spaces for alternative technology production. What is nowadays referred to as the hacker- or makerspace movement has its roots in something once known as 'hacklabs' (Maxigas, 2014). Hacklabs flourished in the 1990s and the turn of the 2000s and were hosted in squatted buildings and social centers in many European cities. Among other things, they provided technical support for their hosts and in street protests that adjoined international events such as WTO and G8 summits. Starting in 2008, a second wave of hackerspaces emerged, this time with the epicenter in the United States. These places are rented and rely on a plethora of financing models, from membership fees to partnerships with municipalities and local businesses, corresponding with a more accommodating political outlook. As Maxigas shows, the rupture was most striking in the Netherlands, where some hackerspaces rented 'antisquat' real estate, a scheme initially established by rentier companies to fend off squatters from the property. Another indication of the reversal in shared beliefs and values that has taken place is the widespread (though not unison) acceptance of US military funding by individual makerspaces with the support of key intermediaries within the maker movement, such as *Make Magazine* (Mitch, 2012).

Seismic shifts in values over time like the ones mentioned above are not always manifest, not even to the practitioners themselves. The existence of hacklabs has largely faded from the collective representations of the makerspace movement. Ruptures and the forgetting that there ever was a rupture occur regularly in hacker movements, often in connection to the emergence of a new sphere of activity (for example from free software to open hardware or DIY biology), or due to geographical evolution (for example, the shift of the hackerspace movement

from Europe to North America). This amnesia is partially explained by the high turnover of participants and a culture oriented towards the New. Another reason might be anxiety among organisers not to scare-off external partners and funders. An indication hereof is debates about re-baptising ‘hackerspaces’ to ‘makerspaces’ as the word ‘hacker’ is deemed too controversial. The third reason, which we put stress on with our framework on recuperation, is the ever-ongoing struggle over collective memory and representations. A case in point is how *Wired*, *Make Magazine* and Maker Faires act as gatekeepers within the maker movement, promulgating storylines about innovation, customisation and entrepreneurship, while marginalising more confrontative stories about alternative technologies (Tocchetti, 2012).

Governmental institutions, and not only for-profit interests, are involved in processes of recuperation built upon such displacement. An example comes from biohacking, which evolved in close relationship with the institutions in which biology is performed, negotiated, and regulated. This link is rooted in the substantial segment of the global do-it-yourself community involving people who work in an academic or government lab. Another sign of this trend is the increasing inclusion of do-it-yourself biology practices in museums, education projects and outreach activities (Delfanti, 2017). Through direct engagement with institutional actors, do-it-yourself biology also actively contributes to state regulation and control. Shortly after its emergence, the DIYbio network of amateur biologists and biohackers was labeled as a ‘biosecurity concern’ in the US. DIYbio members quickly came to an agreement of being incorporated in the FBI Outreach Program for biosecurity. In a few years, the amateur network became a strategic partner of the FBI Bioterrorism Prevention Program (Aguiton and Tocchetti, 2015). This partnership was instrumental in constructing DIYbio as a legitimate framework for citizen science.

Third cycle: Evolution of the spirit of capitalism

The third cycle in which we suggest that hacker practices can be studied is that of capitalism as an evolving whole. Inspiration comes from the reflection on the emergence of a *new spirit of capitalism* suggested by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2005). Adopting a Weberian perspective, Boltanski and Chiapello reiterate that capitalism’s sources of legitimacy are to be found outside capitalism itself. They coin the term ‘connexionist logic’ to describe the spirit of contemporary capitalism. This logic is based on an incorporation of 1968 critiques that helped to restructure and renew the ideological and organisational logics upon which capitalism works. Numerous other authors have canvassed a similar storyline where ideals of 1968, such as individual freedom and self-

expression, were later appropriated and made into the motor of contemporary consumerist societies (for example Harvey, 2005). We single out Boltanski and Chiapello's book because they have developed this observation the furthest, by depicting the evolution of capitalism as strictly intertwined with the practices that oppose it. According to this schema, capitalism feeds on critical cultures: only the incorporation and adaptation of critiques give capitalism means to overcome its own, recurrent impasses. Yet whereas Boltanski and Chiapello's argument dwells on the evolution of organisational forms, the authors have said little about the role of technology in the processes they describe. One can speculate if they dodged this thorny issue to differentiate themselves from innumerable other magistral works about the transformation of capitalism where information technology has invariably been designated as a motor, most notably by Daniel Bell and Manuel Castells. It is in order to fill this gap without resorting to any innate trajectory of technology that we stress the relation between oppositional hacker practices and capitalism. The technical innovations coming out of this conflictual symbiosis, such as, for instance, modular software code, mesh computer networks, distributed retrieval systems (i.e. filesharing protocols), and private cryptography, have all been integrated in the material infrastructure of capitalism.

Besides the product innovations stemming from hacker practices, the latter also contribute to reinventing the cultural infrastructure of capitalism. The inverse side of the critique against proprietary software and other forms of 'closed innovation' systems expressed in free software communities is an investment in 'open' forms of capital accumulation. Thus the critique of hackers are turned into an 'ethical foundation for contemporary capitalism' (Barron, 2013: 19; Tkacz, 2012). This coalesces with a more general investment in the subcultural outsider position of the hacker, which has become a key asset in an authenticity-stricken and consumer-driven market society (Liu, 2004; Fleming, 2009). It is the contribution of hacker practices and values to the systematic features of capitalism that is in focus here, which is to say, the reshaping of labor relations in the computer industry and beyond. For example, Fred Turner describes how in the mid-2000s the syncretism between technological countercultures and new age spirituality that characterised the Burning Man Festival in the Nevada desert has been incorporated in the recruitment strategies of Silicon Valley firms. In turn, this contributed to shaping the career strategies of prospecting employees. The cultures at play in the festival were based on horizontal team-building, task modularity and a commons of shared resources. They represent a non-profit and autonomous analog of the work organisation strategies adopted by Silicon Valley corporations, thus providing a 'cultural infrastructure' upon which the latter evolve (Turner, 2009). Likewise, the project-based and community-centred model of free software development is increasingly drawn upon by firms for

allocating work tasks (Auray and Kaminsky, 2007; Rolandsson, Bergquist and Ljungberg, 2011). The coercive side comes to the fore when this model is applied to the lowest tier of the social and global division of labour, as exemplified by the crowdsourcing platform Amazon Mechanical Turk, a just-in-time labour market for routinised and generic piece-work (Irani, 2015a). Also biohacking and DIY biology have been integral to the formation of the field of synthetic biology and its public perception. The radical stance on openness and distrust for bureaucracies expressed in open source biology research is a conductor for informatic ways of thinking about life and nature, as well as for the transposition of cultural elements from hackerdom onto an increasingly privatised and consumer-driven biotechnological industry (Delfanti, 2017).

A genealogy of the contemporary platform economy can provide another example. A well known story traces the birth of commercial interactive services back to Indymedia, the alternative and radical citizen journalism website that assumed a central role in alter-globalisation movements in the past decade. The values of horizontality, openness and collective gatekeeping that were firstly embodied in Indymedia thanks to its relation with politicised hacker movements in the 1990s have become a resource for social networking services such as Twitter or YouTube. Platforms for distributed production and sharing are thus appropriated by corporate actors for the purpose of reorganising labor and production circuits, whereby waged, contractual work relations can be undercut (Dyer-Witford, 2015). Task-based principles used in free software development are adopted by corporations such as Uber for car rides or TaskRabbit for jobs. The very use of the word 'platform' in the self-descriptions provided by web corporations responds to commercial needs, as it can be part of discursive strategies aimed at representing internet services as open and politically neutral. With these rhetorics, corporations can address both advertisers and publics, as well as attempt at shaping regulatory policies (Gillespie, 2010).

The third cycle situates hacker movements in a *longue durée* perspective. An analytical focus on the co-evolution of, on the one hand, oppositional hacker practices, and, on the other, the incorporation strategies of computer firms, can deepen our understanding of capitalism. In fact, when hacking is approached from this time interval, the object of study has been reversed. Instead of explaining hacker practices by relating them to their historical situatedness, it is the spirit of the times that is being studied through the lens of hacker practices. Contemporary capitalism, we argue, absorbs repurposing and distributed production within its organisational practices, while coupling them with a distrust for incumbents - i.e. 'disruption', to use one of Silicon Valley's favourite keywords.

Conclusions

In order to analyse the evolution of hacking and its relation with the unfolding of history, we have suggested three cycles in which hacker practices can be studied as being hacked, or repurposed to serve institutional goals. Each cycle is understood to be folded into the other. Short term dynamics of action and change occur within longer historical waves of technological and societal transformation. The evolution of single technologies is part of the transformation of hacker scenes over time. In turn, these two cycles unfold within more general transformations of capitalism, which they simultaneously contribute in shaping. Within these cycles, we propose that hacking is continuously hacked by powerful institutional actors, thus diluting its subversive potential. Yet the cyclical nature of our analysis is meant to stress how hacking is also continuously reimagining how to use technological subversion toward its own political goals. Therefore it should come as no surprise that contradictory phenomena unfold at the same time. The very term ‘hacker’ seems to be losing any meaning when IKEA uses it to commercialise its furniture or when Facebook’s address is 1 Hacker Way, Menlo Park, CA. And yet hacking witnesses cyclical waves of re-politicisation, as hackers resist co-optation and continuously explore new techno-political territories: think of the legions of hacktivists who joined entities such as Anonymous (Coleman, 2017), or the renewed role of hacking as a techno-feminist form of political intervention (SSL Nagbot, 2016). Finally, we have also argued that repurposing, the fundamental hacker way of dealing with technologies, is being adopted by corporate and institutional actors as a novel organisational practice within contemporary capitalism. At the commercial level, modular and hackable products are increasingly common in several sectors of today’s Western economies.

By highlighting the role of repurposing in processes of recuperation, we have used hacker justifications and values to reflexively analyse the political contestations and tensions within hackerdom. The hackability of organisational practices is a new feature of contemporary capitalism, and hackers are shaped by this larger whole and at the same time contribute to shaping it. Hacking contributes to the evolution of the work cultures, business models, and ideological infrastructure of capitalism (Coleman and Golub, 2008; Himanen, 2001), while acting within the constraints imposed by such renewed capitalism. The last claim is likely to be controversial. The risks with adopting such an overarching vantagepoint are readily acknowledged by Boltanski and Chiapello:

Stressing historical structures, laws and forces tends to minimize the role of intentional action. Things are what they are. Yet the critical approach becomes meaningless if one does not believe that it can serve to inflect human beings’

action, and that this action can itself help to change the course of things in the direction of further 'liberation'. (2005: x)

Given the limited scope and purpose of this work, we cannot aspire to resolve this grand question here. Instead, we offer an analogy with hackers. They perceive their power to act in the world as derived from a voluntary submission to engineering constraints that, over time, is rewarded with skill and affordance. This resonates with the famous statement of Francis Bacon: command over nature's laws presupposes obedience to the same. Drawing on the principle of symmetry, we propose that this paradox applies with equal force to history. If so, the antinomy between agency and structure needs to be qualified. This antinomy trades on the concern that putting stress on 'historical structures, laws and forces' could be demoralising. Concurrently, however, it is through such historical reflection that one can become aware of the constraints to one's own capacity to act, which in turn is a precondition for acting *effectively* in the world. The same holds true for 'recuperation'. This term foregrounds the succession of past struggles and defeats, from the Arts and Crafts to many other movements, and finally to the present-day hacker, thereby suggesting that the hacker figure is partially recuperated from the start. Rather than being simply demoralising, this historical insight is instrumental if hackers are to counteract future recuperation attempts and assert their autonomy within their relation with more powerful actors.

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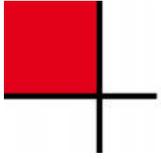
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Occupy Nova Scotia*

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abstract

The Occupy Wall Street movement feeds on public and dramatic performances of 'occupation'. This paper theorizes occupation in terms of organizational being, and provides a dramaturgical understanding as to how societal actors produce meaning in context of the territories they claim. Unlike many Occupy papers that focus on high profile encampments such as those of New York and London, or on the Occupy Movement in general, this paper introduces a small encampment that has mostly been ignored in the academic literature. Known as Occupy Nova Scotia in Halifax, Canada, this case provides insights into what is at stake when 'cooperative occupation' is in play. A series of events occurred in Halifax when territorial traditions of war veterans of the Royal Canadian Legion – a specific commemorative space was claimed to stage a tribute ceremony for fallen soldiers – competed with the putative home site of Occupy Nova Scotia. Thus this term, occupation, signifying a variety of contested political actions that claim physical territory, is problematic. This paper studies the frontstage and backstage organizational moves of Occupy Nova Scotia and asks, what happens when the occupiers become occupied? This qualitative research offers a framework for social activists to think about their relationship with capitalism, social justice, responsible organizing, avoiding stigmatization, and understanding competing claims.

Introduction

Occupy Wall Street, and numerous embodiments of the Occupy movement in the United States and many other countries, is a prolific creator of socio-political and dramaturgical performances. In particular the 'occupation' of both physical

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and non-corporeal space is a basic part of its vocation. Halvorsen (2012) suggests that the global Occupy movement can be better understood by paying attention to the role of territory. Halvorsen calls for further conceptualization of what happens in contested space, and he argues in favour of renewed attention toward how spatiality is produced in social movements. A similar notion was expressed more than a decade ago when Fleming and Spicer (2004) pointed-out a deficiency of academic research concerned with the social geography of organizational being. Social movement studies particularly relating to the Occupy movement have responded with a sustained critique of, among other things, the 'geography of capitalism' (Pickerill and Krinsky, 2012: 281) which theorizes the occupation of space as a central organizing and political strategy (e.g., Milkman et al., 2013; Nyong'o, 2012; Smucker, 2013).

This paper explores social movement occupation in terms of organizational relationships, and provides a theatre-based understanding as to how societal actors produce meaning in context of the territories they claim. We contend that the tools of dramaturgy (Goffman, 1959) help researchers to investigate how social movement actors face-off in engagements with competing occupiers, politicians, and other dramatis personae. This paper extends debates concerning the 'right to the city', an important concept related to spatiality since capitalist profiteering rights have problematically misappropriated all other rights in society (Pickerill and Krinsky, 2012). The overall motivation of this paper is to help facilitate an understanding of the Occupy movement, and to do so by focusing on its theatricality and the building of relationships with extra-movement actors. Unlike many Occupy papers that focus on high profile encampments such as those of New York and London, or on the Occupy movement in general, this qualitative paper introduces a small Canadian encampment that has mostly been ignored in the academic literature. Known as *Occupy Nova Scotia*, it was located in Halifax, which is one of the oldest colonial settlements in North America. This case shows what is at stake when co-claimants of a communal space use discursive tactics and dramatic symbolism in mobilization efforts.

A struggle occurred in Halifax when territorial traditions of war veterans of the Royal Canadian Legion¹ competed with the putative home site of Occupy Nova Scotia. Specific commemorative space was claimed by the veterans to stage a tribute ceremony for fallen soldiers. The claimed territory was in a public space known as the Grand Parade Square.

1 The Royal Canadian Legion is the largest of the many war veteran organizations in Canada with over 340,000 members.



Exhibit 1: Grand Parade Square Photo taken by drone technology, and reproduced with permission of Servant, Dunbrack, McKenzie & MacDonald Ltd.

Pictured here is the home site of Occupy Nova Scotia. In the foreground is Halifax City Hall. St. Paul's Church is at the far end of the square. The area in-between was occupied by tents of activists, and also by a permanent war cenotaph in the centre of the square.

In the context of the Occupy Nova Scotia encampment and its juxtaposition with the war veterans of the Royal Canadian Legion, we have chosen to label negotiations in the Grand Parade Square as 'cooperative occupation'. This signals that occupational identity is in play for those claiming a right to this ceremonial and memorial space in the city. Thus, this term – occupation – is problematic. It signifies a variety of contested political actions that claim physical territory. But what happens when occupiers become occupied? This paper applies a dramaturgical perspective to study this question. The frontstage and backstage organizational moves of Occupy Nova Scotia appeal to history, symbolism and political pressure to negotiate space – a physical and cultural world that is made up of layers of formal and informal systems that organizational members seek to constitute and maintain. These boundary acts create limits not only on corporeal space but also for the more abstract notion of social justice.

It is difficult to challenge whole systems such as capitalism, although social movements are attempting to do just that. For example, Occupy Nova Scotia raised various questions about the character of capitalist domination, its

construction and maintenance, challenges and resistance to its own and surrounding strata, and also its performance. In examining performance, this paper draws on notions from dramaturgy and the work of Goffman (1959) to explore how the right to the city (in its larger context of not only individual liberty but also social justice) is developed, maintained and contested. To explore the idea of occupation, as social actors attempt to create a home in the middle of the city, this paper wrestles with complicated questions as to who owns 'space' and the ways in which protesting actors demonstrate this through their bodies and organizing tactics of their movement. To that end, dramaturgy helps to reveal some of the symbolic and inter-relational aspects of organizing.

This paper shows how dramaturgical concepts of performing regions, performance and audiences, and stigma provide a deeper understanding of how societal actors produce meaning and social realities in the context of the territories they claim. This research also offers a framework for social activists to think about their relationship with capitalism, responsible organizing, avoiding stigmatization, and understanding competing claims.

To elaborate the theatricality of cooperative occupation, discussion in this paper proceeds as follows. First, Goffman's dramaturgical framework is discussed as an appropriate means of studying organizational performances, and the primary concepts associated with dramaturgy that are used in this study are outlined. Second, the paper describes its qualitative research process that depended upon a variety of data gathered from direct observation at the Occupy Nova Scotia encampment, from on-line sources such as websites of Occupy and the news media, as well as 'on the scene' video documentation produced by occupiers of Grand Parade. Third, a working context of the Occupy Movement is provided along with a (necessarily partial) survey of the academic literature it has attracted. Then the empirical events that are part of the case study are described. This is not presented as a linear report of what happened and when, but performed with elements of the theoretical framework of dramaturgy. Finally, the paper discusses implications of the Occupy Nova Scotia movement and presents as a reading of the interface in-between alternative ways of organizational being.

Dramaturgy: A theatrical view of organizing

Dramaturgy is a qualitative research tradition developed from Goffman's (1959, 1963a, 1974) notion of public social performances. It relies on the metaphor of theatre. Dramaturgy recognizes not only a belief in the theatricality of social life but also deals with dramatic elements that are fundamental to organizational processes. Social movement studies dealing with symbolic territory could benefit

from considering artistic staging to enrich analysis and to theorize memorial spaces (Allen and Brown, 2016). Performance of social movements occurs both in the frontstage and backstage of organizational life. Therefore, it has been argued that a dramaturgical understanding of performing regions may act to surface informal power centres. As Smucker (2013: 220) puts it when discussing Goffman's concept of self-presentation, 'It behooves us to explore Occupy Wall Street's backstage and not take its bountiful public performances at face value'. Dramaturgy enables researchers to get inside knowledge-making processes and promote deeper appreciation of tentative and creative elements which provide a framework for social transactions in organizations.

Scholars have applied dramaturgy to address limitations of instrumental foci and to not lose sight of symbolic resources for creating knowledge of organizational practices. This helps analyse the enrolment of actors, the scene, acts and plots producing what passes for social movement governance. Manning (2008: 677) notes that dramaturgical theory could benefit from organizational theorists taking Goffman's work more seriously. Manning goes on to state, 'Goffman's ideas have been... a brilliant, unique and masterful evocation of the central dilemma – posed as a question – of modern life: what do we owe each other?' The questioning of our debt to each other and to society is central to the Occupy movement.

This paper promotes dramaturgy as a robust theoretical framework capable of investigating the alternative expressive form of organizing used by Occupy Nova Scotia. Most theoretical models for analyzing ways of organizing have been drawn from mainstream thinking about bureaucratic entities. Such models tend to look at outcomes and spend much less effort at understanding how we got there (Weick et al., 2005). This issue, we contend, is appropriately addressed by dramaturgy, which provides a useful platform to understand the dynamics of bureaucracies as well as social movements. The tools of dramaturgy can be applied to politics and protest. Rather than ignoring political conflict or seeing it as something to be suppressed, we agree with Pell (2014) that struggles for the right to the city have the capacity to teach us something about social justice. The authors of this paper are concerned to move Goffman's dramaturgy beyond the normative category and demonstrate dramaturgy's capacity for critique. Usually, actors in Goffman's writing would rather conform than fight back. They accept social and capitalist norms and seem prepared to inappropriately overlook struggles such as class and race discrimination, ageism, gender inequity and disparities of wealth. However, this paper attempts to show that dramaturgy does have capacity for critique. The possibilities for this are apparent in *Stigma* (Goffman, 1963b) and in the concept of *Total institutions* (Goffman, 1962). This paper registers a critical stance by understanding Occupy Nova Scotia with

dramaturgical terms to expound upon the presentation of self in the occupation of the Grand Parade Square. For purposes of this paper, the following dramaturgical tools are fundamental:

- **Performing regions:** performances are given in particular places, including the frontstage which suggests cooperation with the audience, and a more private backstage. The idea of space is central to the Occupy movement.
- **Performance and audience:** refers to actors' roles, supported by material such as scripts and costumes, and a personal front such as language and gestures. Performances compete for attention of audiences who, in the case of Occupy Nova Scotia, also participate in the performance – and the occupiers are part of the audience of their own performance.
- **Stigma:** refers to threats to organizational identity arising from discreditable acts, informing debates about how inclusive the Occupy movement has been.

Although there is a substantial body of social movement literature, the field has been under-theorized from the point of view of performance. Recently there has been a growth of interest in seeing insurgency, as well as commemorative space, as movements maintained by artistic theatrical performance, for example: meshwork staging of built memorial spaces (Allen and Brown, 2016), the dramaturgy of object-figures (Eckersall, 2015), the Occupy movement's connection to the theatre (Jackson, 2012), precarious dance and politics of finance (Martin, 2012), and the Occupy movement's symbolic politics of space (Nyong'o, 2012). This paper aims to join these conversations that have at their centre a concern for performance and its relationship with space.

Barry, Berg and Chandler (2012) claim that social movement theory has yet to make a significant mark intersecting with non-social movement entities. This paper takes-up this call by discussing the interaction of Occupy Nova Scotia, the Halifax municipal government and a war veteran organization. Farmer and Farmer (1997: 508) state that 'failing to focus adequately on the bureaucratic in-between has been a natural mistake... the study of bureaucracy should have listened more closely to human experience – to poets like Kafka and Plato and even to bureaucratic outcasts.' This paper pays close attention to the space in-between by seeing territory as a symbolic resource to help understand protest as performance of precarity. 'Precarity is life lived in relation to a future that cannot be propped securely upon the past – or as some argue, life in capitalism' (Ridout and Schneider, 2012: 5). In the case of Occupy Nova Scotia, precarity is

dramatically performed not in a single proscenium-type theatre, but as many acts and scenes played as immersive theatre. Immersive style was originated by the British drama company *Punchdrunk* and welcomed in Canada with the *National Elevator Project* which presents short plays where the performing region is several working elevators located in local office towers. The audience chooses among various elevators then ascend and descend with the actors. There is no playbill or set running time. Indeed, as it is with Occupy Nova Scotia, it would be impossible to convey a set programme given the multiple nature of the relational enactment. The audience participates in the performing of the play, experiencing the social, like the Occupy activist, at the site of the relations with actors. In keeping with immersive theatre, the research process for this paper was open to dramaturgical experiences and collection of various texts. We use the term *text* as any performance, writing or object that can be 'read', including documents, symbols, communications, and virtual performances located on websites. The immersive research process is described in the next section, then the tools of dramaturgy are demonstrated as they apply to Occupy Nova Scotia.

The research process: Collecting drama in the study of a social movement

As discussed above, this study of the Occupy Nova Scotia movement adopted a method of analysis that draws on dramaturgy to show how social actors attempt to enrol others into their programme and collectively redefine power through dramaturgical techniques. To be true to the theatrical framework, the data collection for this paper required multiple sources. First, we undertook to study the presentation of the Occupy Nova Scotia movement in the setting of social media. To that end, part of the research data consisted of *YouTube* videos publically available on the internet. These were posted by subjects of the research as well as the news media and other followers of the Occupy movement. Every directly related video that we could find was selected for analysis, i.e., videos that rendered any type of reading of Occupy Nova Scotia during the period of occupation of Grand Parade Square. As mentioned above, the Grand Parade is a space that serves as the site of the local war memorial. The physical site was to become contentious as Remembrance Day² approached – an issue that will play an important part in the story to come.

2 In Canada, Remembrance Day is held on November 11 each year to commemorate the deaths of Canadians who died fighting in wars in which Canada was a combatant. The 11th hour, of the 11th day of the 11th month was chosen as symbolic of the ending of World War I.

Data were collected starting on October 15, 2011 (the first day of the Occupy Nova Scotia encampment of the Grand Parade), and continued for 28 days until the date of forceful eviction of the occupiers on Remembrance Day, November 11, 2011. During this time 34 videos were collected. Most of these were recorded by protesters using devices such as iPhones. These data enabled seeing through the eyes of the protesters and directly hearing their voices and stories. The videos were particularly useful since internet communication complements the theatrical mode of organizing used by Occupy Nova Scotia. The data collection included a variety of dramaturgical elements including verbal communication, symbols, gestures, facial expression, props, sentiment, physical space, rituals and other means of social interaction. The collected videos embodied cyber performances and helped to expose power relations and inform how the process of knowledge creation is communicated and enacted.

Secondly, the data collection effort included personal observation by the researchers at the encampment. The flows of relational activity were observed at the Grand Parade site from the first day of the occupation until the site was vacated. Although we did not participate in protest activities, we considered our presence and the recording of observations to be part of the messy associative performances on stage at the Grand Parade. The researchers did not enter the space with a particular theme in mind. Although several storylines emerged and were followed, the most evocative (and with the greatest potential to add something new to the Occupy literature) was the cooperative occupation of the Grand Parade Square by Occupy Nova Scotia and the war veterans – a shared production of their organizational being.

After the violent eviction of the Occupiers by the Halifax Police Department on Remembrance Day, there was very little public activity until May 19, 2012 when Occupy Nova Scotia held a solidarity rally at the Grand Parade. The rally commenced at twelve noon and Occupy Nova Scotia enacted a symbolic representation of its encampment, complete with the assembling and display of a miniature tent. We took the opportunity to collect further data because this General Assembly (GA) seemed to be a key piece of the organizing apparatus of the movement. In keeping with the dramaturgical research focus, we documented the GA with a video (two hours in length) recorded by the research team and 68 images which we photographed on-site. The object of interest for the photographs was anything that seemed to be artistic, for example, dancers, music paraphernalia, painting, signage, costumes, colour, etc.

A third stream of research data supplemented other traces of documented organizing of the movement. i.e., texts posted on the public website of Occupy Nova Scotia were reviewed. This included meeting minutes of General

Assemblies and committee meetings, position papers, announcements, media stories, and Facebook and Twitter entries. When performing research which uses a variety of collection streams, it is difficult to decide when to stop collecting data – especially when the occupation was expected to continue for an extended period of time. The cut-off point for this paper was the Solidarity Rally of May 19, 2012. At that time sufficient data were available to support a robust dramaturgical discussion. From the large amount of data collected, we selected items that (1) helped tell the story of Occupy Nova Scotia since part of the research goal was to document and introduce this small encampment, a part of the global movement that hitherto has received scant attention, and (2) provided a dramaturgical perspective to study the frontstage and backstage organizational moves of Occupy Nova Scotia.

The next section provides a working context of the Occupy Movement, and turns to the specific scene of occupation to apply the dramaturgical tools of performing regions, performance/audience, and the concept of stigma.

The Occupy Movement and the encampment of Occupy Nova Scotia

Inspired by the indignados (indignant ones) who began in May 2011 with a series of protests demanding radical change in Spanish politics, and also growing from the preceding Arab Spring and the Occupy Wall Street movement, protesters have gathered all across the world to extend their version of home space, and to challenge capitalism. In Canada the anti-consumerist magazine, *Adbusters*, contributed to the movement by creating a new hash tag on twitter and promoted a poster showing a ballerina dancing on the back of a powerful sculptured bull; the bull being the iconic symbol for the stock market on Wall Street.

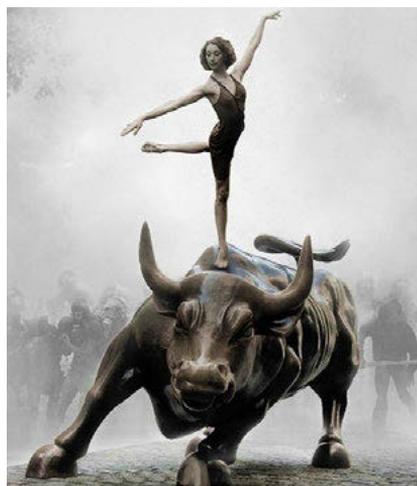


Exhibit 2: Ballerina on a bull. Photo from *Adbusters*

The ballerina on the Wall Street bull is quietly provocative. She gives an artistic and visual representation of the idea of occupation, and a feeling of drama and newness.

At Occupy Nova Scotia, a female occupier reproduced this idea with a precarious solo dance on top of a narrow concrete barricade that surrounds the Grand Parade Square.

Dance performances on unsanctioned surfaces extended the occupiers' milieu and are a means of self-production (Martin, 2012). In Halifax, the dancing occupier's milieu was spread into the busy downtown core. 'Milieus cross, pass into one another; they are essentially communicating' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 313). The music, imagery, dance and laughter of the occupation reached out to competing milieus. Thus, the '99%' (Juris et al., 2012) occupied geographic space in Halifax (and in social media) and created dramas that spilled-out into the streets and claimed an artistic right to the city.

This paper offers a contribution to the growing number of Occupy movement studies. The Occupy movement has attracted interest of academic researchers who question what we can learn from the movement (e.g., Halvorsen, 2012; Heath et al., 2013; Milkman et al., 2013). However, we do not wish to reify the notion that such political activity is novel. The basic idea of political occupation will be well-known to university students of the 1960s and 70s many of whom regularly engaged in 'sit-down' activities as a form of direct action against such things as the Vietnam War, university investments in apartheid South Africa, and feminist protests against how the mostly male staff of the Ladies' Home Journal represented women's interests. While benefiting from the Occupy 'marque', organizers of Occupy Nova Scotia would not want a single meaning to be taken from symbolisms (Khasnabish, 2013) such as the ballerina on a bull. Occupy Nova Scotia is a social movement of people with disparate concerns about the socio-economic and political nature of society. These concerns run the gauntlet from anti-capitalism; a search for alternative forms of organizational decision-making; and various fears about the way pressing environmental issues are being dealt with. This approach was consistent with the wider Occupy movement which fostered a complex and continuous diversity of approaches. The manifestation of this diversity is 'why Occupy matters' (Pickerill and Krinsky, 2012: 286). Precision of demands – getting too precise too fast – needs to be avoided in nascent movements in keeping with ultra-democratic organizational values (Smucker, 2013).

In October 2011 hundreds of people, responding to social media calls, turned up to stage a protest in the city centre of Halifax. The ongoing encampment

included about 50 occupiers according to Khasnabish (2013), a direct participant in the occupation. The protest featured the pitching of makeshift tents, which like Occupy Wall Street symbolized a form of occupation. The protestors literally took over an area that is connected in local popular discourse with the governance of the municipality of Halifax. In the authors' view, the Grand Parade could hardly be more saturated with the geography of capitalism and bureaucracy. The occupied space was in the heart of a symbolic quadfecta consisting of: (1) capitalism – the Toronto Dominion Bank and World Trade Centre across the street; (2) bureaucracy – Halifax City Hall at the North end of the Square; (3) nationalism and military patriotism – a prominent cenotaph honoring victims of war; and (4) religious establishment – St. Paul's Church at the South end of the Square, the oldest Protestant place of worship in Canada which was historically a garrison church for troops stationed in Halifax. St. Paul's official website asks the public to 'bring before Him the needs of the world'. That is exactly what Occupy Nova Scotia did.

Discussion: Using dramaturgy to examine the politics of contested space

This section considers the specific scene of the Halifax encampment and applies several dramaturgical tools to create greater awareness of this small encampment and to examine what we can learn from the processes of this collective action.

Performing regions: Frontstage and backstage moves of Occupy Nova Scotia

Occupy Nova Scotia arrived at a space, the Grand Parade Square, with tents and BBQ's for cooking. Materials on site were used to further construct home – tarpaulin sheets attached to flagpoles and trees. They made themselves a territory. Being at home in a space is the manufacture of a place that provides comfort (Wise, 2000); a process rather than a destination. To demonstrate that the public space is their home, the Halifax occupation included very young children and household pets. According to Goffman, physical spaces segregate social performances. The frontstage is a proscenium space and also associated with personal façade, including gender, race, age, gestures, voice, position titles, costume (e.g., white shirt, tie and jacket for corporate executives). The frontstage is the main theatre platform where the apparent performance is given and the script maintained. The back region is the place 'where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course' (Goffman, 1959: 115). Dramaturgy claims that one's authentic self is usually found in the backstage of social life. However, organizing strategies of Occupy Nova Scotia create havoc with the Goffmanian model of staging. What might be conceived as the movement's backstage, for example, planning meetings, working

committees, drumming circles and decision making – is actually on the front stage for all to see (and participate therein). Occupy Nova Scotia uses territory as a key piece of its resistance but sometimes the *dramatis personae* include outsiders delivering walk-on performances which disturb territorial claims. In an attempt to dislodge the Occupiers from the Grand Parade, Mayor Peter Kelly arranged to meet the protest leaders and members of the Canadian Legion in a tent on the occupied territory.



Exhibit 3: Meeting in a tent. Photo courtesy of Andrew Vaughan

Legion official Jean Marie Deveaux emerges from a tent after meeting with Occupy Nova Scotia protesters who agreed to temporarily move from the Grand Parade to make way for November 11 ceremonies.

Advance notice of the meeting was leaked to the media. As television reporters set up to film the tent meeting, Kelly physically manoeuvred the protest representative to his side, turning him around to face the camera for the photo opportunity. This accomplished an on-television demonstration of his communion with the protesters – a man of the people – no doubt attempting to cultivate political support (it being an election year) from an increasingly influential interest group. This directing activity would usually be stage-managed behind the scenes, but while the television crew prepared to film its report, a nearby Occupier made his own iPhone video, bringing the manipulation to the front region with an internet posting. The players for this mini-drama consisted of a small number of Occupy protesters, the Mayor (his costume included a prominent Remembrance Day poppy on his jacket as an effective signal as to

what role he was playing)³ and a few war veterans in full military uniform. The meeting was performed as a claim to rights of freedom – the Occupiers’ right to territorialize the Grand Parade versus the members of the Canadian Legion who claim to have fought wars to win that freedom for them.

Goffman (1959) suggests that performances can be organized to prevent audiences from observing backstage interactions that could undermine the image being promoted in the front region. This is an interactive process in which organizers and disorganizers adjust to each other. If the dramaturgy of the tent meeting is considered, it was supposed to be backstage, but the front region burst-in on the proceedings when the television cameras arrived and the protesters revealed their own script and auxiliary videographer. YouTube video footage shows the Mayor of Halifax squatting on a milk crate discussing matters with the Occupiers. No victory was able to be declared by the Mayor since the Occupier was not immediately prepared to agree to vacate the Grand Parade for Remembrance Day – a spoiled mayoral performance or part of the territory in-between formal and informal organizing? A lesson learned from this struggle for space is that the contest is as much about staging as it is about the space itself. Goffman (1971) lays out eight kinds of space which he calls ‘territories of the self’. This includes personal space which is the territory surrounding an individual that is private, the bubble space. Spaces may also include delimited ‘stalls’ (Goffman, 1971: 32), e.g., the Grand Parade which has geographic boundaries that tourists can point-to on walking tour maps. Goffman notes that a stall can be left temporarily without vacating one’s claim on the space.

If the Grand Parade is considered to be a stall, then there are competing claims to that space on Remembrance Day. Occupy Nova Scotia maintained its claim – the park benches and grass lawns; the new home of Occupy Nova Scotia – but the war veterans of the Royal Canadian Legion had other plans. Occupy Nova Scotia was now negotiating with someone with a fixed idea of how the space should look and feel. (At this point it should be acknowledged that claiming ‘Occupy Nova Scotia negotiated’ is somewhat problematic. This brings up the difficult question of who exactly is inside or outside an organisation without formal membership. This paper looks to the concept of territory to help constitute organizational involvement through encampment activities). The symbolic staging of the Legion included their comrades, the ghosts of those

3 Canada follows the British tradition of selling manufactured poppies for people to wear as a sign of respect for the war dead. The money raised goes to support charities associated with former members of the armed forces and their families. It is a hugely symbolic gesture that is reinforced in public events by television broadcasters and politicians.

killed in war, who were coming to visit on November 11 (but just the Halifax ghosts, assuming they are tame enough to visit only their designated memorial site). The protest occupiers wished to preserve their territorial claim and initially did not feel obliged to surrender their use of the Grand Parade. They planted tents and homemaking possessions on the empty place, thereby marking the territory for continued cooperative occupation. But the Grand Parade was also staked-out by the identification pegs of city land surveyors. The municipal bureaucracy attempted to restrict use of the Grand Parade by means of ordinances drafted by lawyers and declared by elected officials. Therefore, temporary tenancy of the public area was at play, making it uncertain as to when the claim of Occupy Nova Scotia began and when it terminates. The performance of cooperative occupation demonstrates the potential for governance threats to organizational identity and a layered concept of space.

Weber and the 'shell game'

From the discussion above, it is clear that many fragments contribute to the marking of territory. The claimants bring elements of home to the geographic area of occupation – ‘chez moi’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 9). Notions of territory and home have a capability to situate organizational context. For example, the mobility of home is explained by Wise (2000: 296), ‘Like a hermit crab, I carry my home on my back, my stuff scattered about, bags packed in the trunk. I carry a space.’ It should be made clear that this concept of home implies that home is not only attached instrumentally; it is part of who we are: it is a performance of identity. Similarly, Weber (1947) describes bureaucracy as a ‘shell as hard as steel’ (Baehr, 2001); a metaphor designed to describe the debilitating impact of bureaucratic life on the self. There is an irony here. In stark contrast to the anti-rational thinking and organizing associated with the Occupy movement (often more expressive than instrumental, according to Smucker, 2013), Weber has, largely, been characterized as ‘the father of bureaucracy’ (Cummings and Bridgman, 2011). Yet recent critical scholarship has tried to rescue Weber as a ‘scholar of domination’ (Clegg and Lounsbury, 2009), arguing that Weber viewed bureaucracy not as an idyllic form and not as a recipe for social transformation but a warning about the impact on bureaucracy of social and organizational life. Even here it has been argued that Weber’s profound angst about bureaucracy as an ‘iron cage’ that imprisons people’s sense of self, was a mistranslation (Baehr, 2001). The image ‘steel shell’ which refers to a ‘profoundly changed self that has metamorphosed into a different way of being’ (Mills et al., 2014: 234) speaks to potential links between organizational forms and dominant ways of thinking and being that are important aspects of the Occupy movement.

The social movement approach to organizing recognizes a variety of interpretations that are quite different from that of the ideal-type bureaucracy. In its most developed form, bureaucracy exhibits the following characteristics (Clegg and Dunkerley, 1980):

- Each office has a clearly defined sphere of official duties.
- Officials (engaged in professional careers) are organized in a clearly defined hierarchy.
- Administration is based upon written documentation of a set of regulations.
- People are defined in an impersonal manner, first and foremost in terms of their jobs.
- Candidates are appointed on the basis of technical qualifications or examination.

Occupy Nova Scotia pushes-back against such presumptions with organizational performances that are given to alter existing power arrangements (Benford and Hunt, 1992). With the inclusion of veterans of the Royal Canadian Legion as members of the cast, and co-claimant of the Grand Parade territory (to stage a war remembrance ceremony on November 11), the Occupy theatre included the living and the dead. The Legion brought an abundance of ritual to achieve control, claiming high ground with a show of military medals, poppies, memorial wreaths, shoulder-flash embroidery, and music (the Last Post bugle call signifying that many soldiers have gone to a final rest). The Legion demanded respect for The Fallen, drawing attention to the power of symbolism and of actors' experienced lives with themes of death and home. The municipal bureaucracy upped the ante by attempting to sanctify the territory of the Grand Parade as the pending site of Kristallnacht vigil lights (a remembrance of the 1938 tragedy when Jewish homes and businesses were destroyed) in addition to the November 11th Remembrance Day events. At the far end of the Grand Parade is the meeting room of the Mayor and City Councillors. Inside the building, the Council has designated a territory as totally private. They create a name for this – *in camera* session. Here the Council plotted police action to disengage the protest in time for Remembrance Day. The Mayor seems to have purposefully selected the Legion members (unknown to them) to engage in war with the enemy Other (Occupy Nova Scotia) to remove it from the territory of the Grand Parade. The main weapon was symbolism.

Performance and audience

Performance may be thought of as a political activity. It includes all acting which serves to interact with and influence other players. For example, social movement performances involve efforts of protesters toward convincing others (and themselves) that hegemonic capitalist narratives need to be reframed (Smucker, 2013). Originally, Goffman used the language of theatre to demonstrate how people present themselves, sometimes as a masked persona, in social transactions. They put on a show for others. This paper implies an essential question for social activists: Who are these others? In this section, we describe multiple audiences for the performances of Occupy Nova Scotia.

Careful selection of performers is an important step in developing effective organizational theatricality. But for Occupy Nova Scotia this involves a drawing-in process rather than 'selection'. In the case of Occupy Nova Scotia, the organizational performance requires discourse related to occupation of territory and the cast of characters should ideally have occupation of space as a common conviction. The cast has to be prepared to risk confrontation as they project their milieu since the search for home is heavily imbued with performances that may possibly lead to incarceration. With a view to managing impressions (Goffman, 1959) social movement members engage in casting activities by scripting roles for themselves and others who wish to contribute to the programme. In considering roles for performers, it has to be recognized that the Occupy cast may not be prepared to simply read assigned lines. Social movement actors devote their lives to script-busting and have a general abhorrence of rules and regulations. Occupy Nova Scotia attempted to avoid role disputes by making use of established committees, thus allowing Occupiers to select their own role. Occupy Nova Scotia has a very flat organizational structure and this has the potential to appeal to the cast. (Sometimes it is claimed that Occupy has no structures. But as Jaffe (2013), points-out, horizontalism is indeed a structure, just not a hierarchical one.) The entity takes its lead from various teams, for example, committees working on logistics, finance, arts and direct action. These teams may constitute the idea of rebelliousness differently. The Occupy Nova Scotia arts and culture team (comprised of museum workers, librarians, dramatists, artists, jugglers and painters) might be expected to place great importance on the symbolic nature of protest, and see this as achievement which promotes their interests. However, members of the direct action committee are not likely to see it that way. Part of the expectation is a willingness to be more expressive with their emotions such as demonstrating outrage, providing victims, and creating the 'possibility of critical consciousness and praxis transforming formal spectacle through... active carnivalesque resistance' (Boje et al., 2004: 767). Social movements are adept at improvising scripts to create impressive and

disturbing dramas. Organizational dramaturgy is thus considered necessary for the maintenance of the social movement.

Occupy Nova Scotia was billed as an organization where no one speaks for the whole. Generally, members are thought to have a distrust of leadership, so they try to demonstrate a plurality of voices. The Occupy literature is mixed on the issue of leadership. The leaderless structure is often mentioned, however it is also claimed that everyone in the movement is a leader. Our observations in Halifax concur with Jaffe (2013) who noted that the New York discourse of *leaderless* concealed obvious and consistent stage-managing by a small core troupe. Occupy had no paid employees in Halifax. However, some members had more skill or charisma than others and it seems as if they naturally slid into leadership, perhaps without meaning to. This was a precarious move since Occupiers have a propensity to refuse expertise. The closest thing to organizational continuity was the lawyer assigned to Occupy Nova Scotia by a non-profit legal aid society. His presence was often required due to constant contests with police and other authorities.

Social movements are producers of virtual reality and they embrace simulacra and the hyper-consumption of images (Baudrillard, 1983). The members of Occupy Nova Scotia searched for home comfort by producing imagery within their performance as protesters. Easily transportable musical instruments were standard equipment: guitars, harmonica, voice, violins, and ukulele. The Grand Parade already had a proliferation of signs before the arrival of Occupy Nova Scotia. Citizens walking through the area are solicited to buy hamburgers, vote in the upcoming election, refrain from skateboarding, read names on the war memorial of 'those who have fallen' and, according to by-law A301, pick-up after their dogs. The Occupy movement's artists added to the Grand Parade signage with street painting and banner-making to signify that a territory was now occupied. The signage indicated a disparate programme delivered with many loose ends. Chalk drawings on pavement near Halifax City Hall called out to those entering the building: 'take the power back, voice of women, capitalism fracks the planet, spread the love'. The messy relationships among these various goals may actually have contributed to the Occupy movement's vogue sensation and swift growth (Milkman et al., 2013). With a variety of art forms such as masks on faces, paint on cardboard, embroidery on flags, participants created a 'festival of associative images' (Hajer, 2005: 638). Just like municipal deliberations in nearby City Hall, it is by no means obvious how the various symbolisms informed the actual organizing of protest. An outpouring of contempt for capitalism may have been a central theme for the demands of Occupy Nova Scotia. To transport its anti-capitalism messages, Occupy Nova Scotia attempted to draw-in an audience while concurrently extending its bubble

outwards. Our observations at the Grand Parade reveal that social movement actors use the connection of their bodies (and ideas) with space to achieve communication. For example, the frequent recital of impromptu dance by Occupy members helped produce spectacle that attracted attention from riders on the nearby Barrington Street bus and passers-by on foot. However, social movement theory, either the Political Process School or the New Social Movement School (Barry et al., 2012) – would advocate such a disparate programme for Occupy. The New Social Movement School looks to the backstage of organizing to understand tacit social linkages of those who oppose the status quo. Thus, individual movement actors are not concerned to carry membership cards but they do perform collectively as well as on their own account. They share values that oppose the status quo and power-laden systems to render inequities visible and thus negotiable.

Impressions are performed to engage an audience. The notion of audience distances Goffman's on-stage dramaturgy from Mead's (1934) internally-aimed theatre of the mind. Goffman explored face-to-face situations where actors contend for the attention and ultimately for the support of an audience. This may involve mystification and the maintenance of rituals that activists may stage-manage to foster some consistency with the script (Benford and Hunt, 1992). However, we should recognize that the word 'script' has to be used loosely in the Occupy context. The movement does not privilege elites, so facilitators of GA's ensure that those perceived to be disadvantaged speak first. Occupy Nova Scotia scripts include prior agreement as to hand signals that are acceptable. This creates a sort of Robert's Rules of Order (used extensively at Halifax City Hall), only the parliamentary procedure of the Occupiers is acted-out in pantomime. We observed index fingers pointing upward to indicate a point of information – e.g., tomorrow's food bank location is at the library on Spring Garden Road; thumbs and index fingers forming a triangle to indicate a point of process – e.g., the facilitator is too pushy. An Occupier at the Grand Parade told us that anyone can *block* (veto) with arms extended in a cross pattern. After repeated blocks by an individual, the blocker may be subject to a motion of expulsion. As a last resort, Occupy Nova Scotia will assume that consensus exists with as little as 70% *sparkling fingers*. All this gives rise to significant and frequent questions about organizational process. Occupy Nova Scotia seems to be navigating tensions between mainstream forms of organizing and more emergent forms. Sometimes the process works, other times it causes problems. This was the case for the important decision made by Occupy Nova Scotia members to absent themselves from the Grand Parade on Remembrance Day. They created a home-away-from-home at an uptown Halifax park (from which they were later forcibly evicted).

Organizational theatre audiences are often passive but members of Occupy Nova Scotia try to draw them in – as buskers do – to ask for money and to gain support for occupation of territory. Staging for this includes the major activity of publicity. The Occupiers' territory at the Grand Parade is situated so as to give proximity to prospective audiences that assemble for hockey games at the nearby arena, business meetings across the street at the World Trade Centre, constant comings and goings from Halifax City Hall, and a steady stream of pedestrian and automobile traffic on Barrington Street. Social movement dramas require determined efforts to attract audiences even though large portions of the audience seem intent on ignoring or subverting the performance. The Grand Parade occupiers tried to invite other people into their new home, but we observed that most of those immediately present seemed to pretend the occupiers were not there, or may have viewed them as having only the entertainment value of a side show. We believe this had much to do with more or less constant stigmatization of the encampment by politicians and the local news media. This paper deals with this issue in the next section by applying Goffman's (1963b) concept of stigma.

Stigma: A threat to organizational identity

One distraction that social movement players face is stigmatization. Stigma crosses the boundaries of organizational space, referring to attributes that people perceive as marking the holder as being different and inferior. Society is subject to dramatic processes whereby identities are spoiled and those who are deemed to be different are 'reduced in our minds to less than whole' (Goffman, 1963b: 12). In the context of Occupy Nova Scotia, stigma is relevant from more than one perspective. First, there is the Goffmanian concept which involves the labeling of the members as unfit to occupy space in the Grand Parade on Remembrance Day. This manifest in daily struggles as the occupiers dealt with maintaining its identity at the encampment. Stigma tension arose with members stressed by mental health issues and substance abuse. Second, and we believe more important for gleaning lessons from the movement, is the idea that Occupy may have actually produced stigma in its performance by omitting voices that ought to have been heard. This second type of stigma arose as the Occupy Nova Scotia movement wrestled publicly with the decision about whether or not to leave the Grand Parade Square. Using language burdened with nationalism and military patriotism, the occupiers declared they had reached a territory settlement with the war veterans and municipal officials (Khasnabish, 2013). The occupiers had been increasingly drawn into a precarious dance (Martin, 2012) with politicians and the Legion war veterans about the ethics of their occupation given the 'memorial meshwork' (Allen and Brown, 2016: 25) of the Grand Parade with its war cenotaph, Remembrance Day, and Halifax as an historic military town. The

core of the encampment consisted mostly of young, white protesters. An actant that was absent from the Halifax occupation was an aboriginal memory of pre-white settlement of the Halifax area by the Mi'kmaq First Nations communities. Also missing were stories of how colonial British dominance, and later Canadian governance, was brutal: 'the Mi'kmaq were subjected to conscious attempts to alter their lifestyle... and badly conceived government programs and encroachments upon reserved [aboriginal] lands. Economic patterns that privileged employment as labourers effected irreversible change and left them [the Mi'kmaq] socially isolated'.⁴ Mi'kmaq literally means *the people*. However, the tragic territorial claims of these people were not featured as part of the Halifax occupation. As discussed by Pickerill and Krinsky (2012: 281) Canada's indigenous people were already dispossessed of territory and now there seemed to be 'the impression to some that they were being reoccupied by yet more unwelcome intruders'. Pickerill & Krinsky also question the wider Occupy movement's focus on critique according to wealth, perhaps excluding other inequities such as race, gender, class, colonial dispossession, and the fact that homeless people were, before the occupation, often present in the Grand Parade. Such exclusions at the Occupy Nova Scotia site should be seen as problematic and ironically elitist.

Attention to territory helps surface how social movements and governmental organizations perform anti-stigmatization moves. The Halifax mayor appealed to the demands of invisible dramatis personae, i.e., the public (it was not made known how the Mayor came to know these demands or how he gauged their precedency). Apparently, this nebulous entity - described by Pell (2014) as the abstract whole of a society - requested that the occupied space be given back. However, occupation is the part of the mission of the Occupy movement. In its search for home, Occupy Nova Scotia pitched its tents as confrontation to the makers of municipal by-laws. But there is a limit to the intensity of discreditable acts that the movement can accept for its own. It had to make decisions about disassociating the organization from embarrassing acts such as Occupiers urinating on the public sidewalk. In addition to the dangers presented by ill-meaning individuals, extra-movement actors come with dramatic baggage when they take advantage of a movement's audience to give preference to their own interests. For example, the encampment of Occupy Nova Scotia adopted street youth who had been unsuccessful in attempts to kick their addictions, and some of these youth seemed more attracted to the provision of money and food than to interests of the movement. This was discussed at a GA in the Grand Parade. Dramaturgical circumspection requires that facilitators of Occupy Nova

4 <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/>.

Scotia stage-manage such free riding so as to not detract from the performance of protest.

Being constituted as a whole is useful when it is noted that the 'group' includes broader membership than homeless young people. The Occupy movement also included mainstream supporters such as church ministers, teachers and retired politicians. This increased the encampment's inventory of respect symbols. To enhance aspects of dramaturgical loyalty, Occupy Nova Scotia held a GA once or twice a day to discuss proposals from working groups and to consensually make decisions. However, the administrative overhead involved with GA's is not interesting to activists. Attendance at these meetings diminished as the occupation of the Grand Parade rolled into its second month and the Occupiers were pressed to make the GA's more fun. A number of ideas were floated (Occupy Nova Scotia, 2011): decorate banners, stay in touch with other groups and report on positive occurrences, inspiring talks, food, chants to warm the atmosphere, bring instruments and jam before the event. It was generally agreed that minor administrative issues that get discussed repeatedly can turn people off. The propensity for repetition was very high since it is difficult to manage what amounts to a debating exercise in which everyone has their say, often through chanting human microphones.

What we learn about social movement organizing from the notion of stigma, is that actors may be forced to conduct face work once they have been given a discreditable label (Goffman, 1955). However, the Grand Parade occupiers did not seem to be intimidated by public shaming (on social media) that was a constant barrage during the period of occupation. We offer that the occupiers were more likely to be concerned about performances of the self. Theatre of the mind is perhaps the true 'backstage' of the Occupy movement – where activists are the audience of their own performance. Although Goffman did not theorize the backstage to any great degree, he claimed that he always had enough realistic perspective to see the curtains (to understand that what is performed is an act). But, traditional dramaturgy is based on Mead (1934) who stressed an interaction between a duality that he called the 'I' and the 'me'. The *I* is more in the form of impromptu performance. This includes natural expression arising from biologic drives, for example securing food, flight from danger, and engaging in activist activities. The biologic *I* would seem to have the capacity to wreak havoc on the social world. This is where the *me* comes in. As a social control device, the *me* helps the *I* experience the social and anticipate the experiences of other actors. Therefore, one can be the audience of one's own performance, and the self is a product of the performance in a necessarily social milieu rather than existing *prima facie*. If the self is performed in the theatre of the mind, then face-to-face interactions (which Goffman mostly focused on) become less important and

Goffman's notion of the backstage is not a particularly robust conception of the self. In the case of Occupy Nova Scotia, this is especially important since self-making is a dynamic process and there may be more than one self. 'People's identities do not precede their performances but are constituted in and through them' (Mol, 2002: 37). The theory of the self, discussed in this section, is relevant for what turned-out to be Occupy Nova Scotia's prime occupational move – its decision to vacate the Grand Parade Square in favour of the war veterans. We now turn to a more detailed description of that move, then conclude the paper with a summary of what we have to learn from Occupy Nova Scotia.

Sometimes the Occupy acting cast included outsiders. This was exposed when Halifax Mayor Peter Kelly attempted to enroll members of Occupy Nova Scotia into his network. As indicated earlier in this paper, Kelly arranged for a meeting with protesters in a tent on municipal territory that had been physically occupied. The tent was near the cenotaph remembering Canadian soldiers killed in war. The cenotaph stands at the centre of the Grand Parade and was the physical expression of the most potent political challenge for Occupy Nova Scotia. The relocation of the Occupy encampment coincided with the occupiers' agreement (decided in a GA) to take part in Remembrance Day memorial services at the Grand Parade. Not expected, however, were the events following the Remembrance Day ceremony. The Halifax Regional Police acted on a decision of the elected officials (taken *in camera*) to use force to evict the relocated Occupy encampment. We agree with Khasnabish (2013) that we can learn something from the Remembrance Day eviction. These learnings relate to the theatricality of both material and symbolic territory. The occupational rendering of the self was understood through sensemaking of the territory in which the occupation occurred. Important in the case of the Grand Parade, sensemaking included its historical meanings. The symbolic weight of Grand Parade and Remembrance Day cut both ways, according to Khasnabish:

On the one hand, Occupy NS was drawn, problematically to my mind and in some ways to their distinct disadvantage, into a rhetorical and gestural affirmation of the patriotic, nationalistic, and militaristic legacy embodied by Remembrance Day and the purposes it serves in the context of contemporary Canadian military adventurism. This not only diluted any radical critique of the status quo emanating from the camp, it also led ultimately to its violent eviction. On the other hand, given the widespread nationalist mythology that Canadian troops have always only fought and died for democracy, peace, and justice, when the mayor decided to use force to evict the occupiers on Remembrance Day in the midst of a rainstorm, public opinion turned significantly against the mayor and city council. (Khasnabish, 2013)

The police take-down event had specific consequences. Discourse in the public news media became much more sympathetic toward the cause(s) of Occupy Nova

Scotia. Also, the violent actions of the police changed the attitude of many activists within Occupy Nova Scotia who had previously included municipal police as a part of the 99% (Amirault, 2014). Ultimately, the Nova Scotia occupation promoted further distrust and deep public criticism of Mayor Kelly who announced that he would not be a candidate in the upcoming Halifax election. Occupy Nova Scotia was successful in producing ongoing public discussion about the right to the city. However, things change slowly. Even though the quantity of Occupy-inspired debate increased dramatically, discourse remained in terms couched by the municipal bureaucracy – for example, the legality of urban camping, rules for *in camera* meetings of the elected officials, and new by-laws for public disturbances. An ironic outcome was a subsequent formal motion at Halifax City Council to invite Occupy Nova Scotia to ‘take up shelter and assemble around the statue of Joseph Howe, Nova Scotia’s own champion for our freedom of speech’. This overlooked the fact that Joseph Howe (1804-1873) held mantles of power opposed by Occupy Nova Scotia; he was the Premier and Lieutenant-Governor of the Province. We doubt that Occupy Nova Scotia would wish to assemble at his statuesque feet.

The Grand Parade Square, where Occupy Nova Scotia struggled against capitalist greed, set the stage for the engagement with a participating audience. We suggest that the occupation in Halifax became a cooperative occupation with the war veterans of the Canadian Legion. Hence, the occupation was itself occupied by a theatrical rendering of war remembrance, protest, politics, and a dramaturgical performance of right to territory. Performances do not just display what has already been constructed, but also help to do the constructing.

Conclusion: Implications for cooperative occupation

This study of the Occupy Nova Scotia encampment was concerned to show that the use of organizational dramaturgy helps to create personal and organizational space, recognizing that the term space implies movement and displacement. ‘At the centre of the home, the territory, is not a singular rational subject, picking and choosing milieu, arranging one’s space like flowers in a vase’ (Wise, 2000: 301). The movement feeds on public and dramatic performances of occupation. Therefore, this paper theorized occupation in terms of organizational being, and provided a theatre-based understanding as to how societal actors produce meaning in context of the territories they claim. This paper introduced a small encampment that has mostly been ignored in the academic literature and this exemplar showed what is at stake when ‘cooperative occupation’ is in play. This occurred in Halifax when territorial traditions of war veterans of the Royal Canadian Legion competed with the home site of Occupy Nova Scotia.

This paper focussed on a case study of Occupy Nova Scotia to elucidate a dramatic organizational contest, showing that space intersects with dramaturgical concepts of performing regions, performance/audience, and stigma. Dramaturgy helps to provide a deeper understanding of how societal actors produce meaning in the context of the territories that they claim. The maintenance of a thing such as 'the organization' or 'the movement' relies in part on the performance of territory. As such, performance is important for understanding the achievement of organizing.

Dramaturgy makes methodological demands on researchers, fostering a display of reflexivity. In keeping with critical dramaturgy, the authors of this paper acknowledge that many alternative renderings could have been written into this paper. We chose from a wealth of 'evidence' collected, including observations on site which by their nature are partial representations of reality. We confess that alternative storylines were available in our describing of Occupy Nova Scotia, but offer that selecting from collected data is not unlike occupation. The authors chose what will be represented as truth and much of the story remains untold.

The Occupy Nova Scotia movement's struggle for control of the Grand Parade enabled discussion of the concept of space and its juxtaposition to organizational components of the politics of war symbolism and public administration. We propose that it is in the liminal space that dramatic action occurs, i.e., where activists interact with bureaucrat and with other actors and where they attempt to enrol one another with their scripts and props. Dramaturgy's explicit recognition that an audience is present makes us realize that organizations have to make decisions while others are watching over what may be considered their home territory. Social movements challenge bureaucracy by inviting others to critically examine disputed physical and symbolic space. Over time a number of social movements have been analysed in terms of losing their way because their mode of acting was out of line with their performance which often reinforced the things they were opposed to. The classic study here is Michels (1949) who examined how socialist parties had the tendency to become bureaucratic and, in the process, lose their focus on social change and substitute it with maintenance of the party bureaucracy. Arguably, Occupy Nova Scotia may have lost its way by giving in to the prescription demanded by its cooperative occupier, the Canadian Legion, and the bureaucratic solutions of the Halifax municipality. By the date of the Solidarity Rally of Solidarity May 19, 2012, displayed interest in Occupy Nova Scotia was minimal, as shown in the following picture. Occupy Nova Scotia, the loose and morphing organizational entity, continues to reinvent its home territory.



Exhibit 4: Symbolic encampment. *Photo taken by L. Corrigan*

Core members of Occupy Nova Scotia pitch a miniature tent to remember the encampment in the Grand Parade Square. Unfortunately, members of the news media outnumbered the reprise of the Occupiers.

The movement seems to be trying to unlock its own Iron Cage by starting to work with more established entities such as non-governmental organizations and union groups. However, it may need to reflect on the more profound dangers of organizational life associated with the ‘hard steel shell’ (Weber, 2002) which speaks more to territory of the mind as an even greater challenge than imprisoned ideas.

Smucker (2013: 223) asks if Occupy is simply a name fixed to a flashpoint: he encourages us to treat Occupy as a larger expression: the movement should not be ‘about a certain kind of tactic or, worse, a certain kind of person – one that many people see as fitting into a stereotyped “other” category that they have difficulty relating to (e.g., protester, occupier, and hippie – rather than a popular response to a common crisis’. The arguments of Barry, Berg and Chandler (2012) promote a view that social movements are not something entirely separate from the established processes of organizing in society but have ways of engaging through direct and indirect political contests and forms of dissent. Occupy movements are not easily dismissed as fringe organizations but have ways of holding traditional modes of organizing (e.g., bureaucracy) and decision making (e.g., hierarchy) up to scrutiny. The dramaturgy of Occupy Nova Scotia provided a framework for thinking about social justice, responsible organizing, avoiding stigmatization, and understanding competing claims in cooperative occupation. Even though the encampment ended, the movement continues. ‘The occupations were like a crack in the sidewalk through which blades of grass could sprout’ (Jaffe, 2013: 199). Perhaps the Occupy movement will contribute to building a new world out of the different pieces of this one. Certainly, Occupy Nova Scotia

succeeded in changing the hegemonic narrative of the local political establishment.

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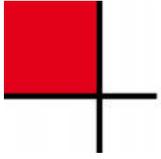
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New media and the Egyptian revolution: The ironies of mediated communication, the fetishisation of information and the shrinking of political action*

Liyan Gao

abstract

The Arab Spring illustrates for many the democratic potential of new media; its ability to facilitate political action through consciousness-raising. Seven years later new media has become a fixture of activism yet its emancipatory role is more ambivalent and ambiguous than ever. My analysis of new media is focused on its formalistic qualities adopting Virilio's framework of accelerating society to analyse how the medium of the message shapes our experience with information. In particular, the dangers of high-speed information closing off a space to critically reflect, disconnecting knowledge from action. My paper argues using Žižek's work that ideology works to not merely repress knowledge but to sever the connection between information and action, and consequently, the enthusiasm for *consciousness-raising* ends up fetishising information. Then, I draw on Dean's notion of *fantasy of participation* to examine how consciousness-raising can create an affective substitute of politics, which diverts us from efficacious political activities. Lastly, I investigate the Egyptian Revolution, to discern how new media and consciousness-raising might supplement, rather than inhibit, political change.

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Introduction

When the events of the Arab-Spring unfolded in the West, it happened over Facebook and Twitter. Protestors shared and tweeted what was happening in Tahrir Square for the whole world to see. This generated a lot of enthusiasm for new media and its ability to facilitate democratic politics.¹ We also see the belief in consciousness-raising's political efficacy in the accolades given to Wikileaks and prevalence of social media campaigns. The underlying assumption is that if people only knew the true state of affairs they would be defiant instead of compliant. Marx uses the concept of false consciousness to describe how capitalist ideology can subjugate the workers and hence once they become aware of their true condition, they will mobilise against it (Sloterdijk, 1987: 20). If subjugation is linked to ignorance, information can awaken us from our domination and the injustices of the world, it enables the first crucial step to politicisation. Given that instantaneous modes of communication have given us greater effective means for consciousness-raising, because of its ability to disseminate information at an unprecedented efficiency, new media is seen through this lens as a politically empowering medium.

On one hand information plays an undeniably necessary role in politics – people need to be aware of a political issue to engage with it, yet paradoxically whilst people are more informed than ever of issues from Climate Change to exploitative labour conditions, this may have increased the outrage but this has not necessarily translated into political action, let alone change. In 2014, BBC found that Chinese factories manufacturing Apple iPhone 6 treated their workers poorly and sourced their minerals from illegal tin mines. Whilst this generated outrage and news coverage, politically people did very little, if anything and Apple products have not changed its practices nor suffered a decline in sales (Bilton, 2014; Huddleston, 2014). Žižek (1989), argues ideology no longer exists in *knowing*, but in *doing*, as he puts it, ideology is no longer the old Marxist formula 'they do not know it, but they are doing it', it is now, 'they know very well what they are doing, yet they are doing it' (1989: 8). With this disconnection between knowledge and action, consciousness-raising for the sake of consciousness-raising only fetishises information.

This paper adopts Arendt's understanding of action as rooted in natality, to begin something new, which occurs through the space of appearance where people act in concert. Online engagement (sharing and liking) does not constitute an action, as politics demands physical and spatial organising of people in a public space; it

1 New media is digital mediated communication including social media, websites, blogs and other online platforms.

in itself cannot create these radical new beginnings (Arendt, 1958). This does not preclude that digital media can be utilised to create political action; it can be a tool to mobilise people to act collectively. However, as this paper will illustrate consciousness-raising, informational sharing-based activism can also create the opposite intended effect-inaction. There are many criticisms of new media, for example how it reproduces and even amplifies pre-existing power structures, such as entanglement with corporations (Charles, 2012: 6; Dijck and Poell, 2018: 7). Others critique the content that it circulates from poor-quality journalism; sensationalist or celebrity-focused news bites and in recent times; fake news (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Stives, 1994). While these criticisms are valid, my research does not delve into these debates, instead, it focuses on how the medium of new media transforms the communicative experience; how the process of conveying and receiving information structures our engagement with it (James, 2007).

Whilst new media can be utilised by activists in advantageous ways, however, my paper aims to go beyond taking the middle-ground which treats it as a neutral tool that can be wielded for good or bad, rather I want to analyse how the technology itself affects our relationship with information. I adopt the core insight of McLuhan's aphorism *Medium is the Message*; the very form of technology has social and political implications (McLuhan, 1964: 15). To sum up: 'Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral' (Basalla, 1998: 7 in Srnicek and Williams, 2015: 152). By taking the first step in problematising the fixation on information within activism, we can then develop a more critical understanding of new media, which better equips us to facilitate political action in the digital age.

The first section of this paper draws from Virilio's analysis of contemporary society as *accelerating* society. Virilio discusses how new media qualitatively change our experience of receiving information and how the high-speed information it circulates is mindlessly absorbed and not properly processed. The effects of high-speed information and how it affects our (un)consciousness are analysed through Žižek's psychoanalysis. The second section uses Dean's notion of fantasy of participation to provide a framework for understanding how the experience of propagating information creates the illusion of political activity, satisfying participants desire to be political, in lieu of political action (Dean, 2009). My last section analyses the Egyptian revolution dubbed the Twitter revolution. For many it demonstrates new media's democratic potential. I argue the link between the presence of new media and the success of the uprising have been overemphasised at the expense of obfuscating the long-term, face-to-face organising that was essential to the success of the revolution. Using the theorists discussed, I examine how Egyptian activists navigated through the channels of

high-speed information to avoid the fantasy of participation and fetishising information, whilst they did not reject it as a tool; they were mindful and wary of its political limitations and importance. I conclude that new media may have a positive supplementary role in facilitating political action, but the fixation and fetishisation of new media and consciousness-raising undermine this by diverting passions and energy from the sometimes less glamorous but ultimately more politically efficacious activities of long-term organising and protesting. Some accuse McLuhan of being too pessimistic, however as he claims 'There is absolutely no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening' (McLuhan and Fiore, 1989: 25). This paper is in the spirit of the willingness to contemplate what is happening.

Accelerating, over-information and the unconscious

Virilio is a cultural theorist who writes on the phenomenological experience of technology. He paints modernity as driven and defined by acceleration, where speed and efficiency are the core values of this high-speed world (2000a, 2000b). Under the rationale of acceleration, high-speed networks become a ubiquitous mode of communication, which proliferates and circulates sound-bite information, whilst discursive and theoretically based knowledge come to be regarded as a luxurious waste of time (Virilio, 2000a). For media enthusiasts, the increasing capacity to connect and communicate an expediently vaster amount of information to a larger audience could rejuvenate democracy with information networks becoming the agora of the modern age. Virilio challenges this optimism towards technology arguing that rather than being a source of enlightenment, it transforms our experience of reality in disempowering ways. Though Virilio's theory can be hyperbolic with his dystopia vision of modernity, his phenomenological approach to critiquing technology provides analytic tools which enable us to examine the effects of new media, how receiving high-speed information does more than change the rate of information circulation and increase connectivity. It also transforms our relationship with it (James, 2007: 2; Virilio, 1997).

One of the most illuminating illustrations of the mechanism behind high-speed information circulation is the 2013 art piece *Bit.Fall* by Julius Popp (Popp, n.d). *Bit.Fall* replicates the phenomenological experience of high-speed information society by manifesting the process in material form. The art installation is a machine that releases droplets of water from a high platform in a calculated pattern to form words, similar to how printers create words with pixels. These words are only visible for a few seconds; once the top of a word takes form, the bottom has already begun to dissolve producing a puddle of water. The puddle of

water is pumped back up again to form new words and the cycle continues. Being linked to the Internet, the machine forms words based on what is trending, thus creating a connection between the machine and culture.



Figure 1: Bit.Fall by Julius Popp, © Julius Popp

Bit.Fall articulates how the effects of information are shaped by the medium; the fleeting presence of the words fails to provide us enough time to properly process and reflect upon it.

Water, an amorphous medium, becomes a carrier of cultural information that is only perceptible for a split second and then disappears again. This aspect of *Bit.Fall* refers to the ephemeral nature of cultural information and values: while we do perceive them, we are truly unable to grasp them. (Popp, n.d)

This ephemeral nature of cultural information and values is analogous to the high-speed information of our new instantaneous modes of communication, in particular, social media which favour short sound bites.

Lash (2002: 1) describes ideological systems as a set of beliefs interwoven to form a historical and/or political narrative that constitutes our understanding of the

world. Ideologies cannot be expressed by high-speed information which favours the superficial immediate over the narrative, compressing the complexities of time and history (Harris and Taylor, 2008: 182). Mere facts, data and statistics lack any meaning unless they are situated in a historical and socio-political context, without this framework of meaning, information cannot be an object of critique (Virilio, 1997). New media can increase the accessibility of discursive forms of knowledge (online Journals for instances), however, in our accelerating society, more often they function to provide sound bites and palatable visuals for speedy consumption (Harris and Taylor, 2008; Lash, 2002). For example, Twitter, one of the most popular social media sites, has a 140-character limit. Another popular facet of Internet culture is memes, which political organisations utilise to capture the supposedly elusive attention of the millennial. These sound-bite ways of communicating can constrain critical thought in two different but related senses. Firstly, the formalistic properties of new media do not provide the time needed for critical reflection and secondly, as a non-narrative mode of communication, it lacks the framework for critical thought.

Krips (2007) uses Adorno's critique of mass media to explicate two methods of disseminating ideological lies; denotatively and connotatively. The former is an explicit deceptive message; the latter is when the lies are delivered within the form. In the same vein as Virilio, Krips argues, the power of manipulation in an advertisement is most potent connotatively:

...the lie encoded at the level of form rather than content, despite its transparency, it sneaks under the audiences critical radar and affects what they do. (Krips, 2007: 2)

The *contents* of information are conveyed to the consciousness of the receivers, whilst *the form* of the information affects the unconscious aspects of the mind. Even the most politically radical content can thus be nullified by the medium in which it is communicated (*ibid.*). New media can circulate information more efficiently but the trade-off is we become overwhelmed by the information, unable to properly digest and engage with it. We suffer from what Virilio describes as overinformation, the constant bombardment of information, which is continuously circulated, proliferated, passively absorbed and consumed (Virilio, 2001). Over-information inhibits our ability to contemplate and reflect (Virilio, 2000a). This gives information a silencing rather than empowering nature, as with the audience of *Bit.Fall*, we become paralysed, we can only passively absorb incoming information which unprocessed becomes part of our unconscious understanding of the world (Virilio, 2000a). It is important to note that my analysis is situated in the current western context of liberal democracies, where there is the freedom of the press and fairly free flow of information (though not without its own issues concerning media moguls and monopolies).

This is different from other places in the world, where there is state-controlled media, the censorship of information or just the lack of information.

Multatuli wrote a book called *Max Havelaar* in 1860, which revealed the poor working conditions in the Dutch East Indies in the nineteenth century to the Dutch public. This sparked public uproar in Holland and a successful-campaign against these conditions including the Dutch Ethical policy, which is said to have led to the end of Dutch Colonialism (Toer, 1999). In fact, the Indonesian writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer applauds it as ‘the book that killed colonialism’. It is unfathomable to imagine that if a book got released tomorrow on Apple’s poor labour condition, it could end Apple’s commercial success. While the Dutch public was genuinely oblivious to the poor labour conditions in the Dutch East Indies, more often now, journalistic reports on labour conditions merely confirm our implicit understanding of how the world operates; we would be more surprised to hear that Apple treats and pays their workers fairly. This is because the knowledge that the wealth of modern western societies is dependent on cheap mass production merely confirms our implicit understanding of how the world operates. The pertinent question of *how do we change these oppressive structures?* is neglected whilst information outlets continue to report incidents of exploitative labour conditions, feeding the circulation of information for daily consumption.

As a result of the over-information and the high-speed circulate of information, without the time to reflect upon the knowledge we receive, it gets pushed into the background and becomes disavowed beliefs and unconscious knowledge (Lash, 2002: 3). Žižek (2004) defines this as the unknown known; ‘the disavowed beliefs, suppositions and obscene practices we pretend not to know about even though they form the background of our public values’. The unknown known holds an unusual position, it simultaneously informs yet fails to affect our actions. It resides in the background-not fully integrated into our conscious decision-making process, yet is concurrently knowledge we possess. Awareness-raising proclaims to be conscious-raising, yet there is a lack of critical engagement, what occurs is perhaps better described as *unconscious-raising*. According to Freudian theory, the analysts job is to interpret and decipher the unconscious desires of an individual. Once the unconscious desires are realised, the problem is resolved (Geuss, 1981). In the social world, the mere acknowledgment of implicit unconscious knowledge is not enough to resolve political problems. Unlike the Freudian unconscious, where the obstacles towards achieving ones self-interest are internal, ideology is sustained by external social institutions thus to overcome the self-deceptive ideological nature of the unknown known, a different approach is needed, namely, structural transformation of repressive social institutions (Žižek, 1989). As Geuss states;

...in cases of ideological delusion, enlightenment does not automatically bring emancipation in the sense of freedom from external coercion exercised by social institutions; much less decrease of suffering and frustration. If anything enlightenment is likely to make awareness of frustration rise. (Geuss, 1981: 75)

Hence, political campaigns need to do more than diagnose society; they need to facilitate political action. In our increasingly image-saturated and informational world, mass media's power to affect our unconscious is more profound than ever. It severs the connection between knowing from doing and pushes humans from deliberated action to impulsive interaction, from autonomy to automatic responses. It transforms our society to what Virilio terms as automatic democracy, 'A reflex democracy without collective reflexion' (Virilio, 2000a: 109).

The fantasy of participation

New media is heralded for its accessibility and greater participation it enables, anyone with Internet access can start a blog or Tweet and further, it permits greater engagement and interactivity by participants through comments, re-tweet, liking, disrupting the one-way relationship of mass media. It not hard to be excited by the new possibilities these technological advances enable, however, there have been criticisms against the veracity of this optimism. Dean (2009) in *Democracy and other neoliberal fantasies* argues that democracy is realised in communicative capitalism by the increased accessibility, interactivity and participation that new media has afforded, yet democracy has failed to fulfill its promises of collective empowerment. Whilst this paper does not abandon the democratic project, it does take up some of Dean's analysis and critique of communicative capitalism, as they illustrate how the promise of empowerment offered by interactivity is often empty.²

The passivity of the audience is the key aspect, Dean proposes, for Debord's discussion of mass media, and, further, that Debord's 'arguments thus proceed as if the problem of the spectacle remained, for all its dispersion, ultimately a matter of top-down control, of actors and spectators' (Dean, 2010: 109). Dean argues, however, the problem we face today is even more radical and pervasive.

2 Dean challenges the belief that new media breaks down hierarchies, she points to how a few sources command a majority of the online traffic, that the reach of websites, blogs, twitter accounts are not equal, new media is not a horizontal platform. New media still exists within the same socio-economic world as traditional media, as a consequence, it mirrors and reinforces the same existing hierarchies rather than breaking them down.

The spectacle has become something we do not merely receive but we participate in, and sometimes under the guise of political activism. Dean uses Žižek's notion of interpassivity to demonstrate how the experience of raising-awareness creates the illusion of political action (Dean, 2009). For Žižek, the shadowy double of interactivity is interpassivity; they are two sides of the same coin. We can be passive while active via the Other, for example, a parent deriving satisfaction through their child's success. We can also be active while passive via the Other. For Žižek, when his VCR records TV shows this satisfies his desires to relax passively in front of a TV without actually watching the TV show, which gives him more time to engage in other activities. Hence, passivity and activity are better understood not as opposites but interrelated; activity is not the same as political action and passivity is not the opposite of action. If an object enjoys passively in our stead, we do not have to bother with passive responses, and we can concentrate on more important activities. The very denial of our passive responses paradoxically hinders our ability to politically act, as we saw above the dangers of losing the space to think and reflect.

Tamagotchi is a popular Japanese digitalised, high-maintenance toy pet that demands the owner to feed, play with and nurture it. For Žižek, the success of Tamagotchi can be understood by interpassivity's capacity to act in one's stead; it can replicate the desire to nurture and care for a real pet without the same responsibilities and commitment (1999). Similarly, by engaging in digital substitutes for political action such as signing a petition or sharing a political article, we satisfy the desire to make a political difference while maintaining one's individualistic a-political lifestyle; 'You think you are active, while your true position, as it is embodied in the fetish, is passive...' (Žižek, 1999: 149). Dean describes the affective illusion of engaging in politics as the Fantasy of Participation.



Figure 2: From the passive audience of the spectacle to the interactive and participatory audience of the spectacle (Gao, 2014).

Dean describes our current society as a communicative capitalist society where the public does not envisage themselves with direct political power. Instead, they believe their civic role is to participate in a debate that will influence political decisions implemented by their elected representatives. This view treats citizens as contributors to a discussion – their primary goal is to have their voices heard. Since the internet has the ability to instantaneously connect millions of people, it appears as an exciting opportunity for democracy, where the accessibility and connectivity of different opinions provide elected representatives a better understanding of the constituency they represent. This conception treats democracy (falsely) as a matter of people putting forward their opinion and waiting for politicians to do their job, rather than engaging in political action themselves. Political opinions under communicative capitalism become individualised packaged products, which elected representatives can pick and choose. Dean describes this disconnection between information circulation networks and official politics as the illusion of political participation. While we are caught up in an illusory circuit of supposed participation, real political outcomes are at risk of being managed behind the scenes by lobby groups, social institutions and the economic market, meanwhile, the collective will of the people is bypassed.

A prime example of this disconnect for Dean is the dissent mounted against the Iraq War. Bush responded to the myriad of opposing views simply as a demonstration of Americans' constitutional right to freedom of speech (Dean,

2009). Bush denied the expression of dissent as relevant to America's foreign policy. Bush's acknowledgment of the criticism is what Dean (2010: 61-84) describes as the *whatever* response. The whatever attitude is typical of how the information network of new media deflects and negates criticism, not through censorship but by undermining the significance of the criticism as just another point of view. The whatever response acknowledges the utterance of a viewpoint but fails to engage with it either in a supportive or oppositional manner. The sanctity of freedom of speech remains intact but the political power of the message is subdued. Instantaneous modes of communication trap us into a spiral of exchanging information for the sake of increasing communicative connectivity; people become satisfied with having their voices heard. Dean argues that *prima facie* increased participation suggests unprecedented control over how people relate to information. However, in many ways, it is more dangerous than mass media because at least the audience of mass media is self-aware of their passivity and may rise against it, whereas the participants of new media falsely believe they are engaging in politics. The experience of contributing to the circulation of information creates the psychological satisfaction of political action without the political outcomes (Dean, 2009).

The Kony 2012 campaign is a prime example of the fantasy of participation at work. In March 2012, a 30-minute video of the Military Leader Joseph Kony was released by the Invisible Children organisation. It condemned Kony's human rights violations and urged people to make Kony famous by sharing the video and plastering their city with posters on April the 20th. The video quickly went viral on social media receiving 70 million views on YouTube, unprecedented for any online campaign video (CBS news, 2012). Despite the initial overwhelming positive online response, two months later the poster-plastering event was a dismal failure. Of the 21,000 people who stated on Facebook that they would attend a postering event in Vancouver, only 17 showed up; In Sydney 19,000 clicked attending on the Facebook event but only 25 people showed up and similar stories occurred around the world (Hager, 2012; Herald Sun, 2012).

The Kony 2012 campaign initial success in grabbing peoples' attention relied on the immediacy of slick visual props and emotive language but it failed to build a sustainable movement because it catered to the sound-bite audience and received the appropriate response. In countries such as Canada and Australia there was minimal if any offline campaign building, yet, the producers of the Kony 2012 campaign believed people around the world, who had no personal connection with or commitment towards the campaign prior to watching the video, would then become actively involved. The low attendance can be explained by our desire and energy aimed at creating political change having been diverted into interactive, interpassive activities such as sharing a video; the fetish object (that

is; social media platform) is active in our place, while the political issue remains unresolved. The campaign remains one of the most successful online campaign in terms of likes, shares and online impact, yet it quickly lost momentum (Barcia, 2013). This is in part because the information was valued for what Lash (2002) calls its exchange value, its ability to circulate at high-speeds measured by the numbers of Internet hits and shares, rather than its ability to incite political change. Whether the message is received; whether it is understood or reflected upon becomes neglected. By privileging the transmission of the message over its effect, one treats the instrument as the aim, discarding and forgetting that these awareness-raising campaigns are undertaken on the premise to create political change, whether these changes are to curb carbon emissions or end state corruption.

The fantasy of participation redirects our energies from political action into the continuous information circulation of creating exchange value; here experience and action come apart. Virilio evokes Kafka's imagery of modern society of this deception; 'The masses are rushing, running, charging through the age. They think they are advancing but they are simply running on the spot and falling into the void...' (Virilio, 2000a: 31). The feeling of running on the spot imitates movement, one performs the same gestures and it manifests the same affective responses (you feel tired and sweaty) yet there is a crucial difference: the lack of movement. The current obsession with awareness-raising imitates political action but it fails to change the scenery of our current political landscape. In the accelerating society, we are thrown into mindless frenetic activities to keep ourselves busy, eliminating any time to pause and think (ibid.: 159). 'The frantic activity of the fetish works to prevent actual action, to prevent something from really happening' (Dean, 2009: 31). This illusion of action risks circumventing the process of reevaluation, where activists pause to rethink their tactics instead of continuing to reflexively feed the information circulation (Dean, 2010: 121-125).

So far, my analysis of consciousness-raising in the digital age has been highly sceptical of its democratic potential, however, my work should not be mistaken as a call for complete disengagement, which is neither possible nor necessarily desirable. The problem is not creating a Facebook event for a demonstration; that is neither going to make nor break it, rather it lies in the fetishisation of information which lends itself to the belief that new media's ability to circulate information with unprecedented efficiency is politically enlightening and represents empowering technological progress.³ As we have seen, this high-

3 This is disregarding a whole range of problems centered around the veracity of information circulating. As the problem of 'false news' becomes increasingly

speed information circulation favours sound bites over discursive narrative based knowledge, which undermines our ability to critically reflect and act upon it. To overcome the disconnection between knowledge and action, we need to slow down and re-think our engagement. Equally important, we must avoid the dangers of heralding the interactivity of online engagement as a new form of democratic participation. Such a perspective lends itself to the fantasy of participation, where new media instead of supporting political action becomes a diversion from it. The following section will look towards Egyptian activists of the 2011 revolution to illustrate how they navigate the pitfalls of information fetishism. Here we will find that the revolution was the culmination of slow traditional forms of networking, community and skill building.

New media and the Egyptian revolution

There is perhaps no event that generated as much accolades for new media's political influence as the Arab Spring, which the media named Twitter and Facebook revolution (Charles, 2012: 180). Mark Pfeifle, a former American national-security adviser, said in regards to the 2009 Iranian presidential election protest 'Without Twitter the people of Iran would not have felt empowered and confident to stand up for freedom and democracy' (2009). Scholarly works vary in the role they attribute to new media during the Arab Spring, however, they seemingly all dispute the simplistic narrative offered by the 'Twitter/Facebook revolution'. As Garbuado argues, the focus on technological tools obscures the role of on-the-ground and face-to-face organising; it confuses what were the true agents of change; the Arabic people (2012: 6, 8). This confusion can be seen most poignantly in Pfeifle's proclamation that Twitter, rather than the Arabic people should be rewarded the Nobel peace prize.

By investigating the Egyptian revolution, this section aims to discern and bring to light the role and limitation of new media's ability to instigate political action by consciousness-raising. As we will find, the analysis shows that the uprising was not a spontaneous event instigated by social media but rather the culmination of years of organising and protesting.⁴ Whilst from a western perspective, dissent

prevalent, due to arguably the fast nature of new media, the push to create click-bait material is stronger than to educate and inform.

4 Wolover argues this over-emphasis of the new media's role in the Tunisian uprising was more prominent in Western media than Arabic new sources. Whilst both western and Arabic news sources identify the human agency and social media as key factors in the revolution, Aljazeera always framed Western new media as a tool; in contrast, Western news sources put social media at the forefront (2016). Wolover

from Egyptians is most visible online, it is how most learned about the revolution, this visibility overshadows the lively anti-Mubarak political atmosphere of the streets, of physical spaces that varied from cabs and mosques to coffee shops. It is these spaces that helped build resilient politicised communities and enabled the mass mobilisation of millions on Tahrir Square.

One of the clearest indications that social media's role has been overblown is how few Egyptians actually engaged with it, only 0.00014% of the Egyptian population had a Twitter account, while only 16.27% were Internet users (Murthy, 2013: 95). Most of the Tweets were in English, directed towards the global western media. Many of the social media famous activists, whilst well known internationally, were not recognised by local Egyptians. Furthermore, the internet connected mostly middle-class Egyptians. New media alone could not account for the millions of protestors at Tahrir Square on the 28th of January (Garbuado, 2012: 65).⁵ El-Nawawy and Khamis argue that whilst the Internet has low audience penetration, it still had a significant impact by revitalising the civil society of Egypt, it facilitated political dialogue and accountability; '...enabling the exchange of political discussions and deliberations online and, most importantly, through exposing the government's many dysfunctions and malpractices' (2013: 85-86). They also note that a vibrant media landscape did not always correspond to street level political mobilisation, because how autocratic governments sometimes allowed an outlet for the people to express their anger to prevent it from manifesting in more radical action (El-Nawawy and Khamis, 2013: 1). Online communicative networks provide this outlet, the fantasy of participation that displaces the space for actual political action.

Badran (2014) and Isamli (2011) both argued that the mobilisation of millions of Egyptians, which toppled Mubarak's rule, was the result of years of on-going demonstrating and protesting from 1998. Isamli cites numerous examples, from a 10,000-textile workers strike in 2008 to an 11-day occupation by tax collectors (2011: 37). Badran (2014: 275) identifies three key movements, the pro-Intifada, anti-Iraq war and Keyefa that made the Tahrir Square occupation possible, whilst

attributes the difference in reporting in part as a form of Orientalism, the belief that Arabic nations needed Western technology such as Wikileaks and social media to overcome their oppressive conditions.

5 This built off the thousands of protestors on January 25th who protest against the police, the key tool of Mubarak's repressive regime, on the national state-media run celebration of police day.

the first two focused on regional issues rather than targeting Mubarak, they nonetheless challenged Mubarak's legitimacy, in particular, his emergency law.⁶

These demonstrations also broke down the taboo of street demonstrations, helped overcome the fear of police brutality, planted into the collective imagination street protesting as an effective channel for dissent, adding it to the Egyptians repertoire of contention (Badran, 2014: 281; Isamli, 2011). The Iraq war movement saw the Tahrir Square be occupied for the first time since 1972 and after the second pro-Intifada demonstration, they became a weekly event (Badran, 2014: 280). These protests also facilitated building coalitions. Previously disparate groups of activist through the campaigns by NGOs become an organised and skilled network (*ibid.*: 275). The Kefeya movement of 2005, which Merlyna Lim (2012) attributes as the birth of the anti-Mubarak movement, saw demonstrations become increasingly targeted at Mubarak. The next key anti-Mubarak sentiments came from the resurgence of the Egyptian Labour movement, where wildcat strikes became extremely prolific (*ibid.*: 234). The strength of the labour movement played a crucial part in the 2011 Egyptian revolution. Srnicek and Williams went as far as to argue that their participation transformed a general protest into a near general strike, by shutting down the country, to become a tipping point in toppling Mubarak (2015: 34).

Kefaya did utilise the emergence of the blogosphere to spread ideas, especially between groups of different political orientation, even after its decline in 2008, the blogs were still utilised to spread news of police brutality (Lim, 2012: 237, 239). The administrator of the Kullena Khaled Said Facebook page, Wael Ghonim, one of the prominent pages opposing the regime, was able to safely report on police brutality from Dubai (Gerbaudo, 2012: 63).⁷ New media has the advantage of distance and anonymity which helps circumvent the censorship of an autocratic government. The downside of this distance is that it does not support the creation of trust, solidarity and comradeship, which are needed for people to feel empowered to take action on the streets, especially when there is the risk of police brutality and repression (*ibid.*: 61). As we saw above, the regional demonstrations were crucial in overcoming this fear.⁸ As a consequence,

6 Since 1981, Egypt has been under emergency law, allowing the arrest and detention of citizen without trial under the decree of the Minister of Interior (Ismali, 2011).

7 Khaled Saeed is an Egyptian man who died under police custody in Alexandria after being dragged out by police forces from an Internet café. The image of his corpse went viral online and was describes by some as the 'The face that launched a revolution'.

8 In fact, a prominent blogger, Wael Abbas, posted many videos of police brutality online, was accused by supporting the police through inciting fear amongst the public (Isherwood, 2008).

many of these social media campaigns, whilst successful in raising awareness of the failures of his governance, however, were often unsuccessful in translating their online engagement into political action. For example, the first anti-Mubarak group to use Facebook was the April 6th Youth Movement; they accumulated over 900,000 likes after the arrest of their co-founder Esraa Abdel Fatah. Despite the successful online consciousness-raising campaign against censorship, the likes never translate to political action (Lim, 2012: 240). The #orabi2010 campaign met a similar fate.

The importance of strong networks is emphasised in Gladwell's article *Small change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted*, which he begins by discussing the civil rights Greensboro lunch counter sit-in, where four African-American students refused to leave their seats at an exclusive white establishment (2010). The first to join the sit-in was the student's dorm-mates and other close associates. Gladwell summarises that at the core of a successful political movement is discipline, sacrifice and commitment, whilst social media can be successful in getting people to share a post when someone's phone is missing because it is a low-commitment act, social media is far less successful at getting people to make sacrifices (time/energy/risk) which are needed for politically transformative actions. For Gladwell, the strength of the Civil Rights Movements was largely dependent on their ability to utilise the established communities of Church groups to spread their message, build support and mobilise people. Similarly, the Egyptian revolution was not built on ephemeral, loosely connected groups that organised through the internet. Rather the foundation for building new networks were the mobilisation and organization of pre-established strong groups in the community. The 25th January protest at Tahrir Square tapped into pre-existing communities. Cabs, coffee shops, mosques, and soccer fields were all key hubs to build and organise for the Tahrir Square protest and created a coalition of anti-Mubarak protestors (Lim, 2012: 243). In the build-up to the occupation, protestors were instructed to meet up with friends, family and neighbours in small groups, in these trusted groups, they shouted chants and slogans, which encouraged people on the streets to join. These strong knit groups help unite people through the sense of security they created before entering the more hostile space of Tahrir Square (Gerbaudo, 2012: 65).

Learning from the previous failures of anti-Mubarak online campaigns, there was greater pre-protest organising leading up to the 25th of January. The protestors experimented, practised and developed different protesting strategies and tactics in the outer suburbs (Gerbaudo, 2012). In addition, during the protest, they had war rooms to coordinate it. In contrast to the campaigners of the Kony 2012, the Egyptian protestors slowed down to stop and reflect upon their engagement; they demonstrated more awareness of the limitations of new media and dangers of

information fetishisation; and the importance of spatial mobilisation for political change. As a consequence, even bloggers went offline, from contributing to the dissemination of over 20,000 posters to building on-ground networks (Lim, 2012: 240). Many of these activists actively fought against the fantasy of participation that new media was susceptible to promote (Baron and Gunning, 2014: 283). On the 25th of January, Ghonim made a Facebook post to be defined not by their medium, but by their actions; 'today we are going to prove that we are not guys of 'comment and like' as they claim, we are REALITY on earth and we are demanding our rights and we are all participating' (Gerbaudo, 2012: 63).

On the 27th of January, the government shut down the Internet in response to the occupation in order to curb the protestors. Gerbaudo (2012) argues the kill switch reflected an ambiguity in the role of social media, it created some disorientation, as these channels were used for communication and coordination, however, the kill switch ultimately backfired. Firstly, it was viewed as a betrayal by the middle class Egyptian and roused them to join the occupation. Secondly, shutting down the Internet was the ultimate cure for the fantasy of participation: 'The internet shut-down made it impossible to maintain safe distance by following the events on the internet or talking on the phone to one's friends on the streets' (*ibid.* 69). Without the internet, the Egyptians could no longer feel active through the fetish of the technological tools; they had to be bodily present within the space of appearance. The internet shut-down also meant the protestors spent their time at the square not capturing the moment for the international audience but bonding and strengthening ties with their fellow protestors. Despite the claims that the Egyptian revolution was a 'Twitter revolution', in fact, it was the culmination of years of slow and arduous campaigning (Charles, 2012: 237).

Tufekci (2017) makes a related point when she compares Occupy and the Civil Right Movement, the latter movement culminated with the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, with over 200,000 protestors, which led to the Civil Rights Act. The success of this mobilisation demonstrated and exercised the power of an organised group of people who have developed strong ties and relationships built from years of prior organising, which involved collective decision making that enables them to make strategic and tactical manoeuvres (Tufekci, 2017: 66-68, 269-270). Those in the White house succumb to the demands of the protestors, not because of the presence of the people on the streets per se, but because of what it signal, the capacity of the protestors. Tufekci argues that digital tools provide a shortcut that may enable us to mobilise mass amounts of people with greater ease. However, mass mobilization does not only include mass communication. It foremost involves relationship building and collective strategic decision-making to ensure long term commitment. If we use the 'digital short cut' as our main means of organizing, instead of as a

supplement to traditional means, then the protest might eventually lose its collective power and capacity. While a digital based mobilisation may serve certain purposes, there will be limited, if any, repercussions, if these protests are not founded on strong communities that can strategically and collectively exercise power. The anti-Iraq protest and the Occupy movements are examples of this tendency (Tufekci, 2017: xiii). Tufekci argues that the Occupy movement, utilising social media to spread its message, succeeded in intervening in the public discourse as well as in creating a public conversation about wealth inequality. It failed, however, to create any institutional, structural or electoral change (Tufekci, 2017: 214, 215). Tufekci articulates a slightly different problem posed by digital tools than my paper but it reflects an underlying sentiment that social media is a powerful tool, a tool that can support but also undermine organising, especially when people value new media for its high-speed efficiency in accelerating activism; as Virilio warns us can displace political action.

Conclusion

Since the Arab Spring, the enthusiasm of social media was withered though not died, as Tufekci's own personal narrative reflects. As a Turkish woman working for IBM, she saw the potential of new media at the beginning of the Arab revolution, especially in a country with high censorship, however, as the years have gone past, there is now a more ambivalent or ambiguous feeling towards new media- based on her recent Ted talk even a dystopic view of technology's effects. Whilst people have been analysing and debating new media's role in activism, what has emerged is that new media is perhaps best employed the Right. Occupy discourse may have been crucial to the popularity of socialist candidate Bernie Sanders who became a serious contender for the presidential nomination but it was Twitter and reality show star Donald Trump that won the Presidential race. From the Tea party to the Brexit, and perhaps the most concerning Cambridge Analytica, we see the danger of the increasing accessibility and circulation of information, especially when it is used in harvesting the data of potential voters to influence election results (Tufekci, 2017: 215-220). Similar to Virilio's concept of over-information, Tufekci describes the dangers of information glut, where it is not censorship but oversaturation of information, which through confusion, by overwhelming us, stops people from taking action:

Challengers need attention and authority to persuade people to mobilize, while those in power merely need to keep them from acting. Muddying the waters is often good enough for the powerful. (Tufekci, 2017: 273)

In essence, it is easier for the right to utilise information to confuse than for the left to utilise it to act whilst propaganda and political manipulation is not a new phenomenon, high-speed information circulation of information has transformed it in an unprecedented way. As a consequence, in our accelerating world, we need to create the space to slow down and properly process and reflect. Coffee shops, cab and mosques were politically vibrant and transgressive spaces in Egypt because they facilitated discursive, slow discussions and reflections.

Social Media will continue to play a role in politics, as it does have certain communicative advantages, from circumventing censorship to instantaneously sharing information to a large audience. We should not shy away from these advantages, however, we need to be wary and navigate these risks in intentional and conscious ways. I speak a lot of not rejecting digital tools but being wary of them but what does this mean? How is this different from the status quo? I think the key is that political action needs to be grounded by face-to-face, slow relationships. We may use Facebook as a tool to organise meetings or event, or communicate between meeting, it helps send invites, provides a platform to store the details of the event and send people reminders before the event begins, however, the political organising, that involves building relationship, developing trust, learning to make collective decision, and strategic and tactical decision cannot be circumvented by new media. It is fitting that Jane McAlevey recent book outlines a form of political organising against the current dominated approach to activism of social media based mobilising is titled 'No Shortcuts'.

Arendt (1958) in the prologue to *The human condition* states the purpose of her phenomenological investigation as '...very simple, it is nothing more than to think what we are doing'. My paper similarly encourages people to decelerate and think about whether the increase in information circulation of high-speed information networks has in fact empowered us to engage in political action or is it reiterating our collective unconscious knowledge. The Egyptian revolution was 7 years ago, yet, whilst the enthusiasm for the democratic potential of new media has waned, the use of social media for activism has been a fixture. Communication team and digital campaigners are a staple part of NGOs, unions and even grassroots groups, and their job is to maximise likes, shares, whilst their success is measured by these same superficial metrics. It is easy to look at recent political event, from Black Lives Matter movement to the Standing Rock protest, and point to the presence of social media as indicative of its political efficacy, however, I encourage looking beyond the Tweets, as I suspect the success of these events, as we found with the Egyptian revolution, involved the presence of traditional forms of organising. Claims made about new media's emancipatory power fail to appreciate the ways it can negate the radical potential of knowledge. It is more important than ever given the range of political crises

we face and given the prevalence of new media as a platform for raising political awareness to actively fight against the fetishisation of information and the fantasy of participation, to bring forth transformative action and emancipatory change.

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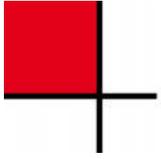
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Coding gender in academic capitalism*

Soile Veijola and Eeva Jokinen

abstract

In this paper, we explore the general societal and political tendency today to encode and digitalise work, production and lived life to as great an extent as possible. We study this by focusing on work at universities where women tend to take care of most of the collective, relational and responsive duties related to knowledge production, education and the working community. We ask, what happens to gender, work and knowledge in the process where academic capitalism decodes the parameters by which the latter three notions are assessed, and evaluated?

Introduction

We love the Internet, digital media and all the options that techno-social life makes available to us. Our collaboration as academic workers, for instance, has been made possible for decades by email and collective writing platforms. Digital connections are, after all, an important affordance for intellectual work for all

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who have a job far away from the village centres of international academia. Thus, we welcome new digital means and gadgets that enable the ‘general intellect’, a force which Marx (1973) linked to general social and collective intelligence: the productive force of the social brain. According to Virno (2004) and many other scholars, collective intelligence is the main productive force of the post-Fordist society.

Moreover, we have – perhaps naïvely – assumed that the university (as we knew it) supports our work and that all forms of research cooperation (digital, tactile, hybrid) are developed in order to embrace creativity and variations in research and research communities. By university, academia and academic life, we mean the generalised idea of the university as a global site for knowledge and innovation. It is worth mentioning that we have both been working in the privileged universities of the Global North in Northern Europe, studying the social sciences. We have not needed to pay for our education, nor have we really expected to be treated differently because we are women, even if we could see that most of our own professors were men and that there seemed to be a gender issue going on among older generations. We, nevertheless, had high hopes that gender would gradually cease to make any difference in academia, that it would become a mere difference among other differences and would help people to do important and radical things together, not block them.

We can now see how premature these hopes were. We are not witnessing the universities we know, defending their autonomy and duty of critical thinking and supporting people who commit themselves to independent research and passionate teaching. Instead, we see increasing insecurity, a blundering new public management of academic work and individuals who are forced to compete against one another and apply for external funding to do their job: to conduct research. There are endless new, often rather non-organically formed, institutional networks and units rather than inquiring minds in collaboration looking for the realisation of ideas and the empowerment of human beings (see Slaughter and Leslie, 2001; Beverungen, Dunne and Sørensen, 2008; Berglund, 2008). The optimistic ideas of expanded opportunities, on one hand, and the gritty reality around us, on the other, have one thing in common: both are created by the general capitalist tendency to *make life codable* – and thus digital, mobile and fast to travel.

What do we mean by codability? A code has typically meant a system which converts letters, words, gestures, sounds and images into other (e.g. shortened or secret) forms of representation. In contemporary capitalism, coding is often marketed as an objective process that increases accountability, efficiency – even equality – among people. Since capitalism proliferates restlessly to new areas of

life in order to survive and prosper, we witness the capitalisation of public and governmental institutions, universities included, on a global scale.

Making life codable appears to have propelled the university to adopt a new but rigid and unfruitful understanding of itself. Our treatise is thus an effort to understand how and why our academic lives and work are changing. As always, when looking into the taken-for-granted aspects of society, we start with our embodied, and thus inevitably gendered, existence and its significance today. The marriage of gender and general intellect is ambivalent in the coding society. Research, and our own experience, shows that gender still plays a role in work and careers at the university (see e.g. European Commission 2006; Munar et al., 2015; Barrett and Barrett, 2011; Barrett and Barrett 2013; Allen, 1997). Nearly two decades ago, Eileen E. Schell (1998) succinctly depicted academic non-tenure women metaphorically as ‘mother-teachers’.

In feminist social science discourse, gender has been theorised in recent years as ‘a contingent habit’ or ‘embodied performativity’ following the leads of Judith Butler (1990), Pierre Bourdieu (1977; 1990) and many others (e.g. Adkins and Skeggs, 2004; Skeggs, 2001). These dual concepts aim to capture the dynamics of gender in action. Gender works in us, habitually, whether we want it to or not; yet it is also marked by indeterminacy and unruliness since gender habits and gendered structures of action are incessantly open to change and surprise.

On the basis of previous discussions, we recently suggested the concept of ‘the hostessing society’ to account for a contemporary working life that utilises various affective, caring and aesthetic performances of femininity as company assets required from everyone, including men (Veijola and Jokinen, 2008; Veijola, 2009; Jokinen and Veijola, 2012). These are seen as the necessary fabric of the social as well as the economic, yet all the while, they refuse to improve the societal position of actual women. Thus, when hostessing skills are performed by women they tend to become women’s natural traits rather than their tangible skills; they become expectations and obligations that only women encounter. ‘*We seem to have run out of coffee here... Could someone perhaps...?*’

Hostessing is a tangible *skill* and an *act* that is necessary in all contemporary working life, from business-to-business meetings to jobs in the tourism and (other) creative industries – even universities. People, ideas, artworks and artefacts travel smoothly and effectively with the help of institutionalised and individual hostessing skills, creativities and practices. When men hostess, it is often considered a skill, and they get an increase in salary for having ‘a flexible body’ (Martin, 2000). In the contemporary mutation of patriarchy, men are able to claim their workplace identity as their ‘own’ identity rather than having a

hostessing identity naturalised as their innate feature, as is the case with women. A self-identity can then be contracted, exchanged for a better salary and made use of as a labour market resource (Adkins, 1995; Adkins and Lury, 1999.)

Performances of hostessing generally deal with relations. Relational work typically refers to fields of work such as care or hospitality work (see Twigg, 2000; Mol et al., 2010; Hochschild, 1983; Veijola, 2009), however, we argue that it also and most concretely applies to university work. The care sector, the hospitality sector and the university sector are all based on a wide spectrum of collective expertise and the skilful handling of social relations, affects and material conditions in order to generate well-being, happiness or knowledge, for example. All three branches of work are also increasingly encoded, standardised and managed in the name of efficiency, transparency and accountability. Technologies are imposed on all these spheres in a heavy-handed manner – to increase volume and reduce labour costs. However, technology does not seem to be self-sufficient and automatic, judging from the commonly occurring fact of university people using their office hours and even leisure hours to feed codable numeral information into the university's surveillance system; women also occupy precarious jobs more often than their higher-ranked colleagues. *'Would you please be so kind as to fill this for me....?'*

In this article, we combine perceptions of the current tendency to make life generally codable with the idea of the university as a central site in the hostessing society. We want to know what kind of a makeover operation we can perform through the notion of the hostessing society in contemporary working life if we analyse code and coding as its new key constituents. We will look into the ideas, formations and arrangements of gender through the tendencies of contemporary capitalism to decode and recode human life (the relations, vitality and affects between people) in its efforts to increase productivity and efficiency and to control this coding as efficiently as possible.

Here, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2005: 8) is helpful. It explicitly recommends standardised educational qualifications to make universities comparable and transferable, have them facilitate and increase mobility between countries and to emphasise research outputs as the standard measure.

'Academic capitalism', the shift towards managerial authority, accountability to economic productivity standards, and quantitative performance auditing, has introduced norms and values that disrupt those of the classic liberal-humanistic university, including its elitist professional authority relations, 'old boy' networks, and internalized disciplinary standards. (Ferree and Zippel, 2015: 561)

The principal mechanism for controlling the possibilities created by coding work performances – that is de- and re-coding the possibilities in the public sphere – is generally called ‘new public management’ (see, e.g. Rose, 1999). This means that at the level of organising work, new public management uses old ideas, such as cutting work processes into bits and pieces, and then reassembles these ideas with new technologies, codes and algorithms to count, measure and value labour performances (see, e.g. Thrift, 2007; Germann Molz, 2011).

The notion of a *gender code* also exists. This is familiar to feminist social theory and refers to a norm or constraint, for instance, in female or male comportment or dressing. Yet, in contemporary capitalism, code and gender code have been installed into yet another position: the labouring and gendered subjects are dissected, dissolved and recombined – coded – into new, often virtual compositions. In this process of dissecting and dissolving the labouring subjects, gender also assumes new forms, meanings and processes of becoming. Human performance, however, in all its details and contexts, is difficult to manage and measure in its finest form. Yet the measuring-standardising-coding activity that produces standardised, codified and commensurable numbers attempts to do this, and the knowledge produced is often the only thing that people and organisations consider to be the real evidence of results or objective outcomes (Lampland and Star, 2009: 10).

We can of course ask whether the digitalisation of the parameters of our existence implies that a thing, a human being or an event only exists if it can be counted. In new public management, which is based on indicators, if something can be measured, then it can be controlled. In order to control something, it has to be measurable (Helén, 2015). In relational work, the equation is, of course, not so simple. Should one count touches or caresses per hour? Instead of objectivity, the issue is essentially about power relations; what and who are coded, who is coding, who is controlling the code, who decides it, who has access to the key of the code, who pays the price for all the coding and who gains from coding.

Therefore, we will focus on the patterns of gender and work in terms of relational work in today’s hostessing society after they have been subject to coding, recoding and decoding. Here, we follow Donna Haraway’s lead in her famous treatise on the codability of life in *A cyborg manifesto* (1991). We argue that coding does not reduce itself merely to converting the practices of doing one’s work well into the accountability, measurability, executability and streamlined efficiency of this doing-well. It also has repercussions for gender and gendered work performances. Working well in any organisation based on relational human activities and cognitive and/or affective performances might actually be hampered when the organisation starts to manage and evaluate itself in terms of

codable indicators and coding logics. We argue that by separating the means, goals and values of relational work from its outcomes, the coding tendencies intertwine with older patriarchal tendencies to extensively exploit women's lives and work in the interest of men and competitive capitalism.

This is not to say that men in university, and outside of it, do not also suffer from neoliberal management. Rather, it is the structural position of men that is different, given the disproportionate number of women in the contemporary university working as adjuncts, part-timers and running between teaching jobs as a precarious, flexible, powerless and cheaper workforce, while the share of men in full professorships is over 75 percent in EU 27 countries; a similar pattern prevails outside European countries (see Nikunen, 2014; Huisman, de Beer, Dill and Souto-Otero 2015: 570-571; ERA Progress Report 2017: 17-19). The new situation runs the risk of making women's position even more difficult than in the old patriarchal – and fraternal – academia.

Critically inspecting coding capitalism is worthwhile for yet another reason. It allows us to theorise the possibilities of post-binary, post-human actions in future society, which is of concern to us all. How can we decipher and cultivate the human condition without resorting to traditional gendered agencies, on one hand, or to mere virtual compositions without gender, which coding capitalism turns us into, on the other? Is there another or third way to understand and live a life in relation to gender and digitalisation?

Codability of life and work

Codification conventionally refers to the ways in which a universe of objects, relations and events is rendered into communicable symbols. Codes, in other words, (inter)mediate events and signs, worlds and cultures. According to Mackenzie and Vurdubakis (2011: 5), the various meanings of codes in everyday language include a written system of laws, communication codes from language to ciphers, DNA-instructions and written or unwritten rules of conduct. In modernity, code has become the ubiquitous manifestation of the presumption that, in principle, all things are cognisable; the age-old question of *being* turns into a question of *how we know* (Bryan, 2010). It is self-evident that code has also been part of programming and software terminology in information and communication technologies. It has been used to refer to communication, both open and secret (e.g. in the sectors of intelligence and security services).

The key use of the term has however been in its identification as 'the execution of a sequence of pre-scripted operations' (Mackenzie and Vurdubakis, 2011: 5)

exemplified especially by machines. Moreover, as Haraway (1991) noted in *A cyborg manifesto*, contemporary forms of knowing, from computer and communication sciences to modern biology, involve a common move: the translation of the world into a problem of coding.

Technological determination is only one ideological space opened up by the reconceptions of machine and organism as coded texts through which we engage in the play of writing and reading the world. (Haraway, 1991: 152)

Coded processes thus deal with the transactions and flows of digital data across coded infrastructures.

The word *data* is interesting. Coding assumes that there is data out there, something that is simply there. In Latin, data means given. In contrast, one could also lean on another term, *capta*, which means taken: something is being produced through, say, investigation; it is *taken* out of reality and therefore invested with perspectives and interests. *Capta* is situated, partial and constitutive, while data is, seemingly, just there. We can see that the relation between coding and data is a match made in heaven: both appear to be objective and universal; and when acting together, they seem to promise to deliver no less than objective facts (Kitchin and Dodge, 2011).

So what is simply given and what is taken out of reality when the outcomes of an activity are created through relations between people? For instance, when the offering that is being pursued includes care, trust or hospitality – which need to be co-produced, co-experienced and given meaning together – decoding and recoding thus constitute performative action, produced and mediated by power relations, rather than a mere operation of systematic calculation. Coding rationality has personal, communal and material preconditions and consequences.

Code, in other words, is the language of machines, yet its impacts reach far beyond them; ‘So many situations today become tractable and manageable (and also in-tractable and un-manageable) by virtue of their code-ability’, state Mackenzie and Vurdubakis (2011: 4). The codes that we adapt to and accept reveal the ways in which the will-to-power and the will-to-knowledge tend to be enacted in the contemporary world. Thus, the growth of techniques and practices, for example, generating, designing and commodifying codes (in software or open source), has supported the formalisation of practices. These formalisations, for their part, have emphasised ‘the performativity of code, its apparent ability to “make things happen”’, as Mackenzie and Vurdubakis (2011: 6) maintain.

Hayles (2005: 40) argues, in a book *My mother was a computer* that our understanding of speech and writing in general is deeply influenced by the pervasive use of coding, which thus has metaphysical implications. Codes have become part of everyday life; they are included in everything. They hold the promise of efficiency and results today. They carry the weight of what used to be about performative acts of cognitive excellence. The latter is now lifted from the shoulders of human beings and turned into the quantitative requirements of achieving the calculated number of scientific publications per administrative unit, to be coded into score-keeping registers. The importance of groundbreaking research-based knowledge in these publications has been surpassed by their quantified comparability in compiling lists of top-ten and top-hundred scholars in each research field. In the discourse of forward-looking nations, the comparability of quantities in every line of work/production has become the driver of national economies.

Yet a further perspective on coding is offered by Papadopoulos et al. (2008: 252), who argue that capitalism is currently not at all interested in the links between (individual) subjects, agency and power – as it once was – but instead in dissecting and dissolving the working subject and recombining it into new and productive virtual compositions. In Deleuze's (1995) view, societies of control are what results when populations meet code in the era of informational capitalism; when population turns into 'the set of entities whose properties or behaviours are [sampled] and estimated by various means', which for its part disassembles and reassembles societies by means of 'numerical language[s] of control' (Mackenzie and Vurdubakis, 2011: 8-9). Capitalism is simply a generalised decoding of flows; and to code desire – and the fear, the anguish of decoded flows – is the business of the socius (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983: 139).

Papadopoulos et al. (2008: 252) even maintain that, apparently, individual bodies *are* in fact codes:

The individual body only looks like an individual in its apparent bodily shape, but in reality it becomes a genetic source, an automated client, a host to a virus, a set of competences, a self-creating assemblage of skills, a register and a code, a body capable of extreme mobility, an actant in a colony of stem cells. (Papadopoulos et al., 2008: 252)

For Haraway (1991), the new role of code is described as a process in which human beings and their natural and social worlds are transformed into a reserve (standing resource), similar to natural resources, and amenable to decoding and recoding, investing and exchange. Our bodies and interrelations become central to value creation, and codes that can captivate and recode our bodies and interrelations become a defining discourse of our time. Codes offer both

explanation and salvation to every possible problem. For example, if an institution, or a certain practice in an institution, is flawed, one can simply rewrite the code and re-execute (Berry and Pavlik, 2005: 1). The desire of many universities to periodically 'restructure' their activities fittingly demonstrates this point.

In global cognitive capitalism, the flagship role of the code has extended itself to almost everyone's life, and this is also the case in academic capitalism. Academic communities, like any other field, face the outcomes of the global transformation of working life and the mechanisms of value production such as the formalisation and execution of the coding of human action, including relationalities between humans, machines and environments. Academic workers are transformed into a human and hybrid resource that is amenable to coding and recoding, sets of competences, commensurable indicators and coded desires. The logics of the codability of life, labour and love may however not reach (measure and recode) some of the 'source-codes' of academic communities: those of caring, sharing, helping, learning, advising and knowing together. This is also a gender issue.

Hostessing in coding capitalism

For women in particular, the dynamics of coding capitalism in academia have three key features: it simultaneously exploits and dismisses women's work; it gives women more work without more pay; and it annuls the university as one of those workplaces in which equality has had a comparatively good chance of being achieved. When looking back at our own careers as faculty members and full professors, as well as the memories of our colleagues (e.g. Koski and Tedre, 2003: 23), we can sign under all these points in numerous situations. For instance, keeping an eye on things and taking care of repetitive tasks and the smoothness of departmental operations are being demanded from us while knowing that 'personal experience, a gut feeling or embodied knowing are not constituted as knowledge, as science' (Koski and Tedre, 2003: 30), that is, an accountable aspect of work. Let us, however, try to articulate these statements in academic language.

First, current coding capitalism both exploits and dismisses hostessing skills. Hostessing is excluded from the countable outcomes of relational work (which is the status of most fields of work in one way or another). The process of codification of work enables new forms of separation of work from its outcomes as well as from its doers, continuing and solidifying age-old capitalist ways of organising work. The actual relational and embodied work with other human

beings can supposedly be detached from what is understood as the product and productivity of this line of work (cured patients, happy tourists, smart students, brilliant papers), even if it is this very embodied and relational work that actually produces the targeted outcomes and deliverables of the particular field (Jokinen and Veijola, 2012).

Put differently, current capitalism, in its cognitive and post-Fordist mutation (Moulier Boutang, 2011), intensifies and appropriates the very constituents of work in the hostessing society: the performances of femininity that were once and still are unacknowledged when performed by women. Only now they go unacknowledged on yet another level – hostessing – as with all relationality and its situational, tacit and borderless nature, it lacks proper boxes to tick and is left outside of codable data. Hostessing, expected from women more readily than from men, thus becomes the immanent fabric for producing and circulating value in a process in which both agency and credit are denied from those who take, or are given, responsibility for relations between people.

Second, in new public management, the ones who take care of, or are expected to take care of, hostessing work also have to do extra work that is codable in order to be acknowledged as a worker. This means extra shifts for women, after taking care of the administrative, tutoring, nurturing and bureaucratic tasks that commonly pile up on their way (e.g. Haynes and Fearful, 2008). Meanwhile, the decoding and recoding of work in the form of filling time-use reports, etc. adds to, rather than decreases, one's workload and thus hardly enables anyone to be more effective at work. The consequences of this hit women harder than men in relational work even if the overall necessity to cope with the multiple chores of codification logics also concerns men. Patients, customers or students have to be taken care of, just like before, in addition to filling in the reports of this taking care of, as Hirvonen (2014) demonstrated in her study on the agency of welfare service workers. In a very different scene of management and business faculties, put on display by Flynn, Cavanagh and Bilimoria (2015: 40), we learn that '[m]ale faculty may be more likely to obtain tenure given their disparity relative to women in terms of research productivity and in time spent on fulfilling teaching/advising and university service responsibilities'. The allocation of faculty time by sex turns women easily into 'maternal figures', while men fall more easily into the role of 'a busy and absent fatherly figure' who are allowed to stay away from the humdrum of everyday life of care-giving.

In much knowledge work as well as in most forms of hostessing, that which cannot be coded is exactly what the work is about. Yet, only the codable *counts* when listing the outcomes of work, while only the uncodable *matters* when evaluating the quality of the same work. It is impossible to code an entire

hostessing process that glues together the skills of being, relating and working with other people.

Third, the university constitutes one of the fields, which, at least in principle, offer women and men equal opportunities to pursue a career and strive for excellence. Bodily strength, social status, marital status, socio-economic status, ethnicity, sexual orientation or even looks do not matter in the performance of scholarship. It is also one of the most illuminating examples of all three constitutive aspects of hostessing – cognitive, relational and hospitable – intertwined in contemporary globalised and mobilised working life. However, the opposite is a lived reality, practically everywhere in the academic world, and not easily addressed in all-male or mostly-male faculties. In addition to being a ‘highly gendered institution with a concentration of women in teaching-only, insecure roles’ (Marchant and Wallace, 2013, cited in Mair and Frew, 2016: 3) universities worldwide have not made a collective effort to change the situation.

Academic work taps and leans on gendered performances of femininity such as social and language skills, yet it advertises the performances of individualistic masculinity as the actual source of academic profiling and branding, for instance, in universities’ public announcements of conferences (see Munar et al., 2015). Finnish political scientist Saara Särmä’s famous tag, *Congrats! You have an all-male panel!*, with David Hasselhoff giving a thumbs-up to all-male gatherings on stage, has drawn international attention to this phenomenon, and deservedly so (Särmä, 2016). Speculatively, we could draw a connection between the over-representation of men on conference podiums and the ethnographic results of a university setting by Rebecca Lund (2015). Lund draws the conclusion that, unlike for women, it is legitimate for and even expected of men that they trumpet their achievements on every occasion and can use ‘big talk’ of themselves as a resource.

When coding capitalism invades all the activities of knowing, relating and welcoming that academic life and productivity rest on, it participates in the maintenance of existing traditional gender hierarchies and annuls women as academics. Thus, gender order and gender hierarchy are simultaneously enforced on two levels: as traditional, even if contested, gendered agencies, on one hand, and as coded and dispersed outcomes of measurable data that does not accurately measure women’s work, on the other.

Producing, renewing and testing academic knowledge leans on collective, communal, virtual and person-to-person collaborations in the search for solid and valid knowledge that benefits society and the Earth. We can thus see that productivity in the university is already defined on false premises (data instead of

capta), even before its codable dimensions are chosen. Academic work is first de-collectivised, then the decodings and recodings of the apparently objective data are executed, after which the results of this operation are made public as objective evaluations of individual and institutional academic performance serving science and the wider society.

Thus, academic brainwork is polarised by the current capitalist patriarchy in which non-codable and non-spectacular work should preferably be deposited on other people's shoulders – to people standing on a lower rung in the organisational hierarchy. These people are often women with precarious jobs.

Is it possible to avoid 'the academic scissors', the fact that women are producing a substantial number of PhD degrees, but after this stage, their numbers in the academic workforce decrease (Flynn, Cavanagh and Bilimoria, 2015)? The remnants of the old gendered hierarchical ideological code remain strong, whereby women are more likely to be involved in teaching than men. Throughout the EU 27, only 10% of universities are headed by women. Models of leadership are not inclusive of women (*She Figures*, 2009; Huisman, de Beer, Dill and Souto-Otero 2015: 570-579; ERA Progress Report 2017: 17-19). If we widen the scope of our perspective from gender to other powerful assemblages of intersectional differences, such as ethnicity, indigeneity, sexuality, able-bodiedness and age, we can see how much there is to take care of for 'the maternal figures' of faculties when it comes to supporting students who find academic culture to be an intimidating or chilly environment (McCall, 2005; Smooth, 2016; Berger and Guidrog, 2009). Coding capitalism does not seem to change the imbalance; instead, it seems to strengthen gender as a social organiser.

But is it possible for a third alternative to emerge out of the double-bind created by the coding academy? Can we find a thread of positive potentiality in all this? Could coding have, despite all said so far, a liberating impact on women's situation? Thus, when gender is absorbed into the overall substance of work outcomes, without articulating or separating care and hospitality within it, and when all this is being subject to codification, can new constellations and configurations of subjectivity – gendered or non-gendered – be generated? The chances are not high, but it certainly is worth looking into gender theory and its links to codes once more to find out.

Gender as effect of coding

Gender composes a basis for human conduct. It is a social contract and thereby a normative code, yet also changeable. It is a binary code machine that models our behaviour, but it is simultaneously, for the time being, a means of gaining subjectivity. The workings of the deep-rooted structures of a gender code are manifest everywhere, from language to toilet doors. However, gender theory, biology and life itself have already problematised the idea of a gender dichotomy in myriad ways. Gender is factually not a code of either-or; it is also in-between or both. Yet it cannot be ignored or escaped as a point of reference in anyone's life. For instance, new-born babies are coded in almost every country of the world as either a girl or a boy.

Thus far, there are three aspects of codes that are relevant to the making of gender theory. The first was worded in social theory as the conventional gender code by Erving Goffman in his famous analysis *The arrangement between the sexes* (1977):

In modern industrial society, as apparently in all other [as such in which], sex is at the base a fundamental *code* in accordance with which social interactions and social structures are built up, a *code* which also establishes the conceptions individuals have concerning their fundamental human nature. (Goffman 1977: 301, italics added by authors)

These codes are embedded into Western modernisation and the idea of the nuclear family, which is tightly linked with Fordist production and industrial capitalism. Gender roles are taken as natural and given. Due to the inertia of habit and patriarchal power relations, conventional gender codes are still effective today, even if gender is no longer entirely controlled by these, especially in Western cultures (Adkins, 2003; Jokinen and Veijola, 2012; Adkins and Jokinen, 2008; McNay, 1999).

The second link between code and gender lies in women's uncoded productivity, discussed in the previous sections: standardisation based on the *decoding* of work but skipping the part of labour that *recodes* it into double or triple shifts. On top of the previous aspects, there is a third aspect in the way that codes and gender relate to one another, which is activated pointedly by neoliberal capitalism. This is the merging of the old gendered divisions of labour and the gendered access to control management processes. Let us take a typical case story: universities spend huge amounts of money on new coding systems to help control productivity, strategy, process description and process monitoring, as well as the maintenance and updating of these processes. The companies selling these coding tools to the new management, to borrow a popular phrase, laugh all the

way to bank, while the working conditions at universities become increasingly challenging for those who want to get their work, not only monitored and coded, but also done well.

Thus, the business idea behind many software businesses lies in the in-built necessity to correct errors in programmes and systems after clients have started to use them; this means that people working in the ICT sector earn money from university workers' extra performances when the latter test, use and send in complaints about the problems they find in the half-finished programmes. Engineers and other technology professionals (mostly men)¹ are planning, building and selling – as well as ordering – tools for coding that do not work properly but which also do not meet the reality of hostessing practices such as care and hospitality (performed mostly by women). Codability therefore cuts into gendered power hierarchies, which thus becomes capitalised along with other aspects of knowledge production.

The fourth aspect is however the most interesting and promising. The discourse and ideology of the codability of life (Haraway, 1991; Bryan, 2010; MacKenzie and Vurdubakis, 2011) has started to seriously challenge the discourse of individual agency engendered through power relations (Papadopoulos et al., 2008), as we are used to understanding it in critical social theory. This calls for an updated understanding of gender and gendered agency in contemporary capitalism.

As Haraway (1991) has noted, many of the developments in science and technology challenge the idea of an individual and autonomous subjectivity. They open up ways to assemble and reassemble the capacities of human beings and bring them together with machines and programmes, thereby disassembling individual agency as well as bringing up new hybrid subjects. Moreover, the significance of relational and affective labour and service production in current cognitive capitalism emphasises the performances of co-experiencing, co-inventing, co-feeling and co-knowing (Moulier Boutang, 2011; Dowling et al., 2007; Morini and Fumagalli, 2010) and thus forces us to rethink the borders and boundaries of an autonomous agency. Agency becomes hybrid and collective, technological and shared, porous and fluid; this is, in many ways, different from the autonomous and liberated model man of modernist social and economic thinking (Adkins, 2004; Skeggs, 2004; Jokinen, 2016).

1 According to EU statistics, 9.2% of the male population (16-64 years) with university studies or more have undertaken studies in math, statistics, computing and engineering, whereas the score for women was 2.84 (Women active in the ICT sector 2013: 88-89).

But how keenly should women of our generation, for instance, anticipate hybrid and collective agencies to replace singular and gendered ones as the assemblage of a general intellect? What would hybrid work and hybrid care look and feel like, and how would they turn into resourceful and efficient research and education in the future? Can matters of care be weaved into the textures of academic practice (see Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011) as their inherent, general features rather than as unacknowledged hostessing work by women?

Caring for the coding university

Having worked in universities since the early 1980s, we have witnessed the change in our working environment from a global and mobile rhizome of academic communities in cultural, feminist and critical social sciences to a hierarchical conglomerate made of administrative units steered by political fashions and short-term national or regional economic interests.

Despite this, academic life hosted by universities (albeit nowadays only half-heartedly) still consists of people collaborating with one another in myriad ways: from the tiny helpful gesture with a reference to serious participation in a large research project. Scientific communities are all about relationalities, for better or worse.

It now appears that relationalities have been reduced to relations between institutions of knowledge production. The key correspondence between research units and their largely externalised funding authorities increasingly takes place between their administrative bodies. The role of the actual researcher is to function as a personal CV to be judged by its length – one more token of individualised excellence.

Concepts like gender, as a contingent habit and an embodied performance, catch one side of these developments: women continue to tender, take care, organise, make coffee, keep an eye on things and do double or triple shifts, since it follows the binary code of conduct in the patriarchal society, which includes academia. Women follow it since it would be cumbersome to continuously whine about it. Moreover, most of the time, the gendered division and hierarchy of labour are taken for granted to such an extent that it would require endless extra time to identify the levels and the numerous banal details of its exploitative aspects.

We coined the term ‘the hostessing society’ as a reminder that there is always already in any known society a question of care and reproductive work; we wanted to point out the societal (what sociologists used to call structural) layers of caring and hostessing. We have seen that contemporary capitalism is very quick

and good at embracing hostessing skills and gendered bodies, including the useful images of them. What we now witness is that capitalism is extremely quick and good at also embracing the new possibilities created by digital technologies as well as the devices designed to control and govern the human action enabled by them. In other words, tracing systemic, gendered and power-related patterns in both hostessing and encoded capitalism gives us a kaleidoscopic view on the processes of knowledge production in the university.

The implementation of so-called new public management has led to rigid straightforwardness in the performance and development of science. The tools and means of coding as the core performances of the university – such as endless codes of conduct, process flowcharts, working time tracking, revenue generation models based on ‘products’ such as publications (valued on the basis of often irrational and randomly indicated ‘quality’), graduated students and the amount of external funding – are in clear disagreement with the very idea of universities as sites of creative and collaborative research and teaching.

We can see how decoding and recoding patterns have started to modify academic work performances into more calculable forms instead of boosting general intellect, innovativeness and prosperity for all. The misalignment or even conflict between the ideas of independent academia and new public management makes automated, mechanical ‘clearings’ (see Germann Molz, 2014: 25) in space rather than creating new openings for vital and intellectual processes. Thus, even if universities were trading their offerings on an open market – as one wishes they would in new public management – there is a problem. Their offerings are not countable items. Moreover, even more problems would follow since universities, quite simply, are not enterprises.

There seems to be a calibration problem: a blurring of means and ends (Lenglet, 2011: 62). Furthermore, the growing interest in manufacturing new coding programmes, the algorithms that direct them, and in giving the power to code working performances to these algorithms, may reconfigure the nature of academic exchanges and markets: universities that have both the ability to develop the adjacent machines and the financial resources to deploy the fastest and most intelligent systems in them are praised as the best in terms of ‘making a healthy profit’ – as a phrase in the language of new public management goes.

The fantasy of making the whole of life codable, measurable, improvable, marketable and governable masks the fact that not a single mutation of capitalism has survived without care and the performance of reproduction. Let us not forget that even the university cannot cope without care. If all those people

whose thinking capacities form the scientific intellect of the university stopped caring about their Alma Mater, it would most certainly fail.

Conclusion

Unravelling the elementary performances and relations in the ubiquitous ‘social factory’ (Gill and Pratt, 2008) called the university in the way we have done here gives us a contour drawing of academic work in coding and hostessing capitalism. It displays the unholy alliance between gender and care in the university, which has increasingly become a sphere in which women carry a multiplying and intricate workload of cognitive, social and emotional performances based on the various and contradictory requirements for, and criteria of, success in the new university. Women are also the ones who pay the price for the extra shifts they do; there is no promotion based on multitasking, rather the reverse. As Babcock et al (2017) point out, the so called low-promotability tasks (service instead of research) are both suggested to and accepted by women more often than men in faculty environments. This has an effect on women’s careers, as it always does when women’s hostessing work is taken for granted but not acknowledged.

What would happen if we all did what Eric Barker suggested in his column in *The Week* in admiration of Cal Newport, a professor who wants to ‘be the most productive person in your office’ and ‘do very few things, but be awesome at them’? That is, ‘do less shallow work, focus on the deep stuff’. For Newport, ‘shallow work is little stuff like emails, meetings, moving information round’ (Barker, September 18, 2014). So, no more emails at all by anyone? Problem solved?

Turning the course of social transformation towards a technology-intensive society is difficult for a number of reasons. Naturally, we do not want to reject machines, network computers, programmes and codes that connect people, ‘equip and extend our brains’ (Moulier Boutang, 2011: 36), take care of heavy, dirty and dangerous labour and very often provide us with a platform for taking care of others and doing the necessary hostessing work in academia and elsewhere. However, we want to change the ways in which the decoding and recoding processes are put to work and used as grounds for evaluation and comparison, which in turn invoke both old binary gender codes and new vicious circles of exploiting women’s labour and embodied capacities. The objectives of the encoding processes are, by definition, to become the ‘fastest, most accurate, and most efficient’ (Trogeman, 2012: 41). However, ‘fast’, ‘accurate’ or ‘efficient’ are not self-evident attributes; they are relative and arguable judgements.

By way of ending our account, let us imagine three alternative futures for us and our university with the help of three figures that show that there have also been earlier vigorous paradigmatic breakings and that ‘gender might not be global identity after all, even if it has profound historical breadth and depths’ (Haraway, 1991: 180).

The Harawayan cyborg, familiar from the 1980s, reminds us of the fact that the new hybrid agencies are not innocent; neither were they born in a beautiful garden, starting immediately to seek a unitary identity. ‘Intense pleasure in skill, machine skill, ceases to be a sin, but an aspect of embodiment’ (Haraway 1991: 180). Even more accurately: our machines, algorithms and codes are not *its*. They are not wild objects to be animated, worshipped or dominated. They are *us*, *ours*, *our* processes. Therefore, they are not responsible for all the madness we see around us; they do not dominate or threaten us. It is *we* who are responsible for all the boundaries we encounter; as Haraway states, ‘*We are they*’ (1991: 180).

In a similar manner, yet in a more post-human language, Rosi Braidotti (2013) welcomes into our dreams and scenes the figure of the post-human. ‘Life is passing and we do not own it, we just inhabit it, not unlike time-share location’, and the figure of the post-human resists the ‘inhuman(e) aspects of our era’ (Braidotti, 2013: 133, 3). The figure of the post-human is about the affirmation of differences. It is a possibility to develop new, unknown but imaginable subjectivities, to embrace post-human ethics and construct affirmative post-humanist politics (Braidotti, 2013: 45). It helps to work towards alternative futures by embracing – instead of fleeing – new possibilities for hybrids of humans and computers. For Braidotti (2013: 178), the digital humanities in particular have the resources, and perhaps also the power and strength, to rethink our technological condition. Surely, the proper subject for the humanities is no longer ‘man’ but various aspects and transformations localised in the figure of ‘the post-human’. Haraway (2016), around the next corner, tops this by suggesting that we should replace the term post-human with *compost*. It is a compost, which brings together and changes everything added to it; it gets hot and nourishes.

That said, the potentialities of these figures are lost if we allow academic striving for new knowledge, as well as women’s hostessing duties and skills, to become side-lined in post-academic, post-human and post-gender codifications of academic performance. Post-human bodies, whether they are hybrid, collective and part of the general intellect, affects and relations, do not exist without the responsiveness and reciprocities of bodies being-with and dwelling-with in material spaces and local places.

Let us audit one more figure. This one embraces plurality in a proper, ontological, ethical and epistemological way. The figure we suggest is that of *The campers*, a hybrid, social and embodied academic agency of authorship, perhaps with a specification such as ‘The Campers There-and-There-Then-and-Then’, thus also inviting the spaces and timeframes devoted to academic collaboration to be part of the authorship (as they often are).

Consequently, instead of listing and ordering staff members according to their individual achievements, there will be a gender-and-hierarchy-free collectivity producing joint results of its work, a collective that also rotates its caring and publishing duties annually or biannually.

Moreover, the ethos behind The Campers would ally with machines by way of creating the most innovative, disturbing and unforeseeable thinking. Here, even the most skilful coders are unable to programme a machine to simulate a non-routine task by following a scripted procedure; but they can programme a machine to master a task by studying successful examples of this task that have been carried out by others (Autor, 2015: 25). Thus, machines (if made clever) can expand the brains and memory of thinking and acting academic collectives. Importantly, machines can assist us, with their endless power and capability to master huge amounts of data in demonstrating that there really are tacit and relational dimensions in academic performances of general intellect and that these dimensions are vital in all forms of meaningful knowledge production.

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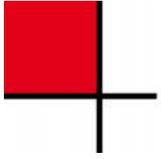
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Serving coffee with Žižek: On decaf, half-caf and real resistance at Starbucks

Erik Mygind du Plessis

abstract

This paper investigates the term *decaf resistance*, which signifies a resistance, which, although experienced as risky, is harmless in reality, because it – like decaf coffee – is stripped of its potentially dangerous main ingredient. Theoretically, the article is based on Alessia Contu's previous outline of the term and Slavoj Žižek's theory of ideology. The explanatory force of this theoretical perspective is examined through the use of the online chat forum *ihatestarbucks.com*, where baristas at Starbucks, amongst other topics, describe how they as a form of resistance serve decaf coffee to customers who have ordered regular coffee. The paper concludes that while useful in explaining the individual employees' libidinal investment in and subjective experience of his or her resistance, the decaf-perspective also implies a rigid dichotomy between 'real' and 'decaf' resistance, which is rather unhelpful for distinguishing between different types of resistance. The analysis thus shows how the sharing of hidden acts of resistance on a public online-forum seems to make these acts subjectively less 'decaf' for the baristas, albeit without crossing the Žižekian threshold, which would allow for a characterization of these acts as 'real' resistance. This leads to a discussion of how this type of 'half-caf' resistance, which is neither harmless nor revolutionary, challenges the Žižekian dichotomy between decaf and Real act.

Introduction

The following paper takes a Žižekian perspective, refined by Alessia Contu, as its theoretical point of departure, as it critically engages with the idea of '*decaf*' resistance. This term signifies a resistance, which has been deprived of its potentially dangerous main-ingredient, but is still experienced as the original

‘dangerous’ resistance, where both the resister and the resisted have something at stake (Žižek, 2003, 2004, 2010b; Contu, 2008).

The empirical reference is the chat forum *ihatestarbucks*, where Starbucks-baristas share their experiences on informal resistance practices. The aim of the paper is to examine the explanatory force of the ‘decaf’-perspective and contribute to the development of our conceptual understanding of resistance in organizations. The paper concludes that while useful in explaining the individual employees’ libidinal investment in and subjective experience of his or her resistance, the decaf-perspective also implies a rigid dichotomy between ‘real’ and ‘decaf’ resistance, which is a rather unhelpful analytical distinction for distinguishing between different modes of resistance. The paper thus shows how the sharing of hidden acts of resistance on a public online-forum seems to make these acts subjectively less ‘decaf’ for the baristas, albeit without crossing the Žižekian threshold, which would allow for a characterization of these acts as ‘real’ resistance. The paper concludes that while the ‘inner worlds’ of the baristas, that become visible through the website, can be described and explained quite precisely through the Žižekian perspective, this only applies to the invisible and unrecorded resistance. The moment the resistance is shared on a publicly accessible website, it seems to challenge the Žižekian dichotomy between decaf and Real act, in becoming a type of ‘half-caf’ resistance, which is neither harmless nor revolutionary.

State of the art

Within critical studies of management and organization (e.g. Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Alvesson, Bridgman and Willmott, 2009) informal resistance (e.g. Scott, 1985) is by no means a new object of analysis (Prasad and Prasad, 2000; Spicer and Böhm, 2007). In recent studies however, the concept of resistance has become increasingly shrouded with ambiguity, as scholars underscore the dialectical and mutually constitutive relationship between control and resistance (Mumby, 2005; Bloom, 2013) and the subsequent difficulties of distinguishing and categorizing one from the other (Fleming and Spicer, 2008; Parker, 2007). Resistance, in this view, is thus understood as a set of situated practices ‘(...) that are simultaneously enabling and constraining, coherent and contradictory, complex and simple, efficacious and ineffectual’ (Mumby, 2005: 37). Such dialectical accounts can be seen as a response to earlier conceptualizations of resistance in organizations, which among other things have faced criticism for either over-romanticizing resisters as pure revolutionary subjects, or conversely – and perhaps more commonly – viewing them as unwitting dupes. This has also to some extent entailed a conceptual division,

where the organization becomes comprised of managers ‘as morally deranged creatures who seek to exercise their will to dominate at any opportunity’ (Fleming and Spicer, 2007: 4), and employees who naturally desire even the most minor form of liberation and seek to further their emancipatory political agenda at every turn (*ibid.*). While the study of resistance in organizations has been undertaken from a wide range of perspectives, including critical-cultural, feminist, interpretive and poststructuralist-postcolonial (Prasad and Prasad, 2000), the historically most prominent of these have arguably been Labour Process Theory (LPT) and Foucauldian approaches. This section thus proceeds with a short outline of each of these perspectives, before turning to Žižekian theory as a potential future avenue for studying resistance in organizations.

The premise within Labour Process Theory (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Burawoy, 1979; Knights and Willmott, 1990; Grugulis and Knights, 2001) is, drawing on Marx, that resistance should be understood less as the outcome of a rational actor, acting out of personal interest, and more as the inevitable result of capitalisms’ exploitation of the workforce (eg. Braverman, 1978). Resistance is thus the result of an inherent antagonism between capital and workers, most prominently displayed in the workplace, which is understood as the primary site of exploitation (Spicer and Böhm, 2007: 1669). The purpose of resistance is a ‘re-appropriation’ of the things systematically denied the worker such as identity and time (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999: 25). While the most obvious forms of re-appropriation happen through unions, there have within LPT also been studies of more informal forms of resistance such as sabotage (Brown, 1977), humor at the expense of management (Taylor and Bain, 2003) and theft (Ditton, 1977). LPT has however been criticized for not being able to sufficiently account for the individual employee’s subjective understanding and experience of her daily life in the organization, and over-emphasizing structural and somewhat deterministic explanations when accounting for resistance in the workplace (Spicer and Böhm, 2007: 1670).

Partly as a response to this critique, other scholars have turned towards Michel Foucault in their studies of resistance in organizations (Collinson, 2003; Knights and McCabe, 2000; Thomas and Davies, 2005; Jermier, Knights and Nord, 1994). Foucault’s emphasis on how subjectivity and reality are shaped through concrete practices and technologies in complex webs of knowledge, power and resistance (Foucault, 1991, 2000) makes it possible to expand the idea of power and resistance beyond a structural and class-based conception. In the Foucauldian tradition, resistance is comprised of informal micro-politics, which are understood as the constant negotiation of discourses and identities that are ascribed new meanings through these subtle processes (Spicer and Böhm, 2007: 1670). In this tradition, emphasis is often given to the ways in which employees

resist various attempts by the organization to colonize their subjectivities (Knights and McCabe, 2000; Thomas and Davies, 2005) such as through the negotiation of masculine identities (Collinson, 2003) or the opposing of performance management (Ball and Wilson, 2000). As in LPT however, the Foucauldian tradition has also been accused of having certain difficulties in ridding itself of structural determinism – in this case however, it seems to be the discourses rather than the economic structures that determine the actions of the subject (Newton, 1998). Whether or not this critique is justified, is however debatable. More recent contributions to Foucauldian organization studies have thus suggested a number of new and potentially fruitful avenues for heeding it. Drawing on Foucauldian concepts such as ‘agonism’ (Fleming and Spicer, 2007) and ‘dispositive’ (Raffnsøe et.al 2016) these studies have been quite convincing in their directions for overcoming ‘received dualisms’ of power and resistance, determinism and counter-agency and structure and agency within Foucauldian organization studies.

Another potential avenue for the ridding of such dualisms and dichotomies in studying resistance is the theoretical frameworks of Jacques Lacan and especially Slavoj Žižek which in later years have become quite popular within organization studies (Cederström and Hoodemakers, 2010; Contu and Willmott, 2006; du Plessis, 2015; Gabriel, 1995, 1997; Glynos, 2008; Johnsen, Pedersen and Muhr, 2009; Karlsen and Villadsen, 2015). Given that both Lacan and Žižek emphasize the desire involved in any identity construction (action/agency), the dependence in this process upon the Big Other (structure) as well as the inherent limitations of both the subject and the socio-symbolic order (Stavarakakis, 2010: 59), the utilization of Žižekian-Lacanian theory can be seen as a way to contribute to a more dialectical view of power and resistance. Furthermore, this perspective differs from perspectives like LPT and Foucault through its keen eye for the individual employee’s libidinal investment in and experience of her resistance.

Thus the theoretical starting point of this paper is the introduction of the Žižekian term ‘decaf resistance’ by Alessia Contu (Contu, 2008), which is critically applied by employing the Žižekian concepts of cynicism, ideological fantasy and jouissance as a theoretical backdrop, and the accounts from Starbucks-baristas about informal resistance as the empirical point of departure.

Decaf: The thing without the thing

Žižek occasionally uses the term *decaf* to describe a tendency, where a thing is deprived of its potentially dangerous main ingredient (Žižek, 2003, 2004, 2010b). It still resembles the original thing, except from the fact that it is no

longer potentially harmful. This tendency can be seen in anything from everyday consumer products to politics and sex:

On today's market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol... And the list goes on: what about virtual sex as sex without sex (...), the contemporary redefinition of politics as the art of expert administration as politics without politics etc. (...). (Žižek, 2003)

In the following analysis, resistance is explored with this 'decaf'-tendency as an underlying basis. This approach builds upon Alessia Contu's conceptualization of 'decaf resistance' as resistance without a cost:

In this decaf resistance we receive a payment in the form of the illusion that we are still having the thing (resistance). However, we do not have to bear the cost that is associated with having the thing itself, which is the danger of radically changing things as we know them. (Contu, 2008: 374)

Resistance and criticism is thus often associated with a certain element of danger and is among other things referred to as a 'weapon' (Bourdieu, 2005) or something that can cause 'shellshock' (Willig, 2011). Others have emphasized how the critical practice implies the resister risking her subjectivity by staking it against a current regime of truth (eg. Butler, 2004). Resistance then, is something that threatens and potentially harms either the resister or the resisted, because both have something at stake. Decaf resistance is conceptualized in opposition to this, as a form of resistance, which neither threatens nor harms anyone, because neither the resister nor the resisted have that much at stake. It is however reminiscent of the original and dangerous form of resistance in the same manner as decaf coffee is reminiscent of regular coffee.

Methodology

In the following, this coffee metaphor is pursued into the actual by exploring work-life at Starbucks, which is the largest coffee franchise in the world, represented by more than 20,000 restaurants worldwide¹. Starbucks is interesting, because its baristas seem to be exercising a form of resistance, which both literally and metaphorically can be characterized as decaf. At least according to the website www.ihatestarbucks.com, which has as its primary purpose to offer a forum, where baristas at Starbucks can discuss the chiefly negative aspects of their work. The website can be described as a part of the growing breed of so-called 'counter-institutional websites' that are characterized by providing

1 <http://loxcel.com/sbux-faq.html>.

‘(...) a space outside the control of the target organization to oppose official institutional messages, policies, and practices’ (Gossett and Kilker, 2006: 64). Besides a chat-forum, the website contains a page, which states a number of reasons for hating Starbucks along with some general guidelines for using the forum. The site has existed in various formats since 2001² and contains several hundred pages with different threads ranging between one and more than a thousand entries. For about a year, I paid at least weekly visits to the site, and monitored the activity on the forum without participating in the discussions, which often contained specific descriptions of informal resistance.

Methodologically, this presence on the forum as a ‘fly on the wall’ can be described by the term *lurking*, which originates from online-ethnography, where scholars, despite the advantages of so-called ‘naturalistic’ (Hewson and Laurent, 2008) and naturally occurring data, usually encourage more participatory forms of observation (Garcia, Standlee and Bechkoff, 2009: 59; Hine, 2008: 262-3).

However, when the researcher is more concerned with a webpage as a ‘community online’ than an ‘online community’ which is arguably the case in this paper, thick ethnographic descriptions of the user-experience, i.e. being a part of the forum, posting messages etc., become less pertinent (Kozinets, 2010: 63-65). This of course does not imply that a more engaging approach, which might entail engaging in a dialogue with the users on the forum about the supposedly ‘decaf’ nature of their resistance, perhaps combined with actual ‘IRL’ fieldwork in a Starbucks-café, could not yield interesting results. While outside the scope of this paper, such approaches would arguably be an important contribution to the study of hidden vs. public (online) resistance and organizational life in general.

Notwithstanding, my continuous anonymous presence on the chat-forum has resulted in an extensive archive consisting of several hundred pages of accounts of criticism and resistance amongst the baristas at Starbucks. The extent to which these accounts are in fact true, and not merely expressions of different kinds of bragging or fantasizing, is difficult to determine. This, however, is less significant, as it is not the purpose of this paper to draw conclusions about

2 During the review-process of this paper, the website www.ihatestarbucks.com has, for unknown reasons, been taken down. This has resulted in all of the threads cited in this paper becoming inaccessible online. It is unclear whether this closing is permanent or temporary. However, as part of the empirical archive, the author of this paper is in possession of print-outs of all the quotes used in this paper. Similar empirical material is also available other places online. For example, some of the popular themes and discussions from the forum, including the classic ‘Who did you decaf today?’-discussion, are also taking place on the Starbucks-sub-forum on Reddit: https://www.reddit.com/r/starbucks/comments/1qfkv9/whod_you_decaf_today/.

actually occurring resistance in modern organizations. Instead the purpose is to contribute to the continuing conceptual discussion about the meaning, impact and transformative potential of these kinds of resistance as well as how they can be grasped analytically. The chat-forum is thus seen as an empirical input to this discussion, which can be used to examine the idea of decaf resistance as a Žižekian inspired analytical perspective. The use of the forum as a general empirical reference is thus supported by the fact that the deliberations of the baristas have shown themselves to be able to illustrate both the strengths and weaknesses of ‘decaf resistance’ as a Žižekian analytical perspective, as well as stimulate the conceptual development of the term.

My anonymous presence on the forum does however also raise some ethical considerations (Garcia et al., 2009: 59). Even though www.ihatestarbucks.com is a public forum which can be accessed without creating a user-profile, the discussions on the forum can still be experienced as private to some extent by the users (Hine, 2008: 265). Furthermore many of the quotes could compromise, and in some cases maybe even incriminate, their orators if their anonymity had been broken. It is however impossible to anonymize the name of the website, if one, as in the case of this article, uses verbatim quotations, because anyone can type the quotations into Google and hereby potentially find their way to the correct website and user. It should however be noted that the users have ensured their anonymity through usernames, and that the site has already been mentioned in a number of other media-outlets.³

A (decaf) Venti soy mocha frappuccino no whip

The forum contains an account from a user, who describes how a customer comes into the café and orders her coffee – a *Venti Soy Mocha Frappuccino no whip*. It is a long order, typical of the enormous selection of different coffee-variants at Starbucks. The user, who is employed at Starbucks as a barista, repeats the order twice to be sure. A *Venti Soy Mocha Frappuccino no whip*. A little later, when the customer receives the drink, she asks ‘what the heck is this?’ and proceeds to state how she ordered a Coffee Frappuccino, not a Mocha Frappuccino. She then points at the barista and exclaims loudly ‘this girl right here messed up my drink and I want it remade’. The barista apologizes and quickly starts

3 Since the website is currently closed down, these considerations have become somewhat less pertinent. At the time of writing however, it is still unclear whether the closing of the site is permanent or whether the site might reopen at some point in the future. This would potentially make all the quotes used in the paper accessible again.

remaking the coffee. This time however, she uses decaf beans instead of regular beans for the drink. This is completely deliberate and is referred to as ‘de-cafing’ among the baristas. The user ends her entry: ‘Don’t point at me ***** [bitch] pay attention!’

This story can be found in the thread ‘Whom did you decaf today?’ which with over a thousand posts is among the longest on the forum. In addition to this form of resistance being literally decaf, because the coffee served is decaffeinated, it can also be seen as decaf in a metaphorical, Žižekian sense. Serving decaffeinated coffee instead of regular coffee is thus completely harmless and does not hurt or threaten anyone, as well as no one except the barista notices that the resistance is even carried out. This decaffeinated resistance thus acts as a surrogate for an open confrontation, where both parties have a lot more at stake. Particularly the barista, who risks losing her job if she fails to treat the customers properly.

This is due to Starbucks’ so-called ‘Just say yes’ policy (Boone and Kurtz, 2010: 615) which states that baristas must always say ‘yes’ to the customer, no matter what he or she demands. According to the baristas, this policy is one of the worst drawbacks to the job as a Starbucks-barista. Thus, a user has written the following on the forum:

(...) I despise my job I dread every time I go into work (...) and here’s why:

The customer is ALWAYS, ALWAYS right even if they are trying to rape you, steal from you, abuse you etc. (...)

Another user writes:

(...) probably every three or four transactions, I just want to start screaming, ‘We are PEOPLE! Why do you treat us this way?!!’ I detest the corporate culture that has led to all our customers being entitled man-babies.

These accounts can be read as signs of frustration about the humiliation of assuming the *just say yes* attitude, where one does not talk back, no matter how rude the customer is, or how degraded one feels. It is humiliating to passively accept a scolding from a customer, if one has not done anything wrong. Among other things, it is these daily humiliations that the baristas are reacting against, when they serve decaffeinated coffee to unreasonable, rude or condescending customers. As one user on the forum writes: ‘(...)Efff those customers who think they are so much better than us’. This lack of dignity thus seems to be the immediate motivation behind the decaf resistance, where the customer is indulged on the surface but secretly contradicted.

However it is not just the guidelines for customer care, which discontent the forum-users. A more general criticism of Starbucks as a brand is also prevalent on the forum. The forum-administrator thus explains the background for naming the site 'I Hate Starbucks' as follows:

(...) Starbucks is not your friend. It doesn't like you. It doesn't want you to have a 'third place'. It wants your money. It doesn't do magnanimous things out of the goodness of its heart. It is trying to maximize profit and part of the way they do this is by selling a brand that 'does good things for the people that pick beans'. Even if Starbucks follows these business practices with less than 1% of the coffee that they buy.

The forum-administrator points out two central tenets of the Starbucks-brand, which are seen as false and instrumental in the sense of existing solely to disguise the aspiration of the corporation to further enhance its profits. The first tenet being the idea that Starbucks is a kind of 'third place' between home and work, where one can unwind in comfortable chairs and a relaxed atmosphere,⁴ and secondly the idea that Starbucks is a socially responsible organization that cares about its employees and suppliers in the third world. The serving of decaf instead of regular coffee can thus be seen as a silent protest against having to indulge unreasonable clients, combined with a more general distaste for the Starbucks brand, which is seen as fake and pompous⁵.

In the following, three interrelated Žižekian perspectives on decaf resistance are presented. Firstly it is demonstrated how the baristas' dislike can be seen as a form of 'cynicism' vis à vis the brand and values of Starbucks. Then it is explored how the cynicism of the baristas is supported by an 'ideological fantasy' which offers the subject a false dis-identification from the role as Starbucks barista. The third perspective is the concept of 'jouissance', which allows for an investigation of the element of enjoyment in the cynicism and informal resistance. Finally the paper discusses the fruitfulness of the Žižekian perspective, which is challenged with regards to conceptualizing the public dimension of decaf resistance in the form of the accounts about it online. As the argument unfolds, some additional Žižekian terms are introduced, as they are necessary for understanding the three perspectives.

4 <http://www.starbucks.com/about-us/our-heritage>.

5 Part of the resistance of the baristas is initially directed toward the customers, but is simultaneously an indirect resistance of Starbucks' guidelines for customer-care. Thus Žižek might claim that baristas and customers are in a way in the same boat, as they are exposed to the same interpellations, but with different positions for resisting through consumption and service, respectively. Žižek has thus himself written about the critique of Starbucks from the perspective of the consumer (see for instance Žižek, 2009: 53-54).

Cynicism: Starbucks is a joke

The critique of the Starbucks brand on the chat-forum can be understood as targeting the ‘ideology’ of the corporation, if one employs a commonsensical understanding of the term such as ‘system of ideas’. Žižek’s version of the term, however, is somewhat different from this. Žižek has suggested that ideology can no longer be understood in the classical Marxist conception as ‘false consciousness’ where the diagnosis of its subjects are ‘they do not know it, but they are doing it’ (Žižek, 1989: 28). Additionally, Žižek rejects the classic strategy of ideology-critique that follows from this statement, where the false smokescreen of ideology must be dissolved through a confrontation with the reality, which the ideology thus far has been able to distort. Instead, Žižek adopts from Peter Sloterdijk the thesis that modern ideology’s dominant mode of functioning is cynical (Sloterdijk, 2005). The cynical subject is thus perfectly aware of the distance between the ideological mask and social reality, but nonetheless insists on keeping the mask. Sloterdijk’s diagnosis of the subjects of ideology thus is ‘They know very well what they are doing, but still they are doing it’. The cynical reason is no longer naïve, but has developed into a paradoxical form of ‘enlightened false consciousness’: The subject is completely aware that the ideological universality is false and functions as a disguise for certain private interests, but still the subject does not reject it (Žižek, 1989: 28-30).

Looking at the Starbucks-baristas through this cynicism-lens, it appears to have a certain explanatory force. The users of the forum on *ihatestarbucks.com* thus seem to be completely aware that the ideology of Starbucks is false and only serves to enhance the company’s profits, but they still put on the ideological mask as they go to work every day. The tendency in late capitalism of organizations attempting to elicit the required efforts of its members through their identification with the ‘company culture’ (eg. Kunda, 2009) can thus also be seen at Starbucks, where management has given the baristas the euphemistic and almost Orwellian title of ‘Partners’ – which is the subject of much cynical satirizing by the users on the forum. Relatedly, the baristas are acutely aware that the customer-is-always-right-mantra ‘Just say yes’ does not mean that the customer is in fact always right, but they still on a daily basis act as if this was the case. Thus the servings of decaffeinated coffee and anonymous internet scribbles are the closest they come to a rejection of the ideology, which they know very well is false. As a user writes on the forum:

(...) I’ve only recently started to decaf. I’ve been with the company 3 years now, and I’m not sure how I’ve managed to go so long without doing it to keep my sanity. My reasoning was that yes, even though customers can be a pain in the ***, I still am there to do my job and provide a quality drink.... of course now that I’ve come

to the realization that working at Sbox is a total joke (...) ...well, let the games begin.

The Starbucks-ideology is a total joke, and the false consciousness has consequently been enlightened after three years. In spite of this discouraging new insight, the barista does not quit her job, but instead augments it with a new 'game' to avoid going insane, in the form of decaf servings.

From a Žižekian standpoint however, the cynicism of the baristas is not an expression of a rejection of the ideology, but the exact opposite. Even though the cynical attitude and actions can be experienced as a form of resistance by the individual employee, the idea is that the cynicism only serves to tie the employee even stronger to the conditions which she is resisting and secretly criticizing (Fleming and Spicer, 2007: 69ff). According to Žižek, the ironic dis-identification from ideology and the belief in an authentic position outside its grasp, is exactly ideology at its purest (Kay, 2003: 151; Žižek, 1999a).

But wherein lies the ideological? If 'they know very well, what they are doing' but are still doing it, why not look at it as merely a matter of post-ideological indifference? According to Žižek, because ideology does not work through a distortion of our knowledge about social reality, but is somehow inscribed in that very reality – the reality of our actions. In this perspective, the Starbucks-baristas are thus supporting the Starbucks-ideology by going to work every day and playing the role as loyal employees, no matter what they might secretly be thinking or doing.

What they overlook, what they misrecognize, is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity. They know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know. The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality. And this overlooked, unconscious illusion is what may be called *ideological fantasy*. (Žižek, 1989: 30)

The fundamental level of ideology is thus for Žižek not the illusion that distorts how things really are, but instead the *ideological fantasy* that structures our entire social reality.

Ideological fantasy and false dis-identification

The function of the fantasy is to cover up or explain the traumatic feeling of lack, which constitutes the Žižekian subject. When the subject enters the symbolic

order (i.e. language) it is thus reduced to a symbolic mandate (woman, barista, etc.) which does not quite correspond to its own experience of itself, and therefore results in a feeling of lack within the subject (Stavrakakis, 2010: 63). The lack is given by the distance between the subject's immediate experience of itself and the symbolic title, which assigns it a certain status or authority. The frustrations of the baristas about not being seen as people, but as 'coffee-robots', is an example of this lack, which the subject will do anything to fill, in order to attain an unrealizable ideal of unity (Stavrakakis, 2010:63). According to Žižek, this lack is the basic foundation of subjectivity (Žižek and Daly, 2004: 3; Žižek, 2000: 28)⁶.

Returning to the cynical baristas and the idea of standing outside ideology and resisting it through servings of decaf coffee, this notion is, as already mentioned, an expression of ideology *par excellence*, according to Žižek (Kay, 2003: 134). Specifically, it can be seen as an 'ideological fantasy', which serves to cover up the subject's basic feeling of lack. For the baristas, this happens through the idea of an 'authentic being' as free subjects, who are somehow outside the phony ideology of Starbucks. However, according to Žižek, this kind of 'authentic' or 'lack-free' being is constitutively impossible, and the ideological fantasy is hence left with trying to cover up this traumatic fact (Žižek, 2010a: 70, 88).

An often used example to illustrate the fantasmatic function is the anti-semitic fantasy of the Jew in Nazi-Germany, where the figure of the Jew is constructed as an impediment to a sublime German being and as an explanation for a fundamental experience of lack and incompleteness. But where the Jew in the Nazi fantasy appears as the impediment to a sublime Germanness, for Žižek, the Jew is actually the filling, that replaces a perfect German condition, which does not exist. Thus, what is seen as an impediment to the fully constituted identity of a society, is actually the condition of its possibility. The fantasy of the Jew stages a desire for the sublime and makes it possible to imagine a pure, harmonious Germanness (Laustsen, 1999: 24-27; Žižek, 1997: 76, 2010a: 90).

6 This attribution of the frustration of the baristas to a primordial lack may fit somewhat uneasily with the phenomenological everyday-experience of enduring various abuses in a job earning minimum wage. Moreover, it might also be seen as running the risk of depoliticizing power-relations. The point however is not that the abuses endured by the baristas are not the cause of the frustration, but rather, that the primordial feeling of lack is fantasmatically projected on to this frustration in a cynical fantasy, which promises autonomy, wholeness and unity of self in the ironic distancing from the organization and the abuses one endures. This again leads to a 'decaf' resistance, which sustains the very power-relations that are frustrating the baristas and causing them to resist.

If we observe Starbucks through this fantasy-perspective, we see a similar structure. The specific objects of the 'hate' directed against Starbucks, i.e. the management clichés and lack of respect for its employees, can be seen as the impediment to the fully constituted identities of the baristas as free individuals. In this way the general feeling of lack is explained and justified, while at the same time a desire for autonomy and freedom is staged. It is thus the very idea of the phoniness of Starbucks, which renders possible the fantasy of oneself as a free individual who is outside of ideology.

The sublime ideal, the object of the fantasy, can be understood as the completely autonomous subject, which only acts according to its own inner convictions, and is not subjected to any limitations of its freedom. In the fantasy, the realizing of this ideal, however, is hindered by the fact that the barista is subjected to an authority – for example in the form of the 'Just say yes!' decree, which she is forced to 'officially' obey, even though she has seen through the falsehood of corporate clichés. The fantasy also features a transgressive aspect, which consists of this authority only being respected on the surface, while the barista secretly 'knows better' and breaks the rules, for example by serving decaffeinated coffee. The fantasy thus offers the barista a secure sense of identity as the autonomous rebel who has seen through management's clichés, and knows that there is 'something more' than the claustrophobic and incomplete reality, to which she is subjected at work (Glynos, 2008: 14).

In other words, this cynical fantasy and the experience of being outside ideology, offers the barista a 'breathing space' where she can be free from the limiting restraints of work and live out her autonomous, unique self (Contu 2008: 372). This breathing space, which the subject achieves through dis-identification and resistance towards the ideology, should not be understood as a form of subjectivity, which is beyond ideology. On the contrary, the claim by Žižek is that dis-identification should be seen as an ideological practice. The standard notion of ideology, where it traps its subjects by offering them a secure point of identification, must thus be turned on its head, so that ideology functions just as much by offering a space for 'false dis-identification', a false distance towards the actual coordinates of the subject's existence (Žižek in Butler et al., 2000: 103).

This idea of a false dis-identification from ideology seems to be an appropriate description of the cynical resistance at Starbucks. On the chat forum the users thus advise each other to mentally detach themselves from work, when it becomes problematic or unpleasant. Part of this detachment consists of applying a so-called 'Ralph Wiggum expression'. Ralph Wiggum is a character from the 'Simpsons' cartoon who due to lack of intelligence remains unaffected by his surroundings and hence always greets the world with his characteristically daft

smile. This smile can be utilized by the Starbucks-baristas when faced with unreasonable customers who are scolding or nagging:

A pleasant, dim indifference will usually diffuse the situation by giving them no further ammunition (or potentially making them rage harder because they're not getting their way by making you panic/scared/reciprocate attitude(...)) and, best of all, you can't get in trouble because you didn't do anything wrong during the altercation! And then you can laugh about it later, too.

The empty, smiling expression and the image of Ralph Wiggum is used by the baristas to dis-identify from the prohibition against talking back to customers, while at the same time upholding it perfectly.

Other studies show that this form of surface-acting of the organizations 'customer-culture' is not unusual, as the employees realize its instrumentality and purpose as a technique of control, and therefore do not internalize it as their own (Fleming and Spicer, 2007: 71; Hochschild, 1983). But even though the individual may feel like she is dis-identifying and resisting, this resistance is harmless, because the individual in her actions is behaving 'ideologically correct' – i.e. doing what she is supposed to (with exception of the actions that remain outside the gaze of management). The hidden acts and thoughts of resistance thus do not constitute a real threat for the democratic logic, where the subject is constituted as the free, liberal subject, who among other things has the right to disagree. The trick is, of course, that the subject still complies with whatever he or she may disagree with (Contu, 2008: 368). At Starbucks this is exemplified by the fact that the baristas, regardless of what they may secretly be thinking or doing, are still doing their job and not talking back to the customer.

In contemporary liberal workplaces, these forms of resistance against ideology are thus already factored in, and it is precisely this resistance, which renders possible the continued reproduction of the ideology. The HR-guidelines of many modern workplaces thus warn the employees against identifying to much with the organization, as this could lead to stress and burnout (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Leidner, 1993). The distance towards the ideology is what makes it efficient.

Jouissance: Pleasurable resistance

The resistance acts of the baristas at Starbucks are not limited to serving decaffeinated coffee. In the following, we will be exploring some of the more extreme forms of resistance, and simultaneously engaging with the Žižekian concept of 'jouissance', which can shed light on the pleasurable aspects of informal resistance. The concept of jouissance, is often understood as that which

is lost and lacking when the subject enters into the symbolic order. Hence, *jouissance* is the imaginary and impossible pleasure that is linked to the illusion of oneness and wholeness, and which is lost upon entry (Stavrakakis, 2010: 62). Paradoxically this loss is not synonymous with the subject living its life without *jouissance*. Despite the condition for entering the symbolic order is the giving up of *jouissance*, the symbolic is to a large extent sustained by different fantasies staging the loss and regaining of this *jouissance* (Cederström and Grassman, 2010: 115).

The *jouissance* installed by the aforementioned cynical fantasy is paradoxical in the sense that there is at the same time too much and not enough *jouissance* – both a lack and an excess. For the baristas at Starbucks, *jouissance* is thus attained both in the form of a loss – if only the customers, the store manager or the big bosses at Starbucks were not such idiots, then we would be ‘truly’ free and able to do what we wanted. But it also comes in the sense of a surplus, as something we possess – we assume that we can actually do what we want (e.g. ‘decaf’ difficult customers etc.), as long as we hide this excess from the gaze of power (Contu, 2008: 375). This surplus can be understood as little *crumbs of jouissance* – little pieces of *jouissance* that we are able to ‘snatch from under their noses’ (Contu, 2008: 375). According to Žižek, these crumbs function as a kind of ‘libidinal bribe’ that sustains the power-relation between the inferior, who steals the crumbs of *jouissance*, and the superior, who silently accepts this theft, as it does not represent a threat against his position, but on the contrary sustains it (Žižek, 1997: 33-34).

Even though *jouissance* can be translated as ‘pleasure’ it cannot be equated with our common-sense understanding of the term, which is linked to balance and satisfaction. Contrary to this, *jouissance* is destabilizing, traumatic and excessive (Žižek and Daly, 2004: 113). *Jouissance* is thus experienced as a form of excessive pleasure/pain – the something extra which gives the feeling of pleasure a fascinating and often unbearable intensity (Dean, 2006: 4), like scratching a mosquito-bite. Furthermore *jouissance* is often linked to a renouncement of pleasure and joy (Žižek and Daly, 2004: 114). This kind of self-torturing pleasure can be used to understand some of the entries by the baristas on the chat forum such as the one below, where a user fantasizes about how he would feel if/when he one day stops working at Starbucks:

You know (...) one of the sad things is that, a twisted little masochist part of me will one day miss having an entire shift’s worth of complaints each day. But the rest of me will be glad I’ll have eventually found something I fully enjoy doing (..)

The suspension of pleasure and joy, which results from the complaining customers (enhanced by the 'Just say yes!' policy) thus creates a 'masochistic' jouissance that functions as a supplement for the (fantasmatic) future in which the user has found 'something I fully enjoy doing' and the feelings of pleasure and joy are no longer suspended or lost.

The connection between jouissance and the denouncement of pleasure and joy is sometimes illustrated by the idea of jouissance acting as the 'obscene underbelly' to an authoritatively demanded renouncement of these feelings, which it simultaneously helps to sustain. Žižek has given the case of the military as an example of this (Žižek and Daly, 2004: 128). On the surface level there is a set of very strict rules (hierarchy, discipline, procedure etc.), which, according to Žižek, cannot function without their jouissance-supplying supplement (vulgar sexist jokes, sadistic hazing rituals etc.). If we turn towards the baristas at Starbucks, it seems there is also an obscene underbelly to the 'Just say yes!' policy. The forum thus contains several accounts of the so-called *special straws*, which have been dipped in the toilet, and the ways in which these straws make their way into the drinks of rude customers. Additionally, there are accounts of male baristas dipping their testicles into coffee cups, which are later handed to customers, as well as the 'spiking' of drinks with pubic hair. These acts can be seen as the jouissance-soaked, obscene underbelly of the customer care-law at Starbucks, which at the same time functions as this law's prerequisite. According to Žižek, the renouncement of pleasure and joy (in the form of refraining from talking back to unreasonable customers) enables a so-called surplus-jouissance (plus de jouir), which sustains the renouncement (Žižek, 2010b: 126-7; Kay, 2003: 163, 166; Žižek, 1999b: 291). At Starbucks, these informal obscenities can thus be seen as that which renders it bearable for the baristas to go to work everyday and get scolded by unreasonable customers.

But what then?

Based on Starbucks as an empirical example, we are able to conclude that the Žižekian perspective of 'decaf criticism' has a certain explanatory potential. Žižek's concepts can be applied in showing how the resistance is decaf not only in an actual sense (they are serving coffee without caffeine) but also in a metaphorical sense (they are practicing resistance without resistance). The cynicism, which is concomitant to the decaf servings, is one of Žižek's most consistent targets of critique. Žižek's aversion against the cynical attitude can be attested to the fact that it appears to be subversive and resisting status quo, while in reality it works to sustain contemporary ideology, which has already

incalculated the imagined distance towards it held by the cynical subject of late capitalism.

However, this engagement with the Žižekian perspective also prompts a couple of obvious counter-questions. Because what then is ‘real’ resistance? And how does one practice a criticism or resistance that is not decaf? The Žižekian answer to these questions is the ‘Real act’.

The Real act, however is one of the most contested concepts in Žižek’s work. It is understood as a radical act, where the subject breaks with the symbolic order in which it is placed, and acts beyond desire, in a manner that results in the symbolic coordinates around the subjects existence being radically altered (Kay, 2003: 156). To resist power the subject must give up its inner core of jouissance through which it is tied to power (Žižek, 1999b; Žižek, 2010a: 118). This ‘traversing of the fantasy’, thus requires the subject to ‘disappear’ and place its own structural lack in the place of the desired object (Hoedemakers, 2009: 194). The Real act thus entails the subject accepting its own radial eccentricity vis á vis the big Other, and no longer navigating through pre-given coordinates in the social, but instead realizing its own radical responsibility (Sharpe, 2004: 241; Glynos 2000: 15).

In continuation hereof, the Real act is an expression of a shift in Žižek’s understanding of ‘the Real’, which in his earlier writings is described as pure negation and impossibility, but later on is given more subtle characteristics, and no longer just understood as a strict external boundary of symbolization, but also as something which plays a part in our experienced reality (Žižek and Daly, 2004: 8, 71). This in turn has political consequences, because the possibility of a ‘Real act’ then arises as ‘that which cannot happen but happens anyway’ (Bjerre, 2011:38). From time to time we catch a glimpse of it – but are still unable to comprehend (symbolize) it: ‘When you do something crazy, like an heroic act, which goes against all your interests, there the real happens – you cannot justify or explain it’ (Žižek and Daly, 2004: 165). This shift coincides with a shift in Žižek’s political orientation (Bjerre, 2011: 37-38) which moves from an interest in liberal democracy as a way of symbolizing the Real (e.g. Žižek, 1989), towards an interest in those moments in history, where radical shifts have taken place (e.g. Lenin and Žižek, 2002; Žižek, 2008).

The Real act suspends the symbolic order and opens up the possibility for change – of actions beyond the given matrix of expectations (Dean, 2006: 188). In her discussion of ‘decaf resistance’, Alessia Contu argues how its necessary alternative is the radical Real act:

A real act of resistance would be one for which we would have to bear the costs. It would be an act that changes the sociosymbolic network in which we and our way of life make sense. It would be costly because we depend on these sociosymbolic networks. To lose them, would be like losing the world. (...) This is a risk of dying symbolically and perhaps also physically. (Contu, 2008: 374-5)

If the only alternative to decaf entails traversing the fantasy and performing a Real act which results in the symbolic and maybe even physical death of the subject, the question is how useful the idea of decaf resistance is as an analytical concept. Especially given the fact that this radical act '(...) is not something that can be outlined in prescriptive formulae, nor can it be easily named in the form of an example' (Hoedemakers 2009: 195). The empirical descriptions of concrete, actual Real acts are thus very scarce and revolve around heroines in Greek tragedies (Žižek, 1998) or non-specific speculations about whistleblowing in neoliberal workplaces (Contu, 2008: 376). According to Žižek however, one should not worry about what the Real act is or whether it is possible or impossible, because it has always happened and will continue to do so (Žižek, 1996: 146-7).

But if we nevertheless insist on conceiving the Real act versus decaf as an analytical distinction, which can be utilized to characterize resistance, then it would seem that one side of the distinction covers a disproportionately large amount of the empirical identifiable resistance. Everything thus becomes decaf, because the Real act is so rare. The question is then, how useful a distinction this actually is.

In connection to this, Stavrakakis (Stavrakakis, 2010: 90) has warned against the idea of the Real act and described it as a form of 'quasi-religious' and 'leftist-speculative' idealization of the one miraculous and apocalyptic act, which leads to total transformation. According to Stavrakakis, the idea that the absolute radicalism of *the act* is the only alternative to decaf resistance and, in a broader context, also the only way to revitalize the lost bite of radical political movements, is highly problematic. What is overlooked with the idea of the Real act is thus how the dialectics between power and resistance are always characterized by multiple, diffuse and unpredictable processes, which are part of every political struggle (Stavrakakis, 2010: 90; Fleming and Spicer, 2007). According to Stavrakakis, it is not only the decaffeinated resistance that can be incorporated into the dominant order, to which it has a dialectical relationship. The same is the case with revolutionary acts that if judged by their historical effects over time, also seem to have an unmistakable decaf glare about them – as is the case with for instance certain forms of critique of capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007). This however often seems to work in favor of social and political transformation, which according to Stavrakakis is also the case for other acts,

which might otherwise to quickly be characterized as decaffeinated and worthless (Stavrakakis, 2010: 90).

In a sense, the distinction between real and decaf thus seems to mirror the dichotomy in much resistance research, identified by Mumby (2005: 37) and others, between the resistor as an unwitting dupe on the one hand, and a pure revolutionary subject on the other, albeit with both poles of the dichotomy subsumed in the same theoretical framework. Organizational scholars in the Žižekio-lacanian tradition have responded to this problem by seeking to conceptualize resistance acts, which are less 'grandiose' (Hoedemakers, 2009: 195) than the Real Act, but still in some way unsettle or disturb the parameters of ideological fantasy within the organization, thus situating the resisting subject somewhere in between dupe and revolutionary (eg. Karlsen and Villadsen, 2015; Fleming and Spicer, 2007). For example, it has been suggested that certain types of humor might be able to display the inherent antagonisms of the symbolic order of the organization – i.e. claims of unity, cohesion and homogeneity – and reveal how these signifiers act as a disguise for non-identity and primordial lack (Karlsen and Villadsen, 2015: 527). A related strategy of humorous destabilization of the symbolic order involves over-identifying with it as opposed to cynically dis-identifying (Fleming and Spicer, 2007: 84, Hoedemakers, 2009: 195; Karlsen and Villadsen, 2015: 526). Examples of this involve covering one's car with an excessive amount of company stickers (Fleming and Spicer, 2007: 84) or taking the rules and regulations of the organization completely literally and 'working to rule' (Fleming and Spicer, 2007: 5; Kay, 2003: 136; Žižek, 1997: 29). What these strategies have in common, however, is that they are not easily conceptualized through the decaf/real-dichotomy and can be seen as seeking to 'work around' these inflexible categories.

Half-caf resistance

In addition to the above mentioned theoretical objections, one can also raise an empirical critique against categorizing every act of resistance, which does not completely reconfigure the social coordinates, as harmless and insignificant. There is thus some empirical justification behind the claim that cynicism does not necessarily have to be a reinforcer of the status quo, but can also constitute a basis for other forms of resistance that have a real impact (Rodrigues and Collinson, 1995; Sturdy and Fineman, 2001). Cynicism, sarcasm and decaf resistance can thus function as a necessary forum, in which employees can gather courage and negotiate about how exactly various issues should be addressed. Once in a while on the Ihatestarbucks-forum, initial steps are also taken towards collective mobilizing and direct action, albeit on a very small scale.

The threads are usually rather short and contain a few entries where the baristas discuss the possibility of collective initiatives such as a national strike-day our collective statements demanding better pay and working conditions etc. Even though these kinds of considerations are a rarity, they might be seen as expressions of the transformative potential of cynicism and decaf resistance.

Another significant question which can be raised in connection with the Ihatestarbucks-forum as an empirical testing ground for the conceptual idea of decaf resistance, concerns the extent to which the resistance documented on the forum is actually experienced as decaf by the users – as the Žižekian perspective would suggest. For example there is a thread on the forum, in which the users discuss the consequences of the website having been cited in a news-outlet. It is discussed if the site should be shut down or perhaps changed into a forum, where it is required to be registered with a username, before being able to read and write on it. Some of the users regret their previous accounts of resistance:

I, ah, am having posters' remorse. So, er, if there's any way I could have the power to edit? I'll be careful of how I do it, so that the threads still make sense. Kinda wish I hadn't been so candid now. And that I listened when you peeps said not to say anything about where your store is.

Even though one can make the argument that the specific concrete act of serving decaffeinated coffee can be characterized as decaf resistance in the sense that it is harmless and hardly instigates change, it is another matter when this act is recorded on a publicly accessible internet forum. From the point of view of the users of the forum, their recorded resistance is far from harmless, but on the contrary experienced as so risky and 'caffeinated' that it ought to be altered or deleted. The users on the forum thus do not achieve the pure decaffeinated pleasure, where one gets the thing, but without its dangerous main ingredient. For some, a certain dose of risk and fear is also included.

An internet-mediated account of a decaf serving thus seems to be more caffeinated than the serving itself, because the resistance no longer stays hidden, and can potentially be viewed by the whole world. While the Žižekian perspective has shown itself to have a keen eye for decaf resistance in the form of the concrete act where decaffeinated coffee is served, this is not the case, to the same extent, when the action is subsequently recorded on a publicly accessible internet forum. The Žižekian lens thus seems unable to capture the increased levels of caffeine which are apparently infused into the resistance when it is chronicled online.

A potential solution to this problem could consist in the incorporation of an analytical sensibility into the Žižekian perspective, which would facilitate the

distinction between various *degrees of caffeinatedness*, rather than conceiving it is a question of either-or. In this case one could for instance draw inspiration from the ideas originating out of the Essex-school about distinguishing between various degrees of fantasmatic attachment (Glynos, 2008; Glynos and Stavrakakis, 2008; Stavrakakis, 2010) – possibly combined with the abovementioned conceptions of humorous disruptions of the symbolic order. Furthermore, Karfakis and Kokkinidis (2011), applying the work of Sloterdijk (2005) and Foucault (2000), have suggested a distinction between contemporary *cynicism* as it is described by Žižek and others on the one hand, and the practice of ‘fearless speech’ and *kynicism* as it was employed in Greek antiquity, with whistleblowing being a contemporary example, on the other. While this distinction is somewhat homologous to the real/decaf distinction, it is also suggested that cynicism and kynicism should be viewed as ‘two extremes of the same continuum and in-between them lies what we might call the “grey area”’ (Karfakis and Kokkinidis 2011: 339). It is this ‘grey area’ that becomes apparent when the baristas at Starbucks post their resistance-accounts online and thereby to some extent caffeinate their resistance. Incorporated into the large coffee-selection at Starbucks is thus the possibility to order one’s coffee as a so-called *half-caf* – i.e. containing half the amount of caffeine of a regular coffee. The coffee, then, is neither decaf nor as caffeinated as regular coffee. Hence, as implied above, a *half-caf resistance* seems to be part of the resistance-selection of the Starbucks-baristas, but not yet part of the analytical selection of Žižekian theory.

While the recording of employee-resistance on publicly accessible internet-forums represents a challenge to the Žižekian decaf-perspective, it also presents an obvious opportunity for the study of a hitherto hidden practice, not easily accessible for research. Latour has thus pointed out that the digitalization of ever more aspects of our lives represents a goldmine of information for social science: ‘It is as if the inner workings of private worlds have been pried open because their inputs and outputs have become thoroughly traceable’ (Latour, 2007).

Thus it seems that the study of *IhateStarbucks.com* works both as a justification of and a challenge toward the Žižekian perspective presented in this paper. A justification because the ‘inner worlds’ of the baristas, that become visible through the website, can be described and explained quite precisely by the Žižekian perspective. Paradoxically, this validation of the Žižekian perspective only applies to the invisible and unrecorded resistance, because the moment the resistance is shared through a publicly accessible website, it seems to challenge the Žižekian dichotomy between decaf and Real act. This happens because the recorded account of a decaf-serving seems to involve more risk and potential

harm than the serving itself. None of them however completely reconfigure their surrounding social coordinates and thereby cross the Žižekian threshold between decaf and Real act.

Conclusion

The Žižekian notion of decaf resistance is fruitful in terms of diagnosing libidinal investments in informal resistance through concepts such as cynicism, ideological fantasy and jouissance. The limitation of this Žižekian perspective, however, is that it becomes difficult in a concrete analysis to identify anything but harmless decaf resistance, since its alternative, in the form of the revolutionary Real act, happens very rarely. The perspective thus loses a certain empirical sensibility towards the internal differences between the many different forms of resistance, which are *en bloc* characterized as decaf. While the writings on the I hate Starbucks-web forum have proven to support the idea of decaf resistance to a certain extent, the opposite is also the case. The fact that accounts of the hidden resistance become publicly accessible, thus suggests that non-revolutionary resistance can still entail different degrees of risk and danger (e.g. levels of caffeine), which is difficult to conceptualize within the Žižekian perspective.

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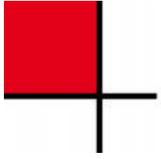
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Managing international development: (Re)positioning critique in the post-2008 conjecture

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abstract

Despite earlier neglect, International Development (ID) has begun to receive some attention from the Critical Management Studies (CMS) community over the last two decades. This paper reviews existing CMS work that engages with ID and outlines directions for future research. Building on extant research and scholarship that has focussed on linkages between managerialism and ID, we identify and discuss in some depth three emerging areas within ID – financialization, evaluation and projectification – that, we argue, merit further critical scrutiny from CMS scholars. We call for a programme of theoretical and grounded empirical research into these three areas in the hope of reinvigorating CMS's engagement with ID; a programme that would seek to expose the fallacy of the universalizing managerialism that increasingly informs ID projects and organizational practices. In operationalizing this research programme, we draw attention to problems of *positionality*, drawing on methodological and epistemological debates in Anthropology to inform our argument. We thus highlight the need for grounding CMS research practices in reflective trans-disciplinarity.

Introduction

Given the centrality of International Development (ID) to the global economy, trade and international relations in the post-World War II period, it is not surprising that ID has attracted some attention from Critical Management Studies (CMS). Among others, Cooke (2004), Dar and Cooke (2008), and Murphy (2008) have provided an outline for interrogating the management of ID, or development management, from a range of historical, theoretical and

geographical positions. This critical scholarship builds significantly on previously existing critique of ID from Anthropology and Development Studies, particularly Post-development Studies (Escobar, 1995, 1996). We want to move this engagement forward, arguing that since the 2008 global financial crisis profound changes in ID warrant renewed attention from CMS.

We begin with a comprehensive review of CMS's engagement with ID, a key domain of contemporary management practice. Our review highlights, first, the global and sectoral mobility of managerial concepts. Second, it reveals that development management has been central in the evolution of specific logics and techniques—including 'de-politicization', 'participation' and 'universalism' – that are foundational to contemporary ID. In this discussion, we analyse in depth a number of changes within ID and development management that have emerged since the 2008 global financial crisis. We find that political responses to the crisis have brought forward a rhetorical turn away from globalisation and neo-liberalism toward a complex mix of nationalist, protectionist and populist discourses, both in the 'Global North' and the 'Global South'. However, despite these political shifts, we show that the movement of ID and development management in the direction of universalizing tendencies has accelerated significantly.

The core of our paper is a call for renewed consideration of areas where CMS scholarship can engage critically to analyse this new conjuncture. We identify financialization, evaluation and projectification as three new and/or rapidly transforming empirical phenomena in ID practice in the post-2008 period. On *financialization* of ID, we are currently witnessing a shift away from traditional approaches, i.e., bilateral and multilateral aid, and direct lending. While continuing to be a central development resource and tool, contemporary finance now manifests itself in more complicated ways, e.g., through micro-finance, social investment bonds, remittances and consumer credit. This is unfolding in the context of the nation state reasserting itself as an authoritative agent, and claiming legitimacy via particularistic national outlooks including the internal/national control of development. Meanwhile, *evaluation*, particularly through the turn to randomized controlled trials (RCTs), is globally reconfiguring development management knowledge and practice. It has produced its own industry of professionals, practices and standards that ostensibly provide measurable parameters of success of ID. Not only does it reverse the successes of community-led and participatory approaches to ID (see Cooke and Kothari, 2001 for a critical discussion), but it has, we argue, changed the ways in which we conceive, organize and manage ID. Finally, *projectification* has altered the processes by which development interventions are organized, giving rise to its own managerial language. This reifying and de-politicized nomenclature is often

disassociated from any practical relation to what occurs on the ground in development projects. Yet despite its foundational limitations, it has, increasingly and disturbingly, become the *always already* available means of framing ID projects.

We argue that since the global financial crisis of 2008 these three areas of ID share a strong tendency toward abstraction that reproduce a universalizing 'scientific' gaze (Sanyal, 2007) which, based on specialized, and supposedly apolitical, knowledge principles, masks the exercise of power and the complexities of social relations in the field. That is, supposedly universal principles shape reality by guiding the 'performativity' of agents in ID towards the reproduction of the universalism that these principles prescribe (Callon, 2007). Broadly-speaking, the demystification of such hegemonic universalisms is the central aim of projects of future research we recommend for CMS's engagement with ID. And we believe that this problem can be helpfully engaged methodologically through attention to the implications of *positionality* in research, which has been a central epistemological problem in Anthropology. Building also on previous work in CMS on ID (Kenny, 2008, 2012; Dar, 2014; Frenzel and Sullivan, 2009; Frenzel et al., 2011), we understand positionality as entailing refinement in research practices to encourage complex and in depth consideration of the interrelations of various subjects implicated in ID contexts, as well as reflection on one's own position as a researcher; that is, the historico-political and personal conditions in play when preparing, conducting and representing research. This may at times entail notions such as 'critical performativity' in which research is understood as a political practice that shapes empirical realities towards alternatives to the status quo (Parker and Parker, 2017). Such reflexive considerations, we argue, enable the researcher to better engage with and appreciate the ramifications of differing subject positions and power relations, in this case, as they are inscribed by those involved directly in ID practices.

Our intention is not to develop a prescriptive research agenda but rather to advance and, we hope, inspire debate regarding CMS's engagement with ID. That said, we believe that bearing in mind the methodological considerations addressed above in combination with the sophisticated approaches to organizational dynamics that those working in CMS pursue as a matter of course, CMS has the potential to contribute substantially to the advancement of the extant general critiques of ID and development management.

Managing international development (ID): A review

The organization and management of ID has been the subject of considerable research, particularly in Anthropology and Development Studies. Beginning with Ferguson's (1990) seminal *The anti-politics machine*, Anthropology has provided a number of ethnographic accounts of the organization and practices of ID.¹ Related criticisms of development management have also begun to emerge from its practitioners, calling attention to the inherent tensions between its purported aims and its practices (Eyben, 2014). Building on such influential critiques, CMS scholarship on ID has been instrumental in pointing out the deep-rooted connections between development management and management more generally (see for example Cooke and Faria, 2013, for an outline of their mutual entanglements).

CMS has been at the forefront of critical interrogation of institutional and managerial practices in ID and the influential role of development managers. Having called attention to their colonial continuities, Cooke (2003, 2004, 2008), has taken an historical approach in pointing to the tyranny of contemporary participatory approaches in development management. Murphy (2005, 2008) has discussed not only the growing influence of large private corporations in ID, mainly via global governance led by the World Bank, but also the emergence of an elite, global, managerial class that has led to the 'de-ideologisation and technisation of decision-making' (Murphy, 2008: 150). Relatedly, others have drawn attention to the institutional extension in ID to non-governmental actors like NGOs (Srinivas, 2008) and INGOs (Murphy, 2005, 2008) and their inter-relationships (Contu and Girei, 2014).

Still others have researched *within* development organizations, exposing the sometimes insidious but always problematic role of managers and managerial control and dominance. Kerr (2008) follows a discursive approach in revealing the role of project-based technologies as part of the intensification of governing devices. Using an ethnographic approach, Kenny (2008, 2012) has described the inner-workings of power among professionals involved in ID. Meanwhile, Dar (2008b, 2014) has focussed on the role of quotidian managerial practices in ID, such as reporting which not only leads to the subjugation of the Other but that also re-inscribes global inequalities. In addition, Girei (2016), following Gramsci, implicates development management in the expansion of cultural and political hegemony.

1 For example, see Escobar (1995) on professionalization and Mosse (2008, 2011). Also see Lewis and Mosse (2006) for a discussion on experts, professionals and managers; and Kothari (2005) and Hodge (2010) who offer a valuable historical discussion of development management.

Taken together, this influential – although still incipient – corpus of CMS work on development management challenges the singular and universal representations of management and organization of ID. It has called attention to the global power dynamics that inhere in organizing ID generally, and organizational life as part of ID, with accounts that foreground the fractured, multiple or hybrid nature of the organizational realities involved. In this work we see, and we agree with the move towards, a process of research that seeks to politicize ID against the imposition of putatively value neutral and objective managerial techniques. Revealing that development management serves specific ideological motivations and ends, including both neoliberalism and nationalism, CMS research on ID is linked to broader resistance movements against the politico-economic status quo (Dinerstein and Deneulin, 2012). Building on this emergent research trajectory, we aim to expand CMS's agenda into areas with which, it has, thus far, not engaged closely and with a sufficiently critical eye.

Contemporary shifts in ID

Arguably since the 2008 global financial crisis, the status of neoliberal globalisation as the dominant development framework (Brohman, 1995) has come under increasing criticism. Under conditions of austerity, rising right-wing, political forces in the Global North have been calling for restrictions on, or the rejection of ID as part of nation-states' cost cutting. At the same time, governments in the Global South have been increasingly policing INGO and NGO interventions in the name of national security and/or sovereignty (Anheier, 2017).

As related briefly in our introduction, we see significant, on-going changes in the nature of financing of ID. Bilateral and multilateral aid, in which nation-states were the key donors and recipients – a form dominant in the second half of the 20th century – have been widely challenged. Aid has been increasingly taken over by new institutional actors, such as regional blocs and new South-South alliances (such as the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank), philanthrocapitalists, crowd-funding and peer-to-peer (P2P) lending, etc. (Bishop and Green, 2008). There has also been a proliferation of innovative experiments in development financing, such as Social Impact Bonds (Joy and Shields, 2013) and an increased role of banks operating as hedge funds for ID. Relatedly, new institutional actors have emerged alongside newer global alliances. These include social enterprises, operating on peer-to-peer funding models and a number of new philanthropic and solidarity-based ventures such as Kiva (Bishop and Green, 2008).

Much of the earlier CMS-inspired critique analysed ID-financing based on a structure with powerful states, multilateral aid agencies and INGO organizations, mostly located in the 'First World', on the one hand, with recipient, resource-constrained NGOs in the 'Third World', on the other. Based on the changes outlined above we contend that such binary distinctions between the 'First' and 'Third Worlds', donors and recipient organizations, 'North' and 'South', 'West' and 'the Rest', profit and non-profit, state and non-governmental have been replaced by a more complex field of ID organisation, finance and accountability. These changes require critical scrutiny from the CMS community.

In addition, just as new organizational forms that challenge the previous and long-standing taxonomy of non/profit, social/enterprise, and state/civil society have emerged, so have new forms of expertise. Following criticism of expert-led ID, its alternative, 'participatory development', has arguably become the orthodoxy itself (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). Challenges to participatory development from a range of feminist and/or subaltern perspectives (Maguire, 1987; Sweetman, 1997; Agarwal, 1997), however, left an institutional void which has, we argue, resulted in the return of 'the expert': a feature of ID that needs to be interrogated further, e.g., by CMS.

At the same time, in the name of austerity, states and INGOs, mostly located in the 'Global North' have been calling for conditional aid, i.e., aid linked directly to measurable and verifiable impacts. The UK's Department for International Development (DfID), for example, adopted a Results Framework in 2014 which not only emphasized measuring its direct role in development outcomes but also its organizational efficiency. Such managerial practices were expected to lead to a focus on 'best value poverty reduction programmes', thus 'achieving value for money for every pound of taxpayers' money' spent on development (DfID, 2014: 1f). Within this, there has been a shift in evaluation practices as well as projectification, which has become the organizational framework for facilitating the mobilization of financialization.

In what follows we turn to the three empirical areas, namely financialization, evaluation and projectification, each of which expose both continuities and discontinuities from prior forms of ID.

Engaging critically: CMS and International Development

Financialization

The emergence of 'financialization' as a topic for critical research has taken place in the context of debates over changes to the dominant regulatory regimes of

capitalism (Harvey, 1989). The turn to financialization since the 1970s has affected developing countries and ID in a number of ways. Aitkin (2013: 474) understands financialization ‘as the increasing role of international capital and finance in the provision and organization of overseas development assistance’, which started with the turn towards post-Fordism. Limited return on capital in the ‘First World’ and the liberalisation of capital flows globally, following the end of Bretton Woods, saw capital seeking new frontiers in the developing world. A period of reckless lending by a newly formed international financial sector led directly to the debt crises of the 1980s, which crippled many developing countries’ economies (Caffentzis, 2010). Ostensibly to rescue these indebted countries, international finance organisations such as the IMF and World Bank imposed austerity under the neo-liberal economic policies of the ‘Washington Consensus’ (Escobar, 1995), otherwise known as structural adjustment programmes. ‘Conditionality’, in this way, has become a key instrument of power in implementing specific ideas of development. In the post-colonial Cold War period, these were often linked to political alliances with, and de facto patronage of donor countries. The end of the Cold War, meanwhile, marked a reduction of transfers when the earlier ideological motivation to align developing countries to Cold War-era blocs diminished. Since the 2008 global financial crisis, development aid from wealthier nation states has experienced a further decline. This has meant that sources of international aid have transformed considerably (Garcia-Arias, 2015).

The search for alternate institutional mechanisms for ID financing has led to a number of proposals. The Monterrey and Doha resolutions (UN, 2013), for instance, include proposals for new global tax regimes, such as the ‘Tobin Tax’ on financial transactions, but they also list new instruments and vehicles for leveraging and expanding foreign direct investment and official development assistance. The latter instruments are highly complex and are administered by finance managers who are subject to limited democratic oversight. Although often introduced as ‘innovative thinking’ by the wider ID community, they also serve the interests of financial institutions in their search for new markets (UN, 2013).

To illustrate our analysis of the transformation of conditionality, we discuss two examples from very different empirical ends of the spectrum: microfinance, and macro-level funding from the Commonwealth Development Corporation Group. Microfinance has developed in the last four decades in the name of ‘democratisation of finance’, which claims to have stimulated wealth creation in the ‘Third World’. Conceived as a finance facility to empower women entrepreneurs in developing countries, microfinance has, according to its critics, increasingly subjected the world’s poor to [t]he most dubious risks associated

with global finance: speculative instability, over-extended (and oversold) credit, unpredictable chains of financial fragility at both micro and macro levels' (Aiktin, 2013: 493). While some scholars have defended microfinance as a potentially empowering tool of ID (Hermes, 2014), Mader (2014) offers overwhelming evidence that microfinance does not alleviate poverty.² Instead, he claims its main functions lie in the creation of market relations between the poor and the non-poor, with the purpose of making the social reproduction of the poor productive for what he calls the 'global rentier class'. In his work, Mader (2014) employs what we commonly understand as social studies of finance³ to identify ways in which civil society actors function as crucial mediators between finance and the poor. This institutional change is reflected in a number of new organizations formed to facilitate microfinance. We believe that CMS can contribute meaningfully to much needed analyses of this institutional change.

Relatedly, institutional changes are also taking place at the macro-level of ID finance. The transformation of national development banks to publicly-owned hedge funds is a key example. In the UK, the Commonwealth Development Corporation Group (CDC), in operation since the 1948, provided finance for ID based on government subsidies. However, since 2004, CDC has operated as a publicly-owned hedge fund, which focusses on highly profitable investments in developing countries. According to the CDC's own data, it made returns on investment in the range of 30% from 2000-2012, exceeding average performances of indexed funds in developed countries by a large margin. Such figures are indicative of the CDC's priority in seeking lucrative investment opportunities over benefits that pertain to public goods or the pursuit of socially and politically valuable aims of ID such as empowerment or environmental protection.

Another less sanguine motivation for high returns on investment came to light in 2010 when NGOs published the huge bonuses of CDC fund managers (Cornerhouse, 2010). Clearly the new hedge-fund shaped CDC is built on the debunked but persistent assumption that overall economic growth will trickle down to the poorest. Despite such problematic conduct, there has been little

2 See also Sinclair (2012).

3 Here techniques and practices of financialization are examined in a variety of practical contexts, ranging from the general operations of financial institutions to the influence of such institutions in policy arena, such as Wall Street's interference with regulatory regimes. These studies also encompass research on housing, consumer and student finance, and the development of new forms of accounting. The thrust of these critical arguments point to increasing quantities of 'hot money': free-floating capital that seeks to find rent income from social production across the world (Gaulard, 2012).

attention from CMS scholars on the institutional transformation of national development banks, which are posited in the understanding that operating funds are under some form of political control of the nation states involved. This has implications, *inter alia*, on regimes of accountability, indicating that the abstract principle of rate of return on investment becomes the crucial indicator for successful ID interventions. While this clearly marks an extension of developments analysed by Sanyal (2007), e.g., with regard to the diminishing role of national institutions and their forms of accountability towards more abstract, universalist principles, a critique of such re-configured financial institutions has, to date, been the sole province of a handful of NGOs and journalists.⁴

CDC is but one example of the broad field of newly emerging development finance organizations and funds, an area largely under- or self-regulated. Socially responsible investment (SRI) opportunities have exploded in recent years, but need more scrutiny from CMS scholars, possibly building on the critical accounting literature that analyses claims made with respect to social responsibility (Sikka, 2011) or critical work on social investment bonds (Joy and Shields, 2013). Social investment bonds are limited to national level policy interventions today; however, parallel initiatives in ID that attempt to harness private finance for development goals are certainly conceivable. As Mader (2013) has shown in the area of microfinance, financialization aims to broaden the ability of capital holders to earn returns on investments. The institutional implications for ID, be it in the marketization of basic social reproduction of the poorest, or the role of NGOs in becoming agents of marketization, are manifold and require a new, concerted effort by CMS scholars to expose the deleterious social logics at work in this domain.

Evaluation and measurement

Recently there has been increasing emphasis on identifying and measuring the effectiveness of ID aid (Eyben et al., 2015). In 2013, the UK's Department for International Development (DfID, 2013a) outlined a new policy on aid effectiveness, focussing on ensuring that only the *right* people and organizations receive aid. DfID began handing out new aid once results had become visible and existing aid was thus accounted for. Known as 'Payment by results' (DfID, 2013b), outcomes of ID interventions are subject to robust verification. These shifts, DfID (2013a) argues, were a result of the governmental response to the global financial crises in 2008 and the subsequent state-led pursuit of austerity.

4 The satirical magazine *Private eye* first exposed the 2010 CDC scandal.
[<http://taxjustice.blogspot.co.uk/2010/09/private-eye-new-cdc-scandal.html>]

As anyone familiar with contemporary changes in the field of ID will know, questions of aid effectiveness, its measurement, and associated practices of aid distribution are not peculiar to the UK, but have become far more pervasive, globally, since 2008.⁵ Integral to such evaluation is the need to identify and measure the benefits of aid, and channel future aid into areas (both thematically and geographically) where it ostensibly yields the greatest benefits; or, from a critical perspective, where it can be most easily or conveniently measured. This emphasis has given rise to new organizational practices of evaluation which focus primarily on: (a) establishing causal links between multifarious social conditions and under-development; and (b) assessing development interventions and their impact, numerically. Such approaches to evaluation and its measurement are built around the conception of quantification as science, informed mainly by econometric approaches to development, and have replaced previously-favoured participatory approaches.⁶

In the following section we focus on the growing popularity of randomized control trials (RCTs) as the 'gold standard' of gathering scientific evidence for development evaluation.

Pioneered by the Jamal Abdul Lateef Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) at MIT in 2003, RCTs involve, briefly, the identification of randomly organized test and control (also called 'counterfactual') groups, comparison of the impact of an intervention ('treatment') on the groups, assessing its statistical significance, and measuring the scale of impact. RCTs are, its proponents suggest, the 'most rigorous' form of evaluation, 'produc[ing] the most accurate (i.e. unbiased) results' (PAL, nd). Central to the use of RCTs, and its rapid diffusion across the globe, are the associated practices of training and certification of professionals proficient in their use, and the diffusion of RCTs and their adoption by development organizations, mostly in the Global South, as part of development management.

RCTs have been subject to some criticism, particularly within Development Studies, on the basis of a number of serious shortfalls in their scientific methodology. These include: (a) the dominance of method over research questions (Shaffer, 2011); (b) difficulties in correctly predicting development trajectories to identify appropriate counterfactuals, and associated problems in

5 See, for example, USAID (2011), the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (nd) and the European Union (2013).

6 See, for example, Chambers (2007), Mukherjee (2004) on Participatory Rural Appraisal; and Chambers (2010), Gonsalves (2004) and Gonsalves et al. (2005) on Participatory Action Research.

the field (Woolcock, 2009); as well as (c) inherent philosophical limitations relating to causality within RCTs (Cartwright, 2012).

CMS, we argue, has much to offer by way of critical engagement with practices and expertise involved in development evaluation. CMS can interrogate the processes by which scientific evidence and knowledge are produced through RCTs and how they have come to be so powerful. CMS has made substantive critiques of evidence-based social practice (Learmonth, 2006, 2008; Learmonth and Harding, 2006), following which, RCTs can be understood as serving particular kinds of interests, namely, those of donors in the ‘Global North’. Further, drawing on discursive analysis of the polemics of evidence-based management (Morrell, 2008), we can interrogate the narrative devices employed in the popularization and legitimation of RCTs in ID.

In addition, given the rise of new forms of experts and professionals involved in RCTs, CMS could mobilize extant and extensive scholarship on professionalization. We have in mind studies that consider professions through the lens of institutionalized forms of control (Johnson, 1972), disciplinary mechanisms (Fournier, 1999), responsabilization (Grey, 1997), and performativity (Hodgson, 2005). Such a critical interrogation would, we argue, reveal the functioning of power within ID but, more importantly, also build on earlier critiques of professionalization in development found most notably, for example, in Escobar’s (1995) seminal anthropological work.

Encountering Development.

Finally, the adoption of any new practice of evaluation, we argue, reconfigures everyday practices of organizing and managing within development organizations working in the field, particularly NGOs. Accordingly, we would like to call particular attention in the CMS community to the need to interrogate emerging managerial and organizational practices in the sphere of ID as a result of this concerning turn toward scientific evaluation. We note that at present, there has been little research into the effects of evaluation and its associated practices—planning, reporting, accounting – within development organizations.⁷ Given that RCTs involve the production of numerical, ‘scientific’ data, it gives rise to new kinds of experts and expertise, and new forms of organizational practice in project planning, monitoring, reporting, accountability, etc., which are likely to become sites for further managerial innovation. There is an opportunity, we suggest, to build on Dar and Cooke’s (2008) signal work on development

7 Notable exceptions are Dar (2008b, 2014) and Kenny (2008, 2011).

management by identifying and problematizing incipient forms of organization, discipline and managerialism in ID.

Overall, we contend that the kind of scientific evaluation represented by RCTs should be understood within the wider cultural authority of science and the growing ‘trust in numbers’ (Porter, 1996). It is this deeper authorization of science, research, and the cult of experts within modernity that has led to the emergence and popularity of new kinds of knowledge organizations, such as J-PAL. A critical question that suggests itself is: in what ways do such knowledge organizations, and experts employed by them, reconfigure social relations within the aid industry, and without?

Projectification

Perhaps more than the other two empirical areas of investigation, projectification shows strong continuities in the post-2008 ID practice from earlier incarnations. And CMS’s critique of project management is, of course, an already well-established subfield of study (Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006; Hodgson, 2005) while the critical project management theme has also been explicitly explored within the development context (Dar, 2008a; Ika and Saint-Macary, 2012). However, CMS’s critique of projectification in ID remains relatively underdeveloped and thus constitutes a fertile area for further theoretical and empirical research. We argue that the projectification of ID, in an important sense, re-packages financialization and evaluation into what purport to be coherent managerialist programmes. It serves as a putatively unchallengeable application of value-free scientific methods of organizing and managing development projects. Therefore its relevance has increased with the above described intensification of financialization and evaluation since 2008.

Projectification of ID should be placed within a broader context of the generic projectification of society insofar as it marks an internationally expansionist effort to export ideologies and managerial methods. As noted in our opening literature review, Cooke’s (2003, 2004) elegant historical analysis reveals a genealogy of development management that tracks its origins in colonial administration. On the basis of Cooke’s work, one might argue that certain aspects of projectification derive from the historical effort to subjugate and control colonized populations. That said, the ideological roots of ‘the project’ lie within bureaucratic modes of modern organizing which, as Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) contend, have morphed into a kind of contemporary obsession – projectification – that has become one of the defining characteristics of social organization in what they term the post-1968 ‘new spirit of capitalism’.

The social logic of projectification within ID contexts is succinctly captured by Dar when she observes:

[D]evelopment is instilled with an overbearing sense of design. Development must be planned in order for it to be successful... In this way western traditions of managerialism are grafted on ideas of development; planning, bureaucracy, and systemization all become processes that share logics delineating from development and managerialism... Through an emphasis on design and control, development has become synonymous with linear-economic ways for steering such progress. (2008a: 99)

The means by which ID is organized entails the systematic disbursement and bureaucratic management of resources *assumed* by Western agencies/donors to be necessary for development to be accomplished. According to Fforde (2017), these resources take two forms: capital and technical assistance. Capital primarily consists of monetary investments needed for *material* inputs into the process (hospitals, schools, roads, irrigation systems, dams, agricultural machinery, etc.) while technical assistance refers to intangible *knowledge* needed to deploy and utilize these inputs. Like capital, as discussed in the financialization section above, technical assistance is a means by which Western assumptions and ideas are privileged over those of indigenous *subjects* of development. In this way, technical assistance becomes a conduit for the establishment and practice of power-knowledge (Foucault, 1980). It is the vehicle that enables agencies and donors—through the bureaucratization of knowledge—to generate what Escobar refers to as ‘the institutional production of social reality’ (Escobar, 1995: 108). As Dar contends, ‘[t]his textual and tangible form of expert knowledge undermines local forms of knowledge (that can be non-textual, non-standardized, and more culturally embedded) and therefore presents the expert or professional as the key agent who can ensure social and economic improvement’ (Dar, 2008a: 97).

International aid agencies and donors require projects to specify a cause-effect logic, on the assumption that these can be known *a priori*, that is, *before* a particular set of development interventions have taken place. In order to justify allocation and expenditure of taxpayers’ funds, INGOs and NGOs, university research teams or other would-be mediators of ID aid must complete detailed plans that stipulate in advance the aims, objectives and expected ‘impacts’ (socio-economic, health, wellbeing, ecological, scientific, capacity building, etc.) of a given project. A typical method by which these cause-effect pronouncements and predictions are articulated is the so-called Logical Frame Approach (LFA) or ‘logframe’, for short. This methodology is driven by a boldly performative and utilitarian ideology that, once again, links financialization and evaluation closely to projectification. This social logic is well illustrated, for example, in the recent statement of purpose in relation to aid interventions by the Australian

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade: ‘The fundamental principle underpinning the new performance framework is strengthening the link between performance and funding’ (Australian Government, 2014: 16).

Within the fields of Development Studies and Development Economics, Fforde (2009, 2013) has been one of the most strident critics of LFA. Mirroring Escobar’s (1995) critique, Fforde maintains that the logframe approach amounts to an ethnocentric assault on the diverse social epistemologies of indigenous populations subjected to development. At best it lacks cultural sensitivity and, at worst, emulsifies cultural difference while crassly prioritizing mono-cultural, Western-based, utilitarian means-ends assumptions. According to Fforde, the modern episteme that informs LFA – with its uncompromising insistence on predictive planning, close reporting and resource control – can have highly damaging effects on the welfare of the poor toward whom the aid is directed. It can also result in manifest inequities, as disproportionate amounts of funds go to maintaining aid agency bureaucracies and salaries for ‘international experts’ over in-country disbursements and on-the-ground spending. There is no little irony, therefore, in the following culturalist statement on the part of the Australian Government in relation to assessment of aid programmes when it asserts a desire, ‘to *drive a culture* that is sharply *focused on results, achieving better value-for-money*, and getting the best *development returns* on each aid dollar spent’ (Australian Government, 2014: 16, added emphases). Our point is that it is the very culture and ideology of inflexible performativity that lies at the root of desultory performance and outcomes of ID, whether viewed from the perspective of either the donor (in this case the Australian Government) or the intended indigenous recipient.

Empirical evidence of the failure of project management, such as the LFA, is offered by Ika and Saint-Macary (2012), whose studies show that planning and monitoring logics entail sacrificing ‘effectiveness’ in the name of putative ‘efficiency’. They point to the fact that project management privileges procedural implementation over the intended *purpose* of development intervention; something they liken to ‘a doctor performing a surgery that is deemed a technical “success” even if the patient dies’ (Ika and Saint-Macary, 2012: 428). Project management in ID, they conclude, ‘is the art of not violating procedures’ (2012: 429). Their critique of projectification focusses on the governmental and legal aspects of employing Western social logics in the setting up and running of aid and development interventions.

In practical terms, projectification leads to an unhealthy degree of short-termism and dependency on the part of governments who receive aid. Project envelopes are typically one-to-three years in duration, during which time managers of aid or

development investment strive to ‘get results on the ground’. All too often, however, the constraints of logframe’s cause-effect approaches mean that short-term outcomes or impacts are given higher priority than longer-term capacity building. At the end of the project, the capital resources and international expertise are withdrawn and the host country is to manage on its own or, as is perhaps more often the case, until the next project appears, bringing with it yet another set of short-term objectives and intended impacts.

If both the research evidence and experience of development workers speaks repeatedly to the impoverishment of ‘the project’ as a *modus operandi*, it invites the question as to why it has been – and remains – such an enduring form of organizing ID (Fforde, 2017). This is thus an area ripe for CMS critique. Critical research might range from macro-level studies of LFA and ‘project’ discourses more generally, through to close empirical examination of the practices (often dysfunctional and disingenuous) that projectification gives rise to in relation to ID.

Positionality in critical research on ID: Some reflections on methodology

Financialization, evaluation and projectification involve claims to knowledge premised in universal managerial abstractions that obscure the political dynamics of those engaged in ID, from its practitioners to its affected communities. Rooted in detailed, on-the-ground fieldwork, we contend that empirical research examining how contemporary and incipient managerialism works in these contexts could productively disrupt ID’s deeply problematic universalist claims, which to some extent, as outlined in our discussions above, have evolved in the post-2008 period toward new techniques and practices.

This programme would place a premium on refining our research practices to include both at depth consideration of positionality among the various subjects implicated in ID contexts, and our own positionality in the politics of research. In order to scrutinize what is at stake in any particular research project we suggest close attention, then, to: (a) how the researcher *gains access* to the field and other information bases; (b) the power dynamics between researcher and informants and/or various information bases *while field research is being conducted*; and (c) the intended audience(s) for, and the stylistic quality of ‘texts’ *representing the research*. While we argue that one’s positionality as a researcher always deserves close and explicit scrutiny, we note, in particular, the rich analytical and, indeed, political seam that might be tapped among current or former ‘development insiders’, should they be inclined to cast a bold eye on their own work. Below we will discuss how intimate proximity and deep personal involvement with projects

afforded to ID professionals – consultants, experts, advisors, etc. – might hinder their ability to produce balanced analyses. Nonetheless, we applaud the opportunity that some ID professionals have taken in increasingly interrogating their own ‘locations’ and so turn their own experience into the basis for substantive critique of the contemporary world of development.⁸

To date, in a *de facto* trans-disciplinary effort, a few CMS scholars have drawn on Socio-cultural Anthropology, Subaltern Studies and Participatory Action Research (PAR) to operationalize *reflective positionality*. Relying on Geertz (1973), Kenny’s (2008) participant-observation within a UK-based aid organisation allows her to question her role as a ‘neutral observer’, a finding that assists in analytically problematizing the ‘western-centric’, ‘power-laden’ positionality of her research subjects. Meanwhile, building on Banerjee and Linstead (2004), Dar (2014) suggests that ethnographic engagements complicate and resist uniform and clear accounts of knowledge. Based on four months of fieldwork, conducted with UK donor-endorsed authority at an NGO working with Indian tribal groups, Dar (2014: 137) describes her own multiple positionality – as ‘a western academic, a Hindu-Brahmin, a woman, a native English speaker and a Hindi speaker’ – as ‘fragments of myself’. This discovery, arising from her ethnographic method, is in turn extended to deliver ‘new knowledge...[that is] unequal, representing partial understandings of [each] participant, rather than any kind of rationalized truth’ (Dar, 2014: 137). Elsewhere, Gilmore and Kenny (2015) seek to avoid the excessive reflexivity that often appears in such self-conscious research processes, through recourse to feminist anthropological perspectives that may encourage shared reflection between researchers and research participants, and, so, highlight the analytic power of colliding worlds: in this case of ID practice and research. Meanwhile, inspired by critique of ‘action research’ as it was originally conceived (Cooke, 2008), for Frenzel and Sullivan (2009) and Frenzel et al. (2011), *co-research* is employed as a safeguard for avoiding complicity in the perpetuation of power-knowledge regimes. Here, in order to ensure autonomy and control over research, PAR participants define the purpose of research and commission the researcher to support them.

8 Trained as an anthropologist, Mosse worked for many years on projects in India for the UK’s Department for International Development (DfID). He later asked and received permission from his former DfID colleagues (and *erstwhile* friends) to use information from projects they had worked on together for his academic work. However, when he moved to publish, his former colleagues objected stridently to his depictions of the *de facto* politics of development projects and what they perceived as Mosse’s critique of their own roles, as professionals, in development work. Indeed, they tried, unsuccessfully, to have Mosse’s work suppressed (See Mosse, 2005, 2011; Mosse and Lewis, 2005, 2006). Other work by development practitioners *cum* academics, and academics *cum* development practitioners, includes Eyben (2014), and Case, et al. (2017).

As suggested in several of the examples above, positionality has been closely addressed within Socio-cultural Anthropology: indeed, it effectively drives the discipline's epistemological concerns. Therefore, to better appreciate why intimately engaging with positionality is relevant to CMS scholarship – and in order to encourage trans-disciplinarity – below we consider problems of positionality as they have developed within Anthropology: a discipline where the core rationale of 'encountering the other' relates so closely to the forms of empirical research and the unmasking of 'expert-led' practices that we have in mind for CMS's engagement with ID.

When first established formally in Western academia in the mid-late 19th century, Anthropology explicitly pursued comparisons between anthropologists' own (Western/Christian/'developed'/'complex'/'civilized') societies and radically-different people's variously described as 'savage', 'simple', 'tribal' or 'traditional' (Stocking, 1987). Notably these peoples are, for the most part, the core targets of current ID interventions, if now called 'Southern', 'excluded', 'less developed' or 'developing'. In this context, early Anthropology, directly aligned as it was with colonialism, soon drew anthropologists' attentions to the unfortunate *political* positionality of their work (Boas, 1887a, 1887b; Stocking, 1974), a concern that has continued (Rosaldo, 1989).

Since the early 20th century, engaging positionality as a source of *knowledge production* has been grounded methodologically in the direct empirical experience of anthropologists with their subjects (Malinowski, 1922). 'Participant-observation' within a subject/host community is meant to be long term: generally at least a year, or a complete annual cycle. While adjusted according to the particular circumstances of fieldwork, this methodological regime remains the 'ideal type' today. Therefore, and consistent with the early tradition, attention to 'difference' and, so, at least implicitly, *comparison* has remained Anthropology's key source for generating analysis and theory. However, unlike the largely 'armchair' anthropology of the 19th century, comparative knowledge was now to be accumulated through personal experience, i.e., 'participant-observation', with anthropologists sharing community directly with their subjects: dependent upon them for their research needs and, very often, their practical and emotional wellbeing. Making use of such methods, detailed fieldwork studies from around the world generated an explosion of information about, and appreciation of, the extraordinary diversity of human communities. With returning anthropologists often finding their home societies, usually Western, hardly superior, their 'cultural relativism' (Boas, 1887a, 1887b; Stocking, 1974) was deeply felt.

Historically, overarching unequal geopolitical relations between nation states allowed (usually-Western-based) anthropologists non-reciprocal access to communities in the 'Global South', as it still does. However, as outlined above, due to fieldwork experience and methodology, from the early 20th century anthropological *analysis* split off from colonialism's universalist vantage point (Stocking, 1974). Rather, '...anthropology...stood for the refusal to accept th[e] conventional perception of homogenization toward a dominant Western model' (Marcus and Fischer, 1986: 1). In this, Anthropology's intellectual trajectory stands in radical contrast to development management which, as we have seen in our outline of CMS's critique, traces an unbroken line across time from its precursors in colonial administration to the present (Cooke, 2003, 2004).

As a result of the lengthy historical and methodological trajectory outlined above, in Anthropology today problems of 'political' and 'interpersonal' positionality have come together into one epistemological package, both intellectually and emotionally. This includes a sustained effort from the 1980s - the so-called 'crisis of representation' (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Marcus and Fischer, 1986) - to irrigate the wound of structural dominance, commonly articulated as 'colonial guilt' (Rosaldo, 1989), in the context of the general phenomenological critique of social science as 'science'. Meanwhile the Anthropology community, as elsewhere in academia, has become increasingly diverse in terms of gender and national origin: women and non-Western/Subaltern scholars are major intellectual figures. Thus, engaging fully with overarching structural politics and multiply-positioned personal and emotional relations between themselves and their subjects, anthropologists now keenly interrogate: (a) the power relations allowing their projects to go forward, e.g., access and funding; (b) how power affects their relations with informants in the field; as well as (c) the politics of the 'textual' representations of their work for the academy, and elsewhere.

While coping seriously with positionality, Anthropology has of course moved with the times and in relation to the expansion of new areas of interest, including ID itself. Of particular relevance here, starting in the late 20th century, the radical surge in communications technology has precipitated new global forms of exchange and the dispersal of persons, objects, information, organizations and space itself in ways entirely unfamiliar. These issues are foundational to understanding ID or, more precisely, the structure and politics of the institutions driving ID and, in turn, the day to day conditions of those impacted by it. While not yet applied at depth in Anthropology to ID, with varying degrees of success 'multi-sited' fieldwork (Marcus, 1995) as well as following 'the social life of things' (Appadurai, 1986) - and ideas, for that matter - have arisen as methodological and conceptual responses to global connectivity in the context of physical dispersal. Others have argued that these emergent, technologically-

implicated phenomena are most effectively engaged via traditional, participant-observer, ethnographic field methods, especially if assisted by theory of sufficient sophistication – for example, a focus on ‘networks’ of actors⁹ – to allow for consideration of a community’s varied connections across time and space (Sedgwick, 2007).¹⁰

Meanwhile, how the intimacies of fieldwork should inform analytic work remains dynamic and controversial in Anthropology (Sedgwick, 2017). ‘Auto-ethnography’ treats researchers’ life experiences as the core object of study (Rabinow, 1977; Ryang, 2008). ‘Para-ethnography’ dignifies *informants’* intuitive, informal, interpersonally-based knowledge – claimed, rather pompously, as typical of anthropologists’ insights – as a source of analysis (Holmes and Marcus, 2006); while elsewhere, para-ethnography encourages the co-production of ‘complicit’ knowledge about the *outside world* via informants’ substantive interactions with anthropologists themselves (Marcus, 1997). Conceptually, such ‘collaborative’ interactions with subjects may seem attractive to researchers of ID, and in the opening of this section we outlined efforts by current or former development practitioners to undertake academic research. However, explicit examination of the analytical implications of the positionalities entailed in those relations would be critical here, for the power of engaging substantively with ‘difference’, Anthropology’s core strength, is often collapsed. Indeed, such studies often generate the lightweight analysis that troubles ‘anthropology-at-home’. Development practitioners need to be aware of the pitfalls of auto-ethnographic work.

We feel that in all stages of their research projects, CMS scholars taking on ID from whatever angle would do well to self-consciously integrate the problems of methodology and epistemology that we have outlined: reflecting on the vicissitudes of political and personal engagement through self-awareness and

9 Our discussion of Evaluation specifically comments on the potential of CMS in engaging ID through the techniques of Science and Technology Studies, including actor-network theory.

10 Expanding on CMS’s potential embrace of ID through methodological engagement with positionality, it is worthwhile noting that in Development Studies itself there is a stimulating and instructive tension between those who ‘study’ development, as a subject of research, and those training themselves for careers as development ‘practitioners’. Across the board, the latter have the very best of intentions and are aware (and critical) of the neo-colonial taint of ‘aid’ and ‘assistance’. Indeed, and especially in the context of anthropological training in development, there has been a rich convergence of interests driven by Anthropology’s long-term ideological, i.e., (neo-) colonial, concerns with the moral conundrums of doing and accounting for fieldwork. An instructive example is Mosse’s extended engagement with development both as a practitioner and anthropological analyst, discussed above.

explicit discussion of the problems of positionality. Such a disposition would significantly enhance the critical demystification of the scientific social logics and, specifically in relation to the areas we feel need particular exposure, the 'expert' fetishism of financialization, evaluation and projectification. It would serve to assist with theoretical, methodological and empirical de-naturalization of implicit organizational assumptions and practices in the ID domain.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have presented what we think are three crucial areas for critical research in ID. They have certain continuities with prior forms of modernization, with which the CMS community has already engaged, but also mark acceleration and/or profound shifts which merit further scrutiny from the CMS community. In light of the increasing financialization of ID, we argue that a new institutional landscape is emerging that needs the attention of critical scholars. In the area of ID evaluation, we have outlined three areas that CMS could engage substantively: the rise of professionals and professionalization, the production of scientific knowledge in ID through RCTs, and incipient forms of organizing and managerialism that result from scientific evaluation practices. Likewise, in the area of projectification, we have highlighted the potential of CMS to examine macro-level studies of 'project' discourses as well as the close empirical exposure of the questionable practices that projectification gives rise to in relation to ID; the point being to question the forcing, in the name of efficiency and rationality, of complex social processes into specific project-based designs. Projectification thus complements financialization and evaluation in inscribing such notions as 'value for money', 'generalizability' and 'reliability' into performative managerial practices and knowledge regimes.

As bases for critique, financialization, evaluation and projectification are interrelated and can be applied to variegated forms of managerialist expansion. Packaged together, they constitute an *organizational* triumvirate which assists in explaining and understanding how the principles of neoliberalism (Harvey, 2007) are implemented in development contexts. In other words, they constitute the managerial and organizational *rules of play* that apply in multiple international settings in which modernization plans and marketization are being pursued in the name of development. There has been, we would argue, an intensification in each of these areas following the global financial crisis in 2008; and a corresponding reconfiguration of ID that warrants critical attention.

We believe that, today, a significant form of the Global North's *de facto* dominance over the Global South is crystalized in ID's universalist

managerialism, while such forms are also mirrored in internal, domestic inequalities within nations in both the South and the North. Driven by a methodology of reflective positionality, the intent of our effort is to expose both the social logics and on-the-ground conditions of the work of ID as unfolding in varied, historically-determined and culturally specific contexts. We believe that revealing the tensions between real world cases of such work as it actually intersects with performative financialization, evaluation and projectification will expose these forms of managerialist universalism as an ideological sham; a mystification that disguises the harsh work of power relations in a problematically unequal world.

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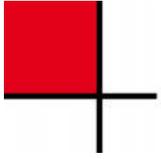
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Rational choice and neoliberal theories of the intellectual commons: A critical analysis

Antonios Broumas

abstract

Over the past twenty years theorizing about the intellectual commons has undeniably become a popular activity not only among scholars that deal with the dialectics between information/communication technologies and society but also among the wider scientific community. Rational choice and neoliberal theories of the intellectual commons are reconceptualizations of the social intellect as the productive force of our intellectual commonwealth, albeit in a relation of complementarity or subsumption with capital. As emerging theoretical paradigms, both of these theoretical trends contribute to a strong theory of the intellectual commons, which eventually comes in contrast with the dominant notions of the social intellect that restrictively advocate the establishment of private monopolies over intellectual works. By deciphering contemporary shifts and dynamics in the ways we produce and distribute information, knowledge and culture, a strong theory of the intellectual commons is thus better placed to inspire and orientate social movements, recast agendas of policy-making and construct alternative narratives to existing socio-legal arrangements, which are capable of accommodating the potential of the intellectual commons.

Introduction

The intellectual commons are social practices of pooling together and managing in common intangible resources produced by sharing and collaboration within and among productive communities. At the same time, practices of commoning within the intellectual commons are not only restricted to the reproduction of resources, but rather constitute in their totality forms of life in common, i.e. practices which constantly reproduce the communal relations upon which the

productive process is based. From such a processual ontological perspective¹, intellectual commons are viewed to be related primarily to intellectual, less than manual, work in terms of the production, distribution and consumption of information, communication, knowledge and culture. Since any productive intellectual activity is inevitably based to material objects of production, intellectual commons normally involve the pooling in common of both tangible and intangible resources.

The present endeavour offers a critical analysis of rational choice and neoliberal theories of the intellectual commons. The foregoing theoretical approaches, along with social democratic and critical perspectives², are considered to constitute the constellation of the diverse theories of the intellectual commons. The article focuses on the epistemological foundations, on the analytical tools in regard to social actors, social structures and the dynamics between them, on the normative criteria and, finally, on the perspectives on social change of these two theoretical trends. Hence, these theoretical families are classified according to their diverging perspectives regarding, on the one hand, the dialectical relation between the intellectual commons and capital and, on the other hand, the potential of the commons in general for emancipatory social change. In this light, rational choice theories offer a perspective of complementarity between commons and capital. On the other hand, neoliberal theories elaborate on the profit-maximising opportunities of the intellectual commons and further highlight their capacities of acting as fix to capital circulation / accumulation in intellectual property-enabled commodity markets. As a result, both of these theoretical approaches tend to reduce the potential of the intellectual commons to the improvement of the dominant capital-based mode of social reproduction, thus concealing their more radical potentialities towards commons-based societies.

1 Contrary to positivist resource-based definitions, which run the danger of reifying the commons and downgrading their social dimension, the processual approach followed in this article conceives of the commons in general and the intellectual commons in particular as sets of iterative social practices, i.e. communal institutions, and seeks out the base of their existence in productive human activity.

2 Social democratic and critical theories of the intellectual commons are examined in detail elsewhere (Broumas, 2017).

Rational choice theories of the intellectual commons: The commons as patch to Capital

Main question and methodology

Rational choice theories of the intellectual commons deal with the ways that individuals come together, establish communities and institute rules for the sustenance of intellectual resources or for the pursuit of desired outcomes on the basis of sharing and equality (Ostrom, 1998; Hess and Ostrom, 2007b: 42). In this light, rational choice theorists also examine how stakeholders in an interdependent situation self-organise in order to avoid social-dilemma situations within intellectual commons' communities, such as phenomena of free-riding, shirking or opportunistic behaviour (Ostrom, 1990: 29). Ultimately, they search for the reasons that lead to the success or failure of resource production / management systems within the sphere of the intellectual commons in order to synthesise appropriate frameworks which will ensure long-term viability (Frischmann, Madison and Strandburg, 2014: 11). Even though they belong to the field of collective action theory, in contrast to other traditions in the field, rational choice theories pay tribute to the previously neglected social phenomena of the commons as institutional sets for the governance of resources that are distinct from market- or state- based institutions (Ostrom, 1990: 1, 40-1).

In relation to methodology, rational choice theorists emphasise on the clarity and precision of definitions, concepts and arguments used, whereas they establish connections between them through rules of formal logic (Russell, 1945: 834). Furthermore, they tend to evaluate the intellectual commons according to consequential criteria, focusing on the degree of efficiency that the institutions of the intellectual commons exhibit in regard to the provision of positive outcomes for general social utility (Ostrom, 1990: 193, 195-205, Frischmann, Madison and Strandburg, 2014: 36-7). In terms of agency, rational choice theorists commence from a rational individualistic conception of human actors. From an epistemological perspective, rational choice institutionalism is a philosophical endeavour to render the basic tenets of methodological individualism compatible with the main empirical findings of institutional analysis and design. Hence, even though they commence from the rational individualistic conception of agency, rational choice theorists consider individuals as having complex motivations, which cannot be reduced to monetary incentives, whereas their productive activity is expected to be shaped both by economic and social factors (Ostrom, 1990: 183). Within this framework of analysis, market relations are conceived as being embedded in and empowered by interpersonal networks of loyalty and mutual recognition (Granovetter, 1992: 60). Rational choice theorists thus arrive at the conclusion that innovators are essentially placed in

interdependent situations, in which they are able to develop inclinations to reciprocity through the use of reason, as long as they have faith that their contribution will be reciprocated (Benkler, 2002: 369)³. In this context, homo reciprocans is considered as being the productive unit of the commons, who, while still serving her own interests, chooses to cooperate with the other members of the community in order to collectively pursue common long-term interests (De Moor, 2013: 94). Hence, social structures emerge from the bottom-up in the form of patterns of interactions, often crystallised in social norms.

Point of entry: Refuting Hardin's theory of the tragedy of the commons

For rational choice theories the starting point of theorising the commons is the refutation of Hardin's 'tragedy of the commons' theory. In the context of natural common pool resources Elinor Ostrom has proven that Hardin's tragedy is neither inevitable nor necessary and that the leviathan of the state or an all-encompassing application of the institution of private property are not the only alternatives available for the organisation of collective action (Ostrom, 1990: 8-20). Ostrom supports her devastating critique of the tragedy of the commons theory with concrete historical and empirical research, which shows that human communities have the capacity to resolve social dilemmas through self-organisation beyond the state and the market. This communal mode of resource production and management is the commons. Even though Ostrom accepts that common property may face the failure of overharvesting (Ostrom, 2010), she highlights that Hardin's narrative applies to specific social arrangements, in which: (a) common pool resources are openly accessible rather than managed; (b) stakeholders share little or no communication, and (c) stakeholders act only in their immediate self-interest and are unable to coordinate their behaviour in order to derive joint benefits (Hess and Ostrom, 2007a: 11).

Due to the fact that they are naturally non-rivalrous and non-subtractable, overharvesting and crowding effects in relation to intellectual resources cannot apply at the stage of their consumption (Ostrom, 1990: 32). On the contrary, the social utility of intellectual resources increases the more they are shared. In comparing the overgrazing of open access pastures with software code, Eric Raymond observes that grazing does not reduce the availability of code, rather, he concludes, 'the grass grows taller when it's grazed on' (Raymond, 1999: 151).

³ Nevertheless, Benkler distances himself from the rational choice framework on the grounds that it fails to 'give a complete answer to the sustainability of motivation and organization for the truly open, large-scale nonproprietary peer production projects' (Benkler 2002: 378).

Nonetheless, open access intellectual commons run the danger of a tragedy of under-production, when individuals abstain from production, because they expect that the outcome of their work will be used by free riders (Lemley, 2005: 1037-8), enclosed and commodified by market players (Hess and Ostrom, 2007a: 5), or of a tragic stalemate, when they delay putting their creativity / inventiveness at work, waiting for other users to invest first (Suber, 2007: 183), or they may lack resources of time, skills or money to contribute on a voluntary basis (Fuster Morell, 2014: 285). Apart from lack of provision of the resource itself, similar social dilemmas may also arise in relation to the supply of the necessary infrastructure and effort for its production, preservation or aggregation, such as in the case of digital libraries or repositories (Hess and Ostrom, 2007b: 48).

The institutional analysis and development framework

Rational choice theories have initially been developed by Ostrom and her collaborators for the scientific analysis of the natural commons. These theories have been consolidated in a detailed theoretical framework, termed as Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD). The method of research followed by IAD scholars progressively escalates from the thorough analysis of empirical phenomena to clear-cut theoretical conceptions about their qualities and causal interrelations. In particular, as a first step, the resource characteristics, community attributes and communal rules of the commons under investigation are examined. Next, the focus of analysis shifts to the action arena of the commons, along with its actors and action situations. Then, patterns of interaction among actors and the outcomes of commoning are elicited. Finally, abstract evaluative criteria are extracted in order to draw more general conclusions about the elements that contribute to the equity, efficiency and sustainability of commons' institutions (Hess and Ostrom, 2007a: 6).

In relation to the natural commons, Elinor Ostrom has distilled eight design principles as evaluative criteria for robust, long enduring, common-pool resource institutions on the basis of a large set of empirical studies (Ostrom, 1990: 90–102):

1. Clearly defined boundaries in place.
2. Rules in use, well matched to local needs and conditions.
3. Participation of individuals affected by rules in the modification of these rules.

4. Respect of the right of community members to devise their own rules by external authorities.
5. A system for self-monitoring members' behavior in place.
6. A graduated system of sanctions in force.
7. Access of community members to low-cost conflict-resolution mechanisms.
8. Nested enterprises, i.e. appropriation, provision, monitoring, enforcement, conflict resolution, and governance activities organised in a nested structure with multiple layers of activities.

In the process of bringing intellectual commons under the lens of the IAD framework, rational choice theorists commence their argumentation by establishing an analogy between the natural environment and the public domain (Boyle, 1997; 2008). According to this analogy, just as ecosystems are shared resources necessary for our sustenance and well-being, intellectual resources in the public domain constitute our commonwealth and the basis for our future cultural and scientific advancement. Yet, unlike ecosystems, which are given by nature, intellectual commons are created from scratch. Hence, social arrangements within the intellectual commons are not only dedicated to the 'preservation' of the resource through egalitarian sharing mechanisms but also purport to establish the appropriate social terrain for its sustainable [re]production (Frischmann, Madison and Strandburg, 2014: 16).

Core concepts

Intellectual resources are as a rule non-rivalrous and non-excludable, feature zero marginal costs of sharing and bear a cumulative and aggregate capacity. Yet, intellectual resources are not produced out of thin air. Depending on the type of the resource, their production presupposes the existence of an appropriate material infrastructure, such as construction facilities, electronic communication networks and micro-electronics based equipment in the case of the digital commons (Hess and Ostrom, 2007b: 47). The ownership status and mode of governance of these secondary material resources often heavily influences the architecture of the intellectual commons as a whole (Fuster Morell, 2014: 285). For instance, free software developers primarily produce code but also establish repositories for such code, meet at hackerspaces, organise linux install fests and, in general, exchange views, ideas and values through online forums and bulletin boards, which all together form the specific hacker culture of each free software community.

Intellectual commons are also formulated around communities of commoners, who contribute to, use and manage the resource, govern its infrastructure and its productive process. Especially in contemporary digital communication networks, communities of the intellectual commons are manifested in various productive activities, such as open hardware, open standards, free software, wikis, open scientific publishing, openly accessible user generated content, online content licensed under creative commons licenses, collaborative media, voluntary crowdsourcing, political mobilization through electronic networks and hacktivism, internet cultures, and memes. These new intellectual commons communities have reinforced cultural and techno-scientific commons which amass the foundations of our civilization, such as language, collective history, ideas, beliefs, customs, traditions, folk art, games, shared symbols, social systems of care, knowledge in the public domain and all our past scientific and technological advancements.

The main building blocks of these communities are on the one hand a commonality between their members, which relates either to their cultural or scientific interests or their expertise (Frischmann, Madison and Strandburg, 2014: 16), and, on the other hand, the spur to contribute to a commonly shared goal of creative / innovative content. The capacity of the producer, consumer and/or decision-maker may be either dispersed to all the members of the community or concentrated to distinct groups within the community (Hess and Ostrom, 2007: 48). Consumers in their own capacity play a significantly less important role than producers in the realm of the intellectual commons and normally have limited or no direct rights in the decision-making mechanisms of the community. Alternatively, decision-makers come as a rule from the group of producers, without meaning that these two groups necessarily coincide. Finally, participation in intellectual commons' communities is contributed on a voluntary basis. This characteristic may result in hierarchical relations between resource-poor and resource-rich participants or even the de facto exclusion of the former from the community (Fuster Morell, 2014: 286).

Governance arrangements within the intellectual commons are imprinted on the applicable rules-in-use of the community. Rules-in-use are conceived as shared normative understandings between commoners, which shape the behaviour of the latter in the action arena and have the capacity to produce specific patterns of interaction and outcomes through monitoring and sanctioning mechanisms in cases of noncompliance (Crawford and Ostrom, 2005). Depending on their importance and hierarchical relation with each other, rules-in-use are categorised in three levels of regulation: operational [day-to-day level], collective choice [policy level] and constitutional [allocation of power level] (Hess and Ostrom, 2007b: 49). Rational choice theorists generally tend to apply Ostrom's eight design

factors in order to evaluate the robustness of different cases of intellectual commons (Fuster Morell, 2010; Frischmann, Schweik and English 2012). In relation to the first of these factors, i.e. boundary setting rules, it has been persuasively argued that boundaries in the information environment are necessarily social and cultural, rather than spatial, constructs (Madison, 2003; Ostrom, 2003: 132-134). On the one hand, access to common-pool-produced intellectual resources is regulated by communal norms or legal rules or a combination of the two. Copyleft licensing is the most common example of such types of rules. On the other hand, communally enacted licenses also determine the boundaries of the community, as assent to them constitutes the main prerequisite for participation (Frischmann, Madison and Strandburg, 2014: 34). Accordingly, other design factors, such as participatory decision-making arrangements, monitoring mechanisms, conflict resolution processes and nestled enterprises, are found in many robust, long-enduring intellectual commons' communities, showing that the central suppositions of the IAD framework are also applicable to a certain extent to the realm of creativity and innovation (Madison, Frischmann and Strandburg, 2010).

Rules-in-use are in dialectical relationship with action arenas, as both interrelate, act and counter-act, and, eventually, shape one another. Incentives of participants in action situations are particularly important for the determination of patterns of interaction (Hess and Ostrom, 2007b: 54). Outcomes of commons-based peer production are proposed to be classified according to the binary logic of enclosure / access to produced resources (Hess and Ostrom, 2007b: 58). Finally, Hess and Ostrom, suggest the following criteria for the evaluation of registered outcomes, which apparently enrich the strictly consequentialist cost / benefit approach of the IAD framework with deontological evaluations of the common good (Hess and Ostrom, 2007b: 62):

- (1) increase of scientific knowledge,
- (2) sustainability and preservation of resources,
- (3) participation standards,
- (4) economic efficiency,
- (5) equity through fiscal equivalence, and
- (6) redistributive equity.

The relation with commodity markets

Proponents of rational choice theories presuppose or imply a relationship of co-existence between the non-market commons-based peer production and commodity markets, thus refraining from a critical analysis of their interrelations and dynamics (Lessig, 2002: 115-6). According to this view, although capitalist markets have out-competed other systems of resource management in most sectors of social activity, intellectual resources have certain properties which may render them in certain cases more apt to be governed as commons (Benkler, 2011: 152-3). In the words of Lawrence Lessig,

[w]hile some resources must be controlled, others can be provided much more freely. The difference is in the nature of the resource, and therefore in the nature of how the resource is supplied. (Lessig, 2002: 93-4)

In fact, co-existence between the sphere of the intellectual commons and the domain of commodity markets is not only possible but also mutually beneficial. As David Bollier claims,

the market and the commons interpenetrate each other, yin/yang style. Each ‘adds value’ to the other in synergistic ways. (Bollier, 2008: 251)

Critical evaluation: The intellectual commons as patch to Capital

Epistemology	Agency	Structure	Internal Dynamics	External Dynamics	Normative Criteria	Social Change
Rational Choice Institutionalism	Individual(s) in Interdependent Relations	Patterns of Interactions	Bottom-Up Emergence	n/a	Consequential	The Commons as Patch to Capital

Table 1: The characteristics of neoliberal theories of the intellectual commons

The main argument of rational choice theorists is the thesis that intellectual commons are relevant today as objects of research, because they significantly contribute under certain conditions of institutional efficiency to the advancement of art and science and should, therefore, be utilised by policy-makers as a complement to state and/or market regulation of intellectual production, distribution and consumption.

In regard to epistemology, the quest for objective and value-free knowledge through inductive methods of research, which characterises rational choice theories, inevitably bears the shortcomings of positivism. As far as the goal of objectivity is concerned, observations of the empirical reality of the intellectual commons are fatally theory-laden and, as a result, framed from the given social

context, in terms of both the socially pre-constructed meanings of the semantics used to describe them and the theoretical presuppositions and motivations of the observer. As far as the ideology of value-free science is concerned, the choices of rational choice theorists regarding the objects of their analysis, their core elements and interrelations and, finally, the stated goals of their theoretical endeavours, are also laden with specific values that correspond to or contend with dominant or subversive value systems in our societies. Finally, the persistence on an analysis of the intellectual commons as precisely defined, with clear-cut boundaries, limited to resource management, internally consistent, reduced to their components and interconnected with iron causal laws may end up with a static and fragmentary perception of reality, subjugated to the incapacity of grasping processes of becoming. As a result, the theoretical contribution of rational choice theories is eventually limited to the examination of particular cases of intellectual commons' communities, thus failing to place the social phenomenon of the intellectual commons as a whole within social tendencies, contradictions and antagonisms and to arrive in conclusions relevant to their position in the social totality.

In terms of the internal dynamics of the intellectual commons, rational choice theorists fail to recognise that the public goods' character of intellectual resources is not only based on their intangible traits but is also in part socially determined, being nowadays more and more under pressure by legal and technological enclosures. Accordingly, human agency within the rational choice framework remains inescapably confined to a methodological individualism, which conceives individuals as engaging with the intellectual commons in order to maximise their personal benefits (Bardhan and Isha, 2006: 655, 660-1; Macey, 2010: 763). Hence, rational choice scholars inevitably conceive commoners primarily as extractors of resource units or free-riders of the efforts of others, whereas competition is again elevated at central stage. In corollary, the IAD framework fails to fully grasp the shared ethics, values, goals, narratives and meanings, which hold communities of the intellectual commons together, tending to reduce them to their functionalist, procedural and consequential aspects (Bailey, 2013: 109). The institutional forms of the commons are mainly conceived by rational choice theorists as shaping behavioral patterns more by putting fetters on and less by empowering social action and enabling sharing and collaboration.

Yet, their main shortcoming is that rational choice theories diminish the interrelation of the intellectual commons with capital to a simplistic conception of either co-existence or complementarity. By approaching the intellectual commons from a utilitarian perspective, such theorists evaluate them in comparison to state intervention or intellectual property-enabled markets solely

according to the criterion of utility maximisation (Wright, 2008: 236). Hence, intellectual commons are held as more effective modes of organisation in social contexts where they out-compete the state or the market. In this theoretical exercise asymmetries of power between the dominant capitalist mode of intellectual production / distribution / consumption and the insurgent sphere of the intellectual commons are not taken into account. In addition, the impact of commodification over commons-based peer production and the public domain is generally neglected in favour of a more conciliatory ideological conception of society free from contradictions and antagonisms (De Angelis and Harvie, 2014: 287).

Most important, the utilitarian perspective of rational choice theories falls prey to the dominant perspective over the common good, which inextricably connects the maximisation of social utility with the proliferation of private property, capitalist markets and private monetary incentives. Inevitably, values proliferating within and through the sphere of the intellectual commons that are found at the margins of the current state of social reproduction, such as access, sharing, collaboration, self-government, individual and collective empowerment, will tend to be ranked lower in the utilitarian calculus of rational choice theories and their positive social outcomes will tend to be downgraded in comparison to dominant conceptions of the common good.

Rational choice theories provide a theoretical framework for the evaluation of the intellectual commons in relation to their potential for social change, which is ahistorical by design and, therefore, limits the latter in a complementary position to intellectual property-enabled markets. In accordance to their utilitarian epistemological choices, the underlying rationale behind the approach of rational choice theories is that intellectual commons are appropriate in cases where state or market-based modes of social organisation encounter failures. Nevertheless, such complementarity is ostensible. Opposing processes of value circulation and value accumulation between capital and the intellectual commons make any interrelation between the two inherently contentious. Within the context of the dominance of the capitalist mode of intellectual production / distribution / consumption and the vast asymmetries of power this dominance entails, intellectual commons are inevitably plagued by crises of value and unsustainability (Bauwens and Niaros, 2017). Hence, in actuality, this supposed complementarity is translated as a commons' patch to failures of capital, an argument in favour of commons-oriented practices as long as they remain at the margins of contemporary social reproduction.

Neoliberal theories of the intellectual commons: The commons as fix to Capital

Main question and methodology

Neoliberal theories of the intellectual commons have as their foundation the orthodoxy that markets are the most appropriate mechanisms to maximise net social benefits (Mankiw, 2014: 150-1). From this perspective, neoliberal theorists examine the ways in which the intellectual commons are accommodated by the capitalist mode of intellectual production, distribution and consumption, with the aim to provide proposals that best serve market needs. Along these lines, they engage into an analysis of the alternative organisational patterns and value systems of the intellectual commons and research their potential for creativity and innovation in order to provide useful tools for their monetisation. Finally, they search for appropriate restructuring policies for business patterns, capitalist markets and for-profit corporations, which will efficiently exploit this potential. In relation to methodology, neoliberal theories are strongly inclined to evaluate the intellectual commons according either to a pragmatic consequentialism or an openly utilitarian cost / benefit analysis in strong connection with the promotion of markets and the accumulation of capital.

The philosophical anthropology of neoliberal theories generally implies a conception of commoners that is methodologically individualistic (MacPherson, 1964, 1973). In relation to social structures, neoliberal theorists opt for a reductionist methodology. According to this perspective, explanations about the intellectual commons are reduced to explanations in terms of facts about the individuals composing them (Bentham, 1948: 126; Mill, 1858: 550; Hayek, 1948: 6; Hayek, 1955: 37-8; Popper, 1961: 135). Social order emerges in spontaneous form from the bottom-up through the autonomous and decentralised matching of their intentions and expectations (Hayek, 2013: 34-52). The most efficient mechanism of such a spontaneous order of allocating resources is the invisible hand of the free and competitive commodity market (Stiglitz, 1991: 1). Within markets the pursuit of individual private interests leads to greater wealth for all and a more effective distribution of labour (Botsman and Rogers, 2010: 41).

Projecting this methodology to the realm of the intellectual commons, neoliberal theorists consider the ensemble of social relations within the communities of the intellectual commons as collections of individuals who exercise their freedom of creativity and innovation according to their own preferences and without external interference. In the process of commons-based peer production commoners are pooling together their private property rights over their individual intellectual works through private contracts in order to extract pleasure or other forms of

personal utility (Benkler, 2010: 230). As a result, neoliberal thinkers tend to conceive the structures of the intellectual commons as markets, wherein individuals meet and earn social capital and/or personal pleasure in exchange of putting their skills to work for a mutually agreed cause (Raymond, 1999).

Point of entry: The tragedy of the commons

For neoliberal thinkers the point of reference for engaging with the intellectual commons is the tragedy of the commons theory. This theoretical framework commences from the presupposition of neoclassical economics that individuals are relentless appropriators with no capacities for coordination to achieve anything but short-term goals. In the absence or failure of human capacity to coordinate in the long term, the commodity market emerges as the necessary coordinating mechanism external to any collections of individuals (Buchanan and Yoon, 2000: 3).

Already as far back as ancient Greece, Aristotle framed the commonsensical view behind the tragedy of the commons theory by pointing out that '[w]hat is common to the greatest number has the least care bestowed upon it. Everyone thinks chiefly of his own, hardly at all of the common interest' (Aristotle, 1966: 33). In modernity, the tragedy of the commons returns in the pamphlet of political economist William Forster Lloyd, who observed that:

[i]n an inclosed pasture, there is a point of saturation [...] beyond which no prudent man will add to his stock [...] Were a number of adjoining pastures, already fully stocked, to be at once thrown open, and converted into one vast common, the position of the point of saturation would immediately be changed. (Lloyd, 1833: 31)

Much later on, the Austrian school economist Ludwig von Mises claimed in his treatise on the economics of human action that

[i]f land is not owned by anybody [...] it is utilised without any regard to the disadvantages resulting. [...] the erosion of the soil, the depletion of the exhaustible resources and other impairments of the future utilization are external costs not entering into [the commoners'] calculation of input and output. (Mises, 2008: 652)

Along the same lines, the economist Scott Gordon engaged with the economics of the plight of fisheries by remarking that: 'the plight of fishermen and the inefficiency of fisheries production stems from the common-property nature of the resources of the sea [...] a bag-limit per man is necessary if complete destruction is to be avoided' (Gordon, 1954: 131). Some years later, private property theorist Harold Demsetz claimed that the private enclosure and parceling of the commons into property rights is the most appropriate solution to

their demise, arguing that common-property regimes are inherently flawed (Demsetz, 1967).

Still, it is only in 1968 that the ecologist Garrett Hardin sums up all previous elaborations in regard to the vulnerabilities of the commons in order to formulate his famous theory. In comparison to previous thinkers, the novelty in Hardin's theory is that the tragedy of the commons is inescapable. In his own words, '[f]reedom in a commons brings ruin to all' (Hardin, 1968).

The intellectual commons as component to capital accumulation

Neoliberal theorists have been quick to grasp the potential of the re-surfing intellectual commons for human creativity and business profitability. In their business manifesto, Don Tapscott and Anthony Williams enthusiastically welcome us 'to the world of Wikinomics where collaboration on a mass scale is set to change every institution in society' (Tapscott and Williams, 2006: 10). In a similar manner, in an earlier online version of his own book-length call to the brave new world Charles Leadbeater again greet us 'to the world of We-Think', where '[w]e are developing new ways to innovate and be creative en masse. We can be organised without an organisation. People can combine ideas and skills without a hierarchy' (Leadbeater, 2008). Even the Time magazine confirmed this rising new fashion in 2006 by naming as its 'Person of the Year' the creative 'You'.

New terms have been coined to describe the exciting dynamics of the digital era. Already from 2004, at the O'Reilly Media Web 2.0 Conference, Tim O'Reilly and Dale Dougherty talked about the emergence of Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005). In its relation to the market, O'Reilly has later clarified that the whole idea and the success of Web 2.0 is based on 'customers [...] building your business for you'⁴. Inspired by Alvin Toffler's idea that the information age will blur the boundaries between production and consumption and give rise to the 'prosumer' (Toffler, 1980: 265), Tapscott and Williams, have elaborated on the model of prosumption as an important new way through which businesses are putting consumers to work (Tapscott and Williams, 2006: 13, 43, 125-7). In this vision, prosumers are included in the productive process as fundamental component, whereas the market is no longer a space where supply and demand meet but has rather become inseparable from the productive process as the actual 'locus of co-creation (and co-extraction) of value' (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004: 5).

4 O'Reilly T. and J. Battelle (2004) *Opening Welcome: State of the Internet Industry*. San Francisco, California, October 5.

Other commentators have added an even more insightful dimension in the debate, claiming that the business technique of prosumption reconstructs the very agency of consuming masses in ways more prone to exploitation by exchanging new consumer freedoms and a feeling of empowerment with the right of corporations to expropriate consumer creativity and innovation (Zwick, Bonsu and Darmody, 2008: 185). In this context, for-profit entities, which grasp the zeitgeist of the information age, do not only become leaders of the new mode of intellectual production, but also renew the fractured social contract, upon which conventional modes of work and production are established (Leadbeater, 2008: 88-90).

The proliferation of social and business patterns relative to the productive processes described above have led Botsman and Rogers to introduce in 2010 the term 'collaborative consumption' so as to describe social arrangements in which communities of individuals pool together and share privately owned products and services with the help of contemporary information and communication technologies (Botsman and Rogers, 2010). Drawing from the concept of crowdsourcing, defined by Jeff Howe as the 'act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent (usually an employee) and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call' (Howe, 2006), Botsman and Rogers have coherently demonstrated the potential of emerging patterns of online collaboration for the satisfaction of individual needs and the promotion of collective goals, as diverse as co-sharing scarce resources, producing intellectual goods in commons-based peer mode, building business models upon the intellectual commons and even acting together for the resolution of social problems as important as climate change (Botsman and Rogers, 2010: 59). From such a perspective, engagement with collaborative consumption not only secures a small income but also transforms participants into 'microentrepreneurs' (Botsman and Rogers, 2010: xvii, 180). Businesses, which base their profitability on communities of collaborative consumption, are successful on the condition that they view themselves not as rulers 'but more as hosts of a party helping to integrate new members with the rest of the community' (Botsman and Rogers, 2010: 204). Acting as the definite community builders of the information age, such corporations actually own and architect the online platforms and tools, which both facilitate the horizontal peer transactions of collaborative consumption and encourage relations of trust and reciprocity among participants (Botsman and Rogers, 2010: 91).

In this nexus of social relations, corporations are not just looking for unpaid work to be exploited. Instead, they invest in the construction and management of entire communities of resource sharing, sociality, collaborative creativity and innovation (Botsman and Rogers, 2010: 204). The main object of profit

extraction is the information and communication produced by the matrix of social relationships continuously weaved within online communities⁵. Ownership of the platform and the related infrastructure, which underpins the community, bestows access and control over the data produced by the networked social exchange of its users. Sociality itself in the fixation of data becomes a form of commodity and a source of profit. Hence, the most important technique for business ventures to develop in order to surpass the profitability of competitors in this context is how to monetise the community and embed the powers of the social intellect into the structures of the capitalist market (Bollier, 2008: 238).

Another way through which the intellectual commons are employed as component to capital accumulation, is in market competition between corporations. On the one hand, intellectual commons' communities are utilised by single enterprises to leverage their position in market competition. The most famous example of this type of relationship between the intellectual commons and a for-profit corporation is the relationship between IBM and the free software community (Lessig, 2002: 71). In 1998, IBM began supporting the apache and linux free software communities and granting to the latter compatibility with its hardware. As this collaboration gained momentum, IBM reaped the benefits, by gradually improving its position vis a vis its main competitors (Tapscott and Williams, 2006: 79-83). On the other hand, alliances of non-dominant actors have pooled together and shared resources for their industries in order to pre-empt the ability of competitors to control assets of strategic importance for the development of the market (Merges 2004). Many market consortia and patent pools, especially in biotechnology and open source software, are managed as intellectual commons between the members of the market alliance (Madison, Frischmann and Strandburg, 2010: 692). This has led Milton Mueller to claim that '[t]he commons as an institutional option is rarely implemented as the product of communitarian compacts or a sharing ethic. It is more likely to be an outcome of interest group contention' (Mueller, 2012: 40-1). Neutralisation of strategic assets might even take place in relation to a single market actor. Indicatively, Tapscott and Williams, report that with the release of

5 Based on an all-inclusive conception of labour, which extends to every aspect of social reproduction, this distinct form of social value appropriation is also defined by certain critical thinkers as exploited free labour (Hardt, 1999: 93; Hardt and Negri, 2004: 147). To the extent that the accumulation of social power by capital can take many forms, accumulation by exploitation being just one of them, the interpretation of all forms of value capture from the virtuous circle of the intellectual commons and their insertion in the circuits capital circulation / accumulation as exploitation is ideologically framed, since it disregards the fact that the intellectual commons reproduce a form of life distinct to the reproduction of capital and are thus not a by-product of capitalist organisation and exploitation but, instead, an assemblage of alternative circuits of power circulation / accumulation.

15,000 human gene sequences into the public domain in 1995 the pharmaceutical giant Merck ‘pre-empted the ability of biotech firms to encumber one of its key inputs with licensing fees and transaction costs’ (Tapscott and Williams, 2006: 166-7).

Intellectual commons and the restructuring of the corporation and the market

Since monopolisation is in the nature of intellectual property, its contentious relationship with market competition has been a well recorded issue of interest both in theory and in policy planning (WIPO 2012; OECD 2013). By expanding the public domain and facilitating access to prior information, knowledge and culture, vibrant intellectual commons' communities are a social force, which has the potential to counter the dynamic inefficiencies produced by the unbalanced enclosures of intellectual property-enabled markets over competition (Lessig, 2002: 6-7, Boyle, 2003: 63-4). Hence, a commons-oriented regime of governance at the cutting edge of technology and in the new modes of cultural production may be required as a fix to the rigidity of dominant intellectual property regimes in order for corporations to take full advantage of the rapidly shifting conditions in intellectual production / distribution / consumption. To put it more generally,

In cyberspace [...] market after market is being transformed by technological progress from a “natural monopoly” to one in which competition is the rule. (Dyson, Gilder, Keyworth and Toffler, 1994)

The intellectual commons are also implemented as a strategic tool for the aversion of market failures that have been characterised as tragedies of the anti-commons (Heller, 1998, 2008). Such conjunctures occur when too many market players hold and exert partly or wholly overlapping rights of exclusion against each other over a strategic resource, so that no party finally acquires an effective right of use (Hunter, 2003: 506). These failures in the optimisation of social utility constitute the tipping point where the social relation of property becomes a fetter to forces of production (Mueller, 2012: 45). In this light, fixing the failures of monopolies through the construction of intellectual commons over strategic assets, whereas keeping market competition around them, is viewed as a method to combine the best of both worlds and achieve optimum social utility (Mueller, 2012: 60). Examples where state and market institutions co-ordinate to produce intellectual commons in order to avert tragedies of the anti-commons over strategic intellectual assets include standard-setting entities, joint ventures for research and development, informational databases and patent pools (Tapscott and Williams, 2006: 178-9, Madison, Frischmann and Strandburg, 2010: 692, OECD 2013: 22).

As far back as 1945, Friedrich von Hayek has claimed that knowledge is a resource unevenly distributed in society (Hayek, 1945). In the context of the collective intelligence of post-industrial intellectual commons' communities, Pierre Levy wrote: '[n]o one knows everything, everyone knows something, all knowledge resides in humanity' (Levy, 1997: 20). To make matters even more complicated, the distributed force of the social intellect does not exist in static form within the individual minds of creators / innovators, instead it is unleashed by a dynamic process of intellectual sharing and collaboration (Castells, 2001: 101). In order to correspond to the challenges mentioned above, commercial enterprises in knowledge-based sectors of the economy restructure their organisational patterns in order to co-ordinate and pool together the productive forces of the social intellect. This ambitious aim has a corrosive effect not only on the hierarchical top-down structures of the corporation but also on its boundaries with society. Permeability vis a vis the distributed innovative powers of society is achieved by various means, all of them involving the engagement of actors located outside the organisational structures of the corporation (Chesbrough, 2003: XXIV).

Outsourcing creative work to the crowd is one among the many corporate methods of capturing the productive value of the social intellect, which cannot be supplied in-house. The aggregation of distributed individual talent and knowledge is conducted on privately owned project platforms, which are focused on the management of creative labour supply. The platform design enables open recruitment, meritocratic ranking and self-selection of tasks (Lakhani and Panetta, 2007). Commercial innovation management platforms also borrow the organisational patterns of task modularity, granularity and diversity, which are observed in the institutions of intellectual commons communities⁶. Such platforms are a manifestation of the expansion of the commodity market over the structures of the hierarchical corporation, which has been rendered possible by the significant reduction of transaction costs due to contemporary processes of digitization. Yet, similarities with the intellectual commons stop here. Despite the fact that communication, sharing and collaboration among peers is ostensibly encouraged in order to create a sense of community, the competitive environment cultivated within such projects ultimately transforms them into labour commodity markets, rather than hub-bubs of commons-based peer production.

6 See e.g. Amazon's mechanical turk crowdsourcing platform According to Amazon's pledge 'Mechanical Turk is a marketplace for work' [<https://www.mturk.com/>]. We give businesses and developers access to an on-demand, scalable workforce. Workers select from thousands of tasks and work whenever it's convenient'.

Apart from outsourcing innovation to the crowd, a deeper corporate restructuring seeks to embrace the potential of the intellectual commons by combining the market with the community. In Leadbeater's vision,

[t]he most exciting business models of the future will be hybrids that blend elements of the company and the community, of commerce and collaboration: open in some respects, closed in others; giving some content away and charging for some services; serving people as consumers and encouraging them, when it is relevant, to become participants. (Leadbeater, 2008: 91)

In this peculiar hybrid, the engine of 'collaborative consumption' and the 'sharing economy' is the community and the lifeblood flowing within its circuits is trust (Botsman, 2012). The mere role of the corporation is to enable and empower 'decentralised, and transparent communities to form and build trust between strangers' (Botsman and Rogers, 2010: 91). In practice, this contribution usually concerns the provision of material infrastructure, which requires an expensive and concentrated capital base to be produced and can rarely be provisioned by communities themselves (Benkler, 2016: 102). According to another less materialistic view, market mechanisms and commercial enterprises generally provide to intellectual commons' communities the instruments of regulation and management that are necessary for their well-being and cannot be provided internally (Ghosh, 2007: 231).

Hence, corporations and markets have the unique opportunity to embrace and harness the potential of the intellectual commons for collaborative creativity and innovation by orchestrating the forces of self-organization thriving within their communities (Tapscott and Williams, 2006: 44). In this market / commons hybrid scheme, social power is not only circulated and accumulated via the monetisation of the community. Ownership of the communal infrastructure on the one hand separates commoners from the means of reproducing their sociability and controlling their collaborative productivity and, on the other hand, gives owners the power to govern production and determine its final goals (Andrejevic, 2011: 87-8).

Critical evaluation: A commons fix for Capital

Epistemology	Agency	Structure	Internal Dynamics	External Dynamics	Normative Criteria	Social Change
Methodological Individualism	Isolated Individual(s)	Market	Bottom-Up Emergence	Co-optation of Commons by Capital	Utilitarian	The Commons as Fix to Capital

Table 2: The characteristics of neoliberal theories of the intellectual commons

Neoliberal theorists conceive of the intellectual commons not as human communities but as networked markets of exchange among self-interested individuals and between individuals and corporations. According to the neoliberal view, their decentralised structure and capacity for individual self-empowerment renders the intellectual commons an ideal terrain for human creativity and innovation, which may even supersede the innovative capacities of the corporation (Benkler, 2002: 377). First, commercial enterprises can benefit by capturing their social value with various business techniques. Furthermore, they can be utilised as a vehicle to restructure markets in order to make them more competitive and well-functioning. Finally, they can be employed as a tool to avert serious market failures and gridlock effects. In Peter Barnes' words,

[t]he essence [...] is to fix capitalism's operating system by adding a commons sector to balance the corporate sector. The new sector [...] would offset the corporate sector's negative externalities with positive externalities of comparable magnitude. (2006: 65-6)

The main contribution of neoliberal theories in relation to the analysis of the intellectual commons is the fact that they bring to our attention the various ways through which capital dialectically relates with the intellectual commons. Nevertheless, the alleged co-existence between the intellectual commons and capital is emptied from its obvious contradictions. As communal resources, values and their systems, which are consumed by private for-profit activities, constantly undercut the energy and dynamics of intellectual commons' communities and degrade their potential for creativity and innovation.

Accordingly, asymmetries of power between commoners and corporations are obfuscated through the use of terms such as ‘co-creation’ and ‘co-existence’. Control over infrastructure and the powers it confers to its owners is considered either as benevolent contribution or as a new type of social corporate responsibility or even as another proof that private profit motivation and market mechanisms maximise social utility. And the governance of the intellectual commons by capital is apprehended as necessary regulation, which cannot be supplied internally.

To sum up, neoliberal perspectives approach the intellectual commons as a fix to capital, both by exploiting commons-based peer production as a component to capital accumulation and by utilising the productive force and organisational capacity of intellectual commons' communities as a means to restructure commodity markets and corporate forms and avert their failures (Caffentzis, 2010, De Angelis, 2012).

Conclusion

Rational choice and neoliberal theories of the intellectual commons are reconceptualizations of the social intellect as the productive force of our intellectual commonwealth, albeit in a relation of complementarity or subsumption with capital. Under this prism, they come in contrast to social democratic and critical theories of the intellectual commons, which conceive of the intellectual commons as embodying modes of social reproduction alternative to capital and, thus, having the potential to contribute to the emergence of commons-based societies (Broumas, 2017).

A unified and systematic theory of the intellectual commons should hold a critical perspective over existing social arrangements. Therefore, it ought to have solid normative foundations, not confined within the limitations of the status quo in the field but rather orientated towards what the current state of affairs should become. In this context, the normative horizon of such a theoretical endeavour stretches nothing short of the realization of the radical potential of the intellectual commons to fully unleash the productive forces of the social intellect. In addition, a ‘strong’ theory of the intellectual commons should in principle analyse social phenomena not in isolation but rather within their social context and, hence, touch issues related to the interrelation between the intellectual commons and the social totality. It is within this wider analytical framework that the elements of both rational choice and neoliberal theories have to be evaluated and incorporated, wherever appropriate.

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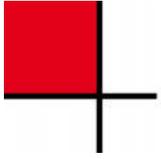
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Big data ecologies

Mél Hogan

abstract

Big Tech is increasingly ‘partnering with/enslaving’ nature in order to maintain and grow its operations while also demonstrating concern for the environment via large scale sustainable infrastructural developments. However, to green their cycles of production, Big Tech invests in infrastructure that not only sustains but also unwittingly serves to encourage consumption at a time of severe social and political unrest and environmental instability. In these material expansions, there is tremendous infrastructural, financial and political support for ongoing consumption and its embedded values: progress, innovation, and social transformation. In order to analyse this power dynamic, I argue that we must reconsider the scale, scope, and the various meanings and enactments of both indigenous and settler ecological thinking, and mediated ecologies, to better understand Big Tech in a rapidly changing environment. I propose the concept of ‘Big Data Ecologies’ to situate infrastructure at the centre of the discussion of neoliberalism within the rapid and global environmental transformations with which they are intertwined.

Introduction

Snippet 1: The severe drought and forest fires of the last few years in California have now been widely headlined, visualized, and extrapolated by the news media as a case study of the early ravages of climate change on a global scale. As a result, water has been ushered back into conversation with local conservation practices, desalination proposals, and various other assessments, including the socio-political impacts of farm job losses. Meanwhile, California is also home to the largest cloud computing facilities in the US – with upward of 800 data centers – yet the drought is rarely discussed in relation to internet infrastructures, the electricity they consume, or the tremendous water required by data centers to cool their servers. (The California Energy Code, 2013)

Snippet 2: As Hurricane Harvey devastated Houston with catastrophic flooding in October 2017, displacing its citizens and causing ongoing power outages for thousands of them, data centers in the area remained operational. Diesel generators allowed the lights to stay on and kept servers running. One data center in the area was stocked with food, water and cots, showers and washing machines. It provided a safe harbour for its workers, their family members, and even United States marshals (Dawn-Hiscox, 2017; Glantz, 2017). This data center was built to withstand a hurricane, tornado, or ice storm, to keep internet services going – and, because it is in Houston, to safeguard the data of ‘practically every single large oil and gas company in the world.’ (Glantz, 2017)

I begin with these two snippets from (US-based) news stories because they highlight the internet’s reliance on nature (water, electricity, land, etc.), the industry’s need to protect itself against it (natural disasters), as well as the requirement for storage of Big Data by various companies involved in ecosystems management (oil, gas, etc.). In other words, these snippets show how our recent turn to Big Data requires a material infrastructure to support it, as well as an industry discourse to rationalize its ongoing expansions. It is this complex relationship that I return to time and again as a way to understand how Big Tech is increasingly encroaching on ecosystems management to, ultimately, grow its own operations. As I explain below, Big Tech has made great strides in rendering various aspects of its industry more self-sustaining; but, and as a result, has carved out a more important (and direct) role for itself as custodian and manager of natural resources. This is a part of the neoliberalizing logics that dominate today’s understanding of nature.

Big Tech is a main driver of sustainable development worldwide – especially when it comes to harnessing alternative sources of power – while also, and invariably, upholding the idea that perpetual growth is possible and economically desirable within these conditions. As such, the biggest internet companies – Apple, Amazon, Facebook, Microsoft and Google/Alphabet – are becoming environmentalists by their own definition, and grabbing at land, water, and power infrastructures to make their case as the industry best suited to manage natural resources, on which Big Tech is dependent (and on which the rest of the economy is also increasingly dependent). As a concept that accounts for all of this, I propose ‘Big Data Ecologies’ to expose that these sites are not only multiplying, but are increasingly at the behest of investors in Big Data infrastructure, and run by Big Data logics. Big Data thereby becomes the underlying currency that funds material developments, and thus formative in our new ecologies.

In the US in particular, data centers are the largest and fastest growing consumers of electricity, and in turn, of water (Sverdlik, 2016). Big Tech supports the stock market, Big Data for insurance companies, genome mapping,

financial transactions, mass surveillance and monitoring, the ‘internet of things’ and ‘smart city’ sensors and grids, and mobile communications for phone users writ large. By most industry accounts, data centers, and the cloud infrastructure that undergirds it, has become the most important sociotechnical system of our time. Because of this, the continuous expansion of server farms is encouraged, supported politically and financially, and celebrated as progress by the industry and most governments, which is most evident in urban and rural areas in search of economic revival. This is how the industry comes to be known as ‘Big Tech’, a conglomerate of internet companies that is increasingly outsizing all other forms of institutional power. Big Tech is considered to be an industry grouping with important economic, political and social influence and is adopting and adapting both public infrastructures and the environment for the internet. In turn, the accumulation of user data, as Big Data, is the main motivation of companies that offer online shopping, social networking, internet indexing, location services, and so on. In this sense, Big Tech are the new farmers – companies toiling matter as memory, companies using large swaths of land and water, working toward future storage and the storage of the future.

Most Big Tech companies (Apple, Amazon, Facebook, Microsoft and Google/Alphabet) own and manage their data centers. They carefully curate their online representations of their data centers by blending marketing discourse to reinforce their various problem-solving impetuses while downplaying this hypervisibility in terms of the cloud’s materiality and its potential impacts (Vonderau and Holt, 2015). In these representations, the glaring paradox of Big Tech is that it uses tremendous natural resources to develop technologies that fight environmental degradation. Part of that mandate has been to become more environmentally sustainable as a global industry. Big Tech accomplishes this by showing its mastery over the environment by, on one hand, creating data centers that can sustain hurricanes and other environmental disasters, and, on the other hand, by enabling Big Data science to flourish as seemingly ‘clean’ information production in service to industry and, presumably, humanity, even while consuming energy resources. These are the two interlocking components of Big Tech – they uphold the material infrastructure that upholds the logics, discourses, and new forms of socialities, that, in turn, uphold the material infrastructure – and so on, and so forth.

Given this relationship between ideas and instantiations, we may wonder how climate change can even coexist with Big Tech. If, as all indices seem to point to, Big Tech already epitomize the technological fix, how can we be living in times of such environmental unrest and, simultaneously, of such incredible computational power? There are a few options that help explore this connection: the *first* is that the ultimate technological fix in fact requires a global

environmental catastrophe; the *second* is that there has long been a false symbiosis in the relationship between nature (the untouched) and computing (as human progress) – and it has reached a tipping point; and the *third* is that we are in a moment of convergence, handing over not only nature to Big Tech (from the commons), but also the very concept of ‘the natural’ and what it might encompass.

(As a queer Canadian settler) I explore these three options by drawing mainly from the work of indigenous and queer/feminist thinkers, and others influenced by them (directly, or indirectly drawing on similar concepts). Stacy Alaimo, Wendy Brown, Keller Easterling, Donna Haraway, Sara Hunt, Ruth Irwin, Lisa Parks, Juanita Sundberg, Kim TallBear, Zoe Todd, Vanessa Watts, and Sheena Wilson, among others, have each greatly shaped the possibilities for reconsidering the entanglements of nature, science, technology, and culture. With them, I propose a conceptual repositioning of Big Tech that complicates the existing environmental framing and ecosystem logics that supports the industry and largely function to justify the perpetual growth of digital communications. Big Tech upholds the idea of shifting its mode of energy production to alternative, sustainable, and renewable sources without implementing radical changes at the level of labour, resource ownership or conceptions of the environment, which have become more pressing matters at this time of global climatic transformations but remain at odds with capitalist endeavours. It is this particular material entanglement – of public and private infrastructure – that is explored in this paper and which serves as my contribution to the growing literature about internet materialities and their various political, social and environmental impacts (Burrington, 2014; Cubitt, 2013; Fish, 2014; Gabrys, 2011; LeBel, 2012; Maxwell, 2014; Miller, 2015; Taffel, 2012; Vonderau and Holt, 2015).

Increasingly, Big Tech has mandated itself to be responsible and to manage natural resources sustainably, premised on the logic of natural balance – i.e. that as long as nature returns to a state of homeostasis, and as long as companies work to replenish what they use, it follows that the development of communications infrastructure is a (two-fold) sign of progress. Despite the US’s withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on climate change, Big Tech remains committed to a shift to renewable energy to power the internet economy. As Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg put it:

Withdrawing from the Paris climate agreement is bad for the environment, bad for the economy, ... we’ve committed that every new data center we build will be powered by 100 percent renewable energy. Stopping climate change is something we can only do as a global community, and we have to act together before it’s too late. (Miller, 2017)

Similarly, Joe Kava, Google Vice President of Data Centers, claims that

huge cloud operators have a responsibility to use their buying power to drive changes in the US. utility industry, which should boost its mix of renewables and make clean energy available to more customers. (Miller 2017)

Apple, Amazon, and Microsoft have made similar promises and have indicated that this helps them meet their corporate social responsibility goals. On the surface, it looks like Big Tech is taking on the task of making global energy more sustainable for the environment's sake, to fight climate change. Outside of Big Tech's main corporations it becomes much more difficult to generate one's own power or to find alternative (green) providers but the motivation is there. Fighting climate change is said to be the driver of Big Tech's sustainable turn, yet, as I point out in this article, this is premised on faulty logics that frames nature more as software than as an agentic organism (Alaimo, 2011; Todd, 2016). This is important because it speaks to long held colonial ideas about controlling nature, managing it as interconnected nodes in a system, and foremost, as requiring human intervention to stay alive for the benefit of humans.

The impetus for Big Tech's Big Data collection is underscored also by the idea that the more data we collect, the more we can know about the world we live in. This pursuant positivist logic is that we will act according to objective and scientific knowledge that can be transferred to myriad social, commercial, and political ends. To do this, Big Tech unwittingly follows its own uneasy logic – one that situates the environment, technology, and humans within an a priori systems-based framework that is self-regulating and self-organizing. This is an idea that is perfect for our neoliberal times, that sees market rationality pervading all aspects of life, until nature and humans alike become merely instrumental (Brown, 2015; Moore, 2015; Watts, 2013; Curtis, 2011; Odum, 1994). Neoliberalism is the dominant ecological ideal of our era, too: when left alone, nature will maintain an equilibrium that can be restored if disrupted through both calculable and mappable market-driven assessments and interventions. This kind of ecological thinking, then, also means a highly controlled society where surveillance and monitoring are integral to communications infrastructure and where infrastructure is increasingly embedded in (if not disguised as) nature (Parks, 2010).

Big greening efforts

Data centers are being constructed around the world at a rate of a 15 percent increase every year, which will see an additional 33 million servers by 2020, all of which are supplied and powered by regional water and power sources (Marr,

2016). These data centers become fodder for how Big Tech manages to simultaneously acknowledge their role in depleting natural resources while also situating themselves as *the* safeguard and solution to society's ills. To be clear, the point here is not to critique greening efforts in and of themselves, but rather to situate those discourses and their applications within a wider neoliberal context, and the market-driven decision-making that inspires Big Tech expansions. Big Tech is a neoliberal project and as such is also a colonial one – enslaving nature under the guise of emancipation (Tobias-Coleman, 2015).

To show this, I present two examples of Big Tech enslaving nature, focusing firstly on Google's conversion of a wastewater facility to cool its servers (Google Green Blog, 2012), and secondly, on Apple's purchase of a forest to manage its own product packaging needs (Cushing, 2015). By presenting these examples (among so many others), I show how Big Tech sees itself as 'partnering' with nature in order to maintain and grow its operations at a time of severe social and political unrest and environmental instability. Ironically, in order to green their cycles of production, Big Tech is 'investing' in nature and in public infrastructure in ways that not only sustain but also unwittingly serve to encourage consumption. In these material expansions, there is tremendous infrastructural, financial, and political support for continued consumption, and its embedded values: progress, innovation, and social transformation. For these sites (which are only two examples among a growing number), I hone in on an instance of infrastructural transformation – such as water and forest – in order to make a point about the very inseparability of any one natural element from its system, while also demonstrating their specificity, as entangled and ecosystemic. This is the benefit and challenge of the ecosystemic approach: to break down the components in order to make an argument about the interconnectedness of all elements, both always already material-discursive (Haraway, 2003). Or, put in other words, the material-discursive conceptualization of nature by Big Tech is one that keeps in place a) the nature/culture binary, b) the idea of ecosystemic homeostasis or balance, and c) the idea of nature as inert and at the service of human 'progress' demonstrated foremost through technological deployments.

Google water

The portion of Google's website dedicated to the environment states that:

We're a data-driven company. The science of climate change tells us that building a carbon-free electrical grid is an urgent global priority¹.

¹ <https://environment.google/projects/ppa/>

Google looked to power purchase agreements (PPAs), which are large-scale, long-term contracts (between one party that generates electricity and one that is looking to purchase it) to buy renewable energy at volumes required by the company. Of note, Google first entered into a 20-year agreement with a wind farm in Iowa in 2010 and has since signed 19 more agreements. Google is now the largest corporate renewable energy buyer on the planet, directly purchasing 2.6 gigawatts of renewable energy. In the company's view, 'additionality' is the idea that through its actions the world has more clean energy (not less, even given how much Google itself consumes).

In 2016, Google had plans to operate 14 data centers globally, with 7 in North America. These numbers, however, remain estimates given the relative secrecy of Big Tech with regards to its infrastructure's locations (Hardy, 2015). Like many data center developers, Google has looked to adapt existing buildings into server farms. It recently converted a defunct power plant in Alabama, which had been running since 1952, into a data center. Google also converted an old paper mill in Finland. Both of these conversions have been praised in the media for the ways the company is repurposing existing infrastructure, adapting old power grids and rekindling the community's economy (Hardy, 2015). This is also part of Google's strategic posturing, as an ecologically aware company, which like many others, does not see its profits as inherently antithetical to the ravages of capitalism in which it participates. But Google is also based there, at the old mill and power plant, because those sites provide steady power, are located near rail lines for easy fibre optic cable installation, and close to a water reservoir to use for cooling its servers.

The notion of an energy efficient and environmentally conscious company – what Google calls 'The Big Picture' on its website – somewhat ironically deflects attention from the incredible size and scale of their operations. Instead, the site focuses on Google's aim to have 'zero impact' on climate by having all its products and services be 'carbon neutral.' 'Renewable' energy has been the byword of Google for the past three years. They pay for reductions in emissions from landfills and claim that their data centers actually save energy. While the Google search engine – what the company is best known for – consistently uses the same amount of electricity as a city of approximately 200,000 people (in the US), it justifies itself in doing so by suggesting that this reduces the overall energy consumption. However, this has only been proven through an awkward comparison between Google searches with real-world searches (Glanz, 2011). Companies like Google use branding and PR jargon to downplay depletion; they draw attention to how much energy they are creating rather than the consumption encouraged at various levels by the industry. At its main campus, Google has its own bike-to-work program, and in certain locations, community

gardens supply its cafeterias (Noble and Roberts, 2016). There are swimming pools, climbing walls, bowling alleys, and golf courses to keep employees happy at work (Wainwright, 2013). To further reinforce the intersecting ideals of well-being and efficiency, Google has built its own power networks and infrastructures, and has shifted from coal to wind and solar (Lawson, 2015). And, in one of its grandest gestures yet, Google has partnered with public water infrastructure to lock-in a permanent and reliable source to cool its servers.

Water is cheaper than electricity. This is why water is used to cool servers in most data centers today. Servers, which are essentially computer hard drives stacked in rows, generate a lot of heat. These servers are then stored in large windowless units, generally in a building the size of several football fields. A midsize center uses between 80 million and 130 million gallons of water a year for cooling, according to various industry estimates (FitzGerald, 2015). This is roughly as much water in a year as 158,000 Olympic sized swimming pools, which is equivalent also to the water used in three hospitals, or for planting 100 acres of almond trees, or to maintain two 18-hole golf courses – and this for computer chips alone (The Wall Street Journal, 2015). Google, however, has been exemplary in its attempt to green its cooling processes, by harvesting rainwater and other non-drinkable sources to reduce its footprint. In fact, it can now boast of using only recycled waters to cool its servers. But, data centers require highly treated water, unlike agriculture or electric utilities.

In 2012, Google headlined on its company blog that it was helping ‘the Hooch’ (Chattahoochee River) with water conservation at their Douglas County (Georgia) data center. Boasting their efficient energy consumption by using evaporative free cooling, as well as their recent shift from potable water to recycled/grey waters, Google is accounting for the environment and local communities that surround its data centers (Google Green Blog, 2012). Having partnered with the Douglasville-Douglas County Water and Sewer Authority (WSA) in 2007, Google was able to rely on recycled water from the The Hooch to cool its servers. The water is treated – filtered, sterilized and chlorinated – once more at a Google-built sidestream (effluent) treatment plant before it circulates through its evaporative cooling towers, and before 70 percent of it is returned to the river, with 30 percent diverted back to the data center (Myslewski, 2012). For the WSA, this has meant an increased capacity to save water in their reservoir for times of drought, as explained in detail also in a promotional Google Green’s YouTube video on ‘smart water’ (Google Green, 2012b). This was Google’s first water treatment plant in the United States and was constructed based on similar plans in Belgium, where it treats water from an industrial canal. In Belgium, Google built a 20,000 square foot water treatment plant, which removes solid materials and sludge, which is in turn repurposed for cement manufacturing and landfill.

In terms of Big Data Ecologies, Google puts to work each displaced and repurposed material byproduct.

Overall, Google data center engineers working toward greening their ‘smart water’ technology assert that there is ‘no impact on the availability of water in a given region’ if every drop is ‘returned to its origin’ (Coors, 2015). Again, in a promotional context, no further insights emerge about what delimits ‘impact’ nor how such a thing might be measured. Since 2010, the nonprofit organization Carbon Disclosure Project has been pressuring companies to issue reports on their water consumption, but this request has been largely denied despite water’s non-fungibility (Woody, 2010). The comments on Google’s promotional ‘smart water’ video are divided and reflect some the general public’s views, concerns and questions: some praise Google’s efforts toward sustainability and others question its propagandistic tone. While the praise echoes the words of Google itself – to frame the environment as something to manage responsibly by working to always restore a sense of equilibrium – the skepticism points to more common and larger questions about multinational corporations becoming increasingly entangled with public infrastructure. As Big Tech is successfully making itself self-sustaining through renewable energies, these companies increasingly exist as islands and fortresses of data, where communities are effectively pushed out, and can only exist outside of this media ecosystem. In times of severe droughts (or floods), it is unclear who will be given priority – communities or Big Tech – and we don’t know how this priority will be measured. Or we do – in Houston, the data centers stayed on while tens of thousands of individuals went without power.

Despite innovations, and perhaps in light of them, many questions remain about water treatment and about what ‘clean’ water means in these various contexts. With such an intensive treatment by Google, including chlorination – which is said to be more ‘effective’ than the Water and Sewer processes – could the water be too clean? The question came up for me in part because a newspaper clip suggested as much ten years ago: the August 9, 2007, *The Quincy Valley Post-Register* reported that the water generated from data centers came out ‘too clean to run through the city’s industrial wastewater treatment plant.’ According to this brief report, the water killed off the bacteria needed to break down solids. In that sense, the water is ‘dead’ because it is absent of minerals and bacteria. However, while the question of natural resource management accountability about water in this case remains difficult to answer it’s nevertheless pertinent as a rhetorical provocation.

From indigenous and queer-feminist perspectives, natural resources are always already agentic and political (Alaimo and Hekman, 2007; Todd, 2016). To

engage the ‘coloniality of power’ as Juanita Sundberg (2014) proposes, for example, in the case of Big Tech, would mean to put into question patterns and dynamics emerging from longstanding and ongoing colonial pursuits that continue to normalize and naturalize labour, technology and the knowledge produced as a result. In a sense, this means that both Big Tech and its watchers (like Greenpeace) has only recognized its greening efforts within the current neoliberal framework. Similarly, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2014) argues that protecting the source of knowledge is in the protection of land, which, applied to Big Tech might mean considering that growing real estate deals, and the immense size of data centers (eg. a data center in Norway is planned to be the size of 84 football fields),² means an expansion and anchoring of Eurocentric, colonial, positivist thinking (and usually at the expense of other modalities). And, as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) remind us, ‘decolonization is not a metaphor’ (3), and as such, data centers play a hand at furthering settler futurity in at least two ways: they stake a claim to land and its proximity to water, and they further locate humanity outside of human bodies, and into machines. How different would our sense of progress be if we accounted for the material and architectural creep of settler technological imaginaries?

There seems to be no way to salvage what has been lost and no means by which to control the environment within our current global socio-political conditions. Given the vastly variant temporalities of capitalism and nature, the move to ‘green’ our communications infrastructure starts to more closely resemble a means of feeding and watering the machine, by privileging clean water and electricity for communication ends than for human ends, as we have already done with e-waste and toxic rare earth mining practices. Jason Moore’s (2015) idea that humans have come to serve as ‘cheap nature’ for capitalism’s expansion may hint at the future of ecology, where many bodies are further lodged into the media ecosystems, while fewer and fewer benefit from its product. Of course, this has huge political implications and becomes yet another way to demonstrate which bodies are valued and which are put to service of capitalism itself.

Apple trees

Corporate declarations about their ‘eco-standings’ are often in direct contrast to independent assessments. In 2011, Apple was rated with the worst score by Greenpeace for its fossil fuels emissions, relying heavily on coal and nuclear energy. Despite this, Apple’s self-assessment that same year declared that it was

2 <http://www.poandpo.com/companies/norway-to-build-worlds-biggest-data-center-1782017403/>.

dedicated to the careful lifecycle management of products, including ‘controlling the quantity and type of materials used in their manufacture, improving their energy efficiency, and designing them for better recyclability’ (Apple, 2011; Gross, 2011). In 2012, Greenpeace reported once again that Apple, along with Amazon and Microsoft, was rapidly expanding ‘without adequate regard to source of electricity’ and relied ‘heavily on dirty energy to power their clouds’ (Greenpeace, 2012). But in 2014, Greenpeace saw a change. In their report, they discussed Apple’s commitment to power its data centers with 100% renewable energy. The report also presented the company as the ‘most improved’ and ‘most innovative’ and ‘most aggressive’ in its greening endeavours (Greenpeace, 2014). Over the course of a few years Apple went from loser to leader in Greenpeace’s assessments of their environmental impacts and innovations, and this despite ongoing challenges to these claims made by journalists (Cole, 2015). Already by 2015, Apple was touted as a prime example of Big Tech purportedly powering itself exclusively from solar, wind, hydro, and geothermal power (Green Energy Investing, 2015). By 2016, Apple is selling power into wholesale markets because of the investments it made in solar power for its data centers, as another foray by Big Tech into the energy business (Crawford, 2016). And, in 2017, as the latest Greenpeace reports suggest, Apple holds its title as leader in its global greening efforts for its data centers but gets a lesser grade on its ability to manage a ‘closed-loop supply chain’ (Greenpeace, 2017).

According to the Greenpeace Guide to Greener Electronics 2017 Company Report Card, Apple

has established an extensive take-back system through its stores and local partners across countries where it sells its products, though it does not make public which recycling partners it relies upon, or where that waste is sent. (Greenpeace, 2017: 17)

Apple currently maintains strict ‘must shred’ agreements with its recyclers thus forcing devices to be shredded instead of repaired or refurbished (Koebler, 2017), while also working with disassembly robots to eventually reuse all the materials in phones, such as tin and aluminum, to create new devices. This example serves to show how Big Tech can still, for now, easily silo off its data centers from the devices that power internet culture and generate the data that becomes the currency with which companies can expand. By not acknowledging that the mobile phone, and all data generated by internet traffic, is the true fuel of the data center, the company fails in making a truly believable argument for sustainability.

Despite advancements in greening their data centers, Apple remains a company dedicated foremost to profit – i.e., making a phone that costs \$5 to assemble (in

the Global South) and transforming it through marketing into a revered device costing upward of \$600 (in the Global North). For operations to continue to function at this scale, Apple must rely on a precarious workforce whose collective agency has been eviscerated by market globalization and is therefore willing to put in long hours in almost always terrible working and living conditions (Cole, 2015). The technological glow of the West relies on the bleak working conditions of the East, where people have been more easily enslaved and disposed of by Big Tech and their promises of global prosperity (Moore, 2015). Furthermore, many of the educated and market-savvy customers that Apple relies on are aware of the appalling working conditions for assembly workers (The Passionate Eye, 2015). Apple's efforts to achieve a kind of Western sustainability, or sustaining the West itself, invite its customer to support its operations, to strive for a greener future, but without having to account for the nuances of 'cheap' versus 'costly' human bodies (or their labour) on a global scale.

In Apple's Environmental Responsibility 2015 Progress Report, they discuss recent accomplishments, of which one is to partner with The Conservation Fund to 'permanently protect more than 36,000 acres of working forest' located in Maine and North Carolina. This partnership was intended to ensure their packaging had a 'net-zero impact on the world's supply of sustainable virgin fiber.' (Apple Environmental Responsibility Report, 2015) This is a measure that remains in place into 2017, where the company boasts that its yearly production from its forest conservation projects is now 'greater than the amount of virgin fiber used in Apple's product packaging during fiscal year 2016.' (Apple Environmental Responsibility Report, 2017: 24) This signals that as sustainability endeavours increase, so too does Big Tech's control over 'its' environment.

In 2015, Apple partnered with the World Wildlife Fund on a new multi-year project focused on responsible forest management in China (Apple Environmental Responsibility, 2015). This turn to forest management and protection by Apple (and Big Tech more generally) is important in identifying neoliberal resources management. The very concept of 'working forests' speaks to Apple's market-based conservation approaches (The Conservation Fund, 2015). As per the report, this partnership was intended to 'transition up to one million acres of forest, across southern provinces of China, into responsible management by 2020' by, among other things, 'establishing long-term market incentives in China for responsibly sourced paper' (Apple Environmental Responsibility Report, 2017: 25). This serves as a good example of how ecosystems management fits nicely into the neoclassical liberal framework, if you can value the component parts and show people how they will benefit from their use (Thompson, 2011).

Launched in 1985, the Conservation Fund is an American environmental non-profit with a dual mandate of environmental preservation and economic development. Since 1998, the Working Forest Fund (WFF) of the Conservation Fund has aimed to address and mitigate the loss of the US's privately-held forests, which account for more than half of all forest in the US, with 30 million acres of its forestland sold every year (The Conservation Fund, 2015b). They acquire endangered private forestland with the goal of ecological management and restoration, while also finding ways to be economically profitable. 'Working forests' are owned by large investors, like Apple, which means that they are intended to manage their products sustainably through fiber for pulp, paper, and wood products (Apple Environment Renewable Resources, 2015). Generally, this means allowing for 30% of the forest to be used, a threshold of tree density set to ensure biodiversity, and a fine-tuned balance maintained between naturally occurring forest floods and fires.

On their Environmental Sustainability website, Apple defines innovation as 'working with what's here to make something new' – a bizarre turn of phrase that reveals nothing about the link between managing finite resources, but rather equates the eternal promise of incremental innovation with the marketing stance that this makes it something 'new'. With its perfect Greenpeace scorecard, Apple epitomizes the ideal of renewability of Big Tech, while disconnected from issues of consumption and the Big Data Ecologies it inhabits.

Apple is a key player in shaping public perceptions of Big Tech. With Google, Facebook, Microsoft, and Amazon, it leads the way for product design, production, communication, distribution, consumption, engineering and architecture. While it remains the case that these companies constitute only a fraction of the 5% of total ownership of operational data centers in the world – as few companies own or run their own data centers – their cultural influence is vastly disproportionate.

The idea of maintaining 'appropriate thresholds' for ongoing exploitation or of 'calculated risk' in ecological management reinforces the cybernetic-ecosystemic dream. Ecosystems management is a field called to task for having been based on leaps from available evidence, where data was forced to fit the theory born of the logics of the time (from 1850 to 1950 in Europe and America). Hugely informed by the emergence of the supercomputer in the US in the 1960s, which was able to correlate data at a scale larger than ever before in the social sciences, the desire to frame and fit nature into a similar cybernetic model proved impossible to resist. As for the emergence of social sciences, where surveys and questionnaires were thought to reveal a deeper truth about human nature based on the conclusions that could be reached by sampling such large groups, more data

meant more objectivity, and more objectivity meant more power to assert a particular order of things, including over nature (Ashby, 1956; Odum, 1994; Curtis, 2011).

When it emerged as a discipline, the dominant logic of Ecology was largely informed by Darwin's evolutionary theories, as well as the advent of Cybernetics as 'the scientific study of how people, animals, and machines control and communicate information.' (Merriam-Webster, 2006) In Ecology, nodes (plant, animal, water, etc.) in an ecosystem were increasingly understood to be disturbed by environmental factors, especially in relation to the extinction of certain species. This, in turn, reinforced the idea that these nodes needed to adapt to environmental factors for survival, otherwise they were succeeded by a more stable version of themselves. As a scientific logic, Ecology proved that stability – imposed or 'natural' – was not only the goal, but that with proper calculation and manipulation, a kind of beneficent order was possible because of this continuous adaptation.

However, recent research emerging from climate change studies forces us to confront the limits of Ecology as a discipline, concept, and theory of ongoing adaptability. Instead we are now forced to reconsider the many 'eco-logics' that have allowed neoliberal policies to dominate. We are now confronted with capitalism's antithetic relationship to the environment and recognize it for what it is: a means to maintain economically viable commodity production in our current era of mass communication, for the personal/private profit of relatively few under the guise of improving the lives of the masses. The only hope for the critical scholar at this juncture – or 'impasse' as Sheena Wilson (2014) frames it – is for a 'revolution of mentalities' (Guattari, 1995: 119) that relocates critical and heartfelt thought as central to the existential shift now needed, rather than looking to technology, media, policy, or Big Data as remedies (Taffel, 2012; Hunt, 2014; Easterling, 2014).

Thinking big

Ecology is the broadest but youngest of sciences. It was first conceived during the 18C as an 'economy of nature' by Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus who observed and documented the interactions of plants and animals. In 1866, 'Ecology' got its official name from German biologist, Ernst Haeckel, as the concept shifted from the lab to the field. Early ecology produced food chain diagrams and animal pyramids as means to interpret and explain the various support systems at play in specific contexts. In the 1920 and 1930s, ecological work became quantified and partitioned in order to be explored scientifically,

where principles of physical chemistry could be applied to nature. However, the ideas that ended up most transforming the field were the recognition of organisms as part of a physical environment, and the observation of competition among species. Modern ecology emerged in the 1970s, developed as a utilitarian and serviced-based approach to generate public interest in environmental conservation. Through these reconfigurations, the field shifted again, from 'ecology' to 'ecosystems,' or 'systems ecology.' By the 1990s, ecosystems management became more overtly a method to estimate the economic value of natural resources: nature as commodity. As we see with Big Tech, land and water in particular have become incorporated into trade mechanisms.

Before ecosystems management became a utilitarian deployment of science, the environment was largely considered to be in 'natural production' offering 'non-appropriable gifts of nature' (Gómez-Baggethun et al., 2010). Nature was not something owned, and as such, had no inherent monetary value, nor was it perceived as serving humans in any useful way. But the mainstreaming through science and policy making of ecosystems management by the late 1990s saw the value of global natural capital and ecosystem services become interlinked. This approach: 'stressed human dependency not only on ecosystem services, but also on the underlying ecosystem functioning, contributing to make visible the role of biodiversity and ecological processes in human well-being.' (Gómez-Baggethun et al., 2010: 1214) Incentives for conservation became baked into the economy – monetized, appropriated and exchanged – coinciding with the expansion of neoliberalism. Now, the connection between neoliberalism and dataism becomes crucial to understanding this potentially new wave of ecosystems management.

This new wave will reinforce the idea of control – of a control society – or a society controlled by scientific logics, which is increasingly determined by Big Data and its push to quantify every aspect of existence as a way to be better managed. This is key. If we have Big Data determining our needs, we also need to create the Big Data Ecologies to maintain them. It becomes not only more difficult to opt out of this system, but also more difficult to see outside of this frame. However, the idea of an ecosystem was shaped early on according to a budding machine logic, where elements of the ecosystem were understood and manipulated as nodes in a complex system of interrelationships that can be 'datafied' – mapped, observed, intercepted and interpolated. Now the machine (and its logics) has changed – it is algorithmically larger and more powerful, and it is learning from 'itself' in a manner we term 'artificial' intelligence.

While Ecology as a discipline has long been focused on the interrelationships between living organisms and the environments in which they live, the concept of 'media ecology' has denoted different theoretical intentions, though arguably

circling back to this always vexing concept of nature. Marshall McLuhan (1962, 1964) developed the concept of 'media ecology' in the late 1960s to explain the various eras of humanity according to the role of technology in social transformations. Neil Postman (1970) carried on this intellectual legacy and used the concept of media ecology to draw attention to processes and structures of media rather than to its content or to textual analysis. Matthew Fuller (2007) pluralised the concept, as 'media ecologies,' and invited readers to a kind of multiplicitous materiality, complicating perceptions about the physicality of information. Since then, numerous important interrelated concepts have emerged to reinstate more overtly the ideas of nature and materiality within a mediated ecological frame: Stacy Alaimo's desire to 'track' 'environmental traces' in texts (2011), Jussi Parikka's (2012) 'medianature' – borrowed from Donna Haraway's (2003) earlier idea of 'naturecultures,' – both pointing to the complex weaving of meaning and materiality. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann's (2014) 'material ecocriticism,' further suggests that stories (are) matter, those generated by material agencies and phenomena and, most importantly to the argument, scholars who put into question the universality of the Anthropocene, such as Ruth Irwin (2013), Sheena Wilson (2014), Jason W. Moore (2015) or Zoe Todd (2016), who position the geological era in question as a neoliberal undoing, rather than generalisable human impact. These scholarly interventions come to represent a reformulation of media theory by complicating matter at the heart of both technology and the environment, as neither distinct nor separable. In particular, by suggesting that media objects (and their affects/effects) have agency this (new) materialist turn in media and communication studies allows for a rethinking of the traditional ecological framework in favour of 'Big Data Ecologies' that bear a particular pointedness – a responsibility and an accountability.

Who has power, who benefits, who suffers, and how those choices are justified by the meanings attributed to 'nature' and innovation vary according to conditions at different technological junctures. This task of deciphering those power dynamics is, in part, the work reserved for critical scholars. Communication infrastructures elicit something important about our shared cultural values, structures, and histories that cannot be measured by Big Data or science alone. Big Data becomes the site of justification for, rather than a byproduct of, the natural disasters and effects of global warming that we must now all endure despite our positionality, philosophical ideals, material access, or place of power in the world. As such, an expanded and more readily interdisciplinary adaptation of the concept of Big Data Ecologies can be employed to advance our understanding of Big Tech as a Western convenience, where waste and polluting processes are most often done in an unacknowledged 'elsewhere,' as a system that relies heavily on disjunctures and contradictions (for

discursive/greenwashing purposes in particular), and on the public perception of communications infrastructure as cloud-like, as immaterial and ephemeral. Conversely, Big Tech's hypervisibility around their data centers and their greening efforts fail to consider the implications outside of the economic perspective that sets value, inclusive of human worth and/in relation to primary resources (Kaika and Swyngedouw, 2014). As Wilson explains, by imagining ways to salvage capitalism and the environment as though the survival of one is not reliant on the destruction of the other, we fail to see beyond the superficial offerings of greening initiatives by Big Tech. In line with Wilson my overall argument is about how the so-called 'greening' of Big Data Ecologies are thin narratives that deploy textual and visual rhetorical strategies intended to obfuscate and overwrite resource exploitation.

With the Google Water and Apple Forest examples, I have carefully accounted for the ways in which Big Tech, and their data centers in particular, have come to monumentalize consumption, and have set in motion a means by which expansion – especially of green energy alternatives – are a symbol of technological success and survival. And yet no matter how green data centers become, and no matter how innovative renewable energy is, there is a larger media ecosystem undergirding it – a world of limited natural resources, technotrash, toxic bodies, and e-waste – driven by ideals of innovation based on the perpetual marketing of the new. Public relations and marketing need to go beyond common branding tactics, where greening mechanisms are themselves used to perpetuate a sustainable future. What is revealed in both examples is that the goals of Big Tech are fundamentally at odds with the business of these companies, whether it is device manufacture in East Asia, delivery of goods from warehouses across North America, or the cooling operations required of massive always-on server farms.

While more environmentally sound in the immediate sense, green alternatives situated in proximity to sites of consumption, but not of production, ultimately cannot inherently resolve questions of social accountability or enlightened governance that are crucial in terms of current policy debates. Indeed, it is extremely problematic to ask these companies to take on a central role in the debate of what constitutes the public good when they have other very real objectives, such as providing returns to stockholders. So part of the problem here – a big part – is the erosion of regional, national and international public policy that could set and attain 'good' energy goals through policy and legislation, rather than leave it to the good graces of a company, which is subject to the fickle winds of public perception. As the now widely used concept of the Anthropocene has suggested, human impact has become central to our notion and assessment of progress in relation to nature (Brown and Timmerman, 2015). We must,

however, further consider how economic incentives have changed since the world was still largely unmapped (in the settler sense), imagined by many of its explorers as undepletable, offering abundant resources to all, for all times. At our current juncture, however, green alternatives further evade cause in that they allow us to stall and deflect on the question of both consumption and production, even at our breaking point (Zehner, 2012).

Instead of dealing with consumption at the site of production, Big Tech is investing in large swaths of land, public infrastructure and in the management and containment of natural resources primarily in its marketplaces, as discursively enclosed ecosystems. Just as Houston's sprawling housing and industrial developments on vulnerable waterways could not stand in the way of a so-called 100-year storm, Hurricane Harvey, Big Tech is building containment systems that will not achieve the same goals in data management. It does this in order to counter competition for the growing rarity of natural resources, to control its sources of energy, and to keep up with ever-growing consumption demands. It is grabbing at natural resources, water and land, and also the wind and sun, to seem self-sufficient and also, by way of a complex definition, self-contained. This pairing is not necessarily new nor specific to new media economies. However, these examples do demonstrate the ways in which Big Tech becomes a spawning species of its own doing: at once predatory, fungal, feral and invasive.

While Big Tech has always relied upon nature in the production of technologies and is increasingly attempting to manage itself as an ecosystem, that is, as a self-sustaining complex network of interdependent and interconnected nodes in a system, it nevertheless fails to reconsider the impact of the very demand on which its supply depends. While implementing material physical infrastructures toward ecosystemic ends, it deploys a capitalist modality of nature to assert itself as green and environmentally-friendly. Natural resources are necessary to the operations of Big Tech, even if, by any calculation, online consumption (McKeown, 2013) – as social media, surveillance, communication, and entertainment – simply cannot be materially supported at today's data-driven expansion rates (Nye, 1996). The problem, however, is that while the concept of a global ecosystem is necessary to make a case against greed and overconsumption, it is also a re-invocation of the same scientific regimes that have long rationalized the domination of machine logics over nature.

We entrust technology with the task to solve the problems it creates, even if water, forests, and rare earth minerals are inherently – and ultimately – counter-commercially sustainable. In other words, the planet can never replenish the raw materials that have been extruded, and once disused, returned as waste to the

ecosystem. Forest, and ecosystems more generally, are said to have a tipping point after which they will not replenish on their own. The time lag of the effects and repercussions of hasty and greedy human interventions – causing animal extinction or forest depletion – take significantly longer to manifest than capitalism invests in managing those same resources. Natural resources are transformed for quick and immediate economic profit. As such, they require rationing policies and practices or they otherwise risk becoming (too quickly) overused and too carelessly dumped elsewhere, determined also by oversimplified economic calculations. In economic terms, value is independent of the resource itself. Nature comes to belong to the highest bidder. This, in turn, means the ecosystemic logic is one based on present and potential utility, with little to no concern for the long term, or for future generations. Big Tech must be repositioned within a Big Data ecosystemic framework to acknowledge technological progress and innovation as a complex player in the transformation of nature and its management, rather than simply either its abuser or its custodian.

What this paper has demonstrated is that the concept of the ecosystem created long ago, through dubious methods, has been updated and rearticulated, but not fundamentally rethought. It has managed to remain in the public imaginary as the most important way to conceive of the relationship between humans and nature. While the idea of human impact on nature propelled by neoliberal policies is now indisputable, the concept of the ecology and of managing ecosystems risks providing false hope. What we need to come to terms with as a culture is that there is no equilibrium to return to. That is a worldview rendered obsolete.

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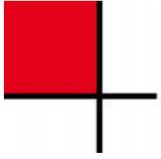
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The shock of the Anthropocene and a margin of hope: On possibilities for critical thinking in the Arctic context

Ville Kivivirta

abstract

As the limitations of anthropocentric thinking become more apparent, some critical research is becoming justified with recourse to the language of performativity. This essay considers this development from an Arctic setting, through the work of Michel Serres. The shock of the Anthropocene and the new forms of knowledge production oblige Arctic universities to become 'useful' to the global economy and to draw funding from outside the Arctic. Serres's discussion of the parasite provides conceptual orientation towards and practical orientation within this predicament. In order to survive in the Arctic universities without losing heart to technocracy, critical researchers, I argue, should transform into what I call parasitic cyborgs or assemblages of actors navigating the Arctic passages

Introduction

The balance of earth systems is altering on a global scale (Wark, 2015) and the safety of humanity is known to have been reduced as a direct consequence of human action (Rockström et al., 2009). And yet the collective responsibility for the future is rarely recognised, let alone deliberately enacted (Stengers, 2015). This polemical essay responds to this baleful scenario by considering the possibilities for critical thinking with material effects in the Arctic context.¹

1 My account is limited to Euro-Arctic Nordic multi-faculty universities, reflecting the situation mostly from the perspective of social science and their changing landscape of research funding. I exclude indigenous studies here, because indigenous studies

Following Peirce, a concept is useful only if it can modify purposive action. And so with the ‘shock of the Anthropocene’ (Bonneuil and Fressoz, 2016; cf. Haraway, 2016), I foreground the epoch’s effect upon human action.

Unfortunately critical theory seems to have been incapable of generating such responses (Bryant, 2011: 289). Latour (2004) was probably right: contemporary critical theorists are too much like generals condemned to fight their last war. And during recent years, I have observed critical scholars in Arctic universities becoming increasingly isolated, for reasons I later discuss. For me, working in an Arctic university in the current situation is also sometimes frustrating.

This essay surveys the prospects for critical social science within the Arctic context and recent debates concerning the possibilities for critical performativity. The difficulties for addressing the audiences in the Arctic facing the shock of the Anthropocene are read through this context. To propose a way forward for the Arctic critical thinking the value of Michel Serres’ account is being examined and a polemical figure of the parasitical cyborg is proposed. This way the shock of the Anthropocene has the potential to catalyse critical theory in the Arctic context, offering us the margin of hope we require.

Critique, performativity and the shock of the Anthropocene

Discussions of technoscience suggest a crisis in the relationship between nature and culture (Peters, 2015) so that traditional critical theory’s emphasis on social justice comes to appear outdated (Virilio, 2010). In what follows I will argue that, rather than seeing themselves as mere observers of technoscientific developments, contemporary scholars should also see themselves as technoscientific products. This requires a reconsideration of the role of social scientific agency, the relationship between the knower and the known included. Following Latour (2004, 246; italics original; cf. Latour, 2014), we should detect ‘*how many participants* are gathered in a *thing* to make it exist and to maintain its existence’ (see also 2013 and 2017). Haraway (1997) and Barad (2003, 2007) have also developed techno-scientifically mediated critical theoretical methodologies which aim at the production of material effects. Contemporary critical scholarship can only claim relevance beyond the academy, it seems, by framing the importance of their work exoterically.

scholars facing the shock of the Anthropocene often have a different relationship to the local communities than most other Arctic social scientists, like expressed by Raygorodetsky (2017) in his *Archipelago of hope*.

Within Business and Management Studies, this seems to have been the characteristic plight of Critical Management Studies (CMS). To what extent should the focus of CMS be on understanding management and to what extent should it be upon changing management? The field's failure to communicate beyond itself was pointedly lamented by Parker (2002: 184) as an 'endless glass-bead game (...) doomed to have relative irrelevance in the bigger games that shape our lives'. In a seminal statement made when the field was becoming institutionalised within university based business schools, Fournier and Grey (2000) argued for three foundational principles: denaturalisation, reflexivity and non-performativity. A so called third wave aiming at greater public significance (Spicer, 2014; Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman, 2016) pushes back against the third of these foundational principles. Through the concept of 'critical performativity' (Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman, 2009; Alvesson and Spicer, 2012), it is held that critical management scholarship should consist of practical interventions into organisational life.

The development has met with considerable opposition. Spoelstra and Svensson (2016) argue that CMS research should not be directly useful, that it should remain outside and distant, and that it is more about opening up than closing down. Others see the critical performativity development as hypocritical (Fleming and Banerjee, 2016), exclusionary (Learmonth et al., 2016) and poorly-theorised (Cabantous et al., 2016). The strong implication has been that critical performativity amounts to a publication strategy which seeks to cash out on already accumulated academic capital. Austin had already highlighted the felicitous context of performativity (Austin et al. 1975).

I'm sympathetic to the ad hominem point but it does not dismiss the wider structural point. After all, a large part of academic labour – certainly in the Nordic context – consists in convincing non-academics as to the relevance and fund-worthy nature of your work. The south Scandinavian context within which many of critical performativity's advocates operate make the concept less relevant for Arctic scholars but fortunately the discussion is also flourishing in other forms. Recently, increasing scholarly attention has been paid to the generative power of the concept of performativity from a position that acknowledges the material dimension (e.g. Butler, 2010; Callon, 2010; Orlikowski and Scott, 2014). I next consider the Arctic context and possibilities of critical thinking with material effects in Arctic universities where social science is practiced.

The Arctic context

The possibilities for critique are experienced, lived and practiced in specific contexts. The approach in this essay is Euro-Arctic, augmenting the discussions of the shock of the Anthropocene by situating it to the Nordic universities situated within the Barents Euro-Arctic region. As an institutional context, the Arctic universities² are different from business schools where the majority of CMS academics are situated (cf. Hartmann, Kärreman and Alvesson, 2016). Many of the trends in higher education have characterised the Arctic context, making it less felicitous. Market-driven managerialist reforms have disturbed the life of academics as universities as producers of knowledge are expected to become 'useful' to the global economy (Kallio et al., 2016) in what Martin (2011) describes as the ongoing technocratic takeover of universities. Indeed, it has been claimed that contemporary university exists to produce conformity (Docherty, 2015), while Parker (2014) notes the failed attempts by critical management scholars to resist such a technocratic takeover.

Arctic social scientists are increasingly required to consider their relationship to the Arctic knowledge infrastructure. Knowledge infrastructures where science is organised as both a culture and a technological infrastructure defines the means of knowledge production (Edwards, 2010; Karasti et al., 2016). In the Arctic knowledge infrastructure, the traditional investigator-initiated discipline-based knowledge production is increasingly regarded as outdated (cf. Nowotny, Scott and Gibbons, 2001), and the role of international interdisciplinary research consortia are becoming more important. Research should now boost local 'innovation clusters' and generate knowledge that enables more efficient exploitation of the Arctic.

In all Nordic countries, the population is relatively well educated and sustainability is considered important, but a blind eye is turned to the potentially harmful effects of localism. There are also some country-specific differences between Euro-Arctic universities: in Finland, conservative governments made funding cuts that worsened the working conditions in all universities, dubious higher education reforms affected the situation in Norway, while in Sweden the

2 The 'Arctic' has become a buzzword during the last decade and different actors in different situations emphasise different aspects of it, making Arctic so-called flexible territorial entity (Kristoferssen, 2014: 11), while the use of the concept can empower some actors or overshadow other interests (Keskitalo, 2015). For example, the universities of the Arctic regions have a strong regional role, but they did not often label themselves as Arctic before it became apparent that doing so would help them to secure funding.

recent policy goals have further highlighted the commercial and innovation-oriented roles of universities (Pinheiro, Geschwind and Aarrevaara, 2016). Euro-Arctic universities themselves are often poorer than certain Scandinavian business schools, and have traditionally depended on direct state funding as well as the support of the local stakeholders. Because strong business schools do not exist in the Arctic regions, social sciences are practiced in relatively small units within multi-faculty universities, where administrators often demand assessment exercises that reduce the outputs of scholars to a number.

All this has material and intellectual implications. To begin with, scholars in Arctic universities aren't always sympathetic towards their southern colleagues, and vice versa. For example, the seemingly mundane practices of academic publishing which might be partly postcolonial marginalise the northern periphery (see Meriläinen et al., 2008; cf. Canagarajah, 2002). In the Euro-Arctic region the colonial history is so messy that it is very difficult to distinguish who has been colonised by whom. It is as if Euro-Arctic scholars are almost as Westerners as their colleagues in southern Scandinavian universities, but not quite.

Arctic scholars might also be labelled merely as servants of the colonial administration exploiting the Arctic, because the shock of the Anthropocene leaves social sciences on a whole in the Arctic universities, and especially research related to Arctic governance and northern change, in an awkward position. It is often assumed that solving the problems of the Anthropocene would require Arctic research to steer collective behaviour towards outcomes chosen by others (see Pelaudeix, 2015; Young, 2010; 2017). The solutions currently offered to the ecological disasters of the Anthropocene by those funding Arctic research are usually those of endemic technocratic grand narratives (cf. Bonneuil and Fressoz, 2016).

The implication being that Arctic social science must either co-operate with natural scientists, or remain isolated. While the latter option still currently prevails, funding flows will soon ensure the rise of the former. Furthermore, if critical scientists continue to be uncooperative, the future Arctic knowledge infrastructure will be shaped by those who do not sense the shock of the Anthropocene quite so keenly. I fear that the possibilities of a social scientific questioning of the Arctic technocratic consciousness are dim if research on Arctic governance and northern change remains limited by the institutionalised inability to theorise the role of knowledge production mechanisms in socio-technical systems that have material effects. I urge social scientists to launch new

identity projects that facilitate critical thinking with material effects and enable a margin of hope.³ And I know one philosopher who can assist in this.

Maintaining a margin of hope with Michel Serres

To recap, I argue that the shock of the Anthropocene requires Arctic critical researchers to refashion their role in the knowledge infrastructure before technocracy prevails.⁴ Enter the post-humanist figure of the parasitic cyborg inspired by Michel Serres feeding at the table of technoscience.

In his œuvre, Michel Serres analyses connection, relations and the interface between human nature and the rest of nature. Latour (1987a) labels Serres' work queer empiricist and views his philosophy as pre-critical because it rejects revolution and works without metalanguage. As a former naval officer, Serres keeps finding passages between and among cultural productions that seem disparate. As a former mathematician, Serres likes shortcuts and rapid thought. This is expressed in his writing style, where short-cuts are made and novel passages opened between different realms in non-linear fashion without bothering to follow the institutionalised faculty territories (Paulson, 1997). His encyclopedic style and intertextual fabric might at first appear off-putting, but follows from his understanding of the philosophical vocation as a boundary crossing one.

For Serres, reason is evenly distributed in the world and not the property of science. He gives the name *tiers-instruit* to one who is able to give up the comforts of disciplinary specialism and risk putting themselves into perpetual translation (Serres, 1991). He often urges us to 'go outside of the human sciences, outside the streets and walls of the city', because traditional political agency is only able of capturing the administrative organisation of groups within the *polis* (Serres, 1995a: 44). He (2014b: 5) regards the traditional *polis* and the urbanisation that fuelled it dangerous because it alienates us from worlds other than its own (see Brown, 2002 and 2005; cf. Bell, 2010.)

3 Term 'margin of hope' was coined by Irving Howe (1984) in his intellectual autobiography. For him it was connected with what Gershom Scholem had called 'plastic hours' or the times when sentiments of hope spread, people come together, and it is possible to act.

4 This is the old warning once expressed by Max Weber (1949), stating that if science does not know its limits, it is used to eradicate those aspects of our lives that make it meaningful for us because they look 'irrational'. Weber was aware of the important meaning of what he called meaningless infinity, or that which escapes the rationalisation attempts of secondary (technocratic) thinking.

In *Natural contract* Serres (1995a) formulates his neo-ecological position upon which he claims the modern conceptualisation of the natural world and our relation to it must be redefined. Ecosystems are living and vibrant agents with which humans co-exist in constant and delicate interactions, vastly extending the definition of the social of the social contract. Serres's solution is to articulate agency from multiple perspectives (see also Latour, 2014: 6f). Throughout his work, Serres (1995c) demonstrates the crucial role of mediators in the constitution of knowledge, constantly questioning the traditional division between human and artefact. He often employs a topological mode of thinking, a shifting distribution of points in complex spatial arrangements to analyse the complexes of space and time, matter and process (Serres and Latour, 1992). His is the ongoing search for the enigmatic union of subject and object which joins historical consciousness and the materiality of the world (Assad, 2011; see also Serres, 2009, 2014a, 2015). While he has it that modernity began when the external world became a feature of the inner subject (1995c), science, for Serres, is not thinkable outside of the collectives and the technologies that provide its proper milieu (1995b). His vision of scientific thought stresses the instability of the positions of observer and observed, sender and receiver, subject and object, and human and the artefact (cf. Brown, 2005). For Serres (1995a), ecosystems themselves are living and vibrant agents within which humans co-exist in constant and delicate interactions, vastly extending the definition of the social and of the social contract.

The solution he offers is to establish a new social contract based on the rights of symbiosis, itself defined as the reciprocity between humans of nature. As the humans of the Anthropocene are equivalent to natural forces, in Serres' view, nature should consequently be endowed with the same rights as those claimed by humans. In his own discussion of the concept of the Anthropocene within *Times of crisis* (2014b), he indicates how Nature itself might become understood as a subject with a voice, a conversation partner. Planetary environmental crisis requires that the beings on our planet including air, water, energy, earth, living beings (Serres calls this *Biogée* or Biogea) constitute a kind of parliament called WAFEL (Water, Air, Fire, Earth, Life) with voices that can address the problems of the Anthropocene with humans. Serres optimistically emphasises the role of science in giving a voice to the non-human world, while acknowledging the requirement to have this voice spoken in multiple tongues. Social scientists, as Serres has it, could help to transmit, receive, store and manage information in ways that could help us all live in Biogea. Only those scholars who, as 'secular people, swear they do not serve any military or economic interest', he states, can speak in the name of Biogea (*ibid.*: 65).

Also relevant to our present concerns is Serres' discussion of how order emerges from disorder. Drawing from information theory, especially Henri Atlan (1974), Serres holds that messages are always received with noise and, by extension, that noise itself is valuable. In *The parasite* (2007), which Serres calls the book of evil, the asymmetrical relation of taking without giving that defines parasitism is shown to characterise communication and human relations. He achieves this by pointing out that the word parasite comes from the Greek *parasitos*, which literally denotes a person eating at another's table. The term parasite also refers to noise (*bruits parasites*) in radio technology and information theory. Parasites are required, it follows for Serres, because no relation is possible before parasites insert themselves into the circuit. Throughout the history of philosophy there have been many attempts to purify systems of noisy or parasitical contamination but Serres sees these as essentially failing.⁵ The parasite, argues Serres, is present in every system because disorder is there from the very outset, hence: '[w]hen the sciences *add* variety to the world, they are to be used. When they subtract variety they are to be rejected' (Latour, 1987b: 96).

For Serres, then, it is the parasite, which enables contingency and transformation in the world. The role of the parasite is to feed near the table where the dinner takes place and to innovatively utilise the information stolen from the dinner conversation. The social scientific parasite cannot be an atomistic modernist individual, but an assemblage of distributed agencies (see Garud and Karnøe, 2003), in many ways resembling a cyborg. This is very much keeping with Latour, who has long argued that scientific production is a function of human and non-human assemblages (see also Bennett, 2010; Callon et al., 2009; Salter, 2016).⁶ The point with Serres is to appreciate how cybernetics offers critical vocabulary and material for identity work: no dualisms, no perfect communication, plenty of irony. Heterogeneous assemblages in the process of

5 Serres also links classical atomism to the contemporary complexity sciences, when highlighting the role of minimal deviation (*clinamen* or 'atomic swerve', concept Lucretius apparently borrowed from Epicurus, who used it to solve the problems with atomistic worldview, namely how complex systems evolve and how free will is possible) that sets up a catastrophic chain of collisions (Serres, 2007: 72; cf. Skrbina, 2007: 52).

6 According to Bennett (2010: 22-23), assemblage in a distributed agency is defined as 'groups of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts [...] able to function despite the persistent presence of energy that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energy that confound them from within. [...] The effects generated by an assemblage are [...] emergent properties, emergent in that their ability to make something happen is distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality considered alone'. In Haraway's (1991) cyborg ontology the agency comprises heterogeneous assemblages in the process of becoming, always moving and forever unfinished.

becoming, always moving and forever unfinished. The dangers of using cybernetics as a utopian stepping stone are already well documented elsewhere (Kline, 2015; cf. also Tiqqun, 2001). Studying cybernetic organisations also saves one from having to decide from the outset what research seeks to explore (see Cooper and Law, 1995; Haraway, 1997). The figure of the parasitical cyborg is in line with these propositions.

Conclusions

This essay argues that the shock of the Anthropocene can catalyse critical thought, although the traditional critical research(ers) could be facing defeat in the Arctic universities. The possibilities for critical scholarship are contextual and the Nordic context can be experienced in different ways and the Anthropocene is also scholarship-in-the-making (Swanson, Bubandt and Tsing, 2015). I have tried to express how I view the possibilities for critique in the Arctic university and I've prioritised Serres because, to my mind, his work suggests possible positions within and passages through the Anthropocene.

Arguably we want science that is subordinated to the needs of citizens and communities. But because of the shock of the Anthropocene one has come to realise that there are indeed other citizens of the earth, some non-human with different spatio-temporal scales, often existing in complex systems that are all shaped by the actions of man. With this in mind and to maintain a margin of hope, I think what is called for is meta-theoretical poetry performed by assemblages of critical researchers who identify themselves as parasitic cyborgs. This isn't as far-fetched as it might sound. Technoscience, with its vast resources, does not need critical social science in the Arctic knowledge infrastructures. But critical researchers here in the Arctic require technoscience's resources if we are to survive. So we have to learn to play the role of a parasite and Serres shows us the beginnings of the way.

Serres is an optimist who continues to chart possible passages for a better world after the Anthropocene, urging humanity to become renters instead of owners (2011). His work might unfetter the performative potential of critical Arctic scholarship. Unfortunately, some of his propositions seem somewhat quaint. The role he proposes might also be too demanding. It might even be too late to negotiate a new contract with nature on account of anthropological hubris (Hamilton, 2015). Or it could be that Arctic scholarship has already been assimilated by technocracy and the shock of the Anthropocene, in this sense, is yet another opportunity for profit maximisation and capital leveraging. These are all suitable reasons to reject Serres and might have paralysing effects.

Unfortunately, the situation also offers easy targets for those who wish to romanticise their own position as truly critical scholars. But the optimism of Serres can also offer us a margin of hope for the future science navigating in the Arctic passages, optimism that critical thinking rejecting the post-humanist figure of the parasitic cyborg might lack.

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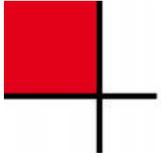
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You can do things with words: Considering the performativity of performativity of economics

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.

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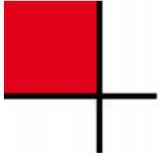
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The matter of objects

Hugo Letiche, Geoff Lightfoot and Simon Lilley

review of

Harman, G. (2016a) *Immaterialism: Objects and social theory*. Cambridge: Polity, (PB, pp. 140, £9.99, ISBN 9781509500970);

Harman, G. (2016b) *Dante's broken hammer: The ethics, aesthetics and metaphysics of love*. London: Repeater Books, (PB, pp. 261, £8.99, ISBN 9781910924303); and

DeLanda, M. and Harman, G. (2017) *The rise of realism*. Cambridge: Polity, (PB, pp. 160, £9.99, ISBN 9781509519033).

A return to the real?

Recent years have seen both a turn towards realism and a turn away from overweening epistemological speculation. Graham Harman's work has been central to both of these moves.¹ What contemporary reinvigorations of realist concerns seem to share is a dissatisfaction with what increasingly appears to be the endless regress of considering the implications of how humans can and do 'make' the world as they make sense of it. For those in this broader emergent 'realist' tradition such regress comes with costs of, *inter alia*: enforced silence in

1 Of course, this is not the first time that we've been enjoined to take 'reality' more seriously, with various incursions from those claiming to plough a 'critical realist' furrow being particularly prevalent in the recent organisational and administrative sciences literature. Readers interested in the ways in which this incursion has developed, and could perhaps develop better, could do worse than consult Al-Amoudi and Willmott (2011).

the face of matters that are apparently too big for prevailing human consideration (e.g. Morton, 2013); of having helped hold open the doors to a polluted post-truth public space (e.g. Ferraris, 2014); and of the unsatisfactory nature of a project which shows interest in the matters of the world when, and only when, their reflections take place in the correlate of human consideration (e.g. Meillassoux, 2008). Harman sees himself as pursuing a 'speculative realist' agenda and, more particularly, he is engaged in developing what he terms an 'object-oriented ontology' (see, for example, Harman, 2011; Bryant et al, 2011). These concerns have been present in his work since his first publication *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Harman, 2002); a popularisation of his doctoral thesis which radicalised and ubiquitousised Heidegger's insights into the nature of the things which constitute our world. 'Heidegger only makes sense if pushed in a radically realist direction' [DeLanda and Harman, 2017: 2].

We believe that Harman's *oeuvre* will be of increasing interest to scholars of management, organisation and the wider social sciences for at least two reasons. Firstly, the empirical domains of these disciplines are contoured by and studded with myriad 'objects' that have too often been ignored, fetishized or black-boxed and too infrequently speculated upon with any degree of seriousness. Secondly, these are domains that have sporadically toyed with Heidegger in their ruminations and it is through Heidegger that Harman sees his opening toward a different way of thinking about the objects of the world.

Harman attends to Martin Heidegger's (1962) famous distinction between the ready-to- and present-at-hand in a manner both idiosyncratic and, on occasion, tending to the monomaniacal. Heidegger most famously plays out this distinction in relation to a hammer. He reminds us that when we look at a hammer in our hand and notice it, at that moment it is not a hammering tool delivering its function. There is a world of mystery between our hammer in the hand as an object of some form of contemplation; and the hammer in a hand that moves seamlessly with us as it sinks nails into wood. The hammer's presence is revealed only when it breaks in its function, or otherwise breaks out of its immersion in the world of objects with which it interacts. Harman is directly interested in the objects of being and a metaphysics that would enable them to *be*; and to *be real*. He suggests that for any object for which the hammer makes itself present-at-hand as a hammer to be contemplated, the other side of the hammer object - in which it is ready-to-hand, immersed in the extending equipment of the world - must be withdrawn into recess for the making present to take place.

Harman's radicalisation takes place by extending Heidegger's insights concerning the relationship between human being(s) and objects of use to

relationships between objects of all sorts. Not merely those in interaction with a human partner; and not merely those that have already been shaped into tools by such human partners. Harman makes these moves to combat what he sees as the ‘general prejudice of post-Kantian philosophy [... which is] that the human-world relation is the sole genuine topic of philosophy’ [2016b: 10], and posits a world in which ‘objects interpret each other just as we interpret them’ [DeLanda and Harman, 2017: 88].

In this extended review piece we consider three of Harman’s recent books in which he begins to apply his ideas to more prosaic domains than that of a splendidly isolated philosophy. We consider Harman’s reading of *The Divine Comedy* in *Dante’s Broken Hammer*; his re-reading of the history of the Dutch East India Company in *Immaterialism*; and join him in conversation with Manuel DeLanda in *The Rise of Realism*.

Why leave the comfortable confines of philosophy?

Philosophy is *philosophia*, not *sophia*. It is a love of wisdom, and therefore it does not know the truth about... anything².

Building a philosophy on an understanding of its limits is a trick that has been played at least since the time of Socrates, who famously claimed that ‘the only thing he knows is that he knows nothing’ [Harman, 2016b: 180]. For Harman’s project it is particularly pregnant with possibility since in his approach to the ‘objects’ he sees as making up the world he is keen to avoid the traditional trap of either under- or overmining his quarry (or worse still, doing both at the same time). This is what happens when we seek to answer the question ‘what is it?’ with an account of what the ‘it’ does or what the ‘it’ is made up of. In the foray into consideration of art objects that Harman undertakes in *Dante’s Broken Hammer*, this is made abundantly clear and is rendered as one of the benefits of considering the objects of art as a way of exemplifying the distinctive contribution that object-oriented ontology seeks to make. For whilst it may be of interest to some to know of the chemical constituents of the splash of vermilion before our eyes, such knowledge does little to inform us of the nature of the artistic object of which it forms part. Similarly, what the artwork may be doing is subject to change on the basis of the perspective with which it is approached as, say, decorative object and/or political call to arms. And what is true of the art object is true of objects in general. It is perhaps just that with the art object the insufficiency of partial explanations (at whatever level) is all the more evident. Harman’s point is an ontological rather than an aesthetic one. Or rather what he

²<https://eupublishingblog.com/2015/09/10/an-interview-with-graham-harman/>

makes clear is that any appreciation of an object *qua* object is necessarily aesthetic, for the ontology of *all* objects is one that escapes direct capture and thus demands an approach that is speculative and interpretative. For Harman this does not mean that the nature of the object is uncertain or unspecified – ‘real objects are always finite and specific’ [2016b: 208] - but they also cannot be fully known or apprehended (either by ‘us’ or indeed by other objects in general) since they are ‘withdrawn from *direct* contact’ [ibid., original emphasis].

Drawing on Latour, Harman (2009: 102) is fulsome in his admiration for the ways in which Actor- Network Theory has granted ‘dignity’ ‘to all sizes and type of actors’ (or ‘objects’ in Harman’s broader terms):

Neutrons are actors and black holes are actors, but so are buildings, cities, humans, dogs, rocks, fictional characters, secret potions, and voodoo dolls...

But apparently ‘this sorcerer’s chant of the multitude of things that resist any unified empire’ (ibid.), does not in itself do enough to show what might happen when one begins to consider the world as made up of more categories than just the human and the non-human and rather opens up categorisation to the myriad range of objects of all sorts.

[T]he rhetorical power of these rosters of beings stems from their direct opposition to the flaws of current mainstream philosophy... [and shifts] the weight of philosophy toward specific actors themselves and away from all structures that might wish to subsume them. (Harman, 2009: 102)

It is here that Harman identifies an insufficiency in Latour’s otherwise admirable interventions. For in his over valorisation of the ‘network’ at the heart of Actor-Network Theory, Latour risks the very reality of the objects he posits. Seeing objects as exclusively the product of the relations in which they are embroiled renders them as only *effects* and for Harman objects must be more than *just effects* if they are not to be completely consumed and exhausted by the relations which they enter into. To really convince us of the value of his approach Harman needs to do more than just assert that ‘we gain access to [reality] only by indirect, allusive, or vicarious means’ [2016a: 17]; he needs to show us how such allusion works in practice in relation to specific fields of inquiry with their specific sets of objects of interest.

The ethics, aesthetics and metaphysics of objects

In Harman’s view, if objects were wholly apparent in the given they would not have enough in reserve to persist and would be quickly exhausted by the relations which they form. In an object-oriented ontology, the object itself remains

reserved whilst only its vicarious cousins come forth to do battle. These representatives engage with the representatives of other reserved objects and in the process may form new objects through miscegenation with each other. And just as unreserved relation would destroy the object worthy of the name, in Harman's terms, so too would complete explication or explanation. Which is another way of saying that unreserved relation and complete explication are impossible. Confronted then by a need to address particular objects in a sustained way but precluded from any simple empirical assay by the tenets of his philosophy, how does Harman proceed? Glibly, the answer is, and must be, allusively. But what does such allusion look like? And where might it take us?

In the case of *Dante's Broken Hammer*³ we find three chapters that in turn draw out object-oriented philosophical lessons from Dante's classic in the realms of ethics, aesthetics and metaphysics. In the chapter on ethics we first note the virtue of Kant's formalistic approach in maintaining a specific space for the ethical that neither dissolves down into the consequences of our actions or up into genuflection to the will of God. Rather, the ethical finds a place of its own in a realm of *duty*; a duty not to what we might gain or what our maker might determine as for the best, but rather to a conception of the good derived on its own terms as categorical imperative. But in its abstraction this imperative risks 'a drab ethical uniformity, with the same actions binding on all humans at all times' [2016b: 156]. To mitigate this, Harman draws upon Max Scheler whose *Ordo Amoris* (or 'order of love') seeks to attend to the specificity of the historical ethical agent in the specificity of their situation. 'For Kant, we reach the true ethical state by abstracting from all objects of our interest; for Scheler, it is a

3 Following a brief introduction in which we are informed of this history and reminded of Harman's abiding philosophical concerns, the first two thirds of the text, prior to these three more reflective chapters, take us through an extended *précis* of the three excursions into purgatory, heaven and hell that make up the whole of the Comedy. It is worthy of note that Harman begins this *précis* with a foray into the middle of the poem; the portion concerning purgatory. Harman believes that 'the key to Dante can be found in this second canticle' [2016b: 10] and we would contend that this key is the *movement* made most visible in this section of the poem; movement through which new *realities* are created by *objects* and their *attachments*. 'Attachment' is a key term for Harman, for which he draws inspiration from Latour and Lépinay's reading of Tarde [Harman, 2016b: 12]. What is of interest to Harman is perhaps most easily communicated via consideration of the dual meanings of the word in English, in which it 'pertains both to emotional and physical joinings' [2016b: 247]. 'Love' is a special form of attachment and usage of the term is reserved for when one of the objects involved is a God, a human or an animal. Harman reminds us that love is present in both heaven and hell (and indeed in the purgatory between them). Our movement will tend to be upwards towards God and his heavenly hosts when we sincerely love and attach to appropriate objects for our ardour; and it will be downwards toward the Devil and his hell-fires when our love is either insincere or misplaced.

matter of enthusiastically increasing our attachments to more and more things.’ [2016b: 168]. It is in this sense that Harman sees Scheler’s (1973) ‘Ordo Amoris’ not only as ‘a near-perfect fit with Dantean cosmology’ [2016b: 11], but also as hugely sympathetic with his own position with regard to the inexhaustible specificity of the objects of speculative realism.

In the second reflective chapter, which deals explicitly with aesthetics, we tread a now familiar path tracing the risks and opportunities of formalist thinking. Harman argues that Kant, in his mobilisation of ‘the sublime’, ends up not in awe to a nature that inevitably exceeds us but rather tames that very nature by placing ‘the dynamically sublime not in [the] overwhelming forces’ of objects such as ‘volcanoes, hurricanes and mighty waterfalls’ but rather ‘in our minds’ [2016b: 195]. Harman avoids what he sees as the ‘correlationism’ in this move by taking a detour via Ortega’s consideration of metaphor’s function, which Harman has previously rendered as a special form of the ‘allure’ through which the sensual, vicarious cousins of real objects interest each other in trade (2005). Indeed he further develops his understanding of metaphor in the context of an object-oriented ontology, suggesting that when we form a metaphorical connection with an object ‘the real [object] is necessarily absent from the scene. There is only one real object that is not absent, and that is *I myself as the beholder of the metaphor*’ [Harman, 2016b: 193, original emphasis]. This beholder is not to be seen as a separate, inviolate entity that arrives on the scene alone, ready to encounter the metaphor in play. Neither are we to see the aesthetic as residing solely in the metaphor to be apprehended. For alongside the real ‘I’ doing the beholding are the sensual objects that the metaphor mobilises.

OOO [object-oriented ontology] joins Scheler in treating the lover and the beloved (in ethics as in art) as a single unit irreducible to either term, or to a mere side-by-side existence of both. By the same token, the aesthetic unit contains the object and the spectator to an equal degree, and cannot be obtained by fumigating one or the other out of existence. [2016b: 215]

Unsurprisingly, we witness a similar set of moves in the final chapter of the book in which Harman addresses metaphysics. Here he builds on the distinction previously drawn between the policing sort of ‘criticism’ that we witness in the rather tawdry point-scoring vein of writing all too familiar to readers of academic texts, and the more appreciative form of ‘criticism’ that is the realm of the ‘amateur’ aficionado and indeed of those professional wine and food critics whose words we enjoy in glossy Sunday supplements.

In the case of metaphysics, attachment occurs when we abandon the taxonomic and hence formalist distinction between thinking subjects on one side and everything else on the other, so that the basic unit of metaphysics becomes the indirect relation between myself as real object and the withdrawn real object

behind the sensual one [that is present in the encounter]. Among other consequences, this model of *attachment* as the central principle of philosophy devalues the aloof and cynical critic of modernity in favor of a more enthusiastic human, defined by his or her loves rather than his or her all-knowing sneers. [Harman, 2016b: 248, original emphasis]

It is in this sense that Harman concludes by reiterating ‘the object-oriented claim that aesthetics is first philosophy’ [2016b: 249].

Empiricism, formalism and materialism

In his exchanges with DeLanda, Harman and his dialogist both dismiss the analytical philosophical tradition as empiricist rather than realist, on the grounds that it too often appears to consider reality exhausted by the ‘given’, with nothing hidden behind it [2017: 9]. Although they concur on their dismissal of the analytical tradition, their reasons for this dismissal are subtly different and the rest of the book explores the basis of this differentiation. The text appears as amongst the more serious attempts to tie together and mutually explore some of the nuanced range of ‘realist’ thought that has emerged in recent years. At the most superficial end of these encounters we witness the myriad laudatory introductions, forewords and afterwords with which many writers in the new realist mode valorise their texts as complementary to the work of others within what then increasingly appears to be an emerging tradition. Harman’s engagement with DeLanda here is at least more substantive and sustained. However it does at times feel as if depth of engagement is partly sacrificed to maintenance of loose agreement. This may in large part be the result of the way in which the conversation is staged around consideration of a list of paired ‘theses’ primarily derived from the work of Braver (2007, 2012). Whilst the theses themselves are potentially of some interest, their lack of direct attention to an object nature of reality seems to leave Harman always somewhat on the back foot in the subsequent discussion.

To our minds, this is the least successful of the three texts of Harman that we’ve been considering and for our purposes the most interesting point of the joint text is the way in which it begins to clarify for us Harman’s object-oriented ontology’s relation to materialism. As Harman puts it:

On the one hand, we have your philosophy, which is both ardently realist and ardently materialist. Then there is my own position which is ardently realist while rejecting materialism as a form of either upward or downward reductionism, depending on whether it takes a scientific/Marxist or social constructionist form. [DeLanda and Harman, 2017: 3] (See also Harman, 2010.)

Whilst for DeLanda a material account of the matters of the world entails the information through which that matter is organised.

[T]he term ‘materialism’ should not imply only the mind-independent existence of matter, but also energy and physical information (material patterns and forms)... I use the analogy quite often to give mathematics a material status [DeLanda in DeLanda and Harman, 2017: 11]

For Harman, material is more easily dismissed than the forms which it might take when we encounter it. Given this, he unsurprisingly struggles to conceive of a matter without form or at least struggles to see the virtue in such a notion.

Harman is at his most appreciative of DeLanda in relation to the ‘brilliant opening pages’ of his *A new philosophy of society* (2006) [Harman, 2016b: 221]. When describing these pages Harman delights in DeLanda’s demand for ‘a *realist* philosophy of society’ [ibid.]; a ‘philosophy of society as it exists apart from humans’ [ibid.], by which Harman takes him to mean a ‘society autonomous of any human *observer*.’ [ibid., original emphasis]

That is to say, society must have an innate character that exceeds the knowledge of any particular sociologist, since no one can claim to plumb the depths of society fully [Harman, 2016b: 221].

We thus conclude our extended review with the 2016 text, *Immaterialism: objects and social theory* which is Harman’s most direct attempt to consider matters sociological via an approach that he terms ‘immaterialist’.

What’s the matter here?

The specific ‘object’ upon which Harman’s gaze alights in *Immaterialism* is the Dutch East India Company. This object is chosen since the famous philosopher Leibniz had previously mobilised it in an effort to show that considering it as constituting a ‘substance’ would be ‘so patently ridiculous that no one could ever take it seriously’ [Harman, 2016a: 37].⁴ Harman claims his text is about ‘objects and their relevance to social theory’ [2016a:1] and explicitly links an ‘interest in objects’ with ‘interest in “materialism”’. For Harman, however, there has too often been too easy an identification between a concern for ‘materialism’ and a concern ‘objects’ and he is keen to distinguish the two to clarify what he sees as distinctive in the object-oriented approach. ‘Materialism’ or more specifically what Harman recognises as ‘New Materialism’, is a loose set of theses that he

4 See also Rutherford (1995) who reports in a footnote Leibniz’s use of such a pejorative account of the Dutch East India Company in a letter to Arnauld of 30th April 1687.

discerns as more or less implicitly present in much recent social theorising.⁵ Key amongst these theses would be the notion of relatively constant change, an abiding contingency to world and a tendency to view what a thing *does* as more important than what a thing *is*. Harman's concern throughout his delineation of new materialist tendencies is what appears to him to be their 'deep commitment to the *overmining* method' [2016a: 15, original emphasis] in which discernment of the action attendant upon objects of the world occludes the objects themselves. In this he continues his long abiding love-hate relationship with the transformations wrought in academia by the twists and turns of the development of Actor-Network Theory.

Harman [2016a: 15-16] proceeds to list 'axioms of immaterialism' which he sees as avoiding the risk of overmining and thus as guides to more effective development of theorising about the social. The obverse risk to overmining for an object-oriented ontology is that of the *undermining* that is most apparent in the reductionism favoured by certain forms of natural scientific discourse that endlessly seek the absolute, underlying entities of that which confronts us; the sort of disciplinary hierarchisation that sees either physics or sometimes mathematics as the *ur*-discipline, with everything else something of a poor cousin.⁶ Harman is convinced that his axioms of immaterialism will not fall into such an obverse trap 'because immaterialism recognises entities at every scale of existence without dissolving them into some ultimate constitutive layer' [Harman, 2016a: 16].⁷

Harman sees the objects of his interest as being instituted and sustained by moments of what he, following Margulis (1999), calls *symbiosis*; a biological term used to denote interaction between two distinct organisms in physical

5 The term 'new materialism' was coined by a number of writers who see themselves as working this vein (see, for example, Coole and Frost, 2010). Harman uses it to describe not only their work but other work that he sees as sympathetic to the underlying loose set of theses he discerns within the new materialist tradition, regardless of whether or not all the authors so identified would explicitly rally to the specific banner of 'new materialism'.

6 This is not, as DeLanda points out, necessarily a stance taken by the whole of the natural sciences, for as he reminds us, chemists are more than capable of seeing equivalent reality in both the hydrogen and oxygen that fuel fire and their combine in the water that can extinguish it [DeLanda and Harman, 2017: 8].

7 Of course, it is entirely possible for an object to be both undermined and overmined simultaneously in a process that Harman terms 'duominging'. He provides the example of 'certain forms of scientific materialism, which ruthlessly undermine when they treat ultimate particles, fields, strings, or indeterminate "matter" as the ultimate layer of the cosmos, but then ruthlessly overmine when claiming that mathematics can exhaust the primary qualities of this genuine layer' [Harman, 2016a: 11-12].

association, often mutually beneficial in nature. Harman believes that each object experiences a number – but a relatively small number – of symbiotic moments during its life and he further contends that these moments tend to concentrate at the earlier stages of that life, which is clearly consonant with his immaterialist axiom that ‘change is intermittent and stability is the norm’. Symbiotic moments are often both ‘non-reciprocal’ and ‘asymmetrical’ [2016a: 120-121]. Harman gives the example of his own relocation to Cairo to illustrate his point; for whilst this clearly changed *his* life significantly it probably did considerably less to the object we call Cairo, in part because he and Cairo are significantly dissimilar objects. Harman sees a path dependency in the development of objects, an *irreversibility*, which he renders in terms of his account of symbiosis as a constraint upon the flexibility of the development of an object. In the most general of terms for Harman, symbiosis refers ‘to a special type of relation that changes the reality of one of its *relata*’ [2016a: 49]. In developmental terms he sees a tendency for symbiosis to shift historically from constituting relatively weak ties to those ties becoming so strong that they may imperil the object itself. For example, when the tightness of coupling of the entities so symbiotically bound becomes a co-dependency in which a break to or perturbation of any remaining weak link can rapidly take down the whole [2016a: 118-120].

Harman terms his stance ‘immaterialism’ because he believes that ‘formalism’, ‘the natural opposite to materialism... is too closely linked [in philosophy] with abstract logico-mathematical procedures that are foreign to the object-oriented method’ [2016a: 15]. But it is clearly a formalism that he favours. That is the formalism of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* which highlights the unbridgeable gap between our knowledge of the objects of the world (what Kant terms ‘phenomena’) and that which might exist regardless of our perceptual peregrinations (what Kant terms ‘noumena’, the things-in-themselves). Just as *Tool-Being* previously ubiquitousised an insight from Heidegger, *Immaterialism* radicalises Kant by taking ‘us’ out of the equation; suggesting that for any account of the world in which objects are sufficiently deep to be not fully given in their relations and thus for any account of a world capable of change, ‘every inanimate object is a thing-in-itself for every other as well’ [2016a: 29]. Which is all well and good. But we still have a nagging sense that the excursion which applies the ideas of object-oriented ontology to the *Comedy* [2016b] is considerably more satisfying than the account of their application to the Dutch East India Company. Why might this be so?

Concluding remarks

As Campbell, Dunne and Ennis (2017) point out, and as we have intimated above, Harman remains a philosopher and avowedly so. As such his theorisation essentially advocates, and can only advocate, an aesthetic approach to the revelation of necessarily withdrawn and withdrawing objects of the world. Thus he can offer no definitive ‘method’ to the organisational and social sciences and this is why the latter pages of *Immaterialism* are taken up by a series of what must remain ‘provisional rules of method’ [2016a: 114 *et passim*]. Such a stance towards aspects of our world works tolerably well when directed to a foundational text such as the *Comedy*, which has a relatively constrainable context and a central concern with love. But it is less successful when confronting the messier text of the Dutch East India Company with its endlessly ramifying contexts. For here it is forced to address and at least partially answer, however implicitly, questions such as the ways in which Coen, its ‘grim... Governor-General’ [2016a: 39] can and does represent the company and its sponsor state; the stability of the referent of the term ‘the Dutch’ in an era of different borders than our own; and the relationship between the rapacious colonization of Indonesia and the achievements of the Golden Age in Holland. It may simply be that there is more to appreciate, more to which one can warmly attach, in an epic poem of love than in a tragic account of imperial adventure. Superficially this might suggest that object-oriented ontology is unlikely to be a definitive guide to better appreciation and understanding of the objects of our world, which is undoubtedly the case. But the problem here is not so much with object-oriented ontology’s lack of capacity to deliver definitive answers. It resides rather more in the persisting desire for definitiveness in the face of objects whose nature is to inherently resist complete explication.

More fundamentally however, our dissatisfaction with the *provisionality* of the rules that Harman offers us for the conducting of social scientific investigation probably reflects our inability to really take seriously the lessons that his philosophy offers us. Which, curiously, takes us right back to the Heidegger with which both we and Harman began our excursions. Heidegger informed us that the ‘enframing’ of the world of modern technology as ‘standing reserve’ is an active process in which only aspects and parts of recalcitrant reality are brought forth and stabilised as representations of instrumental value. A view of the world that bears much similarity to that offered by Dutch still life paintings of the Golden Age; paintings which present that world ‘as a table top ruled by the human hand and eye’ (Fisher, 1978: 144). For, despite superficial robustness, such representations are *always* at risk of falling back into the world from which they were drawn; a tendency which is itself productive of the congenitally failing desire to enforce and stabilise the enframed standing reserve.

Pressed to its extreme, this process tends towards finality through the construction of large-scale systems of certainty which seek to master what remains of uncertainty; a continuous chain of terms is forged which must reinforce each term's certainty. Heidegger calls this process 'the gigantic' (Cooper, 1993: 288).

As we saw, a key strength of Harman's interventions is his insistence on pressing aspects of Heidegger's insights to their absolute limits. It is thus not only the 'terms' of *our* making that we would deliberately seek to forge that subsequently press back in on each other and begin to dedifferentiate that to which they are attached. Rather *all* of the objects of the world possess both the capacity to persist and the capacity to produce change and novelty through their symbiotic entanglements with other objects. But social and organisational objects, just like *all* objects within an object-oriented ontology, engage with each other only partially and via intermediaries and thus can only be grasped by other objects, including objects such as ourselves, in partial and incomplete ways. If we wish to do them justice we must approach them with this understanding of their and our nature in mind. To take but one pressing example, it is just such an understanding of the shifting faithfulness of the objects of the world that we might need in revising our organisational and social sciences such that they are better able to reverently engage with 'the environment' as a cryptically reserved potential source of surprise that endlessly exceeds the category of mere container.

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