



# Modes of organization

**ephemera:** theory & politics  
in organization



## **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**

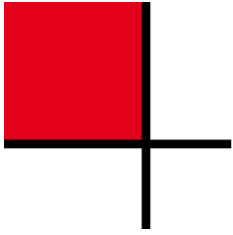
*ephemera* encourages contributions that explicitly engage with theoretical and conceptual understandings of organizational issues, organizational processes and organizational life. This does not preclude empirical studies or commentaries on contemporary issues, but such contributions consider how theory 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*

ephemera 21(3), Aug 2021

## **Modes of organization**

Lisa Conrad, Rowland Curtis and  
Christian Garmann Johnsen



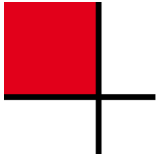
Published by the *ephemera* editorial collective: Bernadette Loacker, Birke Otto, Christian Garmann Johnsen, Christos Giotitsas, Ekaterina Chertkovskaya, Emil Husted, Justine Grønæk Pors, Jette Sandager, Karolina Mikołajewska-Zajac, Lena Olaison, Lisa Conrad, Lisa Wiedemann, Marton Racz, Mie Plotnikof, Nick Butler, Ozan Nadir Alakavuklar, Randi Heinrichs, Rowland Curtis, Yousaf Nishat-Botero, Yousra Rahmouni Elidrissi.

First published for free online at [www.ephemerajournal.org](http://www.ephemerajournal.org).

ISSN (Online) 1473-2866

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

Cover image © Wolf Knaut



## Table of Contents

### Editorial

Modes of organization	1-16
<i>Lisa Conrad, Rowland Curtis and Christian Garmann Johnsen</i>	

### Articles

The reorganization of the bureaucratic encounter in a digitized public administration	17-41
<i>Anja Svejgaard Pors and Eva Pallesen</i>	

The cynical university: Gamified subjectivity in Norwegian academia	43-71
<i>Tereza Østbø Kuldova</i>	

On commoners' daily struggles: Carving out the when/where of communing	73-93
<i>Giacomo Poderi</i>	

Reading groups: Organisation for minor politics?	95-120
<i>Claudia Firth</i>	

### Notes

Infrastructural standby: Caring for loose relations	121-139
<i>Annika Kühn</i>	

Giving an account of one's work: From excess to ECTS in higher education in the arts	141-158
<i>Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt</i>	

Enoughness: Exploring the potentialities of having and

being enough 159-173  
*Gabriela Edlinger, Bernhard Ungericht and Daniel Deimling*

Filtering data: Exploring the sociomaterial production  
of air 175-188  
*Vanessa Weber*

Deserting academia: Quitting as infrapolitics 189-202  
*Phil Hedges*

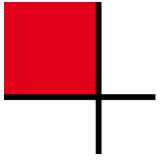
### **Reviews**

Pleasure as a political ethics of limits 203-215  
*Roberto Sciarelli*

Economic theology: Is economy a subfield of theology? 217-227  
*Enrico Beltrami*

Economic theology: A question of academic primacy?  
A response to Beltrami 229-231  
*Stefan Schwarzkopf*





## Modes of organization

Lisa Conrad, Rowland Curtis and Christian Garmann Johnsen

### Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

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



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

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

### **How is a mode? Agamben contra Aristoteles**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Modes of organization

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Conclusion

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

## references

- Agamben, G. (2015) *The use of bodies*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Agamben, G. (2007) *Profanations*. New York: Zone Books.
- Beltramini, R. (2020) 'Power and management according to Agamben: Some implications of Agamben's thoughts to management scholarship', *ephemera*, 20(4): 195-221.
- Böhm, S. & Jones, C. (Eds.) (2001) 'Responding: To Cooper', special issue, *ephemera*, 1(4).
- Burrell, G. and G. Morgan (1979) *Sociological paradigms and organisational analysis*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Campbell, N., G. McHugh, P.J. Ennis (2019) 'Climate change is not a problem: Speculative realism at the end of organization', *Organization Studies*, 40(5): 725-744.
- Coin, F. (2017) 'On quitting', *ephemera*, 17(3): 705-719.
- Cooper, R. (1976) 'The open field', *Human Relations*, 29(11): 999-1017.
- Czarniawska, B. (2009) 'STS meets MOS', *Organization*, 16(1): 155-160.
- Davies, W. (2019) 'The political economy of pulse: Techno-somatic rhythm and real-time data', *ephemera*, 19(3): 513-536.
- Fleetwood, S. (2005) 'Ontology in organization and management studies: A critical realist perspective', *Organization*, 12(2): 197-222.
- Frost, T. (2016) 'Redemption between politics and ontology: Agamben on the coming politics', *ephemera*, 16(2): 125-136.
- Helin, J., Hernes, T., Hjorth, D. & Holt, R. (Eds.) (2014) *The Oxford handbook of process philosophy and organization studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Holbraad, M. & M.A. Pedersen (2017) *The ontological turn: An anthropological exposition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Johnsen, R., Skoglund, A., Statler, M. & Sullivan, W. M. (2021) 'Management learning and the unsettled humanities: Introduction to the special issue', *Management Learning*, 52(2): 135-143.



- Karppi, T., Kähkönen, L., Mannevuola, M., Pajala, M. & Sihvonen, T. (2016) 'Affective capitalism: Investments and investigations', *ephemera*, 16(4): 1-13.
- Kemmer, L., Kühn, A., Otto, B. & Weber, V. (2021) 'Standby: Organizing modes of in|activity', *ephemera*, 21(1): 1-20.
- Latour, B. (2011) "What's the story?" Organizing as a mode of existence', in J.H. Passoth, B. Peuker and M. Schillmeire (eds.) *Agency without actors? New approaches to collective action*. London: Routledge.
- Latour, B. (2013) *An investigation into modes of existence: An anthropology of the moderns*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Letiche, H., Lightfoot, G. & Lilley, S. (2018) 'The matter of objects', *ephemera*, 18(3): 681-693.
- Mol, A. (2002) *The body multiple: Ontology in medical practice*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- O'Doherty, D. & Neyland, D. (2019) 'The developments in ethnographic studies of organising: Towards objects of ignorance and objects of concern', *Organization*, 26(4): 449-469.
- Sørensen, B.M. (2003) 'Gilles Deleuze and the intensification of social theory', *ephemera*, 3(1): 50-58.
- Spinoza, B. (2002) *Complete works*. Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Spoelstra, S. (2005) 'Robert Cooper: Beyond organization', *The Sociological Review*, 50(1): 106-119.
- Willmott, H. (1993) 'Breaking the paradigm mentality', *Organization Studies*, 14(5): 681-719.

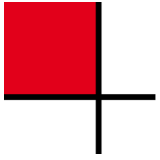
## the editors

Lisa Conrad is a member of the editorial collective of *ephemera*.  
Email: [lisa.conrad@lephana.de](mailto:lisa.conrad@lephana.de)

Rowland Curtis is a member of the editorial collective of *ephemera*.  
Email: [r.curtis@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:r.curtis@qmul.ac.uk)

Christian Garmann Johnsen is a member of the editorial collective of ephemera.

Email: [cgj.mpp@cbs.dk](mailto:cgj.mpp@cbs.dk)



# The reorganization of the bureaucratic encounter in a digitized public administration

Anja Svejgaard Pors & Eva Pallesen

## abstract

This article examines how an ambitious public sector digitalization strategy, focused on motivating and enabling citizens to take up digital self-service, changes the nature of everyday encounters between citizens and frontline staff in public offices. Based on an ethnographic study from a citizen service centre in a Danish municipality, our analysis shows how the sense of time and space in these encounters is radically changed, and how the relationship between private and public is reframed in this context. In contrast to the idea of digital technologies as a neutral upgrade of the state administration leading to more efficient welfare provision, the article highlights the unintended effects of digitalization, showing how the traditional ideal of bureaucracy reflected in Weber's legal-rational model, which described bureaucracy as hierarchical, rule-enforcing and impersonal, is reversed. We argue that attention to how digitalization changes daily bureaucratic encounters and the relation between public authorities and citizens, is lacking, both in policy and in the literature on digitalization and e-government.

Whether because of the structure of the apparatus or because of the structure of memory, it is certain that the noises of the first telephone conversations echo differently in my ear from those of today. They were nocturnal noises. No muse announces them. The night from which they came was the one that precedes every true birth. [...] Not many of those who use the apparatus know what devastation it once wreaked in family circles. The sound with which it

rang between two and four in the afternoon, when a school friend wished to speak to me, was an alarm signal that menaced not only my parents' midday nap but the historical era that underwrote and enveloped this siesta. Disagreements with switchboard operators was the rule, to say nothing of the threats and curses uttered by my father when he had the complaints department on the line. (Benjamin, 2006/1950: 48-49)

## Purpose and contribution of the paper

The pervasive effects of new technologies on everyday life are not a radically new phenomenon. In this excerpt from Walter Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (2006/1950), we are reminded of how the telephone changed mundane everyday life at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: The voices that the first telephone announced were night sounds; they seemed to come out of nothing, without warning they broke into the rhythm of being here and now. The physical distance enabled by the phone eliminated other distances; the border between private and public was blurred, disagreements with employees of the phone company were moved into the home.

In this paper, we aim to shift Benjamin's sensitivity to how new technology reframes encounters in everyday life into the digital era. Based on the premise that technology determines the situation by organizing it (Beyes, Conrad and Martin, 2019), we focus on how the introduction of self-service technologies – a key tool in the Danish digitalization strategy – (re)organizes the encounter between citizens and frontline personnel in public offices. Here, we follow Beyes, Holt and Pias (2020) in being committed to the everyday, empirical world, rather than framing our interest from established disciplinary concerns. As they point out, this implies being sensitive to the material forces of organization, and how media in the form of objects and processes shape the everyday practices of organization.

Based on an ethnographic study of a citizen service centre within the Danish public sector administration, we investigate how public and private spheres, as well as the sense of time and space, become reframed in the context of new ideals of the relationship between citizen and state – as staged in bureaucratic encounters at such service centres. The article draws attention to the transformation of traditional ideals of bureaucratic conduct such as impersonality, strict adherence to procedure, expertise and the absence of

personal moral enthusiasms, as we know them from Max Weber's descriptions of the bureaucratic ethos. In order to act in the interests of welfare and the citizen, bureaucrats must be guided by an ethics of impersonality. As Weber emphasises, one of the most important 'social rules' of bureaucracy is:

the rule of formal impersonality: *sine ira et studio*, or without 'hatred or passion,' and so without 'love' and 'enthusiasm'; impersonality impelled by concepts of simple obligation. The ideal official fulfils his office 'without regard to person': 'everyone' is treated with formal equality. (Weber, 2019: 353)

Bureaucrats are committed to an ethos outside their personal moral principles (see also du Gay, 2008). These founding bureaucratic values are reversed in the new demands placed on frontline bureaucrats in the digital era. As we will argue below, attention to how digitalization reorganizes everyday bureaucratic encounters, and thereby radically changes the relation between public authorities and citizens, is lacking both in policy and in the literature on digitalization and e-government.

### **Digitalization in the Danish public sector: Self-service solutions as a key instrument**

For a decade now, digitalization in the Danish public sector has been given marked political priority (Schou and Hjelholt, 2018; Pors and Schou, 2020). On a political level, the digital strategy adopted is considered to be a success: Denmark sits at the top of international comparative assessments of the digital readiness of the public sector (e.g. OECD, 2005; OECD 2010; United Nations, 2005/2010/2012/2014; European Commission, 2014). As a 'leading edge' case with potential lessons for governments around the world, the Danish public sector is an appropriate empirical setting for studying how the bureaucratic ethos is changing in bureaucratic encounters in the digital era. A central aspect of the official strategy is the idea of what in the literature has been described as 'making able citizens do more' (Magretts and Dunleavy, 2013: 6), i.e., saving costs by developing digital solutions for self-service. Since 2012, people have had to apply online for such services as rent subsidies and day care (see The Danish Government et al., 2011: 16). Today, about a hundred welfare services, i.e., social services such as reimbursements, parental benefits and old-age pensions, have been digitized and turned into

self-service solutions. This pushes the administrative services out of the municipal office, transforming them into self-services that people both can and must access from their personal computers and mobile devices – anytime and anywhere.

Thus, the Danish public sector is undergoing a transition in which the digitalization of administration and welfare services is linked to a demand for efficiency, supported by the establishment of the *Agency for Digitisation* in 2011 – a governmental institution under The Ministry of Finance. The Agency's mission is to build and manage a clear, slim IT governance structure, creating a more digital Denmark that optimizes and frees up resources, modernizing services for individuals and businesses (Agency for Digitisation 2012: 4; Agency for Digitisation, 2021). This digitalization strategy has thrown the public sector into a radical restructuring process: both back-office administration and management, as well as the frontline services of the public sector, are being digitized. Communication between public authorities, individuals and businesses is continually being moved to digital channels:

By 2015, it will be mandatory for citizens to use digital solutions to communicate in writing with the public sector [...] This major step towards e-government will require considerable changes to the way public authorities work, and a certain degree of acclimatization from citizens. However, the transition will take place gradually, as user-friendly e-government solutions are introduced in more and more areas. Help will be available for citizens who find it hard to use the new solutions. (The Danish Government et al., 2011: 3-5)

The objective of the public digitalization strategy is to create a simpler and more efficient public sector, in which the interface between citizen and public administration will be changed according to ideals of empowerment, flexibility and efficiency:

Overall, the strategy aims to modernize and rethink public service production by ensuring a more efficient and effective provision of public sector services. The goal is to maintain or increase the quality of public welfare services while at the same time reducing public expenditure. (Common Public-Sector, 2013)

The authorities describe the transition as an acceleration; the strategies for digital welfare 'accelerate the transformation already under way' (ibid.: 3) in everyday life, as well as in the public sector:

The central government, regions and municipalities are proposing a new e-government strategy in order to accelerate the adoption of digital solutions in the public sector. We must capitalize on our leading position and take the next steps on the way to future welfare services. (The Danish Government et al., 2011: 3)

However, in the public debate, criticism has also been voiced regarding the cost of digitalization. Public employees and their trade unions have focused on the changes that digitalization imposes on jobs and tasks (HK, 2012). The critical voices raised against digitalization are few, but often they focus on individual cases, pointing out the disadvantages for elderly or disabled people, for example, who for various reasons lack the necessary prerequisites for self-service (see e.g. Karkov, 2010; Søgaaard, 2014).

Thus, the ambitious Danish digitalization strategy implies certain expectations, making demands on citizens, who are thus assumed to play an important part in achieving the political goals of efficiency and cost reduction. The strategic vision is that people should take the initiative to explore possibilities and administer their contact with the authorities – ideally stay away from the public office. The premise behind this vision is that it is better for people to be digitally self-reliant, but also that this digital self-reliance is a necessary precondition for realizing the economic gains of digital technology. However, the people who come to the citizen service centre have – for different reasons – not managed to use digital solutions on their own (Pors, 2015). When these people turn up in person at the citizen service centre, frontline personnel become responsible for not only solving their specific problems, but for training them to become digitally competent. ‘Co-service’ is the term describing this new practice, through which the capacity of citizens for self-service is trained. The staff must proactively assist, and indeed endeavour to encourage citizens to become digital. As described elsewhere (see Pors, 2015; Schou and Pors, 2019; Pors and Schou, 2020), co-service is constructed as a transitional space, a passage or *intermezzo*, through which citizens are guided into the digital world. Within this space, the role of the bureaucrat, is reframed in the light of a strategy according to which citizens are supposed to be prompted and guided through ‘learning by doing’ and by trying out the possibilities afforded by digital self-service. In this article we inquire into this reframing of roles and relationships in the context of digital self-service.

## **Digitalization as a management paradigm: research literature and critical discussions**

The digitalization of the Danish public sector has been influenced by private sector management approaches (Jæger and Pors, 2017), to a large extent transmitted into the public sector by private consulting firms engaged to support public sector digitalization strategies. Policymakers tend to view digitalization with a great deal of optimism, as a way of automating administrative tasks (Eubanks, 2018). This technological optimism also dominates the e-government literature, leading to a strong focus on the enabling effects of digitalization and how such effects can be increased. Reviews of the e-government literature (Grönlund, 2005; Norris and Lloyd, 2006; Titah and Barki, 2006; Yildiz, 2007) describe a field that is overly optimistic about digitalization. E-government has been portrayed as an underdeveloped research field attempting to emulate the hard sciences (Raadschelders, 2011) and as a field of literature that primarily focuses on e-government as a means to achieving certain prescribed outcomes, for example cost reduction, the upgrading of bureaucratic professions and macro perspectives on e-government (Dunleavy et al., 2006; Margetts, 2008; Pollitt, 2011). However, micro level studies on the actual deployment and use of technology in the context of state bureaucracy are sparse, e.g., studies of how welfare institutions have been prompted to adopt self-service solutions at the expense of face-to-face encounters with citizens, and how self-service changes the relationship between state and citizen. However, some scholars have begun to relate more critically to the interface between digitalization and street-level bureaucracy (Buffat, 2015; Hansen, Lundberg, and Syltevik, 2018; Jansson and Erlingsson, 2014; Pors, 2015; Schou and Pors, 2019; Pors and Schou, 2020).

The mainstream literature on e-government has been criticized for lacking both a theoretical and practical understanding of the wider societal consequences of digitalization. Although digitalization a management paradigm for the public sector has been conceptualized under the heading of 'digital era governance' (Dunleavy et al., 2006) – which provides a diagnosis of general changes in public governance – this still seems to fail to capture the way in which digital reforms change everyday bureaucratic encounters and therefore misses out questions about how the boundary between state



and civil society are being redrawn in everyday life (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003) as a consequence of these reconfigured encounters.

In this article, we aim to contribute to remedying this lack by taking up questions concerning self-service technology with a greater sensitivity as to how it reorganizes everyday encounters between citizen and state in the context of a citizen service centre. We discuss the displacement of the bureaucratic ethos known from the seminal works of Max Weber (1948a, 1948b, 2019), which emphasizes detached bureaucratic personae and the ethics of office. We suggest that in contemporary bureaucratic practice in the digital era, such founding values of public office as detachment and bureaucratic practice ‘without affection and enthusiasm’ (du Gay, 2008) are not only displaced, but even reversed. This reversion, we argue, is related to the public bureaucrat’s new obligation to ‘challenge forth resources’ in the bureaucratic encounter, since digitalization as a management paradigm is inherently related to a ‘more for less-rationale’. We borrow the notion of ‘challenging-forth’ from Heidegger’s seminal essay on technology (1977). While it is beyond the scope of this article to account for the vast amount of academic work on Heidegger and Weber, their influential conceptualisations of both modern technology and modern bureaucracy suggest important lines along which to look, and thus function in a way as sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954) as we process our empirical material and discuss our analysis.

## **Empirical material and method**

Posing the question of how (self-service) technology affects everyday encounters in the public sector, the article joins a stream of practice-based studies that focus on technology (Aakjær and Pallesen, 2021; Nickelsen and Elkjær, 2017; Gherardi, 2010; Nicolini, 2007). These contributions suggest explorations of the role technology plays in the construction of daily practices and relationships as part of a continual organizing process involving both intended and unintended opportunities and limitations. In our case, following a practice-based approach encourages us to move from the intentions and goals of the digitalization strategy as such to how digitalization works in everyday encounters between citizens and public sector professionals. This indicates the use of data collecting methods related to ethnographic

fieldwork, with its emphasis on 'being there' as a way to gain insight into everyday actions and activities (Pallesen and Aakjær, 2020). Furthermore, our initial inspiration from Benjamin's description of how the phone changed the rhythm and space of private homes resonates with the increased attention to time (Holt and Johnsen, 2019) and space (Marrewijk and Yanow, 2010; Beyes and Steyaert, 2011; Hernes, 2004) that has emerged along with the growing field of process and practice-based organization studies (Gherardi, 2010; Geiger, 2009). These studies, in contrast to objective time (clock time) and objective space (geographic location), draw attention to the temporality and spatiality distinctive of (and relative to) particular practices (Loscher, Splitter and Seidl, 2019). In this context of an increased focus on lived time and space, the researcher's use of their 'own body as an instrument of research' (Van Maanen 1996, cited in Marrewijk and Yanow, 2010) gains methodological significance. Being bodily *in place* is essential for gaining access to time and space from within, for example, being able to relate to the rhythm or atmosphere of a situation.

In our case, emphasis was placed on being physically present and ethnographically studying the new practice involving assisted self-service – encounters that take place at citizen service centres all over Denmark every day. In practice, the researcher was shadowing (Czarniawska, 2007) the daily activities of frontline personnel, focusing on encounters with citizens. With the researcher standing behind one of the frontline staff, these observations included dialogue, mostly of a clarifying character, and were followed up by interviews consisting of in-depth discussions of the practice observed by the researcher. Over the period of a year, Author 1 conducted a total of approximately 80 hours of both explorative and more structured observations, documented in field notes, followed by interviews later the same day with the staff who had been under observation. The data also include eight interviews with managers and consultants of varying rank in the municipality. All interviews followed the guidelines for semi-structured interviews and were recorded, transcribed and roughly coded and categorized. The empirical material in this analysis was predominantly gathered in one particular citizen service centre in a Danish municipality. The staff at the citizen service centre (which has been steadily reduced since 2010) consisted of 18 full-time employees, two office trainees and a mid-level

manager. The centre staff service around 300 users a day, mainly in the form of walk-in referrals. The ethnographic study also comprises evaluation and validation workshops with the frontline staff and their manager, as well as participation in meetings, workshops and conferences with political actors such as the Agency for Digitisation, Local Government Denmark (KL) and a variety of Danish municipalities.

### **Analysis: The bureaucratic encounter reconfigured**

In the following, we present an example from the observation material that exemplifies one typical encounter in the co-service area of a citizen service centre. This example has been selected because it condenses and illustrates the themes taken up in the analysis, i.e., how the private and public spheres are blurred, and how space and pace are rearranged and reconfigure the relation between citizens and public officials. Our analysis was substantiated by reflections made by the staff in follow-up interviews.

#### *A scene from a citizen service centre*

We are now entering the citizen service centre one Tuesday before noon. The centre occupies part of the ground floor of a large office building housing a variety of local government departments. A big white and green poster says: 'Digital co-service. Avoid the queue – use the Internet! Health service medical cards, new addresses, parking permits, child benefits and much more. There are many possibilities at [www.municipalityX.dk](http://www.municipalityX.dk). Our digital ambassadors will help you get started.' A flat screen on the wall informs people that it is the turn of customer number 630. Three out of the ten service counters in the co-service area are occupied by a member of staff (citizen guide), each assisting someone in the use of digital self-service. At the reception desk, people have formed two queues.

After ending a session with an elderly man, a member of staff in her forties walks over to the waiting area and calls out the next number. A young man of about 20 reacts to number 631 and follows her to one of the service counters. His slightly older-looking friend follows, and they both stand facing the staff member on the other side of the high counter. 'How may I help you?', she asks. 'I need to activate my "Digital Post"', he responds in a low voice. 'Come over

here to the computer on this side of the counter, so you can do the typing', she tells him, and continues: 'OK, start typing "borger.dk" [public self-service portal]'. The staff member waits a bit, then types in the URL, 'B-O-R-G-E-R-DOT-D-K'. 'And then you sign in by entering your CPR number and your personal code', she continues. She then steps aside and averts her gaze for a few seconds. 'You can enlarge the image by clicking there', she says, pointing at the screen. 'And I can see you've already signed up for an "e-Boks" [secure electronic mailbox]. Try to open it. It seems that you have 17 unopened letters in your inbox. I can see there are a few letters from Danske Bank. OK, I'm not entitled to interfere with your private mail'. Again, she steps aside and averts her eyes. 'But I'm not a customer with Danske Bank, Nordea is my bank', the young man says with a puzzled look on his face. 'Well', the staff member replies, 'I don't know, but you seem to be connected with Danske Bank in some way as well. Ok, never mind'. She points to the screen and says: 'Digital Post is actually the same as the "e-Boks" that you already have. If you tick right there, you will gather all your electronic mail in one mailbox, both mail from the private firms that you have subscribed to in the "e-Boks" and digital mail from all public authorities. It's very smart; the mail is automatically transferred'. His eyes flicker and he looks at his friend, who speaks to him in a foreign language. The staff member explains further, looking at the computer screen: 'The most important thing is that you know that you are required to keep an eye on your mailbox. You are required to read it just as if you had received a letter in your mailbox outside your home. By ticking here you agree that no public authority will send you physical mail anymore, and that you are required to read your mail, for example, regarding notice to attend court, or if you are applying for a student grant'.

### *Reframing the relationship between the private and public spheres*

This scene illustrates several themes that arise in many of the encounters observed in the citizen service centre: one of these is the relationship between the private and public spheres. Just like Benjamin's first telephone moved disputes with the telephone office into the living room, the border between private and public in the bureaucratic encounter is redrawn in the context of self-service technology. In this case, not only is private bank information (which has nothing to do with the matter in hand) suddenly visible to the staff member, the latter's professional focus also goes beyond the citizen's

administrative problem and into such personal areas as responsibility and motivation, reaching into the everyday life habits of the individual. This blurring of the private and professional spheres is underlined in the choreography and scenography of the encounter, in which the traditional office desk is replaced by an open space with only some vague demarcation of the beginning and end of the formal encounter (handshakes, doors, sitting down, etc., are absent). One member of staff at the citizen service centre reflects as follows on her ways of working with co-service, and on how her encouragement and connection with citizens is central in the new role:

You meet people in a different way. You're in another environment up there [standing up at the counters]. You see things differently. Well, I think it's because you stand there side by side with the person saying, "Oh sometimes, I'm...". Sometimes you just get along very well with the person. "Oh, you just do this ...", and then you find yourself chatting a bit and saying "that's really good" and things like that. I can get kind of relaxed standing up there with the person, you're in very intense contact, actually. It's just you and the person [...] Often I move around behind people while they are typing, but there's another connection up there than down at the desk. (Interview, staff member, citizen service centre)

Ideally, self-service technology enables citizens to handle problems while physically distant from the service centre. However, in the encounters at the citizen service centre, in which citizens and frontline staff are standing up side by side, both the physical and formal distances that the desk created in classical bureaucratic encounters are eliminated. Another staff member reflects as follows:

I don't know. There's also less authority involved compared to if you were sitting on either side of a desk. Then no one would doubt the distance, formality, and that I'm the authority. It's true, [in co-service] it becomes more like "This is an act of friendship", "I help you", the desk distance has kind of disappeared. So, the border between citizen and public authority is sort of blurred, in some ways at least. (Interview, staff member, citizen service centre)

This new supportive and coaching relationship moves the staff member's role away from classic bureaucratic virtues such as professionalism and impersonality; however, it is explicitly valued in the booklet from Local Government Denmark (the municipalities' association) and HK Kommunal (trades union for non-academic administrative personnel in municipalities)

that guides the administrative employee's work with co-service. The material describes how there are two layers in communication with people, meeting up at the citizen service centre: 'The specific professional content, what the person is seeking an answer or a solution to', and 'the emotional layer in play within the person [...], which is what we can work with and use as an implementation kit' (Kommunernes Landsforening [Local Government Denmark] and HK Kommunal).

Here, the emotional connection becomes a strategic resource – a tool that can help implement the strategic goal of creating a digitally self-reliant citizen and realise the expected economic savings in relation to new digital technologies. The staff members working with co-service are given several training courses directed towards their ability to enhance their contact with people and create positive relationships. The guide from Local Government Denmark lists eight basic 'tools' that will help the administrative employee professionally: The staff member must 1) motivate people to adopt digital self-service; 2) ask about the person's digital readiness; 3) create enthusiasm by showing the possibilities offered by digital self-service; and 4) 'sell' the digital solutions – including their failures and shortcomings. The remaining four 'tools' are all about habits in the employee's own private life: staff members must, for example, use IT in 'everyday life for news, mail, a modicum of Facebook, Net TV, NetBanking and phone apps' (Kommunernes Landsforening, 2012). Again, the private and public spheres, the private self and the public role (or institutional 'persona') are connected and blurred in new ways by thus encouraging the frontline bureaucrat to use compassionate tools in communicating with people in order to generate the enthusiasm needed to realize policy goals (see du Gay, 2008).

Hence, the new task of administrative staff is not only centred around laws and rules, but around a more personal involvement: that is, enthusing about, motivating people to use and 'selling' to them both the idea of learning and the digital solutions. Here, the public sector strategy reaches into the private life spheres of both citizens and staff members, making use of them in new ways; and it implies an emotional connection, in which the professional task almost appears as an act of friendship. Hence, the public and private spheres become related and blurred due to the new practices. This reorganization of the relation between the public and private spheres is especially related to the

reconfigured space of the bureaucratic encounter, in which time is also experienced differently. In the next section, we take up this power of digital technology to reconfigure the sense of time and space in the bureaucratic encounter.

### *Reorganizing the sense of time and space*

Parallel to how the phone altered the rhythm of everyday life around 1900, highlighted by Benjamin, the rhythm of the bureaucratic encounter is altered by self-service solutions. The classic bureaucratic encounter between citizen and public administration takes place over a desk; the public bureaucrats write on their computer and determines the pace and progress of the conversation. The physical-technical milieu of the modern citizen service centre is different: here, the citizens and staff members meet over high counters, with one computer at each counter, in an open office layout without clear demarcation of the beginnings and ends of the encounters. The encounters themselves involve people standing shoulder-to-shoulder rather than face-to-face, with the citizens managing the keyboard and the staff member assisting. Whereas frontline staff used to sit down with citizens in closed spaces, they now have to guide them in open self-service landscapes. An employee describes how the timing and pace in this changed work space affects her professional role:

You're on, you're off, you know. And sometimes my intention is to dig deeper into things in her life situation after finishing the application, but it's difficult to handle. Maybe I just turn around for a moment, and she's gone [...] so she never got the advice I would've given her if we had been sitting at my desk.[...]. Up there [in co-service] you need to see it right away. If we were down by the tables [face-to-face interaction], then I would get an impression of her as we proceed, but now you have to be able to see it right away. It feels like it has to be faster. When facing each other across a desk, you can afford to pause to reflect, or just talk normally, but with the technology and the self-service solutions, it is like everything has to be a bit faster.(Interview, staff member, citizen service centre)

There is a restless pace in the encounter as it is sensed by the employee: meetings are always potentially on their way to being started or broken up. The staff member moves in and out of the relation, and is regularly interrupted by contact with other people in the open co-service space. Control over the timing, tempo and pace of the encounter is predominately in the

hands of the citizens trying to learn how to apply for something online, or search for information in order to handle their own casework. In this accelerated time of co-service, space is sensed differently too:

I would say that [in face-to-face interaction] you're able to hide a little [...]. You sit at your own desk, you have your own screen, you can take a sip of your tea. Well, you can't do that up there [in co-service] – you're bare, very exposed, it's more intimate standing up there, much more intense. You're 'on', and it's more intense because you're more open, very uncovered standing there, and you can't just walk away. Even if you're working with a screen, you're still open. If you are sitting at your own desk at your computer, then it's like you have a territory, you don't have that up there; there's a clear and unobstructed view of you. (Interview, staff member, citizen service centre)

The staff member is standing in an open space where she can be approached from all angles. There is no front or rear, no entrance or exit point, like in the traditional office. The co-service area is a more free-flowing but also unpredictable space, in which encounters may emerge and end without further notice and in which the space to pause and reflect is diminished. This creates a certain restless intensity in the co-service work and a feeling that 'everything has to be a bit faster'. This also means that there is less time and space to help citizens who might not be able to understand particular problems or administrative procedures right away. One frontline staff member explains:

Maybe you [the citizen] are not so good at Danish, and checked a box without having read what it says, then you don't know, or are not aware of, or have not heard, what has been said — there may be so many things. [...] The work situation has become very different from when I started and where you sat and sketched it out, and told them to do this and that: 'look at the paper, go home, and if you forget it, then read it again.' It is more difficult today, because the tempo is a bit hectic. (Interview, staff member, citizen service centre)

In this open space, the pace is high and encounters shift in a staccato rhythm. Furthermore, the citizen's right to privacy and discretion comes under pressure. Two frontline staff members reflected on this as follows:

Frontline staff member 1: I sometimes think that it may be a little indiscreet, also for the citizens. 'Are you on social benefits?'. It feels uncomfortable to say that [in public], but we have to ask. Otherwise, we won't be able to refer to the right place. It may be a little...



Frontline staff member 2: Yes, it is [indiscreet]. And that is also something that clients have expressed when we have done interviews and given them some questionnaires and made them answer all kinds of things. They often say that they are missing something...

Frontline staff member 1: Discretion.

Frontline staff member 2: Yes, they really do. I can understand that, because nobody wants to stand up there and talk loudly about their CPR [Civil Registration Number]. Or say: 'I'm on welfare benefits, I can't support myself...'. (Interview after observation in a citizen service centre)

In this open space, created for the new task of teaching citizens how to administer their own cases in a digital format, the relation between citizen and public employee changes. Citizens become more exposed and the staff member must be careful not to approach them in a way that positions them as incapable or ignorant:

You must really be careful not to make people dumber. One thing is to sit with people across a table, it was a little easier to be on the same level as them. But when you put them in a situation where they do not know how or what they need help with, nor how to find it, and they are not particularly good at it. (Interview, staff member, citizen service centre)

Thus, far from being an impersonal *bureaucrat*, the staff member becomes responsible for the citizens' feelings of failure. This need to gloss over people's difficulties with accommodating small talk is intensified in the open space, where other people may always be standing close by and witnessing the situation. Taken together, these feelings of a faster pace and more open space are experienced by front desk staff as a loss of control. Instead of acting as professional experts, they have to improvise, encourage and draw on more personal traits to protect people from the experience of being exposed as digitally incompetent.

## **Discussion: The bureaucratic encounter reframed**

In this reconfigured space-time, in which the private and public spheres blend in new ways, the staff member is less an authority who presents professional knowledge that helps solve an administrative problem and ensures that it is legally correctly processed. Here, the public bureaucrat is rather a personally

involved motivator, guiding the citizens through the session and prompting them to see the new possibilities of digitalization. This also repositions the citizen: Rather than individuals with a specific administrative problem, they become the carrier of a human resource to be unlocked and extracted in order to meet an efficiency target and, ultimately, contribute to cost reductions in public service. This is not simply a matter of activating motivation in the specific encounter here and now, the focus is to build up citizens' digital competence, i.e., to unlock a durable resource that is on call for further ordering – to use an expression from Heidegger's famous essay on technology (1977), in which he addressed the characteristics of modern technology. While traditional technologies (such as building a house) is a 'bringing-forth' [*hervorbringen*], modern technology, Heidegger maintains, is a 'challenging-forth' [*herausfordern*] (Heidegger, 1977: 6). This is where a significant shift lies, according to Heidegger: to get energy from a windmill, we must rely upon the wind's movements and shifts and our ability to make use of them as they are, whereas the heating value of coal is *challenged-forth* by transforming a piece of land for a human purpose, i.e., 'extracting, storing and circulating' the energy latent in it. Technology here involves an external end that imposes itself on the world, converting a piece of land into a storable value, always on call for a further ordering (Heidegger, 1977: 7).

Although what Heidegger called modern technology is far from current digital technologies (Schiølin and Riis, 2013), the essay suggests some lines along which to look when considering technology as a tool in human purposes. For Heidegger, a key point is that the 'challenging-forth' of modern technology is always and inherently directed 'toward driving on to the maximum yield at the minimum expense' (Heidegger, 1977: 7). In other words, getting more for less is the inherent and inevitable rationale. It is not difficult to recognize this logic of 'more for less' in the material that communicates the official Danish digitalization strategy and its realisation so far (presented in the citations above), which speaks about 'a more efficient and effective provision of public sector services' as the overall goal. Digitalization is a matter of 'capitalizing on' 'accelerating' and 'increasing quality while at the same time reducing public expenditure' (Common Public-Sector, 2013). However, this does not in itself happen with the introduction of digital technology; technology does not simply do that *for us*. What the empirical material from the citizen service

centre presented above reminds us is that pursuing this strategy implies a whole chain of reorganizing, reframing and reconfiguring, in which citizens as well as employees are transformed into ‘human resources’ that can help realize this reduction of public expenditure.

Rather than being a context for solving the problem that motivated people to go to the public office in the first place, the bureaucratic encounter becomes instead an occasion for extracting the resource latent in people (in terms of unlocking motivation), storing it (building up digital competence) and circulating it (reinserting the resource in new digitized practices) with the aim of cost reduction in public sector expenditure. Extracting and storing resources here implies that the bureaucratic encounter is reframed as a learning situation. Motivating and educating people to do certain things by themselves is at the centre of this encounter, while informing citizens and solving the administrative problems they came with is shifted into the background. In the examples presented above, pursuing the goal of the ‘self-servicing citizen’ means that people might actually not even receive all the information that the staff member finds relevant to their case.

In this process, we do not just inject digital technology into public sector administration; we also get reconfigured citizen roles, new ways of understanding the bureaucratic profession and changed bureaucratic practices, in which the public and private spheres are activated and blended in new ways. The bureaucratic encounter in itself is changed: time, pace and space are sensed differently in ways that change the experience of the encounter and what is possible within it.

The traditional ideal of bureaucracy reflected in Weber’s legal-rational model, which described bureaucracy as hierarchical, rule-enforcing, impersonal in the application of laws and composed of members with well-defined formal qualifications and specialized technical knowledge of rules and procedures (Weber, 2019) is reversed: in the frontline of Danish bureaucracy, the injunctions aimed at the public *bureaucrat* are to be responsive to the citizens’ hesitation and lack of digital literacy, and then strategically to use compassion as a policy implementation tool in their role as enthusiastic advocates of this policy. The demands for more ‘personal’ involvement and the ways in which staff enter into the private sphere need careful

consideration. Therefore, the roles, practices, tasks and virtues of frontline staff are important points to examine in order to understand current transformations in bureaucracy. The unresponsive, impersonal expert who sharply separates public and private, work and everyday life, is redefined in this altered ideal of service delivery. Digital reforms require frontline bureaucrats to embrace a stronger attachment to managerial goals that go beyond the goals of bureaucratic case processing and compassionately embrace the learning needs of the citizen in an improvisational encounter aiming to push the citizen to 'become digital'.

These insights form a basis for contributing to the rather limited amount of research on the interface between digitalization and bureaucratic encounters (Buffat, 2015; Hansen, Lundberg and Syltevik, 2018; Jansson and Erlingsson, 2014; Lindgren et al., 2019; Madsen and Christensen, 2019; Pors, 2015; Schou and Pors, 2019; Pors and Schou, 2020) in two ways. Firstly, the analysis demonstrates how new forms of interaction are shaped in the transition towards digitalized public bureaucracies. This is something that has not yet received a systematic treatment in this field of literature. The study showcases the specific ways in which self-service leads to new roles and tensions in the bureaucratic encounter. Secondly, it shows how roles and relations are entangled with technology and with changes in the material set up. These are not just minor, mundane changes; rather they are experienced as intrusive reconfigurations of the time and space of the bureaucratic encounter. Such insights challenge the often technocentric strategic narratives which tend to overlook how adjustments of practice might have intrusive effects on the way governance is performed. Against images of digital technologies as a neutral upgrade of the state, inherently capable of creating more efficient welfare provision, the analysis brings to the fore the unintended effects of new roles for both citizen and bureaucrat. Thus, there may be good reasons to pursue digitalization strategies in the public sector and digitalization may serve us well in reducing public expenditure; however, self-service technology is not simply a cost-reducing tool in human hands - to paraphrase Heidegger (1977). Pushing digitalization as an efficiency tool *does* something to public space as well as to private life and it has practical, political and ethical consequences. All of this raises questions about what constitutes bureaucracy and which values should guide the conduct of public bureaucrats.

## Conclusion

Around 1900, the phone was not just *a new thing* taking its place among other things in existing homes; it was a *newness* changing the entire home and its daily life, reconfiguring its time and space: the public office moved into the home and siestas were disturbed. With self-service technology, there are also new configurations of distance and closeness that blend the public and the private in new ways. Today, welfare service and provision can be accessed at a distance from anywhere, independently of the opening times and spaces of public offices. At the same time, the traditional distance of the bureaucracy (the desk, the formal interaction style, etc.) is transformed into new forms of closeness in the actual encounter between bureaucratic staff and citizens, both in terms of physical closeness (when citizens and professionals are standing shoulder-to-shoulder at the computer and private mail appears on the screen) and an emotional closeness, when the staff member is expected to tap into the person's emotions and personal motivations and make use of them to realize public digitalization goals.

Pursuing an ambitious public digitalization strategy like the Danish one in the name of effectiveness does not simply get new things, devices, apps and electronic templates, into the public sector; it reconfigures the bureaucratic encounter and reframes the bureaucratic profession, and it establishes a new kind of relationship between the public sector and its citizens, in which the latter is positioned as a latent human resource waiting to be unlocked for the purpose of cost reduction and efficiency. Being aware of such changes in everyday encounters between citizens and public sector professionals, we argue, is necessary in order to attune ourselves to ethical and political questions that may otherwise be lost behind the celebration of Danish digitalization success, such as: What kind of demands and expectations can the public sector impose on its citizens in the name of rationalization? What kind of costs and social biases, in terms of specific groups of people being incapacitated in terms of important communication with public authorities, are acceptable? And how far can we go in transforming the public *bureaucrat* into a strategic outpost, committed to goals of competence development and efficiency?

## references

- Aakjær, M. and E. Pallesen (2021) 'Infrastructuring for co-production: a learning perspective on health promoting services among senior citizens', in Elkjaer, B., N. C. Nickelsen, and Lotz, M. (eds.) *Current practices in workplace and organizational learning: Revisiting the classics and advancing knowledge*. Switzerland: Springer Life Long Learning Book Series.
- Agency for Digitisation (2012) *Effektiv Digitalisering: Digitaliseringsstyrelsens strategi 2012–2015*. Copenhagen: Agency for Digitisation.
- Agency for Digitisation (2021) 'Om Digitaliseringsstyrelsen' [<https://digst.dk/om-os/om-digitaliseringsstyrelsen/>].
- Benjamin, W. (2006/1950) *Childhood around 1900*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Bevir, M. and R.A.W. Rhodes (2003) 'Searching for civil society: changing patterns of governance in Britain', *Public Administration*, 81(1): 41-62.
- Beyes, T. and C. Steyaert (2011) 'Spacing organization: Non-representational theory and performing organizational space', *Organization*, 19(1): 45-61.
- Beyes, T., R. Holt and C. Pias (2020) *The Oxford handbook of media technology and organization studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Beyes, T., L. Conrad and R. Martin (2019) *Organize*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Blumer, H. (1954) 'What is Wrong with Social Theory?', *American Sociological Review*, 19(1): 3-10.
- Buffat, A. (2015) 'Street-level bureaucracy and e-government', *Public Management Review*, 17(1): 2-13.
- Common Public-Sector (2013) 'Strategy for digital welfare 2013-2020: Digital welfare, empowerment, flexibility and efficiency' [[https://www.rm.dk/siteassets/sundhed/faginfor/center-for-telemedicin/english/documents/strategy\\_for\\_digital\\_welfare\\_2013\\_2020.pdf](https://www.rm.dk/siteassets/sundhed/faginfor/center-for-telemedicin/english/documents/strategy_for_digital_welfare_2013_2020.pdf)].
- Czarniawska, B. (2007) *Shadowing: And other techniques for doing fieldwork in modern societies*. Frederiksberg: Copenhagen Business School Press.

- Du Gay, P. (2008) '“Without affection or enthusiasm” problems of involvement and attachment in “responsive” public management', *Organization*, 15(3): 335-353.
- Dunleavy, P., H. Margetts, S. Bastow and J. Tinkler (2006) *Digital era governance: IT corporations, the state, and E-government*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- European Commission (2014) *EU eGovernment report 2014*. Paris: European Commission.
- Eubanks, V. (2018) *Automating inequality: How high-tech tools profile, police, and punish the poor*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Geiger, D. (2009) 'The practice-turn in organization studies: Some conceptual and methodological clarifications', in Scherer A.G., Kaufmann I.M., Patzer M. (eds.) *Methoden in der Betriebswirtschaftslehre*. Wiesbaden: Gabler.
- Gherardi, S. (2010) 'Telemedicine: A practice-based approach to technology', *Human Relations*, 63(4): 501–524.
- Grönlund, Å. (2005) 'State of the art in e-gov research: surveying conference publications', *International Journal of Electronic Government Research*, 4(1): 1-15.
- Hansen, H., K. Lundberg, and L. Syltevik (2018) 'Digitalization, street-level bureaucracy and welfare users' experiences', *Social Policy and Administration*, 52(1): 67–90.
- Heidegger, M. (1977) *The question concerning technology*. NY: Garland Publishing.
- Hernes, T. (2004) *The spatial construction of organization*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- HK (2012) *HK Kommunalbladet*, 10. Copenhagen: HK Danmark.
- Holt, R. and R. Johnsen (2019) 'Time and organization studies', *Organization Studies*, 40(10): 1557-1572.
- Jansson, G., and G. Erlingsson (2014) 'More e-government, less street-level bureaucracy? On legitimacy and the human side of public administration', *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 11(3): 291–308.

- Jæger, B. and A. S. Pors (2017) 'Ledelse af digitalisering: Fra projekt til præmis', in Aagaard, P. and A. Agger (eds.): *Ledelse i politisk styrede organisationer*. Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Karkov, R. (2010) 'Befolkningen lades i stikken når det offentlige digitaliserer', *Information*, 23 March [<http://www.information.dk/227956>]
- Kommunernes Landsforening (2012) *Den digitale kompetenceprofil* [Local Government Denmark: The digital competence profile: <http://www.kl.dk/fagomrader/Administration-og-digitalisering/God-borger-service-efter-UDK/Digitale-kompetencer>].
- Lindgren, I., C. Ø. Madsen, S. Hofmann and U. Melin (2019) 'Close encounters of the digital kind: A research agenda for the digitalization of public services', *Government Information Quarterly*, 36(3): 427–436.
- Loscher, G., V. Splitter and D. Seidl (2019) 'Theodore Schatzki's practice theory and its implications for organization studies', in S. Clegg and M. Pina e Cunha (eds.): *Management, Organizations and contemporary social theory*. London: Routledge.
- Madsen, C.Ø. and L. R. Christensen (2019) 'Integrated and seamless? Single parents' experiences of cross-organizational interaction', *Selected Papers of the IRIS*, 9.
- Marrewijk, A.v. and D. Yanow (2010) 'Introduction: The spatial turn in organizational studies', in A.v. Marrewijk and D. Yanow (eds.) *Organizational spaces: Rematerializing the workaday world*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishers.
- Margetts, H. (2009) 'Public management change and e-government: The emergence of digital era governance', in A. Chadwick and P. Howard (eds.) *Routledge handbook of internet politics*. London: Routledge.
- OECD (2005) *Towards better digital service, Increased efficiency and stronger collaboration*, Country review, Denmark. Paris: OECD.
- OECD (2010) *Denmark: Efficient e-government for smarter public service delivery*. Paris: OECD.
- Nicolini, D. (2007) 'Stretching out and expanding work practices in time and space: The case of telemedicine', *Human Relations*, 60(6): 889–920.



- Nickelsen, N. C. M. and B. Elkjaer (2017) 'Shifting boundaries in telecare: The nurse-doctor relationship', *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 29(7–8): 588–600.
- Norris, D.F. and B.A. Lloyd (2006) 'The scholarly literature on e-government: Characterizing a nascent field', *International Journal of Electronic Government Research*, 2(4): 40–56.
- Pallesen, E. and M. Aakjær (2020) 'More for less? Sharing economy as a driver for public welfare innovation', *Technology Innovation Management Review*, 10(5): 19–27.
- Pollitt, C. and G. Bouckaert (2011) *Public management reform: A comparative analysis*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pors, A.S. (2015) 'Becoming digital: Passages to service in the digitized bureaucracy', *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, 4(2): 177–192.
- Pors, A.S. and J. Schou (2020) 'Street-level morality at the digital frontlines: An ethnographic study of moral mediation in welfare work', *Administrative Theory and Praxis*, 43(2): 154–171.
- Raadschelders, J.C.N. (2011) 'The future of the study of public administration: Embedding research object and methodology in epistemology and ontology', *Public Administration Review*, 71(6): 916–924.
- Schiølin, K. H. and S. Riis (2013) *Nye spørgsmål om teknikken* [New questions concerning technology]. Århus: Aarhus Universitets Forlag.
- Schou, J. and A.S Pors (2019) 'Digital by default? A qualitative study of exclusion in digitalised welfare encounters', *Social Policy and Administration*, 53(3): 464–477.
- Søgaard, L. (2014) *Kritik: Kommuner under-informerer ældre om digital fritagelse*, Kristeligt Dagblad, 23 July [https://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/2014-07-23/kritik-kommuner-under-informerer-%C3%A6ldre-om-digital-fritagelse].
- The Danish Government, Danish Regions and Local Government Denmark (2011) *The e-government strategy 2011-2015: The digital path to future welfare*. Copenhagen: The Danish Government.
- Titah, R. and H. Barki (2006) 'E-government adoption and acceptance: A literature review', *International Journal of Electronic Government Research*, 2(3): 23–57.

United Nations (2005) *Global E-government readiness report*.

United Nations (2010/2012/2014) *Global e-government survey*.

Van Maanen, J. (1996) 'Commentary: On the matter of voice', *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 5(4): 375-81.

Weber, M. (1948a) 'Politics as a vocation', in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.) *From Max Weber: Essays in sociology*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Weber, M. (1948b) 'Science as a vocation', in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.) *From Max Weber: Essays in sociology*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Weber, M. (2019) *Economy and society*, trans. K. Tribe. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Yildiz, M. (2007) 'E-government research: Reviewing the literature, limitations, and ways forward', *Government Information Quarterly*, 24(3): 646-665.

## the authors

Anja Pors has a PhD in Organization and Management from Copenhagen Business School with a background from History of Ideas and Information Studies. Since 2012, her research has been related to her work as assistant professor at University College Copenhagen and includes micro studies of professions in public welfare – with a focus on how technological change reorganises the encounter between citizens and authority. Her ethnographic work is primarily conducted in the frontline: at hospitals, in day care and citizen services and published in *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, *Social Policy and Administration* and *Journal of Health, Organization and Management*.

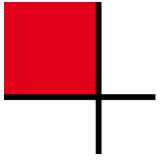
Email: aspo@kp.dk

Eva Pallesen has a background in Political Science and a PhD from Copenhagen Business School. Since 2017, she has worked as a docent at the Centre of Management and Experience Design at University College Absalon, Denmark. Her research focuses on the relation of creativity, entrepreneurship and welfare management, often studied in the context of technological change. She works with organization theory as well as with multi-disciplinary approaches, drawing on art, music and literature. Her work is published in *Organization Studies*, *Technology Innovation Management*

*Review, Methodological Innovations* and in cross-disciplinary journals such as *Otherness: Essays and Studies*.

Email: pallesen.eva@gmail.com





# The cynical university: Gamified subjectivity in Norwegian academia

Tereza Østbø Kuldova

## abstract

Norwegian academia is increasingly subject to governance by numbers. A mixture of New Public Management, corporate governance and the power wielded by management-consultant firms underpins this 'triumph of numbers' intended to stimulate competition, productivity and excellence. Disillusionment, individualization, insecurity, anxiety and envy, have, however, become its products. Few believe that metrics are neutral, unbiased or objective. On the contrary, individual and institutional practices of gaming statistics and manipulating ratings and indicators are widespread, together known as micro-fraud. Predatory publishers, predatory journals and fake metrics markets are growing, considered a 'global threat' to science. Gaming in response to quantified control is symptomatic of the neoliberal moral economy of fraud and the criminogenic marketization of academia (Whyte and Wiegratz, 2016). While there may be 'true believers' in governance by numbers, this article focuses on what appears as the more common figure of the academic cynic, arguing that the triumph of numbers and the reproduction of governance by numbers *despite* mounting critique and critical awareness has to be understood through the notions of ideological fantasy, disavowal and pleasure and through a particular mode of subjectivation – namely, *gamified subjectivity*. Reflecting on (auto-)ethnographic observations and interviews with academics and trade unionists in Norwegian academia, this article offers a theoretical contribution to the function of cynical ideology and gamified subjectivity for organizational reproduction and its consequences for the possibility of resistance. Resistance, it is argued, would involve *externalization of disbelief* and *degaming* of the academic, and putting measure back into its proper place. Can politics proper emerge despite organizational cynicism?

## An Act of Resistance that Recognizes its Own Impotence

Let me begin with a vignette. On the occasion of a colleague's birthday, a celebration at a university department was organized, with the usual polite offerings of cake, wine, and speeches. In a breach of the usual etiquette, the first speaker, instead of emphasizing the academic merits and personality of the celebrated, used his speech to deliver an incisive critique of the marketization and 'governance by numbers' (Supiot, 2017) of Norwegian universities. Passionately, he dissected the practices of 'quantified control' (Burrows, 2012): publication-based performance indicators (*tellekantsystemet*) and indicator-based funding; top-down authoritarian performance management and bureaucratization; strategies, audits, competitive rankings, KPIs, metrics; the pressures on academics to secure external funding, compete and perceive themselves as 'entrepreneurial' subjects; the valorisation of individuals in terms of how much money they bring; the quantification of success, excellence, and impact; the political governance of research priorities through the Research Council of Norway and EU programmes; the withering away of critical thought and academic freedom. Is marketization and governance by numbers killing the university, he asked? As he spoke, the audience was nodding in agreement with this critical stance, but also displaying signs of discomfort, fiddling with glasses and checking others' expressions. Unease could be felt as he spoke of the erosion of university democracy, the demise of collegial elected leaders and the rise of appointed leaders and professional managers – with the recently appointed head of the department standing next to him. After voicing the dissatisfaction of the many with the state of governance of Norwegian academia, he turned to the joyful occasion of his colleague's birthday. Praising her collegiality and witty academic spirit, he emphasized the enjoyment derived from her 'critical companionship' in their local 'club of the dissatisfied' (*misnøyelse-klubben*) which made working under the conditions of neoliberal governance bearable. In the absence of hope for collective resistance, this was already something.

His critical awareness and intimate knowledge of the mode of governance is a result of many years of helplessness vis-à-vis a system that cultivates self-interest, academic stardom and self-branding, which fosters insecurity, (status) anxiety, envy and other harms of competitive individualism in the cut-throat academic market. It is not the goal of this article to dissect the precise

nature of this governance. Others have already done this already, typically under the banner of critique of New Public Management (NPM) (Blekkie et al., 2011; Tjora, 2019). NPM has been largely understood as the introduction of market mechanisms, private sector management techniques and accountability systems into Norwegian higher education since the late 1980s, through a series of reforms and expansion of multi-level and network governance. These reforms have resulted in hierarchization, competitive individualism, marketization, the primacy of instrumental and economic values, and the ideological hegemony of NPM (Solhaug, 2011). For our purposes, NPM can be best understood as a hybrid mixture of approaches to financial, performance and human resource management, which relies on the logics of econometrics, sociometrics, psychometrics, and bibliometrics, and has been introduced with the help of big transnational management-consulting firms into the Norwegian public sector – in the name of increased productivity, efficiency, innovation, competitiveness, excellence, transparency and so forth. The critique directed at this mode of governance arises in response to the *harmful* effects of this ‘triumph of numbers’, where statistical needs trump human and academic needs, resulting in organizational, societal and civilizational *mismeasure* (Hummel, 2006). This triumph of numbers has created new ‘orders of worth’ (Mau, 2019: 6) that are replacing what remains of the humanistic values of the university, while foreclosing the possibility of politics proper through technocratic and instrumental algorithmic (un)reason. The concept of ‘governance by numbers’ best reflects this shift from ‘government’ relying ‘on subordinating individuals’, to ‘governance’, which, ‘in line with its cybernetic vision, relies on programming them’ (Supiot, 2017: 29). This mode of governance, as opposed to government, is at the core of what Mau calls the ‘metric society’ (Mau, 2019). Governance by numbers is reshaping academia at the systemic and structural levels and transforming academic *subjectivity*. It is the latter – the transformation of subjectivity – that shall be our subject here. While there may be ‘true believers’ in the governance by numbers, those who believe that this is the most rational and the best of all possible systems, this article interrogates only the figure of the cynical academic who has no belief in the system yet reproduces it like a true believer. In other words, how can the governance of numbers triumph, expand its grip and *subject* us, turning us into competitive neoliberal subjects, *despite* our critical *knowledge* of its harmful effects?

There are three crucial takeaways from this ethnographic vignette: (1) the precise *knowledge* of the conditions of one's own subjection, and of the systemic and organizational perversions and harms (Craig, Amernic, and Tourish, 2014; Lloyd, 2019), (2) the impossibility of this knowledge to effect organizational change and break with the *ideology* of the governance by numbers, and (3) the *pleasure* involved in cultivating an internal critical distance and disbelief in the governance by numbers. The playful neologism *misnøyelse* (*misnøye* = dissatisfaction) is modelled upon *fornøyelse*, which means enjoyment, and thus reveals the pleasure that lurks in this cynical position. Understanding the function of *cynical ideology*, desidentification, and pleasure (Žižek, 1989; Fisher, 2009) in organizational reproduction is key if we are to make sense of how a system with which so many are dissatisfied manages to reproduce itself and thrive.

*'I know well, but all the same...'*

While Norway likes to view itself as relatively shielded from the most brutal neoliberal forms of higher education governance, compared to Great Britain, the United States, Australia or New Zealand, concerns about the consequences of neoliberal governance by numbers increasingly feature in Norwegian public and academic debate (e.g. Tjora, 2019; Rasmussen, 2018; Kjeldstadli, 2010). Globally, many critical works have mourned the death of the public university and its zombification (e.g. Giroux, 2009; Whelan, Walker, and Moore, 2013; Wright and Shore, 2017; Sievers, 2008; Saltman, 2016). These works resonate with many in Norwegian academia; the recent edited volume *Universitetskamp (The Battle for the University)* testifies to this (Tjora, 2019). There is widespread discontent and cynicism vis-à-vis the performance university, while many academics are well aware of the harmful consequences of governance by numbers. In 2019/20, together with several colleagues, I conducted a qualitative study on behalf of a number of trade unions, including The Norwegian Association of Researchers (*Forskerforbundet*). Our study revealed that governance through quantifiable goals, targets and efficiency requirements has been normalized, permeating all levels of the organizations, creating more authoritarian workplaces and negatively affecting the working environment, eroding professional autonomy and discretion, and threatening academic freedom (Kuldova et al., 2020). The qualitative interviews conducted on this occasion pointed to organizational cynicism (Dean,



Brandes, and Dharwadkar, 1998), and a cultivation of individual critical distance towards the ‘spreadsheet university’ (Sørensen, 2010). What struck me was that *despite* the critique, all the academics we interviewed, myself included, were in practice performing as perfect neoliberal academic subjects committed to given performance requirements and delivering on quantified targets. In the following, I offer a theoretical reflection grounded partially in this material, which has been published as a report in Norwegian (Kuldova et al., 2020), and (auto-)ethnographic reflections on the experience of performing in a Norwegian spreadsheet university and being a trade union representative. The re-discovery of the pragmatic and ‘cynical academic’ in our material did not come as a surprise but deserves more serious engagement. What does this cynicism and ideology that consists in desidentification actually *do* (Pfaller, 2005; Žižek, 1989)? Does it serve organizational reproduction, foreclosing the possibility of change, enabling the neoliberal governance by numbers to be the only game in town (Fisher, 2009)?

This cynicism manifested itself in the widespread insistence on the need to be ‘pragmatic’ if one wishes to succeed – to strategically select publication venues, tweak projects to fit funding bodies’ agendas, engage in strategic self-censorship, craft one’s online persona – while ‘strategically ignoring’ (McGoey, 2019) and *disavowing* the knowledge of the harms that this ‘gaming’ of the system produces. As one of our interviewees put it,

People tend to be cynical. If you take it seriously, then you lack critical distance to what you do. (...) I would say very few [take it seriously]), maybe people who are particularly successful then consider the system particularly brilliant because it seems to reflect on them. (...) You start streamlining things in order to have a chance, because what is the point of writing an application knowing that you are not fulfilling expectations and making it unlikely that you get the money in the end; that would be a subtle kind of resistance, but it would also be quiet of pointless. (...) I can sell myself in a certain way and what I do is a totally different thing; someone else would have to evaluate how much, nonetheless, of my application-kind-of-thinking filtered into the project in the end without me really thinking or being aware of it.

This is symptomatic of the neoliberal academic split subjectivity – the academic *knows* quite well and does not really (internally) believe in all this, but nonetheless plays the *game* (after all, it would be silly, and against one’s self-interest not to) and thus *objectively believes*. The common talk of the ‘academic

*game*' further serves this cynical distantiation. Numerous instances of such behavior have been documented across academic literature (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016; Ashcraft, 2017; Butler and Spoelstra, 2014; Kontos and Grigorovich, 2018; Brandist, 2017; Fleming and Spicer, 2003). Brandist has observed that 'cynicism towards such managerialism is evident throughout the system, but this does not directly undermine the effectiveness of the administration in directing researchers into what may be perceived as "safe" projects likely to yield publications in the most prestigious journals' (2017: 586). Ashcraft argued for 'inhabited criticism' as a response to the common predicament of *knowing* better but not how to *do* better, thereby drawing upon affective theory to challenge the reproductive neoliberal rule of excellence despite critique (Ashcraft, 2017). Butler and Spoelstra have shown how professional judgement is being actively modified as academics align their behaviours with managerial demands in order to succeed, while maintaining an internal critical distance towards these demands – as one of their respondents put it, 'although top-ranked journals tend to publish papers "that make you want to curl up and die", she continues to send her work to them because she recognizes that "it's a careerist game"' (2014: 545). Another remarked,

I hate thinking like that, I don't want to think like that, I want to publish where my work belongs. But I know . . . that whatever the REF panel says, my work will have more bang if I try and get it in *Organization Studies* [an ABS four-rated journal] than it will if I publish it in *ephemera* [an ABS one-rated journal]. (Butler and Spoelstra, 2014: 544)

Journal article submission becomes an act of *submission*. In light of this, it is legitimate to ask: why so little resistance and sovereignty, and why so much compliance *despite* critique and dissatisfaction? Why does critique not translate into resistance, but instead appears to *serve* organizational reproduction? Here we have to take Sievers' insight that 'the individual's and the organization's unconscious dynamics are interrelated' (2008: 241) seriously and connect the systemic to the structure of ideology and ideological subjectivation (Lloyd, 2019; Hall and Winlow, 2015).

Submission to the managerial dictates, despite better knowledge, can be explained through the logic of disavowal and cynical ideology (Kuldova, 2019). Cynical ideology refers to the instances where 'enlightened' subjects believe themselves to be outside ideology, by virtue of the aforementioned critical

distance, but are in fact immersed in it in their material practice (Žižek, 1989; Pfaller, 2014). The psychoanalytical structure of ‘I know well, *but all the same...*’ (Mannoni, 2003) reveals that the problem is not a lack of knowledge, but the habit of *acting as if* one did not know – of acting *despite* one’s better knowledge. Ideology, as Althusser argued, operates at the material level, it resides in *practice*, in our actions, in our behaviour, rituals, etc. – whatever we internally think and believe is irrelevant (Althusser, 1971). In this materialist conception of ideology, knowledge does not challenge or rupture ideology. A Žižekian analysis of ideological fantasy is not concerned with ‘consciousness’ or ‘false belief’ (knowledge performs a different function to that of ideology), but with people’s beliefs as manifest in their actions – ‘staged beliefs’. Or as Žižek puts it,

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 relation to reality. And this overlooked, unconscious illusion is what may be called the ideological fantasy (...) Cynical distance is just one way – one of many ways – to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them*. (1989: 29-30)

In other words, ‘it is precisely our “subversive”, “cynical” distance toward a certain ideology which subjects us to this ideology and allows it to exert its social efficiency’ (Pfaller, 2005: 115). Therefore, our *internal* disbelief changes nothing – to any naïve, cursory observer our actions would appear as those of a true believer. Ideological reproduction can, in other words, take the form of ‘illusions without owners’ (Pfaller, 2014). Resistance, consequently, requires an *externalization of disbelief*. So, what prevents us from externalizing disbelief if not necessarily a lack of awareness and knowledge? We could (rightly) point to the role of structural constraints and *causative potential of absences*, such as the absence of security, protection, or meaning, as analysed by ultra-realist criminologists (Hall and Winlow, 2015; Lloyd, 2019; Raymen and Kuldova, 2021). But what also needs to be explained is their *concrete* relation to subjectivity which is both shaping and shaped by these structures and the dominant Symbolic Order (Lloyd, 2019). Disavowal is furthermore interlinked with pleasure, or *jouissance*. Alvesson and Spicer touch upon this pleasure principle,

An important aspect (...) is the strange seductiveness of rankings, performance measurement and similar systems. What is so striking is that whilst academics are often unhappy, or even downright critical of these techniques, they also embrace and, in some cases, even revel in them. (...) This creates a rather strange double think whereby academics both claim to loathe the control system which they find themselves subjected to and also measure their own self-worth in terms of it. (2016: 38)

Numbers, metrics, indicators, become a fetish – the material trace of the ideological fantasy. While there is pleasure inherent in the structure of disavowal (Pfaller, 2014), which resides in the cynical and enlightened attitude and acts as a first level barrier against the possibilities of resistance, we also have to account for the pleasure that resides in *delegated* enjoyment. This is key to understanding the *gamified* neoliberal academic subjectivity. Awards, rankings, competitive grants, publishing points, and digital platforms such as ResearchGate, which actively employ strategies of gamification to keep you coming back, are turning academia into a *game*, while exploiting the principles of behavioural economics and ‘nudging’ to induce behavioural change (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009). The same strategies of ‘gamification-from-above’ (Woodcock and Johnson, 2017) are also increasingly used by university management to optimize academic performance, often taking the form of internal competition for both financial and symbolic rewards. As Burrows (2012) argued, gamification – the use of game elements in non-game settings to generate behavioural change, emotional engagement, boost performance and so forth – not only mimics the market and market competition but serves their enactment. Marketeers have understood how ideology functions better than academics who insist on notions such as ‘false consciousness.’ Like Althusser, marketers have understood that ideology resides in actions, in behaviour, and that the degree to which one *internally* believes in the ideology is irrelevant. The coveted affective investment in the ideology can be triggered *despite* one’s better knowledge (Kuldova, 2019; Ashcraft, 2017). What is to be done?

### *Breaking the Chains of ‘Decaf Resistance’?*

Let us return to our initial vignette. After the speech, a doctoral student whispered in my ear: ‘This was too cool; he really gave it to *them*. One day, if I ever land a permanent job in academia, I will also have the courage to talk like that’, already anticipating years of self-censorship and submission ahead. But

I replied, ‘he can *afford* to do that, being a couple of years from retirement in a secure position.’ This brief encounter points to the causative nature of *absences* (Lloyd, 2019; Raymen and Kuldova, 2021) – in this case, the absence of security in the highly competitive, individualized and gamified academia and the absence of an alternative – which both prevent the externalization of disbelief (as it comes at a future cost) and mould the researcher’s gamified subjectivity. He cannot *afford* to be critical other than in his interior thoughts. If he is to win in the game, he must, despite his better knowledge, *disavow* this knowledge presented in the speech in order to have a chance of escaping his own precarity (absence of security), thus effectively reproducing the system that keeps others like him in a condition of precarity. Our speaker, on the other hand, could, from his position of security, *refuse* to ‘play along’, compromise, be ‘pragmatic’ and become the entrepreneurial academic; refuse to see his academic work as a game, to tweak his texts, let his production be governed by metrics, self-brand, or see himself through an h-index. Overall, he could refuse to sacrifice his professional discretion at the altar of statistics. This refusal came most likely at a cost of foregone promotion and salary raises – a punishment for not playing along. There is a clear *cost* to insubordination. Yet, his *personal* refusal was accompanied by cynicism vis-à-vis any possibility of *collective* action and organized resistance against governance by numbers. The cynical stance vis-à-vis any possibility of *collective* refusal is symptomatic of a resignation to ‘capitalist realism’ (Fisher, 2009). Cynicism is also directed at trade unions and their representatives, despite the unions’ vocal critique of New Public Management in the Norwegian public debate – much like individual resistance, they are perceived as impotent. Trapped within the logic of ‘government’, the unions are unable to respond to the new modes of real-time ‘governance by numbers,’ and perpetual reform. The principles of co-determination are undermined by the reversal of the function of labour law – through various mechanisms of corporate style governance – into the protection of the employer *from* the collective and individual actions of the employee (Supiot, 2017; Nordrik and Kuldova, 2021). The Norwegian model of workplace democracy is undermined by cynicism and hollowed out from within, which has had profound consequences for the possibility of collective resistance. This also manifests itself in the almost complete absence of any mention of trade unions in the latest critiques of New Public Management by Norwegian academics (Tjora, 2019; Ese, 2019). Resistance proper, as opposed

to ‘decaf resistance’ (Contu, 2008) would involve *collective externalization of disbelief* and *degaming* of the academic, a sovereign political act that defies the logic of technocratic submission to the rule of numbers. While we may lack hope in the possibility of collective action, and we may perceive individual acts as impotent (where one only stands to lose), individual externalization of disbelief and degaming of our academic subjectivity is a possibility we retain. But, to break with ideology and create an alternative in this way, we have to act, foolishly, against our self-interest in the absence of collective material support.

For Steve Hall (2012a) the hope of collective action has been extinguished by neoliberalism’s constant ideological reference to political catastrophism, a parable ever-present throughout the west’s liberal educational and media systems. This is grounded in an objectified fear that any committed and protracted collective action will inevitably result in brutality and totalitarianism. The psycho-cultural result is the constant repression of the ‘passion for the real’ (Badiou, 2007) amongst any established or potential collective. In the grip of neoliberal ideology, this fear percolated down from the specific historical critiques of the French revolution, Stalinism and National Socialism – where of course it is entirely valid – to the broad category of collective action through organisations like trade unions in a social democratic context. In the grip of this mislocated fear, long-term postponement of the return of collective politics as a mass response to neoliberalism’s failures is ensured. While it is true that each creative individual has the capacity to change laws and codes, for Hall (2012b) the individual must find reliable and committed partners in crime. For politics to come alive, it must move beyond the individual’s hopes and dreams to be established by structured symbolic acts, which must be collective. Alas, in neoliberalism, any inaugural political act is materially ill-advised and symbolised as a dangerous and regressive horror. People are now accustomed to finding love and seeking pleasure elsewhere; in cynical acts of revealing oneself to be the cool, motionless ‘one who knew all along’.

## Gamified Academic Subjectivity: Lateral Surveillance, Self-Monitoring, and Pleasure

In the title of his article, Chris Lorenz asks ‘If You’re So Smart, Why are You Under Surveillance?’ (2012). But his analysis falls short, concluding that NPM is so hard to challenge because it is *bullshit*, in Frankfurt’s sense of being profoundly unconcerned with truth (2006); cynicism is reduced to a *reaction* to bullshit. Even if surveillance is explicitly mentioned only in the title, Lorenz manages to ask the right question, pointing us to the need to connect the aforementioned structure of disavowal and cynical ideology to the logic of surveillance and control. Seyama and Smith linked performance management to *panopticism*, and rightly so (2016). Jeremy Bentham was equally passionate about the panopticon as he was about audits and accounting (Bowrey and Smark, 2010), while Frederick Taylor about optimization, or else, ‘the development of each man to his maximum state of efficiency’ (Taylor, 1919: 9) achieved through the monitoring of workers. From the outset, the surveillant gaze has been built into the logic of governance by numbers, but the implications of this have often been glossed over. Today, data-driven tools enable (workplace) surveillance and affective and emotional capture (Lordon, 2014) on an incomparable scale and detail level. The digital footprint of our everyday activities as academics has dramatically expanded, extracted for the purposes of profit, control and data-driven governance (Ball, 2010), increasingly posing a threat to academic freedom and privacy as academics become objects of online surveillance by governments and secret services (Tanczer et al., 2020). Taylorism and surveillance have been digitized and gamified (Dewinter, Kocurek, and Nichols, 2014). Academics have been, often against their will, colonized by the logic of the Quantified Self movement – a direct descendent of scientific management and Taylorism and the European Science of Work (O’Neill, 2016). Governance by numbers aligns with the logic of surveillance capitalism and its hunger for data, prediction and monetization of human futures (Zuboff, 2019), and the technosolutionism of the Silicon Valley (Morozov, 2013). Transparency and audit cultures, risk-based, data-driven, and evidence-based governance, which shape the contemporary culture of control (Han, 2015), are enabled by the faith in and the ‘triumph of numbers’ (Hummel, 2006). Alongside this lies a renewed and unwavering *faith* in neopositivism (Spoelstra, Butler, and Delaney, 2020), radical empiricism,

psychometrics, and statistics, an almost religious belief in ‘raw’, ‘objective’, ‘cold’, ‘rational’, ‘neutral’, and ‘hard’ data and their ability to do away with ‘human bias’ and thus perfectly *optimize* society. Despite decades of sustained critique of positivism (St. Pierre, 2012), and the rise of critical algorithm studies (O’Neil, 2016; Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018; Kuldova, 2020), which have shown that this data is neither hard, objective nor neutral, neopositivism thrives. This naïve faith in the ‘purity’ of data has found its strongest allies in psy-sciences and behaviourism, ‘governing the soul’ (Rose, 1999) through real-time and predictive modelling of behaviour, performance and emotions in the name of profit. Psychometrics and even anthropometry have been revived, now powered by artificial intelligence and equipped with ‘predictive’ powers, utilized by governments, human resources, police departments, advertising agencies and so on, to increase efficiency, cut costs and eliminate the unproductive, the low performers, the future criminals, and others deemed sub-optimal or not optimizable. While commercial products are sold with the promises of ethical, ‘unbiased’, data-driven and efficient decision-making, studies have shown that the proprietary black box algorithms often discriminate, reproduce and exaggerate injustices and existing biases, and create new algorithmic harms (O’Neil, 2016; Benjamin, 2019; Mau, 2019; Pasquale, 2015). Surveillance capitalism relying on technocratic and algorithmic governance now enables large-scale ‘social sorting’ (Lyon, 2003; Amoore and Piotukh, 2016). The problem is thus not only one of the harmful effects of the governance by numbers in academia, but also one of the *epistemological* underpinnings of this form of technocratic governance. Again, the knowledge about data biases and critiques of positivism have not been able to break with the fetishization of numbers and the false claims to ‘objectivity’. This is because numbers have moved out of the realm of knowledge into the realm of collective ideology – evidence-based and data-driven technocratic politics is not only a contradiction in terms, but an ideology par excellence. But we cannot remain blind to the *enjoyment* which sustains this ideological fantasy.

Seyama and Smith argue that top-down managerial surveillance leads to “‘coercive’ compliance” and that ‘strangely, academics seem to have succumbed to the “normalization judgment” effected through systemic managerial practices, to the extent that they “willingly” subscribe to this neoliberal rationale for leading and managing HEIs’ (2016: 172). Perceiving this surveillance as



exclusively coercive they assume that ‘one is then *unconsciously* complicit in one’s own oppression’ (*ibid*: 173; emphasis mine), concluding that ‘despite their discontent with PM (...) panopticism’s numbing and threatening effects dissuades academics from offering resistance’ (*ibid*: 174). It is not that simple. Firstly, the academic knows perfectly well, but *disavows* this knowledge; hence the academic is not unconsciously complicit but rather using critical distance to keep her self-image intact and retain pleasure in knowing and remaining virtuous but dutifully not acting collectively and risking some future political catastrophe. Secondly, top-down surveillance is not the only mode of surveillance; academics commonly engage in *lateral surveillance* and peer-to-peer monitoring (Andrejevic, 2005), tracking competitors and colleagues across social and institutional platforms, performing their own risk assessments and background checks (Saltman, 2016). Thirdly, the academic turns the surveillant gaze against herself, self-monitors and keeps comparing her own quantified measures of performance to that of others – despite knowing very well that metrics and rankings, whether the h-index, ResearchGate score or Google Scholar Metrics, are methodologically flawed, unreliable, built on ‘dirty data’ and biased datasets, saying little about *quality* – instead turning the academic into a product. But these analytics and metrics generated by proprietary algorithms for profit trigger simultaneously both anxiety and pleasure. If we have learned anything from the Quantified Self movement, it is that there is pleasure lurking in this exercise of control through numbers, and a peculiar comfort (Lupton, 2016). Gannon, reflecting on her own experiences shows how ‘academic subjects willingly make themselves amenable to measurement (...) deployed via practices that commodify academic labour and promote an individualising and competitive milieu that is simultaneously experienced as repellent and desirable’ (2018: 73). There is pleasure in submission and in playing the game – seeing the h-index increase, seeing numbers of downloads and views increase (and they always increase). There is a pleasure, which I have described elsewhere in more detail (Kuldova, 2018) derived from the mere phenomenon of viewing numerical growth. We could argue that ResearchGate, Academia.edu, or Google Scholar, keep playing on our behalf – while we are working and occasionally feeding and stimulating these platforms with new publications. They keep running, calculating, analysing, monitoring, playing, in the background and *on our behalf*, while we work. The pleasure is thus *interpassive* – both the enjoyment and the belief (in the

numbers, which is disavowed) is delegated to the platform. The platform not only enjoys, but also believes on our behalf. Ideology here has an *interpassive* structure (Pfaller, 2005; 2014), and that interpassivity is maintained by the acceptance of political catastrophe as objectively real, to be avoided by the virtuous promise of political inactivity (Hall, 2012a). Academic social media function like the *interpassive* self-playing game Cookie Clicker, which keeps playing in the background on your computer, while you keep working (Kuldova, 2018). ResearchGate unlocks new levels on its own and enjoys on your behalf while you frantically work – you are notified on email about your new ‘2500 reads badge’. But the game can also be played more actively; numbers can be gamed. ResearchGate even provides tips on how to improve and game your own RG Score – ‘a metric that measures scientific *reputation* based on how all of your research is received by your peers’ and ‘can’t be turned off or hidden’;<sup>1</sup> simply put, spend more time on the platform recommending, following, adding more details – *keep clicking* (generating more data and profit for the platform). What is it a measure of? Certainly not scientific reputation. And yet, management encourages us to invest time into cultivating these profiles, decorate our CVs with scores, mention them in research applications and self-brand. Excellence is increasingly measured in visibility, engagement and impact. While not all metrics are meaningless and should not be rejected outright, the problem arises when anything that can be measured, is measured; when anything that can be compared is compared, when numbers have been fetishized – and when individuals and institutions begin to understand and value themselves through these fetishized metrics, and accordingly improve their relative position. In this context it becomes increasingly impossible to ‘use judgement to put measurement back into its proper place, mindful that the numbers are never the full measure of the man (or woman or child)’ (Hummel, 2006: 76). From Altmetric (fig. 1) to the Indicator Report by the Research Council of Norway – which proudly proclaims that ‘Norway has one of the highest number of articles per capita in the world’, or else 3,7 articles per 1000

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://explore.researchgate.net/display/support/RG+Score>

inhabitants in 2019<sup>2</sup> – we are to reduce each other to numbers and compete in the attention economy.

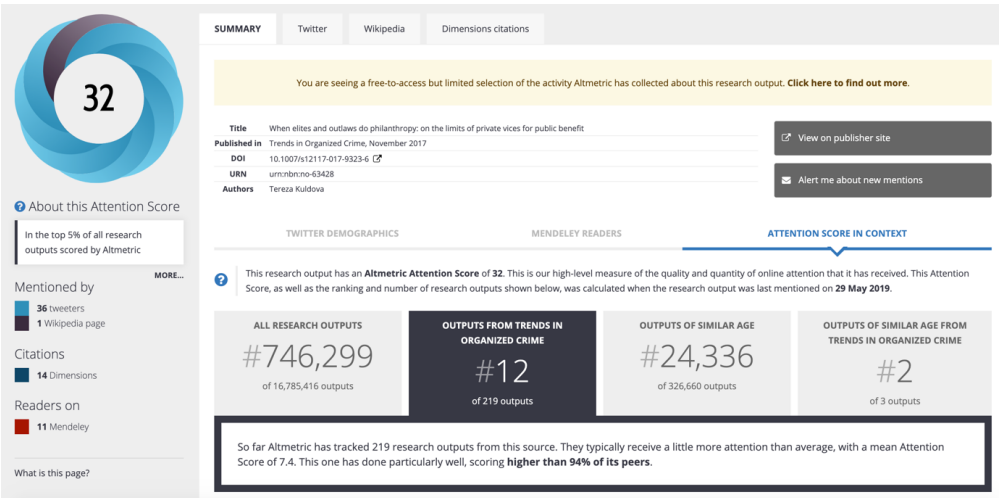


Figure 1 Screenshot of the Altmetric donut for one of my articles, measuring the ‘attention score’. What does it really serve?

Institutions and individuals are encouraged to manipulate and game metrics in the name of financial rewards – practices often referred to as micro-fraud (Oravec, 2017). Governance by numbers is not only undermining academic freedom, job security, and the humanistic values on which universities have been built, but also creating a rapidly expanding market for predatory publishers, journals, fake conferences, fake metrics and even fake universities (*ibid.*). This market has been labelled as a global threat (Cukier et al., 2020). Drawing the line between legitimate and illegitimate publishers and other actors is becoming increasingly difficult, as many academics do have stakes in these markets. In Norway, a number of journals published by the grey-zone MDPI publisher have been listed as point-giving in the national register, thus translating into funding per publication. While there has been some discussion, it has been rather tame, mostly circling around the ethical issue of

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.forskningsradet.no/contentassets/8f25adbfd4cb437eb784b4d06ca35700/science-and-technology-indicators-for-norway-2019.pdf>

academics being incentivized to compromise their professional ethics.<sup>3</sup> The common propositions on how to address the threat of predatory publishers typically consist of *more* governance by numbers: audits and certification assisted by algorithmic and bibliometric sorting of those legitimate and those illegitimate, accompanied by calls for more *ethics*. Such proposed solutions are merely treating the *symptom*, using the very same logic that is creating these proliferating harms. Both legitimate and illegitimate practices are underpinned by the same ‘neoliberal moral economy of fraud’ (Whyte and Wiegatz, 2016) – from ‘micro-frauds’ to large scale academic fraud. These harms cannot be thought apart from the governance by numbers and the neoliberal gamified academic subjectivity. Predatory publishers are just an extreme manifestation of the generalized moral economy of fraud sustained by the ideology of cynicism.

### *Refusing to be Reduced to a Number and Degaming the Academic*

‘How many tickets in the lottery do you have this year?’, a colleague asked me, referring to the recent deadline for grant applications to the Research Council of Norway. Cynicism stemming from the elitist nature of the game – only about 8-11% successful from the thousands of applications sent. The scores, ranging from 1 to 7, where 7 is ‘exceptional’ and 6 ‘excellent’, have become a new order of worth. Results are internally evaluated, scores discussed at departmental meetings, transforming relations between colleagues as they become reduced to their score. Envy, anxiety, stress, insecurity, and feelings of inferiority now number amongst the simultaneously subjective and social harms of the game. These disappointments, as one of this article’s reviewers suggested, may even further stimulate the desire for rewards, resulting in a deeper submission to neoliberal logic rather than resistance. Winners, deemed excellent, gain limelight, but also new enemies. Solidarity, and with it the hope of an inaugural political act, such as a strike or the establishment of a union with real intent, is being destroyed by institutionalised competitive individualism. This is a result of a costly bureaucracy in the name of strategic governance of research – where content has to be aligned with the demands of the bureaucratic forms based on pre-determined criteria of success,

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dn.no/innlegg/innlegg-forskere-blir-ledet-til-etiske-overtramp/2-1-720605>

reflective of key indicators for research funding and policy, on which one has to report. As one of the interviewees put it,

In that [ reporting ] there is enormous influence and power, I was surprised to what extent it shaped the execution of the project (...) now there are institutional structures so that you are no longer in doubt about governance, all authority is up in the system (...) there is a tremendous ideological restructuring that takes place without anyone calling it what it is (...) they remove all criticism.

This system is the opposite of efficient, just or transparent – decision-making remains opaque, not unlike the black-box proprietary algorithms (Pasquale, 2015) that determine the various – and often mutually contradictory, and always *partial*, scores. It is designed to produce elite winners and a mass of losers – of suboptimal (or improperly optimized) individuals with substandard rankings (in turn, their existence legitimizes this competitive system). And, as if built by a predictive algorithm fed by historical data, it tends to always privilege those who have received comparable grants before – or graduated through and worked in prestigious institutions often as a consequence of hereditary privilege – and who can efficiently sell themselves. This is reflected also in the ‘citation inequality’ where 1% of most-cited scientists receive 21% of all citations, a sign of ‘intensified international competition and widening author-level disparities in science’ (Nielsen and Andersen, 2021: 1). Those rewarded by the system are also often cynical about it but far less likely to revolt against it or support those who wish to do so. Or as a colleague put it when I questioned the need for the Research Council and argued for a return to direct funding to institutions,

I agree with the critique, publishing points and all these metrics they use, it is methodologically flawed, of course there are enormous resources being wasted by people applying for these grants and the evaluators (...) but you have to be pragmatic, there is a time for certain questions, you have to be a bit smart and play your cards right. It is a game. But – and you will not be popular for saying that – academia in Norway is full of losers, of second-rate so-called researchers. There is a reason why me, and you, and some of the people in my department are landing grants again and again, it is because we are excellent. And since we are excellent, we do not have a problem getting those grants. (...) Just look up their Cristin profile (Current Research Information SysTEm In Norway) and check their production, they are mediocre. Most should not even have the titles they have. (...) Look at this one, 25 results!

How excellence is to be fairly evaluated lies beyond the limits of this paper, but to become part of ‘the club of the excellent’ under neoliberalism, academics must perceive and value themselves through numbers, scores and evaluations in which nobody really believes. As in Yevgeny Zamyatin’s dystopic novel *We* from 1924 (Zamyatin, 1993), about a future society built on the principles of scientific management and transparency, I was to reduce my myself and my colleagues to a *number*. Gamified governance by numbers not only transforms academic practice into a ‘game’ to be *gamed*, but also results in dehumanization accompanied by both arrogance and disavowal of the structural harms that the system inflicts. It leads to the emergence of ‘special liberty’ (Hall, 2012a) where the individual ‘actively solicits the sociosymbolic structures of neoliberal ideology; the subject epitomizes the competitive individualism, envy and self-interest’ and ‘the absence of a moral duty (...) towards the Other’ (Lloyd, 2019: 114-5). This is what allows one to perceive oneself as excellent, while reducing the Other to a number, and treating the Other accordingly.

A peculiar reversal takes place when we come to cynically act as if the academic field were a game. In normal play, we get carried away despite knowing that ‘it is just a play’ – the ‘sacred seriousness’ of play, its extraordinary affective capacity and pleasure in playing stems precisely from this structure of disavowal (Huizinga, 1970; Pfaller, 2014). In gamification, this is reversed. *We know quite well that the matter at hand is deadly serious, but we act as if it were just a game and hence play by its rules in order to win.* Disavowal is redoubled. We are not only dealing with a cynical disavowal of the game, but also of the anxiety inducing Real; gamification relieves us as it enables the disavowal of unpleasant realities while cynicism helps us cope – while we reproduce the harmful realities that we disavow. At the bottom of this disavowal is the objective fear of the results of real politics and the subsequent relocation of pleasure from the socioeconomic core of solidarity, political action and telos to the peripheral milieu of competitive individualism and the cool administration of what exists with no objective but its permanent reproduction (Hall, 2012a; Hall and Winlow, 2015). So how do we resist these ideological pleasures? I propose a strategy of ‘degaming’ or *externalization of disbelief* in the governance by numbers, a strategy of *refusal* to reduce the Other to a number; a refusal of the fantasy that one is outside of ideology

because one knows better; a refusal of ‘special liberty’ – an ideological license to inflict harm on the Other. We can begin with small acts, robbing ourselves of the interpassive pleasures of academic social media, refuse to be reduced to arbitrary metrics, turned into a product and exploited for profit, our subjectivity to be gamified (fig. 2 and fig. 3). I have myself participated in this, and I am not the first to suggest leaving to seek means of independent research and dissemination as an inaugural political act – to return pleasure and faith in ourselves to their rightful place, the political core of our meaningful intervention in the world informed by the pursuit of truths rather than post-human administrative convenience and cynical, individualised virtue-signaling. At some point, it is time to stop playing along.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, whenever we have the opportunity, we can voice our refusal to participate in the reduction of ourselves, our work, and the Other to arbitrary metrics. If others follow, we can create hope and an alternative even in a system that tells us that there is none, and where the odds are skewed.

---

<sup>4</sup> For others who have left and argued on diverse grounds for leaving, see:  
<https://www.chronicle.com/article/metrics-mania/>  
<https://geokush.com/2020/03/26/moving-on-from-academia-edu-and-researchgate/>  
<https://icietla.hypotheses.org/114>  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/drsarahbond/2017/01/23/dear-scholars-delete-your-account-at-academia-edu/>

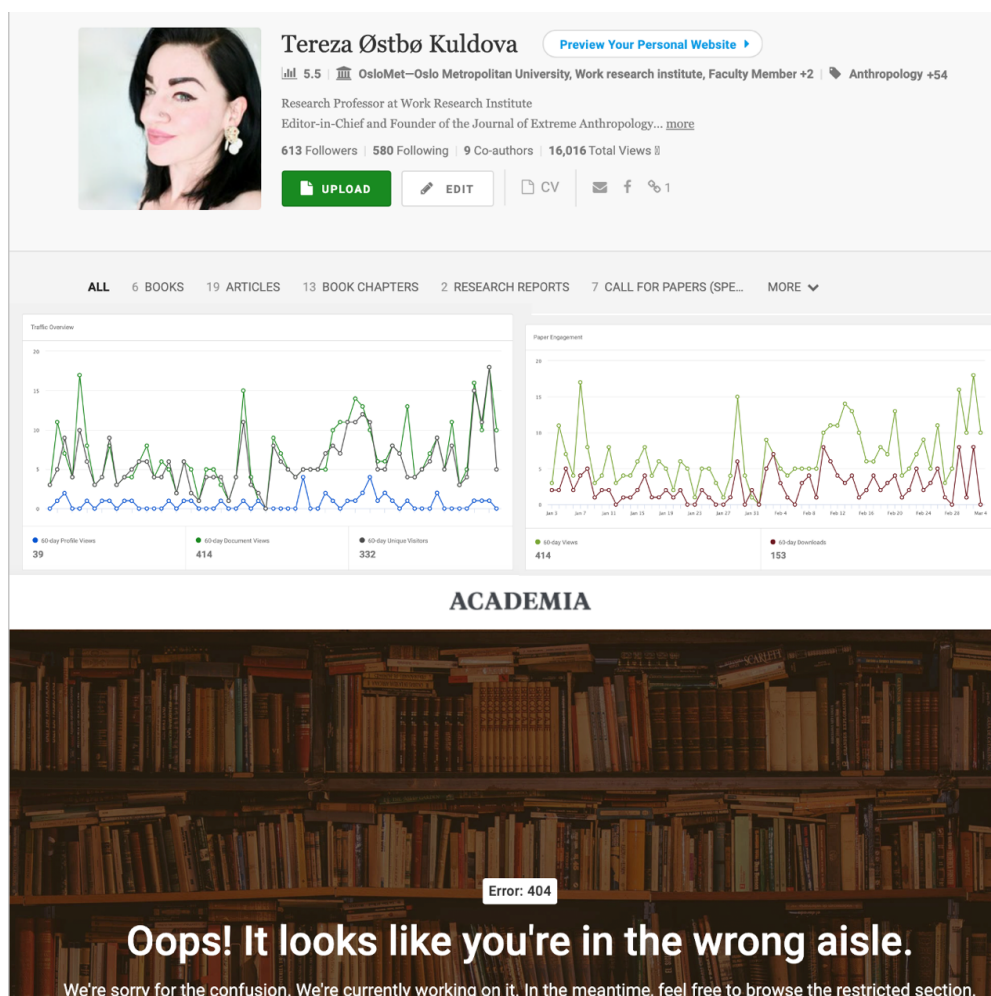


Figure 2 Screenshot collage before and after deleting Academia.edu; note that the very site that argues for open science encourages to browse ‘restricted section’, after all, you have to have a profile to be able to download papers – many of which are available in institutional repositories, or are already open-access; in this sense, Academia.edu drives traffic away from the original publishers and undermines institutional repositories which do not require anyone to create profiles.



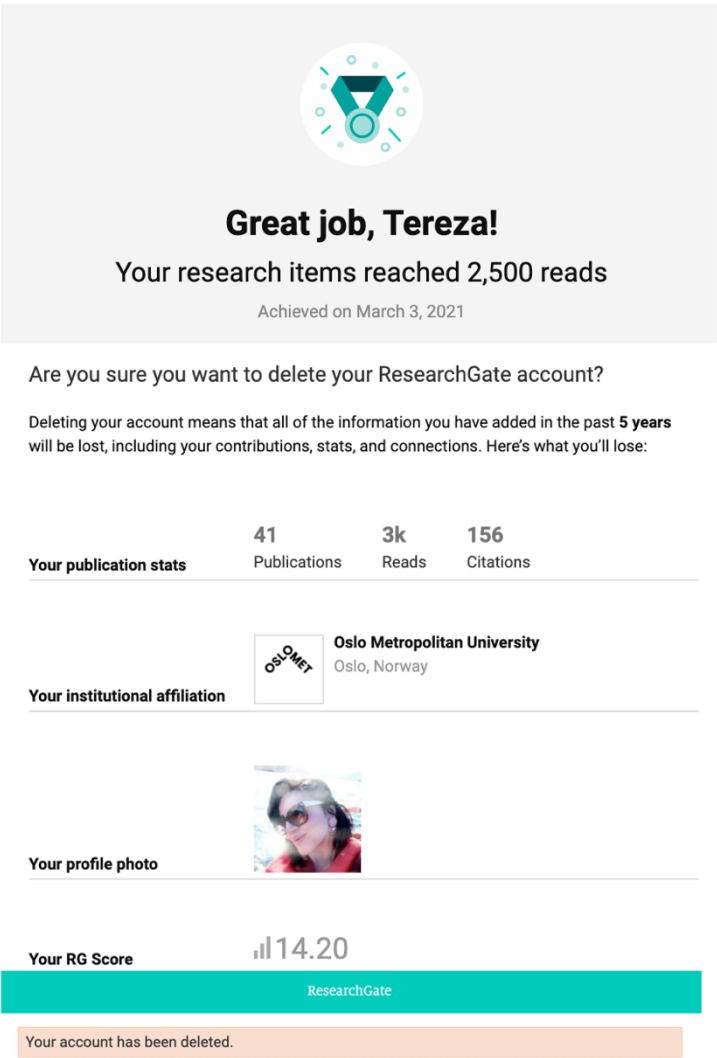


Figure 3 Screenshot collage, deleting ResearchGate profile. Note the threat of ‘loss’, alas, none of these things are lost. The platform loses these, not the author.

**Conclusion: From Disavowal to *Collective* Externalization of Disbelief**

Individual acts, such as the above, may be deemed both impotent and naïve vis-à-vis the scale of the multi-level and networked governance by numbers. But it may be precisely naivety, foolishness and hope that we need. The question is, how can we collectively externalize disbelief in a context of

competitive individualism and *degamify* ourselves? Trade unions, in which most employees in Norwegian academia are organized, could be a way to go, but they tend to be equally trapped by the cynical attitude, and lacking in tools to oppose ‘governance’, the permanent reform and reorganization, and the power of external management-consultancy firms and digital solutions that structure work. Furthermore, the automatic monthly payments to the union relieve the academic’s conscience and *delegate* the work of university politics, resulting in passivity. And indeed, there is no room for politics in a technocratic governance. What results is a resigned, fatalist, cynical attitude that pervades the whole organization, accompanied at best by weak attempts of minor resistance by ‘gaming’ the gamified game that has become academia (at worst slipping into micro-fraud and fraud) – one that reproduces this very technocratic governance through *collective* disavowal. Or as Sloterdijk put it, ‘in the new cynicism, we see a detached negativity which scarcely allows itself any hope, at most a little irony and self-pity’ (Sloterdijk, 1984: 194). The key challenge is that ‘participation’ of the trade unions always already takes place on the *technocratic* premises of management, premises that prevent us from asking the fundamental – political – questions. There is no space for principled questions, instead – one can at best demand a ‘better indicator’ – and treat one symptom or the other. If you demand the impossible, ask principled questions in a meeting with management, you appear as a naïve fool. Or as a trade union colleague put it,

They think you are just a clown and probably an idiot, too; like you have not understood that they expect you to come up with suggestions to change a wording in strategy, but that you are not allowed to question the need for strategy – and that too when the leaders themselves say “yet another strategy bullshit”!

(even the leaders share in the *internal* critical distance and disbelief). He refuses to play the game, be reasonable, and propose the acceptable – thus *externalizing his disbelief* within a forum where this is unwelcomed – it *could* have consequences if taken seriously by others. It has to be discredited. But his is an act of transgression, an act of sovereignty, and refusal to submit to the (technocratic) ‘household economy’ of servitude (Bataille, 1993). We could replace here Bataille’s formula, ‘the sovereign is he who is, as if death were not’ (*ibid*: 222) with: the sovereign is he who is, as if social death were not. Instead of proposing various strategies of counter-gamification or

‘gamification-from-below’ (Woodcock and Johnson, 2017), I argue that we need to *degamify* ourselves and we can do so precisely by externalizing our disbelief. Instead of proposing to game the neoliberal game through ‘subversion, corruption and mockery-making of activities considered “serious”’ (*ibid*: 543) – this is precisely what neoliberal exploitative gamification does to (what used to be) activities considered serious and precisely what the response to it is, already – and by ‘undermining work through the addition of game elements, whose objectives are not those of the work activity’ (*ibid*: 549) – this gamification and its gaming *already* underpin the neoliberal ‘moral economy of fraud’ (Whyte and Wiegratz, 2016) – rather than being ‘subversive’, I argue that we must put both game and play back to its proper place, in the same way in which we must ‘put measurement back into its proper place’ (Hummel, 2006: 76). The only way out, is to collectively *demand the impossible* (Contu, 2008) and break with the apolitical gamified subjectivity of submission. We have to refuse to both play the game and to game it. This means externalizing our disbelief and putting measure, game and play (and thus also pleasure) back to their proper place, and by that refusing to participate in the moral economy of fraud. It also means organizing, reviving trade unions and solidarity wherever possible and developing tools to counter these technocratic dictates. If we agree ‘that positivist knowledge and neoliberal policy dominate our lives is not to be tolerated’ (St. Pierre, 2012: 499), let us together be that naïve fool *despite* our cynicism and refuse the criminogenic marketization of academia and governance by fetishized numbers.

## references

- Althusser, L. (1971) *Lenin and philosophy, and other essays*. London: New Left Books.
- Alvesson, M., and A. Spicer (2016) ‘(Un)conditional surrender? Why do professionals willingly comply with managerialism’, *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 29(1): 29-45.
- Amoore, L., & V. Piotukh (eds.) (2016) *Algorithmic life: Calculative devices in the age of big data*. London: Routledge.
- Andrejevic, M. (2005) ‘The work of watching one another: Lateral surveillance, risk, and governance’, *Surveillance & Society*, 2(4): 479-497.

- Ashcraft, K. L. (2017) ‘‘Submission’ to the rule of excellence: Ordinary affect and precarious resistance in the labor of organization and management Studies’, *Organization*, 24(1): 36-58.
- Badiou, A. (2007) *The century*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Ball, K. (2010) ‘Workplace surveillance: An overview’, *Labor History*, 51(1): 87-106.
- Bataille, G. (1993) *The accursed share: Volumes II and III*. New York: Zone Books
- Benjamin, R. (2019) *Race after technology: Abolitionist tools for the new Jim code*. Medford, MA: Polity Press.
- Bleklie, I., J. Enders, B. Lepori, & C. Musselin (2011) ‘NPM, network governance and the university as a changing professional organization’, in T. Christensen and P. Lagreid (eds.) *The Ashgate Research Companion to: New Public Management*, 161-176. Surrey: Ashgate.
- Bowrey, G. D., and C. J. Smark (2010) ‘The influence of Jeremy Bentham on recent public sector financial Reforms’, *Journal of New Business Ideas and Trends*, 8(1): 1-10.
- Brandist, C. (2017) ‘The perestroika of academic labour: The neoliberal transformation of higher education and the resurrection of the “comand economy”’, *ephemera*, 17(3): 583-608.
- Burrows, R. (2012) ‘Living with the h-index? Metric assemblages in the contemporary academy’, *The Sociological Review*, 60(2): 355-372.
- Butler, N., and S. Spoelstra. (2014) ‘The regime of excellence and the erosion of ethos in critical management studies’, *British Journal of Management*, 25: 538-550.
- Contu, A. (2008) ‘Decaf resistance: On misbehavior, cynicism, and desire in liberal workplaces’, *Management Communication Quarterly*, 21(3): 364-379.
- Craig, R., J. Amernic, and D. Tourish (2014) ‘Perverse audit culture and accountability of the modern public university’, *Financial Accountability & Management*, 30(1): 1-24.
- Cukier, S., M. Lalu, G. L. Bryson, K. D. Cobey, A. Grundiewicz, & D. Moher (2020) ‘Defining predatory journals and responding to the threat they pose:

- a modified Delphi consensus process', *BMJ Open*: 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2019-035561>.
- Dean, J. W., P. Brandes, and R. Dharwadkar (1998) 'Organizational cynicism', *Academy of Management Review*, 23(2): 341-352.
- Dewinter, J., C. A. Kocurek, and R. Nichols (2014) 'Taylorism 2.0: Gamification, scientific management and capitalist appropriation of play', *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, 6(2): 109-127.
- Ese, J. (2019) 'Defending the university? Academics' reactions to managerialism in Norwegian higher education', PhD, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Karlstad University.
- Fisher, M. (2009) *Capitalist realism: Is there no alternative?* Winchester: Zero Books.
- Fleming, P., and A. Spicer (2003) 'Working at a cynical distance: Implications for power, subjectivity and resistance', *Organization*, 10 (1): 157-179.
- Frankfurt, H. G. (2006) *Bullshit*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Gannon, S. (2018) 'On being and becoming the monstrous subject of measurement', in S. Riddle, D. Bright and E. Honan (eds.) *Writing with Deleuze in the Academy*. Singapore: Springer.
- Giroux, H. A. (2009) 'Democracy's nemesis: The rise of the corporate university', *Cultural Studies – Critical Methodologies*, 9(5): 669-695.
- Hall, S. (2012a) *Theorizing crime and deviance: A new perspective*. London: SAGE.
- Hall, S. (2012b) 'The solicitation of the trap: On transcendence and transcendental materialism in advanced consumer-capitalism', *Human Studies: Special Issue on Transcendence and Transgression*, 35(3): 365-381.
- Hall, S. and Winlow, S. (2015) *Revitalizing criminological theory: Towards a new ultra-realism*. London: Routledge.
- Han, B.-C. (2015) *The transparency society*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Huizinga, J. (1970) *Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*. Boston: Beacon Press.

- Hummel, R. P. (2006) 'The Triumph of Numbers: Knowledges and the Mismeasure of Management', *Administration & Society*, 38(1): 58-78.
- Kjeldstadli, K. (2010) *Akademisk kapitalisme*. Oslo: Res Publica.
- Kuldova, T. (2018) 'Interpassive phenomena in times of economic subordination: From self-playing games via cryptocurrency mining to dressing up in subversion', *Continental Thought & Theory: A Journal of Intellectual Freedom*, 2(1): 32-49.
- Kuldova, T. (2019) 'Fetishism and the problem of disavowal', *Qualitative Market Research*, 22(5): 766-780.
- Kuldova, T. (2020) 'Imposter paranoia in the age of intelligent surveillance: Policing outlaws, borders and undercover agents', *Journal of Extreme Anthropology*, 4(1): 45-73.
- Kuldova, T. Ø., I. Drange, H. Enehaug, E. Falkum, A. Underthun, and C. T. Wathne (2020) 'Faglig skjønn under press: Fire case-studier og en sammenfatning', *AFI Rapport:6*, Arbeidsforskningsinstituttet.
- Kontos, P., and A. Grigorovich (2018) "Sleight of hand" or "selling our soul"? Surviving and thriving as critical qualitative health researchers in a positivist world', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 19(2): 1-10.
- Lloyd, A. (2019) *The harms of work: An ultra-realist account of the service economy*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- London, F. (2014) *Willing slaves of capital: Spinoza & Marx on desire*. London: Verso.
- Lorenz, C. (2012) 'If you're so smart, why are you under surveillance? Universities, neoliberalism and new public management', *Critical Inquiry*, 38(3): 599-629.
- Lupton, D. (2016) *The quantified self*. London: Polity Press.
- Lyon, D. (ed.) (2003) *Surveillance as social sorting: Privacy, risk and digital discrimination*. London: Routledge.
- Mannoni, O. (2003) 'I know well, but all the same...' in M. A. Rothenberg and D. Foster (eds.) *Perversion and the social relation*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Mau, S. (2019) *The metric society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

- McGoey, L. (2019) *Unknowers: How strategic ignorance rules the world*. London: ZED books.
- Morozov, E. (2013) *To save everything, click here*. NY: Public Affairs.
- Nielsen, M. W. and Andersen, J. P. (2021) 'Global citation inequality is on the rise', PNAS: Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America 118(7). <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2012208118>.
- Noble, S. U. (2018) *Algorithms of oppression: How search engines reinforce racism*. New York: New York University Press.
- Nordrik, B. and T. Ø. Kuldova (2021) *Faktaundersøkelser – Et 'hybrid konfliktvåpen' på norske arbeidsplasser: en refleksiv studie*. Oslo: Gyldendal Akademisk.
- O'Neil, C. (2016) *Weapons of math destruction: How big data increases inequality and threatens democracy*. New York: Crown.
- O'Neill, C. (2016) 'Taylorism, the European science of work, and the quantified self at work', *Science, Technology & Human Values*, 42(4): 600-621.
- Oravec, J. A. (2017) 'The manipulation of scholarly rating and measurement systems: Constructing excellence in an era of academic stardom', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 22 (4): 423-436.
- Pasquale, F. (2015) *The black box society: The secret algorithms that control money and information*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Pfaller, R. (2005) 'Where is your hamster? The concept of ideology in Slavoj Žižek's cultural theory', in G. Boucher, J. Glynos and M. Sharpe (eds.) *Traversing the fantasy: Critical responses to Slavoj Žižek*. Cornwall: Ashgate.
- Pfaller, R. (2014) *On the pleasure principle in culture: Illusions without owners*. London: Verso.
- Rasmussen, B. (2018) 'Konstruksjon av store forskergrupper som ny norm for god forskning: Standardisering av forskningen gjennom evaluering', *Norsk sosiologisk tidsskrift*, 2(6): 464-480.
- Raymen, T., and T. Ø. Kuldova (2021) 'Clarifying ultra-realism: A response to Wood et al.' *Continental Thought & Theory: A Journal of Intellectual Freedom* 3 (2): 242-263.

- Rose, N. (1999) *Governing the soul: The shaping of the private self*. London: Free Association Books.
- Saltman, K. (2016) *Scripted bodies: Corporate power, smart technologies, and the undoing of public education*. New York: Routledge.
- Seyama, S., and C. Smith (2016) 'Performance management as panopticism: Embedding intellectually repressive conditions in academia', *Socioeconomica – The Scientific Journal for Theory and Practice of Socio-economic Development*, 5(10): 171-188.
- Sievers, B. (2008) 'The psychotic university,' *ephemera – theory and politics in organization*, 8: 238-257.
- Sloterdijk, P. (1984) 'Cynicism – The wilight of false consciousness', *New German Critique*, 33: 190-206.
- Sørensen, K. H. (2010) 'Fra Excel til excellence: Måling og veiing av regneark-universitetet,' *Vardøger*, 32:115-133.
- Solhaug, T. (2011) 'New public management in educational reform in Norway', *Policy Futures in Education*, 9 (2): 267-279.
- Spoelstra, S., N. Butler, and H. Delaney. (2020) 'Measures of faith: Science and belief in leadership studies', *Journal of Management Inquiry*: 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492620901793>.
- St. Pierre, E. A. (2012) 'Another postmodern report on knowledge: Positivism and its others', *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 15(4): 483-503.
- Supiot, A. (2017). *Governance by numbers: The making of a legal model of allegiance*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Tanczer, L. M., R. Deibert, D. Bigo, M. I. Franklin, L. Melgaco, D. Lyon, B. Kazansky, and S. Milan (2020) 'Online surveillance, censorship, and encryption in academia', *International Studies Perspectives*, 21:1-36.
- Taylor, F. W. (1919) *The principles of scientific management*. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers.
- Thaler, R. H., and C. R. Sunstein (2009) *Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth, and happiness*. London: Penguin Books.
- Tjora, A. (ed.) (2019) *Universitetskamp*. Oslo: Scandinavian Academic Press.



- Woodcock, J., and M. R. Johnson (2017) 'Gamification: What it is, and how to fight it', *The Sociological Review* 66(3): 542-558.
- Whelan, A., R. Walker, and C. Moore (eds.) (2013) *Zombies in the academy: Living death in the higher education*. Bristol: Intellect.
- Whyte, D., and J. Wiegatz (eds.) (2016) *Neoliberalism and the moral economy of fraud*. London: Routledge.
- Wright, S., and C. Shore (eds.) (2017) *Death of the public university? Uncertain futures for higher education in the knowledge economy*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Zamyatin, Y. (1993) *We*. London: Penguin Books.
- Žižek, S. (1989) *The sublime object of ideology*. London: Verso.
- Zuboff, S. (2019) *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. London: Profile Books.

## funding

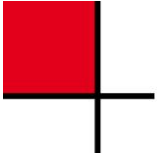
This work was funded by the Research Council of Norway under grant no. 314486 (project: Digital Prism and the Nordic Model of Workplace Democracy Under Pressure). I would like to thank Jardar Østbø, Bitten Nordrik, Steve Hall, Eivind Falkum, and *ephemera's* anonymous reviewers for truly inspiring comments.

## the author

Tereza Østbø Kuldova, PhD is a social anthropologist and Research Professor at OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University. She is the author of *How Outlaws Win Friends and Influence People* (Palgrave, 2019), *Luxury Indian Fashion: A Social Critique* (Bloomsbury, 2016), co-editor of *Crime, Harm and Consumerism* (Routledge, 2020), *Outlaw Motorcycle Clubs and Street Gangs* (Palgrave, 2018), *Urban Utopias: Excess and Expulsion in Neoliberal South Asia* (Palgrave, 2017). She is currently working on algorithmic governance, surveillance, and artificial intelligence in policing and the welfare state. She is the founder and editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Extreme Anthropology*.

Email: tereza.kuldova@oslomet.no





# On commoners' daily struggles: Carving out the when/where of commoning

Giacomo Poderi

## abstract

Following recent developments in commons studies centred on commoning as a practice, this work takes special interest in commoners' lived experiences, desires, expectations, and struggles as they relate to sustaining a commitment to such practices over time. The article adopts a micropractice perspective focused on commoners' privileged vantage point to observe how multiple heterogeneous practices overlap and intersect in the mundane life of commoning and how, in turn, a necessary condition to continue commoning is to unearth ways through this nexus of practices. Empirically, the article is grounded in the analysis of twenty-five semi-structured interviews with long-term commoners recruited from three different commoning realms, and it advances the concept of *carving out the when/where of commoning*: a situated and relational type of boundary work that commoners continuously perform and reproduce when committing (or trying to commit) to commoning. As such, the article contributes to commons studies by starting to unravel commoners' everyday struggle to commit to and perform commoning.

## Introduction

Becoming in common then, is a partial, transitory becoming, one which needs to be (re)performed to remain stable over time and space. (Nightingale, 2019: 15)

Within the burgeoning literature that constitutes commons studies, critical, feminist, and indigenous approaches recently emerged that created distance from early and mainstream debates on the commons. These latter studies built upon Hardin's famous essay 'The Tragedy of the Commons' and upon its misreading,<sup>1</sup> often confined either to discourses about design principles for governing rational agents in collective action or about property rights and approaches to market versus State resource management (Ostrom, 1990; Frischmann, Madison and Strandburg, 2014). A focus on *commoning* (Esteva, 2014; Bollier and Helfrich, 2015) as social practice brings to the fore the historical, social, and cultural traits of collective mobilization for social transformations (Linebaugh, 2009; Caffentzis and Federici, 2014; Ruivenkamp and Hilton, 2017) and also calls into question the extent to which individual and collective actions can be managed, strictly speaking, or even considered rational and conscious (Nightingale, 2011; Velicu and García-López, 2018; Poderi, 2020). According to these approaches, such collective actions are best understood as 'relational outcomes of subjectification, individual agency, emotion, and embeddedness within wider political economies' (Nightingale, 2019: 4).

As they have become central to social imaginaries and transformative politics for more sustainable and fair ways of being and acting in the world, great expectations have been placed on commons, commoning, and commoners. However, Velicu and García-López warn about the dichotomous assumptions upon which such expectations are built, as if any fundamental altruistic human value would be suppressed under neoliberal capitalism, and only under a commons paradigm could this find its full uncontested expression (2018). To homogenize, idealize, and romanticize the commons can be problematic (De Angelis, 2013), as this dismisses the serendipity, contradictions, mundanity, and everyday messiness of the labour underpinning viable alternatives that cut across individual and collective

---

1 According to David Harvey, the prisoner's dilemma, at the centre of which Garrett Hardin placed the commons and their 'tragedy', is a rhetorical device to defend private property and market exploitation of common resources more than it is an invitation to be genuinely concerned about the need of such resources to be collectively nurtured (Harvey, 2011).

needs, both human and non-human needs, on local and global scales (Nightingale, 2011; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Federici and Linebaugh, 2018). Such idealization makes us forget that commoning is inherently exclusive, as it demands forms of engagement and commitment that people must actively enter into and continuously re-enact (Nightingale, 2011). More importantly, to idealize the commons perpetuates the belief that societal transformation, a transition towards sustainability and fairness, is *only* a matter of becoming aware of and choosing the commons for it to be fulfilled (De Angelis, 2013; Caffentzis and Federici, 2014).

In short, critical, feminist, and indigenous approaches invite and help us understand commoning as a 'continuous political struggle to perform the "within/against" of power and agency – a relational constitution of our collective selves – which faces us with the opacity (boundedness) of selves rather than a fully-formed alternative/communal subjectivity' (Velicu and García-López, 2018: 61). Motivated by the desire to better understand the mundanity, the everyday life and labour that underpin commoning practices (Huron, 2017; Federici and Linebaugh, 2018), this article aims to provide a micro-perspective of such boundedness of selves.

To do so, this work relies on a micropractice approach, which zooms in to focus on commoners as carriers of commoning (Reckwitz, 2002; Nicolini, 2009). Empirically, the arguments in this paper are built on an analysis of twenty-five semi-structured interviews with long-term commoners who attended three different realms of commoning (digital, knowledge, and urban commons). The main argument presented below emerges from iterative coding, analysis, and inductive interpretation as inspired by grounded theory's constructivist approach (Charmaz, 2006). Ultimately, this paper contributes to commons studies by articulating the concept of *carving out the when/where of commoning* as a situated and relational type of boundary work with/in? which commoners engage. The article is structured as follows: The first section provides a framing of commoning and commoners through theories of social practices and clarifies the scope of a micropractice perspective. The second section introduces the empirical context of the research by briefly describing the three fields I engaged with and summarizing my approach to gathering and analysing data. The third section elaborates on

the concept of *carving out the when/where of commoning* by building on illustrative excerpts from the interviews. The final section discusses the key points of the work and the study's limitations before presenting the concluding remarks.

## **Commoning as practice, commoners in a nexus of practices**

Practice theories – also known as theories of social practices – started to be consolidated in the 1970s as researchers built on the works of scholars such as Bourdieu, Giddens, and Foucault, and on the influence of the late Wittgenstein (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina and Savigny, 2001). Despite the fact that the *practice turn* affected many fields and academic areas, practice theories have found a welcoming home within organization studies, where they have been used to study formal organizations and institutions, the organization of specific work processes, and the organization of social life in broader terms (De Certeau, 1984; Schatzki, 2005; Nicolini, 2012). Over the years, the 'bandwagon of practice-based studies' (Corradi, Gherardi and Verzelloni, 2010) has intersected with several other fields and domains, such as technology and technology use (Suchman et al., 1999; Orlikowski, 2000); learning and knowing (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Brown and Duguid, 1991; Gherardi, 2000); strategy and decision-making (Jarzabkowski, 2004; Whittington, 2006); marketing, consumption, and social innovation (Shove and Pantzar, 2005; Skålén and Hackley, 2011).

The core tenet of these theories is the idea that central to whatever we might understand as *social*, or *social life*, is something called practice. These practices consist of organized sets of actions, and they link to form wider complexes, a nexus (Hui, Schatzki and Shove, 2017). It is the ambition of social practice theories to help explain and understand such a nexus. According to Reckwitz, theories of social practice represent a modern form of theorizing and framing through which people are able to explain action and social order, besides the more renowned forms of rational choice theory and norm-oriented theory of action (2002). These more well-known theories explain action by referring to individual interests, intentions, and purposes or by relying on the role of collective norms and values. Consequently, social

order can be understood either as combinations and interactions of single interests or as a normative consensus. In contrast, a practice is a 'routinised type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, "things" and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge' (Reckwitz, 2002: 249). Therefore, practice theories mediate a number of issues present in other traditions and in theoretical framing that tend to understand the social in terms of unsolvable dualisms, such as actor/system, agency/structure, body/mind, and social/material (Nicolini, 2012; Hui, Schatzki and Shove, 2017). Indeed, practice theories largely assume flat ontologies. This avoids reducing the social to any of these poles or dyads. Practice theories conceive the social as specific types of behaving and understanding (both of which have bodily and mental connotations) that manifest in particular times and places and that are carried out by diverse agents. In this frame, agents are body/minds who perform, 'carry', or 'carry out' social practices, and as carriers of practices, they are neither autonomous nor at the mercy of norms: 'they understand the world and themselves, and use know-how and motivational knowledge, according to the particular practice' (Reckwitz, 2002: 256). More importantly, as multiple practices constitute the social world, individuals, as body/minds agents, are the unique intersection of many such practices.<sup>2</sup>

Adopting practice theory to view commoning as the 'practice of pooling common resources' (Bollier and Helfrich, 2015: 102), or as 'engagement in the social practices of managing a resource for everyone's benefit' (Bollier, 2014: 16), implies a focus on the bodily and mental routines that constitute the performative dimensions of human endeavours. The defining trait of these endeavours is not only the ability to create and support fairer resource management and distribution systems, but also to create and nurture new forms of social life, of life in common (Stavrides, 2016: 3), which are

---

2 For instance, as shown by Gherardi, practicing entrepreneurship is also intersected by the practicing of gendered performativity. This is something that becomes increasingly clear when the practitioner is a woman situated in a heavily gender-biased context or when the focus is on the practitioner as an individual instead of on the practice as collectively performed (Gherardi, 2015).

antithetical to the dominant, exploitative, and dispossessing forms of contemporary neoliberal capitalism.

Capitalist practices continuously ‘de-socialize the common’ (Hardt and Negri, 2009) both by enclosing and dispossessing the commons and by directly or indirectly obstructing the conditions of possibility for commoning (De Angelis, 2004; Stavrides, 2016). For instance, in relation to urban spaces and urban life, several scholars have stressed that innovation-led policy frames supporting the ‘smart city’ paradigm or facilitating gentrification processes continue to thrive on top of and in spite of urban commoning practices, regardless of their form - squatting in unused buildings, creating open hacker spaces, sustaining urban gardens and social streets, or developing grassroots-driven marketplaces (Borch and Kornberger, 2015; Stavrides, 2016; Jørgensen and Makrygianni, 2020). While being oriented toward creating alternatives, and thus operating against such capitalist practices, commoning performs within/against the dominant political economy of neoliberal capitalism. By building on Velicu and García-López this is what renders the constitution of collective selves around several types of commons and commoning opaque and bounded rather than fully formed alternative/communal and autonomous subjectivities (2018).

At the concrete level of the practitioner, opacity and boundedness emerge through the serendipitous, contradictory, mundane, and messy everyday life commoners face, while committing to the commons and inhabiting a nexus of practices which do not contribute to the commons, and sometimes might also be antithetical to commoning. As reminded above, as practitioners, commoners are – or perform – something else, something more. Besides being able to identify with, conform to, and perform commoning, thus becoming practitioners and carriers of commoning, they are also carriers of practices forming the nexus they are situated in and crossed by. For instance, by being family members, partners, students, or professionals, they also carry those related practices. Through a micropractice perspective, practice theory offers a level of analysis and interpretation that is valuable in exploring commoners’ boundedness to such a nexus, as it frames committing to commoning as one of the many practices that constitute commoners’



everyday life. In the next section, I introduce empirical context of my research.

## Research context and overview

From January 2018 to January 2020, I conducted a research project on the temporal sustainability of commoning. The research focused on the labour, affective, and caring dimensions of commoning and their relationship with commoners' commitment over time. It adopted an interpretive, qualitative approach grounded on ethnographic observation, semi-structured interviewing, and document research. At the centre of the empirical work were three different cases of commoning and the long-term commoners engaged therein. Ethnographic observations and document research were primarily used in an exploratory fashion to become acquainted with the recent history and local cultures of these contexts, as well as to understand the constant infrastructuring work (Poderi, 2020) that is often at the centre of these collaborative endeavours and their localized cultures (Kelty, 2008). Interviews<sup>3</sup> probed commoners' lived experiences, desires, expectations, and struggles as they related to their engagement within those contexts over time. This article focuses primarily on commoners' told stories as they emerged during the interviews. Twenty-five long-term commoners were recruited from the three commoning contexts and interviewed between May 2018 and May 2019. At the time of the interviews, all of the participants had already been involved in their contexts for eight or more years. These contexts were: (1) a Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) project; (2) a grassroots, volunteer-based European nongovernmental organization (NGO) for the promotion and safeguard of FOSS and digital rights; and (3) a hacker space located in northern Europe. Respectively, they exemplify concrete instances of digital,

---

3 Interviews covered three themes: (1) commoners' interactions with other commoners and the tools for commoning; (2) the challenges and strategies characterizing the daily performative aspects of commoning; and (3) commoners' considerations or recollections on their long-term involvement in commoning. When reporting excerpts from these interviews, pseudonyms are used to preserve anonymity.

knowledge (or cultural), and urban commoning. Here, I summarize them in more detail.

(1) Commoners around the FOSS project nurtured a digital environment open to access, participation, use, and modification. In short, this context allowed people to engage with the use, development, and maintenance of software – a video game, in particular – along the principles and practices of a community-driven open-source paradigm. The FOSS project operated through volunteer-based contributions, and it was coordinated as a grassroots movement with no formal organizational structure. Active participation happened nearly exclusively online through the mediation of a complex information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure (e.g., websites, multiplayer servers, bug trackers, forums, chat rooms, code repositories), which was also developed and maintained mostly by the commoners. There was an attempt to create an alternative to the paradigm that sees digital infrastructures, services, and content thriving behind walled gardens, black boxed as products or given for free under the privacy-invasive agreements typical of platform and surveillance capitalism (Srnicek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019).

(2) From a political-activist orientation, commoning in the context of the NGO was aimed at counteracting corporate lobbying performed by information technology (IT) companies at local and international levels. In particular, pursuing awareness campaigns, providing training and educational activities, and offering legal guidance about the complex system of software licenses were the means through which the NGO tried to safeguard, and possibly spread, Free and Open Source Software principles and practices. The formal organization was run by less than a dozen employees and as many volunteers, and its scope was fostered by thousands of volunteers contributing from across Europe. A central role in this context was played by the formal organization itself, which set the strategy targets for campaigning and lobbying, and it provided the infrastructure, tools, and coordination support to the large base of volunteers that committed to the organization's scope. Commoning here was pursued through both online activities (e.g., participating through public discussion lists, translating documents and campaigns into several languages, and contributing to campaign and web

design or system administration) and physical presence at local fairs or public events (e.g., running booths, giving short talks, and organizing events).

(3) In a large European city where rental prices were high, where collective spaces were increasingly few, and where maker spaces were turning into business-oriented environments, the hacker space provided a relatively small physical location that people could turn to if interested in electronics, open hardware, and hacking in general. Access and use of the space was open to anyone, and anyone could become a member. The payment of a small monthly fee allowed anyone to gain independent access to the space at any time and day of the week. As much as possible, the hacker space was run with a grassroots flat structure, with no formal hierarchies or roles. The physical space was around 200 square metres made of four main working rooms and four smaller rooms for storage. Several consumable materials, tools for harnessing electronics and IT hardware (e.g., soldering tools, 3D printers, woodwork machines, and printed circuit boards tools), were available for use to the commoners who also bore the responsibility of maintaining and repairing them. A wiki-based website, several mailing lists, and social media channels were used for communication, archival, and organizational purposes.

These three contexts have a history spanning more than a decade. The FOSS project launched in 2003, the NGO was formally founded in 2001, and the hacker space began in 2009. Over the years, as in many other commoning endeavours, for diverse reasons and in different circumstances, commoners started and stopped engaging with the practice. Many have joined and left, many others remained and continued committing their time and efforts to nurture those instances of digital, urban, and knowledge commons. All three cases had enjoyed livelier times<sup>4</sup> than they did at the time of the research in terms of pace of growth, the number of active participants, and the diversity or depth at which activities were pursued.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the support, training,

---

4 For instance, during the early years of its existence, commoners discussed often the possibility to relocate the hacker space, as they thought they would quickly outgrow the available space.

5 For instance, earlier, commoners in the NGO were able to spread large parts of their campaigns and messages in about fifteen European languages. Nowadays,

mentoring, or coordination of new commoners fell to the relatively few people who had adequate skills and knowledge. At the same time, these few had the skills and knowledge to maintain and operate the collaborative infrastructures.

The research used an inductive approach inspired by constructivist grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2006). This involved a series of iterative coding steps (or labelling) of interview data. All interviewees considered themselves part of these commons, although they all expressed the challenges and the concerns they faced about their current and future involvement therein. A recurring pattern emerged. Commoners kept referring to the substantial changes their engagement in commoning underwent over the years, but they also referred to the small adjustments, compromises, and strategies they devised in their daily lives to keep commoning. Out of the analysis, several labels contributed to formulate the concept of *carving out the when/where of commoning* presented below. In particular, codes such as ‘struggling to find balance’, ‘maintaining balance’, ‘limiting binding commitments’, ‘self-organizing personal life’, ‘personal involvement fluctuating over time’, ‘prioritizing contributions over personal life’, and ‘overlapping organization of work and commoning’ led to the concept’s development and understanding. The next section presents the key finding that emerged from the interviews, which will further elucidate the meaning of carving out the when/where of commoning.

### **Carving out the when/where of commoning**

Carving out the when/where of commoning refers to commoners’ constant engagement in the daily boundary work of identification, negotiation, and appropriation of space and time for commoning. In part, such work is realized by carrying out commoning, thus appropriating such space and time

---

there is consistent translation of content only for the four major European languages. In the FOSS project, for many years, the continuous, frequent updates of new game content and features were considered a great cause of pride by those who committed to the project. Nowadays, new content is shared more sporadically and often consists of the extensive reuse of older materials.

concretely. However, it is also realized by identifying and negotiating such space and time in relation to the nexus of practices each commoner is in at any given moment. As situated in and relational to this nexus, each commoner engages with the boundary work in unique and evolving ways. By building on illustrative excerpts from the interviews, I articulate here how a commitment to commoning carves out the when/where of commoning and how such boundary work can be characterized by its specific bodily and mental routines. The following excerpt comes from John who has been involved in the FOSS project for over seven years with different tasks and responsibilities.

My priorities are in principle as follows: work has to happen; family has to happen; my running does not have to happen, but it is important to me, both for physical and mental reasons, so I make it happen; thus, [the FOSS project] is really only my fourth priority, and I only work on it after I have taken care of the other things. [...] After many attempts over the years, I managed to develop a routine that seems to work. I wake up much earlier than the rest of my family. So, the first hour or so of the day is my [FOSS] time. Then it's work during the day. Afternoons and evenings are usually for family and running. Nowadays, I don't do any more [game] coding in the evening because I am too tired for it by then. [...] Another thing is I have reduced my 'general' involvement significantly. These days I mark most of the discussions as read without opening them, [...] and I only answer those about which I think I know more than most of the other people, basically AI questions. (John, FOSS project, July 2018)

For John, commoning is one among four main practices he wants or needs to attend to. Being a father and a partner, being a researcher and being a body/mind, which requires care, all put John at the centre of a very specific nexus that calls for a certain balance in his engagement, namely when and how much. Over the years, he explored several ways of attending to and managing his various interests and commitments until he found a general routine he considers satisfying, despite requiring him to wake up much earlier than other family members, which became possible only after a considerable reduction of his overall involvement in the project.

The tendency to reduce, or try to reduce, their active involvement in commoning is an aspect that all commoners in the interviews linked to the needs, concerns, and circumstances that emerge at different times in their

daily lives and that call for a necessary realignment of priorities or expectations.

I confess I have spent way too much time and effort on [the FOSS project] over the years, to the detriment of several other things, my education included. I did enjoy it, though, and I think that's the challenge. When you enjoy something, you tend to want to do it more than other things. I wouldn't say finding a balance has entirely been easy for me. (Mark, FOSS project, October 2018)

Some attributed the need to reduce commitments and involvement to excessive and exhausting overcommitments in their early or previous years of commoning. For instance, Mark acknowledged his ongoing struggle for reducing his commitments in the FOSS project by linking the sacrifices made and the enjoyment, fulfilment, and purpose derived from contributing. Others reported significant changes in their private or professional lives that negatively affected their ways of commoning. They mentioned the transitions from being university students to starting their first jobs, switching jobs, acquiring new roles at work, bearing with unemployment periods, the birth of their children, the consolidation or interruption of relevant relationships, and the diagnosis of a chronic health condition. Simultaneously, they also stressed that certain activities or ways of relating to the commons were easier to preserve than others, and those were the ones they maintained to continue commoning.

Nevertheless, despite nearly everyone reporting their attempts to rationalize a distribution or management of various commitments, hobbies, and relationships that constitute their nexus of practices, they all highlighted the ephemeral nature of their achievements, if any. They were ephemeral because sometimes the achievement of balance is more imagined and hoped for than concrete and material, and because what is satisfactory one day can easily become unsatisfactory the following day, week, or month, something that Julie referred to as a constantly moving target.

So yes, it's rather tough. I don't think I already found a good balance, because I'm just trying to balance it all the time and the balance changes all the time. (Julie, NGO commons, June 2018)

The following excerpt from Julie's account further illustrates such ephemerality.

[Finding a balance] changes depending on what I'm doing. [...] When I'm translating, it's very different. In a way, translating helps me to evade myself in something else, and it helps me to make a break from work. It's very different, and it is something that I like to do. So, it really depends on what I'm volunteering for. When it resembles duty or my job, it's often really hard to do, but when it's something that is quite different from what I am doing in the other aspects of my life, then I like it more and it feels good for me. And the other part is also very depending on my day-to-day life. I'm volunteering for a long time now, and I recently had some dire events in my life, and whenever those happened, it will go either in a way or the other. Either I'm contributing a lot, a lot, a lot so I can think to anything, evade, and say that's good. Or I'm really not in the mood and feel I cannot contribute any more for several weeks or months. That may be tough, because when there are people that rely on you, you feel like you shouldn't do it. (Julie, NGO commons, June 2018)

Julie's account shows the extent to which commoning, employment responsibilities, and the unpredictability of personal life tightly intertwine, and they challenge the pursuit of the proper physical and mental conditions to contribute to the NGO's scope. In particular, the search for a balance between when and how much to engage in commoning activities is mediated by the specific commoning activities and her vocational tasks. Indeed, contributing to the NGO is experienced as a way to evade the alienation coming from her job's daily routines. This is substantially upset when health and family difficulties arise. Even the instrumental use of commoning as a way to cope with difficulties is no longer enough and is replaced by the will and need to stop and establish distance.

All commoners in the interviews reported the experience of being unable to achieve or maintain a balance among their various commitments over time and, hence, the constant search for a balance as mainly tiring, stressing, or saddening.

I'm still a paying member, but unfortunately, I only manage to pop by every now and then. [...] Earlier, I was there more than once a week, and I did a lot of volunteer work for the place. [...] At the beginning, once I've finished at work, I usually came down there. There was a lot to do, so I gladly spent many evenings down there, helping out renovating the place. Once things kind of got

settled in, there was more time to, yes, socialize, hang out, work on your own projects, [...] but unfortunately, yes, that also stopped once I got into [the other company], and I got involved with a lot of other different things. It's not that I don't want to come there. Sadly, it's just I do not manage to keep it in my daily schedule any more, so to say. (Stephan, Hacker space, December 2018)

In short, carving out the when/where of commoning does not simply resolve in the activity of time management or planning in the sense of allotting specific time slots in the day and allocating them to specific commoning activities, although some people can deal with boundary work by implementing this specific strategy. Carving out the when/where of commoning is a kind of boundary work that assumes commoners' personal, active, and constant engagement with the complexities of inhabiting, carrying out, and performing multiple practices. It shows situated and relational connotations as well as practical and emotional ones. It is situated because it is always enacted in specific moments in time of a commoners' personal life and identity development. It is relational because the way commoners engage varies accordingly to commoners' identity (e.g., professional, domestic, or social) and their role or responsibility in the commoning practice. Furthermore, it involves the practical work of organizing and handling the possible tensions, conflicts, or synergies that emerge between the engagement in commoning and the nurturing of the aspects of life not directly related to commoning. It bears emotional connotations as each commoner nurtures different emotional relationships to such boundary work, from satisfaction and fulfilment to stress and disappointment. In the next section, I reflect on this finding and highlight the limitations of the study.

## **Discussion**

Scholars, practitioners, and activists have shown that commons are much more than material or immaterial resources coupled with sustainable collective management principles. They are means and opportunities to create languages, vocabulary, and more importantly the social relationships that can (re-)define our ways of being and acting together, which underpin the subjectivities that are alternate to those spurred by contemporary capitalism (Hardt and Negri, 2009). However, commoning also faces us with



the opaque reality of our lives, our agency, and our subjectivities, which always act within wider/specific political and socioeconomic contexts. Therefore, commoning cannot escape the contradictions, limitations, and defeats of existing within and struggling against such dominant contexts. As claimed by Butler and Athanasiou, to acknowledge, understand, and accept such reality is a necessary step to be able to move forward (2013). To frame commoners as bounded selves (Velicu and García-López, 2018) helps us not to neglect such entanglement and to foreground both the relational dimension of becoming a commoner as well as its partial and transitory nature (Singh, 2017; Nightingale, 2019). If commoning and its production of alternate subjectivities is a constant struggle 'within/against', which must not cease to be re-performed to remain stable, then the everyday labour that underpins commoning and that is sustained by commoners acquires renewed significance and should not be neglected, as stressed by several scholars (De Angelis, 2013; Huron, 2017; Federici and Linebaugh, 2018).

As the previous section highlighted, zooming in to commoners' everyday lives helps to engage with their bounded selves and to provide a more nuanced understanding of the constant political struggle of living and performing within/against the dominant context. It revealed how commoners constantly carve the conditions of possibility for commoning out of a nexus of practices that they inhabit and perform. Understanding this struggle is relevant for three reasons. First, it provides empirical evidence of how commoners perform commoning as a struggle for the identification, negotiation, and appropriation of space and times for commoning. This is transversal to the organized routines and collectively shared activities oriented towards a specific resource or social dilemma that constitute commoning as a practice: be they the collective management and operation of a space for hacking and experimenting with technology, or the distributed co-production of open software and digital content, or the organization of political action for defending and promoting open, accessible, and democratic principles of digital ownership and sovereignty. Second, in more substantial terms, it shows commoners' involvement and commitment to commoning as bounded and vulnerable to everyday life and serendipitous events. This reaffirms the partial and transitory aspects (Nightingale, 2019) of performing commoning

in practice. It acknowledges commoners' need to constantly re-perform the decision to commit to commoning, and it foregrounds the labour involved in identifying, negotiating, and appropriating the space and time for such commitments. Third, it reveals that commoners, as autonomous yet bounded selves, can actively work to pursue these spaces and times for commoning, but at the same time, such particular work can also become a relevant source of alienation from commoning itself. This poses an interesting challenge that spurs us to investigate the relationship further between the temporal sustainability of commoning, as collective practices that outlive any individuality, and the material sustainability of practising commoning for any individual commoner.

I raise here two final considerations about the scope and limitations of this paper. One limitation concerns the contexts of commoning underpinning this research and which attends to the Global North. The other relates to the zooming in approach in the analytical and interpretive part of the research and the consequent lack of a zooming out approach. As much as observed and interviewed commoners portrayed a wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds and demographic profiles, their identity is shaped and bounded to that of European and North American people, where the hegemony of a neoliberal and capitalist society is configured rather differently than in the Global South. At the same time, commoners engaged with and committed to practices that involved volunteer-based forms of commoning. Strictly speaking, these forms did not directly contribute to their material sustenance and, therefore, made their pursuit of a professional life one of their priorities. I make no claim about their forms of commoning being corrupted or noncorrupted, nor more or less anti-capitalist than other forms of commoning (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014). Nevertheless, this aspect shall be kept in mind when considering the reach of the insights presented here. In the end, several commoners did acknowledge their condition and their ability to common as a privileged one. In what way this affected the performative aspect of the struggle for the within/against and our understanding of it is a matter for further research. Regarding the second limitation, Nicolini stresses the importance of accompanying a zooming in approach to a practice with a zooming out, in a way that the two approaches iteratively inform each other

(2009). This dialogic approach helps in appreciating how practice and practitioners mutually constitute each other in their collective and individual dimensions. This paper limited itself to a zooming in approach and focused primarily on individual struggles of the commoners as practitioners. One way to further develop the topic of sustaining commitment to commoning through a zoom out approach could, for instance, focus on the collective struggles of redistribution of tasks, commitments, and work overload among commoners, as well as collective practices of caring for each other (Poderi, 2020). Similarly, another way to zoom out on the struggles and implications of committing to commoning should also investigate the extent to which commoners' boundary work affects commoners' nexus of practices and the politics of the social relations that attend to them, beyond the sole focus on how such boundary work affects their attitude towards commoning.

## Conclusions

In short, this work adopted a micropractice perspective of commoners as a privileged vantage point to observe how multiple heterogeneous practices overlap and intersect in the mundane life of commoning and how, in turn, a necessary condition to continue commoning is the continuous unearthing of ways through such a nexus. The article advanced the concept of carving out the when/where of commoning as a situated and relational type of boundary work that commoners continuously perform and reproduce when committing (or trying to commit) to commoning. As such, the article contributes to commons studies by starting to unravel the everyday struggles of commoners as bounded selves.

## references

- Bollier, D. (2014) *Think like a commoner: A short introduction to the life of the commons*. Gabriola Island, Canada: New Society Publishers.
- Bollier, D. and S. Helfrich (2015) *Patterns of commoning*. Commons Strategy Group and Off the Common Press.

- Bollier, D. and S. Helfrich (2019) *Free, fair, and alive: The insurgent power of the commons*. Gabriola Island, Canada: New Society Publishers.
- Borch, C. and M. Kornberger (2015) *Urban commons: Rethinking the city*. Routledge.
- Brown, J.S. and P. Duguid (1991) 'Organizational learning and communities-of-practice: Toward a unified view of working, learning, and innovation', *Organization Science*, 2(1): 40–57.
- Butler, J. and A. Athanasiou (2013) *Dispossession: The performative in the political*. Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Caffentzis, G. and S. Federici (2014) 'Commons against and beyond capitalism', *Community Development Journal*, 49(suppl\_1): i92–i105.
- Charmaz, K. (2006) *Constructing grounded theory*. London: SAGE.
- Corradi, G., S. Gherardi and L. Verzelloni (2010) 'Through the practice lens: Where is the bandwagon of practice-based studies heading?', *Management Learning*, 41(3): 265–283.
- De Angelis, M. (2004) 'Separating the doing and the deed: Capital and the continuous character of enclosures', *Historical Materialism*, 12(2): 57–87.
- De Angelis, M. (2013) 'Does capital need a commons fix?', *ephemera*, 13(3): 603–615.
- De Certeau, M. (1984) *The practice of everyday life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Esteva, G. (2014) 'Commoning in the new society', *Community Development Journal*, 49(suppl\_1): i144–i159.
- Federici, S. and P. Linebaugh (2018) *Re-enchanting the world: Feminism and the politics of the commons*. PM Press.
- Frischmann, B.M., M.J. Madison and K.J. Strandburg (eds.) (2014) *Governing knowledge commons*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Gherardi, S. (2000) 'Practice-based theorizing on learning and knowing in organizations', *Organization*, 7(2): 211–223.

- Gherardi, S. (2015) 'Authoring the female entrepreneur while talking the discourse of work–family life balance', *International Small Business Journal*, 33(6): 649–666.
- Hardt, M. and A. Negri (2009) *Commonwealth*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Harvey, D. (2011) 'The future of the commons', *Radical History Review*, 2011(109): 101–107.
- Hui, A., T. Schatzki and E. Shove (eds.) (2017) *The nexus of practices: Connections, constellations, practitioners*. New York: Routledge.
- Huron, A. (2017) 'Theorising the urban commons: New thoughts, tensions and paths forward', *Urban Studies*, 54(4): 1062–1069.
- Jarzabkowski, P. (2004) 'Strategy as practice: Recursiveness, adaptation, and practices-in-use', *Organization Studies*, 25(4): 529–560.
- Jørgensen, M.B. and V. Makrygianni (2020) 'A migrant's tale of two cities: mobile commons and the alteration of urban space in Athens and Hamburg'. In: D. Özkan and G. Güldem Baykal Büyüksaraç, (eds.), *Commoning the city: Empirical perspectives on urban ecology, economics and ethics*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kelty, C.M. (2008) *Two bits: The cultural significance of free software*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Lave, J. and E. Wenger (1991) *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Linebaugh, P. (2009) *The Magna Carta manifesto*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.
- Nicolini, D. (2009) 'Zooming in and zooming out: A package of method and theory to study work practices', in S. Ybema, D. Yanow, H. Wels and F.H. Kamsteeg, (eds.), *Organizational ethnography: Studying the complexity of everyday life*. SAGE Publications.
- Nicolini, D. (2012) *Practice theory, work, and organization: An introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Nightingale, A. (2019) 'Commoning for inclusion? Commons, exclusion, property and socio-natural becomings', *International Journal of the Commons*, 13(1): 16–35.
- Nightingale, A.J. (2011) 'Beyond design principles: Subjectivity, emotion, and the (ir)rational commons', *Society & Natural Resources*, 24(2): 119–132.
- Orlikowski, W.J. (2000) 'Using technology and constituting structures: A practice lens for studying technology in organizations', *Organization Science*, 11(4): 404–428.
- Ostrom, E. (1990) *Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Poderi, G. (2020) 'The subjects of/in commoning and the affective dimension of infrastructuring the commons', *Journal of Peer Production*, 14: 30–44.
- Puig de la Bellacasa, M. (2017) *Matters of care: Speculative ethics in more than human worlds*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Reckwitz, A. (2002) 'Toward a theory of social practices: A development in culturalist theorizing', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5(2): 243–263.
- Ruivenkamp, G. and A. Hilton (2017) *Perspectives on commoning: Autonomist principles and practices*. London: Zed Books.
- Schatzki, T.R. (2005) 'Peripheral vision: The sites of organizations', *Organization Studies*, 26(3): 465–484.
- Schatzki, T.R., K. Knorr-Cetina and E.v Savigny (eds.) (2001) *The practice turn in contemporary theory*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Shove, E.A. and M. Pantzar (2005) 'Consumers, producers and practices: Understanding the invention and reinvention of Nordic walking', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 5(1): 43–64.
- Singh, N. (2017) 'Becoming a commoner: The commons as sites for affective socio-nature encounters and co-becomings', *ephemera*, 17(4): 751–776.
- Skålén, P. and C. Hackley (2011) 'Marketing-as-practice: Introduction to the special issue', *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 27(2): 189–195.
- Srnicek, N. (2017) 'The challenges of platform capitalism: Understanding the logic of a new business model', *Juncture*, 23(4): 254–257.

- Stavrides, A.P.S. (2016) *Common Space: The City as Commons*. London: Zed Books.
- Suchman, L., J. Blomberg, J.E. Orr and R. Trigg (1999) 'Reconstructing technologies as social practice' *American Behavioral Scientist*, 43(3): 392–408.
- Velicu, I. and G. García-López (2018) 'Thinking the commons through Ostrom and Butler: Boundedness and vulnerability', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 35(6): 55–73.
- Whittington, R. (2006) 'Completing the practice turn in strategy research', *Organization Studies*, 27(5): 613–634.
- Zuboff, S. (2019) *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. London: Profile Books.

## acknowledgements

I would like to thank the editors and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and work during the review process. Furthermore, I would like to thank Yvonne Dittrich, Joanna Saad-Sulonen, and Maria Menendez Blanco for the support and discussions which greatly advanced the early ideas behind this publication. Finally, I would like to thank all the commoners who provided their time and support during interviews and observations.

This work has been supported by the EU/H2020-MSCA-IF-2016 funding programme, under Grant n. 749353.

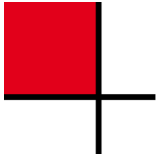
## the author

Giacomo Poderi holds a PhD in Sociology and Social Research from the University of Trento, Italy. He currently works in the Department of Digital Design at the IT University of Copenhagen, Denmark. His research broadly revolves around the topics of digital commons and commoning and builds upon both ethnographic research and intervention-based research grounded on Participatory Design.

Email: gipo@itu.dk







# Reading groups: Organisation for minor politics?

Claudia Firth

## abstract

This article introduces reading groups as organisational forms. It argues that reading groups are important forms of mutual learning and critical knowledge production that have a place in alternative organising and social and political movements. It also highlights the importance of the co-creation of knowledge and subjectivity which can potentially lead to the development of agency, solidarity and social power. In order to start to map a genealogy of reading groups, a range of examples are examined, from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in relation to anti-authoritarian mutual pedagogy and worker cultures of self-learning and cooperation; from the 1970s in relation to feminism, the New Left and union organised worker education; and then from the recent past, in relation to contemporary work and social movements. By excavating some key historical examples, these everyday forms of resistance are made available to be accessed and utilised in the present as a form of 'minor' politics, following Deleuze. This article thereby shows the potential for mutual learning practices to help to build and sustain social infrastructures for resistance and social transformation.

## Introduction

Reading groups exist across such a wide variety of contexts and are perhaps so ubiquitous as to be almost ignored. In this article I will situate reading groups on the periphery of larger organisations, as sites for the creation of knowledge and subjectivity and consequently as 'minor' tools for organising. There is little to no existing literature that specifically deals with reading

groups as organisational forms and this is therefore an exploratory article that aims to start to map out this field for further discussion and research. It draws from existing literature on critical pedagogy, workers' pedagogy, women's book clubs and organisation for resistance to capitalism, in order to contribute to a 'history from below' of reading groups as both politico-pedagogical spaces and forms of organisation.

Within *ephemera*, organising for resistance to capitalism has included 'alternative organisations', anarchist organising, strategies of resistance in the contemporary workplace, and workers' education (Commisso, 2006; Frenzel, 2014; Wellbrook, 2014). In particular, debates around knowledge production, subjectivity and organisation in this context have previously come together in *ephemera* in discussions on workers' inquiry and the im/possibility of the commons. The workers inquiry approach to knowledge production is one that seeks to understand the changing composition of labour and its potential for revolutionary social transformation (Figiel et al., 2014). The aim is the mutual transformation of both material conditions and the self (Wellbrook, 2014), one in order to change the other and vice versa. Intellectual commons are the intangible resources produced by sharing and collaboration. Commons practices are ones which, while producing and managing resources, in this case knowledge and intellectual commons, constantly reproduce the communal relations upon which the productive process is based and the resource is managed (Broumas, 2018). It can be argued that commons are continually being produced while at the same time, capital is constantly attempting to capture and put them to work. Commons are arguably also sites in which critique and resistance have the potential to develop, although whether they will 'create cracks in the capitalistic accumulation process, are stifled by it or even used in the name and interests of recent, philanthropy-and collaboration-oriented, capitalism' is not possible to determine in advance (Caffentzis, 2010: 40, Hoedemækers et al., 2012: 383).

To characterise reading groups as a minor form of organisation is to acknowledge their size and scale, their relatively peripheral position in relation to other forms of organisation and the fact that they consist of a relatively mundane, everyday activity. That they have a peripheral relation to social and political movements could also be seen as indicative of what

Deleuze termed a ‘minor politics’. This is a politics that involves a ‘principle of multiple entries’ (Deleuze et al., 1983: 13), a politics that ‘arises not in the fullness of an identity – a nation, a people, a collective subject – but, rather, in “cramped spaces”, “choked passages”, and “impossible” positions, that is, among those who feel constrained by social relations’ such as poverty or debt (Thoburn, 2012). This understanding of politics is not a question of the expression of a particular subjectivity such as a ‘people’, because as Deleuze states, the ““people” are missing’ (Deleuze, 1989: 216). However, it does entail multiplicity. The minor functions instead as a site of difference to the dominant or normative. Capitalism is often understood as an economy of sameness in which it is impossible to imagine alternatives. The concept therefore aims towards a thinking beyond existing identity formations and potentially provides a framework for a rethinking of minor and minority ‘outside of sociological conventions’ (Laurie and Khan, 2017: 3). A Deleuzian perspective is also a processual ontological one, which can be applied to reading groups as partial organisations which seem to readily dissolve and morph into other modes of organising. Far from being inconsequential, might reading groups instead be an important form of mutual learning that has a place in alternative organising, in social movements, and in building social power and resistance?

As Johnsen et al. have stated, rather than being purely a technical matter, organising is ‘a way of working through complex ways of being human with other humans’ (Johnsen et al., 2018: 419). A reading group can be categorised as a form of loosely organised informal collectivity that crosses the ‘informal social sphere’ and more formally organised spheres of life (Zechner and Hansen, 2015). Reading groups can also be described as being partially organised, displaying ‘some elements of organisation, but not all’ (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2010; Frenzel, 2014: 903). Collective reading is a messier, more complex process of a commingling of a variety of subjects and objects, texts and contexts than the purely linear relationship between text and reader proposed by traditional reader-response theories (Long, 2003; Bakhtin et al., 2014). One way of conceptualising reading groups might therefore be as assemblages of readers, texts, authors and contexts, across which both meaning and subjectivity are produced. Assemblage here is understood as derived from Deleuze and Guattari, and developed by Manuel DeLanda, as

both ‘an ensemble of parts that mesh together well’ and the action of that fitting together (2016: 1). The term has been used in organisation studies to describe socio-technical ‘entanglements of human and non-human components’, ‘configurations of actors and networks’ and organisational cultures (Atkinson and Smith, 2014: 438; Collister, 2014: 772; Sampson, 2015). DeLanda (2017) argues that as social formations, assemblages are comprised of both material and expressive components, so in this case, physical bodies in space, social encounters, flows of words and non-verbal expressions as well as the content and physicality of the reading material. Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari also describe a book as an assemblage, having ‘neither subject nor object’ (1988: 4). Conceptualising groups of things as assemblages emphasises the relationships of the component parts as being fluid and unstable, and the ways in which they might connect to and plug in and out of other assemblages. In order to locate collective reading practices in relation to the political, it might be this messiness and instability of particular ‘reading formations’ which needs exploring, including the social relationships, inter-subjective structures of power, the relationship to public space and therefore what counts (or not) as political (Bennett, 1995: 6).

## Methodology

Foucault’s genealogical method provides a model for constructing a counter-history of reading groups. Foucault flatly rejects the construction of linear developmental historiography in which there is uniformity and regularity. Rather, his method emphasises discontinuity, irregularity and inconstancy. An excavation of the past is performed in order ‘to constitute a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of that knowledge in contemporary tactics’ (Foucault, 2004: 8). This procedure focuses on ‘subjugated knowledge’, historical knowledge of struggles and forms of resistance that may have been buried or disqualified and kept in the margins (Foucault, 1980: 79–92). My operationalizing of Foucault’s method here is to begin an incomplete history of reading groups. By excavating some historical examples, a partial genealogy might be constructed. The choice of examples has originated from my PhD study which focused on groups connected with the German historical novel *The aesthetics of resistance* (Weiss, 1975–1981, 2005), but which has since been expanded. The examples detailed fall roughly

into three historical periods: the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the 1970s and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century examples are from the cooperative movement and specifically anti-authoritarian movements, the resistance to historical fascism in Germany and the Spanish Anarchist movement just before the Spanish Civil War. The groups from the 1970s are in the context of feminism, the New Left, counter-culture and union organised worker education. The examples from the recent past spring from the context of the 2011 student movement, Occupy and Transition movements and debates around the university as a critical institution. Primary archival research was conducted in relation to reading and study groups related to *The aesthetics of resistance* and the resistance to fascism in Germany. I interviewed members of London-based reading groups and have undertaken participant-observation in a number of different groups since 2014. These modes of historical and empirical research inevitably provide different evidential bases which will have an impact on the kinds of analyses which can be undertaken. While archival research tends to emphasise the discursive aspect of reading groups through the written traces that are left behind, empirical and experiential research can include more embodied and relational aspects. As this is an exploratory article, the assertions made will be speculative. Nevertheless, as an initial study it can be used to identify areas for further research. It might also be possible to begin to elucidate some of the different ways that mutual learning practices may help to build and sustain social infrastructures for resistance and change, and what might be useful for organisational thinking.

### **Reading and learning groups in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century**

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, mass worker movements developed an expansive cultural and community based infrastructure which included libraries, social centres, Sunday schools and other educational and cultural associations (Wellbrook, 2004: 363). Education was also a key founding principle in the cooperative movement, most notably started by the Rochdale Pioneers, although there were other early precursors to co-op models elsewhere. Very early on, their cooperatively run shop in Rochdale ‘began to exercise educational functions’ as a meeting place for discussion groups (Holyoake, 2009: 89). 19<sup>th</sup> Century historian and co-operator George Holyoake

described how religion and politics – ‘the terrors of Mechanics Institutes’ – were discussed alongside business confidence and skills.

There is also evidence that study groups were (and still to some extent are) instrumental in the formation of African-American owned cooperatives. Study circles formed one part of a whole series of educational initiatives within the African American cooperative movement but were in particular seen both as pre-training and the organisational form from which co-ops developed. Nembhard states that ‘as early as 1918 black activist groups in urban areas were forming study circles to discuss economic problems and learn about cooperative economics’ (2014: 88). W. E. B. Dubois organised the Negro Cooperative Guild which first met in 1918 in the United States. Advocating the Rochdale model, Dubois encouraged individuals and groups to study consumer cooperation. Study groups were formed following this meeting although according to Nembhard there is no documentation of exactly how many. This long, mostly hidden history of African-American co-op ownership (often characterised as being one of failure), has continued into the 2000’s with study circles still being used today as an early step in the process of establishing cooperative businesses through building trust between members and enacting a ‘study-learn-implement’ model.

Pedagogy, debate, study and research coexisted within the educational activities of most labour organisations in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but these weren’t necessarily centrally organised. In Berlin for example, there is evidence that small workers’ educational groups existed all over the city during the Weimar Republic as an intrinsic part of the workers’ movement (Wenzel, 2014). Two examples I will concentrate on here are the German *Rote Kapelle* or Red Orchestra’s learning circles and the educational initiatives of the *Mujeres Libres*, or the Free Women, in Spain. Both examples consisted of decentralised networks of small learning groups rather than being directly connected to any centrally organised mass movement. While some were, not all the groups of the Red Orchestra were connected to the workers’ movement or to the Communist Party. The network was far more disparate and to a large extent, this contributed to its surviving for as long as it did. Indeed, the historiography of the Red Orchestra has, up until recently, depended on the notion of a centrally controlled organisation directed by the Communist Party, it being perceived as almost impossible to be conceptualised otherwise.

The *Mujeres Libres*, on the other hand were directly connected to the anarchist worker organisations in Spain, and were specifically decentralised in nature.

What was known as the Red Orchestra, or *die Rote Kapelle* was a network of small reading or learning circles (*Kreisen*) that evolved into part of the German resistance to historical fascism from the mid-1930s to early 1940s. While the term *orchestra* evokes a tight knit organisational structure, with everyone playing to the same score, the organisation was far looser and more disparate. It started as a few circles of friendship, discussion and learning, but expanded to include more than 250 people. This included tutors and alumni of schools and educational institutions, including radical schools, the main evening college in Berlin and the art school but also communist groups of self-educated workers, and bohemian groups of artists, aristocrats and early concentration camp survivors. These groups mostly met in the domestic spaces of people's homes. One member compared the structure to the circles a stone hitting a pond makes. Over time, the circles increasingly overlapped, forming what Anne Nelson (2009), describes as a 'new geometry'. She uses the German term, *Querverbindung*, to describe the structure as 'a network of interlocking relationships' (xxvi). *Quere* meaning *across* or *crosswise* and *Verbindung*, meaning *connection*, the term literally emphasising the horizontal connections between members. Personal contacts rippled out in different directions with circles radiating out from various hubs, around individuals or couples.

And while most started off as discussion groups, their emphasis became more political and they progressed to other modes of resistance. As the Nazi regime infiltrated more aspects of society, shattering all formal political organisational elements that might have provided any resistance, activities that were not formally thought of as political, such as leisure and informal ones, were converted into opposition to the regime (Peukert and Deveson, 1989: 102). As well as holding discussions on political and artistic issues, they collected information, distributed leaflets and fly-posters, documented Nazi crimes and hid and helped persecuted people. Some members also became involved in formal espionage. They, very consciously, expanded the network across social boundaries. One key member, Arvid Harnack, was very clear that the key to any resistance work lay in expanding their *Bekanntenkreise*, their circles of acquaintances, and he extended his links to include both Social

Democrat and Communist circles and beyond. However, they not only shared the political desire to end the Nazi regime but also an ethical stance of joyful resistance. This can be summed up as the '*Bund(es) für unentwegte Lebensfreude*', loosely translated as the Association for Persistent *Joi de Vivre* (Roloff, 2003).

In the Spanish context of the 1930s, self-organised education was an essential component of anarcho-syndicalist and anarchist traditions. Bakunin emphasised the importance of developing an independent socialist base of knowledge for the workers' movement (Bakunin, 1869; Wellbrook, 2014). In addition, the insistence within the communalist-anarchist tradition that means must be consistent with ends was also reflected in its pedagogical ideas. If the ends are the achievement of a non-hierarchical egalitarian society then it must be achieved through a movement that is also non-hierarchical (Bakunin, 1990; Bookchin, 1998). Pedagogy was therefore seen as part of the 'preparation' needed to ensure that any kind of revolution would not just lead to the reinstitution of authority in new forms (Ackelsberg, 1991: 55–6).

The *Mujeres Libres* or Free Women was an anarchist women's organisation aligned with the CNT-FAI, the Spanish confederated anarchist trade union and affiliated affinity groups. The *Mujeres Libres* was started in 1936 and organized schools, women-only social groups and a women-only newspaper. The importance of a network of economic, political and cultural organisations and activities which provided a context in which to test the movement's developing theoretical perspectives was very important. Many of the women involved in the movement were interviewed in the 1970s when there was a resurgence of interest through second wave feminism. They were very clear about the shift in mind-set that took place through their involvement in activism and the learning associated with it. They described themselves as 'having come to a full sense of who they were only in and through the activities of the groups they joined'. The libertarian community thus 'became essential to the new developing sense of self' (Ackelsberg, 1991: 36).

Anarchist-supported educationalist initiatives took a variety of forms. *Ateneos*, for example, were local neighbourhood educational and cultural centres, so prevalent during the early years of the republic (just before the Spanish Civil War), that almost every working class neighbourhood had one.



These offered educational opportunities for those that had never been to school, including both adults and children. One participant, Valero Chiné describes what they offered as a ‘totally different kind of education’ which revolved around discussing what people had read. He says:

Each person would talk about what he had read (which often varied a great deal, since sometimes we didn’t understand what we were reading!), and then we would all talk about it, and think about what each had said. (Ackelsberg, 1991: 84)

Through attending these *ateneos*, people experienced a shift or change in consciousness, a ‘*cambio de mentalidad*’ (a change of mentality), which was fundamental in their becoming more involved and more militant within the movement. The intimate relations that they provided, contributed to a deep formation of the self in relation to the wider movement. Enriqueta Rovera, an activist from *Mujeres Libres* said of the experience: ‘that’s where we were formed most deeply’. They also played a part in the creation of a community of people who believed ‘that they could effect a change in the world’ (Ackelsberg, 1991: 86).

### Reading groups in the 1970s and 80s

Educational circles also played an important role in the workers movement, the New Left and the student movement of the 1960s and 70s both in the US and in Europe. These were an integral part of how theory was developed and reading groups were connected to this wider movement (Rector, 2008; Polletta, 2002; Teodori, 1975). Union-based worker educational initiatives were key sites for many of these groups. However, the search for alternative modes of organising and increased democracy of the ’68 generation can also be tracked alongside a readiness to self-study, and a change in mind-set that Sergio Bologna links to the growing crisis of and resistance to Fordist labour practices (Bologna, 2018: 80). In addition, I would like to highlight the role of feminism here with regards to the recognition of small groups and the knowledge produced in them. Without this feminist perspective it is unclear as to whether reading groups per se would be recognised as being valuable at all.

Second wave feminism specifically included an increased emphasis on the importance of multiple voices, narratives and perspectives in small group practices, primarily in the form of consciousness-raising groups. Feminism recognised the value of knowledge produced in these small groups which then fed into the wider women's movement. During the 1970s, many consciousness-raising groups developed out of or began as reading groups (Farinati and Firth, 2017; Spender, 2001). Groups of women read Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, De Beauvoir's *The second sex* or Greer's *The female eunuch*. These books facilitated discussions of their own conditions and at some point, most groups switched to producing knowledge through the telling of their personal experiences. This production of knowledge from the collective analysis of empirical first-hand experience, fed into the larger women's movement and their campaigns, demands and actions. C-R groups were a way of decolonising everyday life, experience and language. Women started to 'deconstruct their muted condition', and their position of having 'been obliged to use a language which is not of their making' (Spender, 2001: 93).

The trajectory that the Milan Women's Bookstore took, however, although coming from similar concerns, was oriented in a different direction. In their case, the group went through various phases of organisation, and *ended* as a reading group. Their collective practice shifted from C-R or *Autoconscienza* (directly translated as self-consciousness, an adapted and specific, more separatist practice to US C-R), to other more open forms of practice which included collective reading (Libreria delle Donne, 1990). The practice of *Autoconscienza* was felt to be too restrictive and insufficient a tool to deal with feminism's relationship to the world. It seemed too static and separatist, straining 'under the pressure of its own contradictions' between the internal experiences of the group and its 'utter otherness and alienation from all other social relations outside the movement'. The Bookstore Collective, set up as part of a move among feminists to construct alternative counter institutions and spaces of autonomous self-organisation, therefore embarked on a collective reading practice (meeting in the basement of the bookstore), using texts of fiction by female authors, in the search for a language that represented them better. They used 'the texts as they would have their own words', taking them apart and putting them back together in different ways along with non-words: places, facts, feelings (Libreria delle Donne, 1990: 7-8,

10). For them, the speaking of disparity and inequality within the group became important, and the reading group as a form seemed better able to deal with differences than *autoconscienza*.

During this period, I would also like to highlight reading groups organised around *The aesthetics of resistance* (Weiss, 1975-1981), an epic anti-authoritarian historical novel by Peter Weiss, a German writer associated with the New Left. This was something of a cult book which initiated reading groups all over Germany, Austria, Sweden and other European countries. Within these groups, there appears to have been a particular emphasis on self-conscious reflection regarding the process of learning that members went through. There was also a relationship to political activism especially in East Germany around the time of the fall of the Berlin wall. *The aesthetics of resistance* reading groups existed both inside and outside formal university education with many union organised and many more self-organised groups. There were also autonomous working groups ('*Autonomen Arbeitsgruppen*') and some on the edges of the University (*Aus-Universitat*) (Rector, 2008: 21). Many were organised outside the formal university and some of those were in relation to industrial trade unions and other workers' organisations such as the *Marxistische Arbeiterschule*, or Marxist Worker School. Even if they were inside the university walls, they were most often organised by students on their own terms. Some members who were involved in non-university and trade union-based working groups wrote about their experiences. One cross sector group which included a hairdresser, a masseur and an economist produced a number of texts which were published (May, 1981). There is also evidence to suggest that there were many more informal groups but these are very difficult to track or reconstruct as they leave little or no record. In this respect, the production of knowledge took place outside of or within the margins of the university institution. Through them, *The aesthetics of resistance* became part of a long tradition of workers' education in terms of its content (it reflects on leftist histories), as a pedagogical object, taken almost literally as *Bildungsroman*, and as an organising principle.

The small reading or working groups (*Lesegruppe*, *Arbeitskreise*) mimicked or incorporated the model that appears in the novel. Reading about the protagonists discussing and debating the contradictory, opposing and fragmentary positions within the Left, working through leftist histories and

grasping to gain knowledge on their own terms, encouraged similar discussion and debate. The practical value of such groups was precisely in the collective reading and discussion that developed into a critical self-examination and positioning within the groups themselves (Rector, 2008). The representation of workers' autodidactic learning also encouraged them to do the same. The groups could therefore become a focus for dealing with some of the theoretical arguments and interior controversies of the Left as well as more classical Marxist and German studies of the workers' movement. For example, they 'demonstrated the necessity of a dispute with Stalinism' taking place at that time. They also discussed the question of politically resistant art and literature. The groups generated a form of collective political and aesthetic self-knowledge as a form of 'militant dialogue' (Magenau, 2007: 15).

Reading groups in the East played an important role in the breakdown of the GDR, part of the larger movement that contributed to the fall of the wall in 1989. Inside the GDR, in the middle of the 80s, where the 'political atmosphere became so stifling', *The aesthetics of resistance* became a medium through which politics and history which could otherwise not be talked about, could be discussed. Groups used the book to discuss both the artistic doctrine of socialist realism and 'the distortion of real socialism'. One member, Sigrid Lange spoke about how it helped her and others to start to think through political alternatives to the society they were living in under the GDR and prompted her to realise that it was impossible to keep out of the political situation any longer. This for her was the development of 'political self-understanding' (Nährlich-Slatewa, 1997: 3-4, 1). She and several of her fellow reading group members were directly involved in the SED roundtable discussions during the last days of the GDR. These were discussions in which members of the East German government came together with representatives of emerging new citizens' movements in 1989 to discuss possible reform.

### **Reading or learning groups in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century**

Around the period of 2011-2014, with the Occupy and the student movements, there was a resurgence of interest in radical and popular pedagogy as an important aspect of transformative praxes (Earl, 2018). There was also a marked shift towards 'building autonomous communities rooted in

new forms of direct democracy', characterised as people making and doing things together as modes of resistance (Shukaitis and Graeber, 2007: 12; Holloway, 2010). Coming after the financial crash and the beginning of Austerity, they have also been dubbed the 'post-Seattle new social movements' (Castells, 2015; Earl, 2018). These put the stress on pre-figurative politics and the 'politics of the first person', that is, those enacting transformations on the level of subjectivity and micro-politics (Bailey et al., 2018; Earl, 2018; Katsiaficas, 2007).

The reading groups in this period are not associated with union-based educational initiatives which in general have largely disappeared, in parallel with both the decline of mass worker based unions and movements, and an increase in accessible mainstream education. However, most if not all the examples have had some relationship, directly or indirectly, to the university as an institution and a resource. This to some extent reflects 'changes in critical research as academics have attempted to systematise a new form of connection between paid researchers and communities of struggle' (Wellbrook, 2014: 359).

Many of the radical pedagogical initiatives that proliferated around 2010/11 in the context of the student protests have now disappeared but a few continued for a number of years. One of these was The New Cross Commoners, a group based in South London. Some of the participants had links to the local university either as academic staff or students, but the group was sufficiently separate from the institution that the distinctions did not exist in the same way. This was not a case of the group bringing in academic expertise, but more of academics, students and local residents working together outside of any formal research or university framework. An important part of their project was an emphasis on non-academic and collectively-facilitated learning that would be accessible to a wide demographic from the local area. They used the reading group format to explore ideas around the commons and related collective practices. The group viewed their collective learning projects, including the reading groups, as autonomous prefigurative practices: as attempts to try out decentralised egalitarian social relations, to cooperate and co-produce knowledge together. As Caffentzis and Federici have argued, in order for commons-based resistance to capital to be effective, there needs to be 'a commitment to the creation of a collective or multiple collective

subjects' by the community involved (2014: 13). The group's reading practice shifted several times between different modes of meeting and reading, sometimes involving practical exercises stemming from the texts and sometimes purely reading. Members felt that there was an important balance between the informality of the group and 'the formal openness of those processes of looking at texts' (Firth, 2019: 100). For one member, it was important that it didn't become too much like a group of friends. There was a level of commitment involved in coming to the group sessions, but one in which the social relations developed were more those of solidarity rather than friendship alone. They felt that the collective reading practice was a form of solidarity practice precisely because of this kind of commitment.

The group generally met in a social centre which they were associated with and helped to maintain. Increasingly, tensions emerged between the needs of the space and the groups and activities that inhabited it. The amount of time and energy it took to look after and reproduce the space was one of the issues which contributed to these tensions. One member delineated between the two kinds of reproductive practices:

The sharing that happens to the cleaning and sharing of the actual space is one thing, but it doesn't particularly include the sharing of ideas or that kind of exchange. In that sense, I would say that it's actually really important that, things like that...happening there, but it was always put in second place. (Firth, 2019: 101)

For them, the reading group was primarily a place for self-reflection: 'a space for dreaming and imagining' beyond cleaning the floor, washing the dishes and cooking dinner that the reproduction of the physical space required. The tensions between the physical space and the demands on people's time, necessary for its maintenance and reproduction, were substantial and put a lot of strain on the people meeting there. On the other hand, the maintenance required to keep a reading group going is of quite a low level, not always even necessarily expecting people to have read the material beforehand.

There is also evidence that reading groups have played an active role in the relationship between academic research and contemporary social movements. Burton et al. provide examples in which the authors as researchers have been deeply involved with activist practices and social

movements and that it has been through reading groups that some transformation has taken place, in this case, within the Occupy and Transition movements. Through these practices they address the nature of research and the relationship with the university as an institution. One Welsh reading group, connected to the Aberystwyth Transition Initiative, meeting in 2011, consisted of a group of academics and students wanting to change the university from within. They consciously evolved a less hierarchical and more creative and empowering structure based on critical pedagogy and consensus decision-making. They also saw themselves as exploiting the university's resources in order to do this. From the examples they gave, it seems that the temporariness of the reading groups, coupled with some required level of commitment, provided an informal structure which could morph and change into other forms. Many of the groups became something different and some of them evolved into more active research or activism and then back into a more reflective mode of collective reading. They suggest that these cycles of reading and doing especially when in a position of being both inside and outside the university can provide 'profoundly transformative' experience for the participants, potentially breaking down barriers between academics, students and activists (Burton et al., 2015). They argue that there is much potential for radical reading groups to subvert institutions, especially universities, in order to create alternatives and resist recuperation. Reading groups do not seem prone to institutionalisation by the neoliberal university, precisely because they fall under the radar.

These groups allowed for spaces in which academic students and staff as activists could meet and focus on the nature of research itself and the relationship with the institution of the university. They consciously evolved a less hierarchical and more creative and empowering structure based on critical pedagogy and consensus decision-making. This kind of everyday form of resistance aims to create a relation of 'undercommons', squatting the university, being 'in but not of' it. This is arguably 'the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university' (Harney et al., 2013: 26). In addition, these examples illustrate potential possibilities for a kind of 'learning feedback loop'; part of a broad action research cycle that might allow different forms of learning, across institutions, social movements and community

groups and spaces to influence and support each other so that they might build on ways for creating lasting transformational change (Earl, 2018).

Reading groups might therefore provide examples of tactical practices as part of a strategy to build creative resistance within, through and outside of academia, connecting ‘different forms of learning within social movements, community groups and higher education’ (Earl, 2018: 2). The ‘split between activists and people in the academy’, might potentially be bridged, by study groups and reading groups (Burton et al., 2015). By providing a longer temporality than activism generally does, they might enable a slower more careful engagement in visionary thinking: ‘We just have to actually give ourselves the time to do this sort of work and in an ongoing way in study groups and reading groups’ (Shukaitis et al., 2003: 91). Self-reflection on the part of researchers/members is one part of this process.

### **Reading groups as organisational forms**

As I have set out, reading groups as partial and informal organisational forms, may exist under the auspices of formal social organisations such as unions, social centres, libraries and universities, or meet in people’s homes. Whatever the umbrella under which they gather, members are most likely to engage in temporary, unstable, and ad hoc relations. Power within the informal social sphere is arguably based on these ad hoc relations, lying in encounters and relations which can create affective contagion and the forming of networks (Hansen and Zechner, 2015). These, Hansen and Zechner suggest, can provide the basis for more formal modes of organisation to emerge. They argue that collective practices in the informal social sphere can offer opportunities for building lasting relations and infrastructures for struggle and change, or other forms of sustainable collective social power at an organisational level. From the examples given here, there is certainly evidence that in some circumstances reading groups can lead to other forms of organisation and vice versa, and that they can quite easily change their mode of operating. The learning groups of the Red Orchestra became more of a network over time, developing strong relationships between the members who became more active in the anti-Nazi resistance movement. The reading groups of the African-American cooperative movement were started with the explicit aim



of forming cooperative organisations. Feminist reading groups shifted to or from consciousness raising and reading groups connected with contemporary social movements moved between reading and more action-based phases. To what extent reading groups can actually contribute to longer lasting organisation is harder to determine.

There is also evidence that the social relations between members were very important. Many of the groups contributed to the development of solidarity between members, and prompted some individuals to becoming more politically active or committed to the movement they were a part of. In several examples, personal transformation and changes in mind-set were reported. These developments in agency, subjecthood and in building relations with others went hand-in-hand with the development of learning and understanding for the members. In the contemporary landscape, it can be argued that the dual creation of alternative forms of knowledge and subjectivity is especially important within the context of post-Fordist conditions. This is a context in which 'the life of the mind' has come to be fully included as productive for capital (Negri, 2007). While it was left outside of Fordist factory production, 'the primary productive resource of contemporary capitalism lies in the linguistic-relational abilities of humankind' (Virno and Lotringer, 2004: 46). If we acknowledge that contemporary struggles are 'over the forces and relations which produce subjectivity as much as wealth and value,' then the places where there is the possibility of creating such subjectivities otherwise can also be viewed as potential sites for the thwarting of appropriation (Read, 2010: 121; Scott, 1989). Practices of social reproduction, in terms of the production and reproduction of knowledge, therefore have implications for the production of the self as well as for processes of organisation. As Marta Malo de Molina argues, 'all new knowledge production affects and modifies the bodies and subjectivities of those who participate in the process' (de Molina, 2004).

In addressing reading groups as potential sites for politics and resistance, it is, however, worth acknowledging that informally organised groups, and the social relations that develop within them, may not always be liberatory. Hidden hierarchies, power relations and cliques can all emerge (Freeman, 1970). A group can be made intimidating for new members. Collective reading practices can reproduce power relations or stage an image of a reading

community but fail to provide much more than this (Hall, 2003; Ganahl, 2001). Groups may also just produce the comfortable reassurance of belonging to a group that shares certain beliefs, a certain demographic, or friendship. It is important therefore not to fetishize particular organisational forms, as has happened with peer-to-peer relations (Hui and Halpin, 2013). What I have aimed to do here is to highlight potential possibilities of an organisational form that has not been paid much attention.

## **Conclusions**

Given the lack of literature on reading groups as organisational forms, it has been productive to have started to map out some of the ways in which they might contribute to understandings of organisation, pedagogy and politics in a minor sense. Deleuze's concept of the minor, as a site of difference to the dominant, works here as a reminder that alternatives are possible to imagine, not only in the face of continuous homogenous capitalist production but also in relation to political polarisation and rigid ideologies. It therefore offers a perspective on everyday practices of collective resistance that are 'counter to all forms of fascism, whether already present or impending', particularly in relation to the development of knowledge and understanding (Foucault, 1984: xv). This potentially points to a role for study groups to play in developing active, wide-ranging and non-hierarchical democratic cultures within organisations or as contemporary anti-authoritarian practices. This has particular resonance in light of contemporary invocations of 'the people', the undermining of democracy, and the rise of nationalisms and the Alt. Right.

Whether as part of African American co-operative education, the resistance to historical fascism, feminist or union based educational initiatives or the Occupy movement, collective reading practices offer examples of sites where the possibility of alternatives might be imaginatively generated which do not align with the norm. Taking place as they have in the peripheries, borders and in-between spaces of other organisations and social movements, my hope is that this 'subjugated knowledge' can both constitute historical knowledge and be made use of in the present.

Through charting this partial genealogy, it is possible to see, for example, the changing relationship of knowledge production to organisation: such as with the role of education in the mass worker and traditional union movements, or consciousness raising within the second wave feminist movement. It is clear that small-group learning practices can play a valuable role in social movements as a form of informal organisation. Through their loose coordination and temporary nature, they can provide spaces for developing social bonds and knowledge and understanding of different kinds. Their very informality allows for processes of social reproduction that are quite different to those produced by more formal meetings or from the labour needed to maintain and socially reproduce a space.

It is however, important to reiterate the significance of context for these quite different examples of reading groups and to emphasise the particular local and historical conditions in which they have been situated. As small *ad hoc* and informal interpersonal networks, these examples show different ways in which reading groups have interacted and intersected with larger organisations and institutions. Some of the groups in the 1930s, under the heading of the Red Orchestra for example, were self-organised, while for others, schools and colleges initiated the contacts between people. It seems useful here to highlight again the decentralised nature of the anti-fascist resistance that developed from these mainly leisure-based friendship groups; something which was not conceivable by either liberal Western or Soviet historiography. For these groups, the domestic spaces in which they met, hidden away from the fascist encroachment into people's everyday lives, became spaces of resistance. The anarchist and cooperative movements also provided different kinds of frameworks for some groups, particularly in the case, for example, of the African American cooperatives addressing the needs and desires for self-help after slavery. The groups from the 1970s were set up through a mixture of organisations, which (at least the ones which left traces) were mostly organised under the auspices of larger existing organisations, such as trade unions and universities. It was on the whole, therefore, in these institutional spaces, that they most visibly met. That is not to say that more informally self-organised groups, meeting in domestic or neighbourhood spaces did not exist, but these have not left many archival traces, apart from feminist groups of which there is some documentation. The groups in the

recent past have mostly drawn on existing social networks, some of which were created during the protests of 2011. They were self-organised, and not held under the auspices of any larger organisation, although some public spaces were used. Many of these groups explored the breaking down of barriers between activism and research and the role of the university as resource. They have met in a mixture of private, public and 'common': libraries, social centres, and domestic homes with the resources these provide.

While highlighting these differences, it might be possible to propose that reading groups' potential for organisation, for building social power and resistance, may be based on several properties: their relationships to other forms of resistance and social and political movements; their fluidity and ability to morph into other social forms; their relationships to spaces, institutions and organisations; their ability to create both knowledge and changes in subjectivity; and their ability to build solidarity and contribute to a vibrant supportive community. They are definitely not 'seamless totalities in which personal identity is created', or expressed, but rather small interpersonal networks which cannot be solely reduced to the persons that compose them, the texts around which they congregate or the contexts within which they operate (DeLanda, 2017: 252). The relationships of the component parts are not stable and fixed. They can be displaced and replaced both within the groups themselves and with other organisations they are related to. Perceiving of these partial organisations as assemblages therefore appears a plausible concept, especially with a focus on process: many of these groups were fluid enough as a social form to either incorporate activities other than just reading and discussion, or to shift into a different organisational mode entirely.

In addition to the reading groups' quite different relations to spaces, organisations and institutions, these loose formations also offered some sustained opportunities for creating solidarities, albeit often on a small scale. Many members documented personally-transformative effects, from the developing of trust and horizontal bonds between participants to an increase in feelings of agency, and the desire to be more involved in their surrounding communities and social and political movements. In some cases, reading groups and collective study provided a starting place for the raising of

consciousness for members, be it in relation to feminism or as workers and political agents. This has at times, but not always, been a self-reflexive process or one of conscious 'research'. It is also true, however, that often what has started as a leisure activity has turned into something else or had effects that could not have been foreseen. Some reading groups have acted as precursors to more formal organisation such as the formation of cooperatives, or gone through various phases of change. There also seems to have quite been a fluid relationship between their constituent parts, in terms of their texts, contexts and participants.

There is therefore fertile ground for further research. It might be useful to continue to examine the relationship between different kinds of grassroots learning and on-the-ground democratic practices, and to consider how agency might emerge from some organisational processes. It is difficult to ascertain precisely the link between knowledge creation and agency creation, so this also offers possibilities for future research. To what extent might study groups actually play a role in developing active, wide-ranging and non-hierarchical democratic cultures within organisations? Or indeed, as a contemporary anti-authoritarian practice? How do reading groups compare with other forms of political education? Might they be useful for more overtly political organisations or alternative conferences such as *The World Transformed*? Or for newly-emerging independent trade unions? Where else might reading groups be present? Where else might they be useful, productive, purposefully unproductive, or create spatial or temporal breathing spaces for activists to reflect? By unearthing these examples, what seems to emerge is that there is potential, however minor, to provide spaces in which agency, solidarity and new forms of knowledge and organisation might be developed. I believe that identifying these spaces is crucial if we are to fully grasp our present circumstances and determine the possibilities for creating social change.

## references

Ackelsberg, M.A. (1991) *Free women of Spain: Anarchism and the struggle for the emancipation of women*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.

- Ahrne, G and N. Brunsson (2010) 'Organization outside organizations: The significance of partial organization', *Organization* 18: 83–104.
- Atkinson, P. and S. Smith (2014) 'Discourse and culture: organisation as assemblage', *British Academy of Management Conference Proceedings 2014*, British Academy of Management.
- Bailey, D.J., M. Clua-Losada, N. Huke, O. Ribera-Almandoz and K. Rogers (2018) 'Challenging the age of austerity: Disruptive agency after the global economic crisis', *Comparative European Politics*, 16: 9–31.
- Bakunin, M.A. and M. Shatz (1990) *Statism and anarchy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bennett, A. (1995) *Readers and reading*. London: Routledge.
- Bologna, S. (2018) *The rise of the European self-employed workforce*. Milan: Mimesis International.
- Bookchin, M. (1998) *The Spanish anarchists: The heroic years, 1868-1936*. San Francisco, CA: AK Press.
- Burton, K., S. Halvorsen and K. Mason (2015) 'Reading groups as radical research practice', *Antipode* [https://antipodeonline.org/2015/02/12/reading-groups-as-radical-research-practice/]
- Broumas, A. (2018) 'Rational choice and neoliberal theories of the intellectual commons: A critical analysis', *ephemera*, 18(3): 605–630
- Caffentzis, G. (2010) 'The future of 'the commons': Neoliberalism's 'plan B' or the original disaccumulation of capital?', *New Formations*, 69: 23–41.
- Caffentzis, G. and S. Federici (2014) 'Commons against and beyond capitalism', *Community Development*, 49: 92–105.
- Castells, M. (2015) *Networks of outrage and hope: Social Movements in the internet age*. 2nd edition. Malden, UK: Polity Press.
- Collister, S. (2014) 'Abstract hacktivism as a model for postanarchist organizing', *ephemera*, 14(4): 765–779.
- Commisso, G. (2006) 'Identity and subjectivity in post-Fordism: for an analysis of resistance in the contemporary workplace', *ephemera*, 6(2): 163–192.

- DeLanda, M. (2016) *Assemblage theory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- DeLanda, M. (2006) 'Deleuzian social ontology and assemblage theory', in Fuglsang, M. and B.M. Sorensen (eds.) *Deleuze and the social*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Deleuze, G. and F. Guattari (1983) 'What is a minor literature?' trans. R. Brinkley. *Mississippi Review*, 11: 13–33.
- Deleuze, G. and F. Guattari (1988) *A thousand plateaus*, trans. B. Massumi. London: Athlone.
- Deleuze, G. (1989) *Cinema 2: The time-image*, trans. H. Tomlinson and R. Galeta. London: Athlone.
- Earl, C. (2018) *Spaces of political pedagogy: Occupy! and other radical experiments in adult learning, 1st edition*. London: Routledge.
- Farinati, L. and C. Firth, (2017) *The force of listening*. Los Angeles: Errant Bodies Press.
- Figiel, J. and S. Shukaitis, A. Walker (2014) 'The politics of workers inquiry', *Ephemera*, 14(3): 307–314.
- Firth, C., (2019) *Reading the collective subject, three moments of crisis, aftermath and the aesthetics of resistance*. Unpublished PhD manuscript, London, Birkbeck, University of London.
- Foucault, M., (2004) *Society must be defended: lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, trans. D. Macey. London: Penguin.
- Foucault, M. (1980) *Power/knowledge: selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977*, trans. C. Gordon. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1984) 'Preface', in Deleuze, G. and F. Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, London: Continuum.
- Freeman, J. (1970) 'The tyranny of structurelessness' [[www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.htm](http://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.htm)].
- Frenzel, F. (2014) 'Exit the system? Anarchist organisation in the British climate camps', *ephemera*, 14(4): 901–921.
- Ganahl, R. (2001). *Reading Karl Marx*. London: Book Works.

- Hall, R.M. (2003) 'The "Oprahfication" of literacy: reading "Oprah's book club"', *College English*, 65(6): 646–67
- Harney, S., F. Moten, and E. Empson (2013) *The undercommons: fugitive planning & black study*. Minor Compositions. New York: Autonomedia.
- Hoedemækers, C., B. Loacker and M. Pedersen (2012) 'The commons and their im/possibilities', *ephemera*, 12(4): 378–385.
- Holloway, J. (2010) *Crack Capitalism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Holyoake, G.J. (2009) *The history of the Rochdale pioneers*. Moscow: Dodo Press.
- Hui, Y. and H. Halpin (2013) 'Collective individuation: the future of the social web', in G. Lovink and M. Rasch (eds.) *Unlike us reader: social media monopolies and their alternatives*. Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures.
- Johansen, C. G., L. Olaison, and J. G. Pors (2018) 'Landscapes of political action', *ephemera*, 18(3): 417–426.
- Katsiaficas, G.N. (2007) *The subversion of politics: European autonomous social movements and the decolonization of everyday life*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.
- Laurie, T. and R. Khan, (2017) 'The concept of minority for the study of culture', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 31(1):92–103.
- Libreria delle Donne (Milano) (1990) *Sexual difference: a theory of social-symbolic practice*. Bloomington Il: Indiana Univ. Press.
- Long, E. (2003) *Book clubs: women and the uses of reading in everyday life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Magenau, J. (2007) 'Nicht ohne lesegruppe', *Tagesztaz*, Taz 15.
- May, H. (1981) 'Wir lesen Peter Weiss', *Literatur Konkret*, 6.
- de Molina, M. (2004) 'Common notions, part 1: workers-inquiry, co-research, consciousness-raising' | eipcp.net  
[<http://eipcp.net/transversal/0406/malo/en>]
- Nährlich-Slatewa, E. (1997) Interview transcript with Sigrid Lange, ADS, SED-Reformdiskurs 24, Rosa Luxemburg Foundation archive.



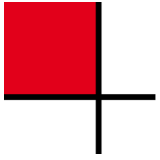
- Negri, A. (2007) 'Logic and theory of inquiry: Militant praxis as subject and episteme', in D. Graeber, S. Shukaitis, and E. Biddle (eds.) *Constituent imagination: Militant investigation, collective theorization*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.
- Nelson, A. (2009) *Red orchestra: the story of the Berlin underground and the circle of friends who resisted Hitler*. New York: Random House.
- Nembhard, J.G. (2014) *Collective courage: a history of African American cooperative economic thought and practice*. University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Peukert, D. and J.K., Deveson, R. (1989) *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, opposition, and racism in everyday life*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Polletta, F. (2002) *Freedom is an endless meeting: Democracy in American social movements*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Read, J. (2010) 'The production of subjectivity: From transindividuality to the commons', *New Formations*, 70: 113–131.
- Rector, M., 'Prolegomena zu einem Forschungsbericht', in *Diese lebende, zähe, kühne Hoffnung: 25 Jahre Peter Weiss, Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*, in A. Beise., J. Birkmeyer, and M. Hofmann (eds.) St. Ingbert: Röhrig Universitätsverlag.
- Roloff, S. (2003) Oral history interviews of 'The Red Orchestra' collection. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, Accession Number: 2014.76.1 | RG Number: RG-50.720.0001 [https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn84871].
- Sampson, S. (2015) 'The anti-corruption package', *ephemera*, 15(2): 435–443.
- Scott, J.C. (1989) 'Everyday Forms of Resistance', *Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies*, 4: 33–62.
- Shukaitis, S., S. Aronowitz, L. Casarini, J. Gabriel, D. Graeber, M. Hardt, and B. Lehman (2003) 'Anti-capitalism and academics: organizing in, around, and despite the academy', *Radical Society: Review of Culture and Politics*, 30 (3-4): 85-93.
- Spender, D. (2001) *Man made language*. London: Pandora.
- Teodori, M. (1975) *The New Left: a documentary history*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.

- Thoburn, N. (2012) 'Minor politics, territory and occupy', [<http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/minor-politics-territory-and-occupy>]
- Virno, P. and S. Lotringer (2004) *A grammar of the multitude: For an analysis of contemporary forms of life*. Cambridge, MA: Semiotext[e].
- Weiss, P. (1975-1981) *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands: Roman*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Weiss, P. (2005) *The aesthetics of resistance. Volume 1*, trans. J. Neugroschel. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Wellbrook, C. (2014) 'A workers' inquiry or an inquiry of workers?', *ephemera*, 14 (3): 357–374.
- Wenzel, R. (2014) 'Uns aus dem Elend zu erlösen - Bildungs - Bewegung der Berliner Arbeiter\_Innen vor 1945', at Galerie im Turm, for exhibition *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*.
- Zechner, M. and Hansen, B.R. (2015) 'Building power in a crisis of social reproduction'. *ROAR Magazine*. [<https://roarmag.org/magazine/building-power-crisis-social-reproduction/>]

## **the author**

Claudia Firth was awarded a PhD in Cultural and Critical Studies at Birkbeck, University of London in 2019. She currently teaches at Ravensbourne University and Birkbeck, University of London and is also a freelance facilitator and consultant, working with collectives, cooperatives and trade unions. Recent publications include *The force of listening*, co-written with Lucia Farinati.

Email: [claudiaf@myphone.coop](mailto:claudiaf@myphone.coop)



# Infrastructural standby: Caring for loose relations

Annika Kühn

## abstract

This paper develops the notion of *infrastructural standby* in order to examine the organization of scheduled breaks in a transport terminal environment. Hamburg's cruise ship terminals rest on a regular basis. They do so in a world for which movement and connection seem to be constitutive. Within such a context, planned pausing becomes relevant as it accentuates processes of (partial) disconnection. It describes a mode of un-participation, yet a mode of being still somehow available. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, the paper argues that infrastructural standby can be described as a way to organize a tension between loosening and weaving relations. From routine pauses to their extension through COVID-19 the metastable state of terminal standby builds on careful and timely balancing work. A sociomaterial perspective of infrastructures and a growing body of (feminist) work on care help to address these practices of balancing as a way to care for *loose relations and spaces* in-between on and off, yes and no, interest and indifference. It allows examining standby as a way to care for *the possibility of repetition*: the on-going infrastructuring of loose relations without linking it directly to progress or movement.

## Introduction

Slowdown is a mundane part of infrastructural operations and emerges in varying compositions (e.g. Harvey, 2012; Weszkalnys, 2017). Infrastructures rest while waiting for an emergency (e.g. urban emergency infrastructures or critical architectures, like bunker systems, banking architectures or information

systems); flows of money, information and passengers are hindered and stuck in waiting architectures until further notice and technical compositions remain available for possible re-usage, e.g. personal computers and cell phones, transport infrastructures like roads and their side strips, or shipping terminals and railway tracks which lie idle for future use. Also, workforces, such as soldiers, dancers, flight attendants or drivers pass the time while waiting for the next assignment. Those infrastructural elements share periods of lying dormant, often invisible and ready for work. During this time, operations slip into a sleep mode, which transcends the logics of infrastructural function or failure, on and off, activity and inactivity (Bissell, 2007).

I call these phases *infrastructural standby* and aim to introduce this notion as a mode of infrastructuring (Star and Bowker, 2002), an active processing which may complicate the relation between circulation technologies and circulating flows. The term standby is well known in transport, military and technical contexts. One of its technical definitions directs us to ‘a collection of low-power modes accessed through power management’ (Meier and Siderius, 2017: 1482). Standby – within this context – displays a temporal composition ordered to reduce energy exchange while guaranteeing availability at the same time. Transposing this tension between on and off to a socio-theoretical context, it does not equate to infrastructural breakdown, nor does it refer solely to spaces of exclusion – tropes often related to infrastructural slowdown<sup>1</sup>. Rather, standby describes a mode of un-participation (Munster, 2016; McCormack, 2021), a mode of being partly disconnected and still somehow available.

The notion of infrastructural standby I propose here emerged from on-going fieldwork within Hamburg’s port environment. Researching cruise terminals drew my attention to a specific standby mode of *planned pausing*. Within

---

<sup>1</sup> Asking for slowdown within infrastructure theory leads to breakdown and its afterlife (e.g. Star 1999; Stoler, 2008; Starosielski, 2012; Gordillo, 2014); breakdown as an integral part of everyday environments (e.g. Simone, 2015; Amin, 2016); slowdown as a moment of exclusion and (unplanned) discontinuity (e.g. Harvey, 2012; Knox et al., 2015; Weszkalnys 2017), in particular in the form of an infrastructural practice of keeping bodies governable within precarious waiting spaces for months, years and whole lifetimes (e.g. Joronen, 2017; Jeffrey, 2008; Manpreet and Bandak, 2018; Agier, 2018).

cruise ship environments the transformation of terminal facilities and workers from service into standby (and vice versa) becomes a continuous, repeated and default operation. Cruise ship terminals transform when ships arrive and leave. And they do so on a regular basis. This repetitive rhythm of service and standby invites an observation of the specific case of standby as *planned pausing*. It allows the researcher to extract its specific components against other forms of standby, for example standby within emergency environments of disaster infrastructures or within military contexts and their ‘high readiness’ or ‘reserve’ troops, where standby endures much longer and/or its transformation into service is hardly plannable. However, it also differs from various everyday infrastructures in standby service: while the use of cruise ship terminals must be planned well in advance (usually two years), public infrastructures such as stairs, revolving doors or roads lack the need to plan each individual usage.

This note concentrates on Hamburg’s three cruise terminals in order to extract systematic components of standby as a mode of *planned pausing*. It will show that standby, in this case, can be described as a form of infrastructuring looseness: the caring for loose relations and spaces in-between on and off, yes and no. In order to do so, the paper weaves its lines around short empirical vignettes of this transport context where standby becomes a mundane and logistical operation of ordering loose relations. The note follows the recurring rhythms of pausing and engages with the tension described above as a transformative force allowing infrastructures to switch between standby and service. It engages with operational routines but also with their interruption: following the unexpected outbreak of COVID-19 shows that docking a ship does not simply turn the relationship between active/passive, mobile/stilled upside down but keeps complicating their relation. Although a critical engagement with the highly contested cruise ship business may seem tempting, this paper concentrates on the operative processes between circulating flows and circulation infrastructures. It asks how standby complicates temporal folds of circulation technologies without any a priori attribution of stillness and movement, on and off, activity and inactivity.

## Moving infrastructures

The notion of infrastructural standby directs us to an intensive debate on ‘mobilities and moorings’ within early mobilities studies (see Hannam et al., 2006; Adey, 2006; Söderström et al., 2013). Stillness is emphasized here as one variety of movement and points to unevenly distributed power relations ‘where the speed of some comes at the expense of others’ (Bissell and Fuller, 2011: 4). Adjoining this important debate, Bissell and Fuller suggest considering ‘how stillness might emerge through other configurations of matter which are not necessarily reducible to the dialectic of mobility and immobility’ (*ibid*: 6). In a similar way, critical infrastructure studies tend to emphasize the potentiality, multiplicity and indifference of the stilled and slow-downed (e.g. Adey, 2010; Knox et al., 2015; Merriman, 2016; Harvey and Knox, 2015; Venkatesan et al., 2018). In various ways, this literature conceptualizes infrastructures as *evolving* entities, which not only *enable* movement but *are* their very own movement (Bowker, 2015). They only endure and keep their shape because of practices of maintenance, repair and re-usage (e.g. Graham and Thrift, 2007; Jackson, 2017; Denis/Pontille, 2020). Consequently, large infrastructures, such as airports, data centres or train stations are understood as reliable and solid anchors that organize circulation *and* as moving materiality, which is constantly changing and becoming connected anew. Thus, infrastructure is a moving target embracing various temporalities, like enduring, acceleration, spontaneity, latency, slowing down and delay (Anand et al., 2018). Within this framework, cruise ship terminals become relevant way beyond their ability to *enable*. Rather, they (re-)direct our attention to local processes of connecting and disconnecting within sociomaterial configurations. Simultaneously, with an interest in temporality infrastructure theories go beyond a narrow concept of hard materialities. In particular, elementary, affective and imaginative compositions are infrastructuralized (e.g. Stewart, 2014; Peters, 2015; Bissell, 2015; McCormack, 2016; Berlant, 2016), calling into question the picture of a long-term structure made out of stable and enduring materiality and inviting alternative perspectives on (infra)structuring mechanisms, such as the affective and imaginative.

Nevertheless, while the definitions of infrastructure have changed, the emphasis on motion and connectivity has intensified. Infrastructure is what binds us to the world in movement, writes Lauren Berlant (2016), inspiring us

to focus on the more or less moving connections that organize our worlds. Within such a context, planned stillness becomes relevant as it accentuates processes of (partial) disconnection. Standby raises questions with regard to infrastructure approaches which may include: how pauses are integrated and organized in a world for which movement is constitutive; how pausing organizes these infrastructural worlds; and how access and repeatability can be guaranteed in a constantly moving world of spatiotemporally distributed actors. Both the constant possibility of (sudden) detachments and the (almost unnoticeable) energy flow between entities on standby generate a *looseness* of connections that might at any time fall apart as it may integrate various elements standing-by (Knox et al., 2015; Stäheli, 2018; Kemmer et al., forthcoming). An infrastructural turn on standby follows this looseness of connections and asks for its ordering mechanisms. It describes standby as a desire to order the availability of formations between ‘not-yet’ and ‘no-more’.

### **Standby as a circular and metastable movement**

Around 200 cruise ships arrive in Hamburg per year, with high season between May and October and very low traffic during Northern European winter (November-March). Cruise tourism is a controversial practice that has led to huge protests, most prominently in European cities, like Venice and Dubrovnik. The international turmoil has left its mark. Nevertheless, the city of Hamburg plans to expand its business: sustainably, as they say in interviews (Kühn, 2017). Along with this infrastructural expansion, cruise pollution, alternative energy supply and working conditions on cruise ships are well-discussed political issues. However, besides one single political investigation (Bürger-schaft der Freien und Hansestadt Hamburg, 2013), it remains mostly unquestioned in political debate that cruise ship terminals remain on standby most of their time: kept in readiness, i.e. heated, maintained, constantly cared for, but remaining inactively waiting, occupying public spaces. This may at least in part be due to what Pawley describes as the very architecture of terminals as box-like buildings valued for their invisibility and functionality. Following Hönke and Cuesta-Fernandez (2017) on port areas, these boxes are gateways that link, order and territorialize global flows of ships and passengers. However, without their counterpart, they slip into the background where they reliably stand-by and become a logistical promise for the movement of others’.

During standby they are maintained regularly and re-used as event-locations. Standby durations vary from one day to several weeks, yet usage remains high enough (at least once a month) to leave them on standby – able to operate with a short lead time – and to not shut down service completely. Thus, within the cruise business, the transformation between standby and operation appears as a recurring and alternating rhythm: standby is transformed into service, service becomes standby.

This recurring rhythm of an invisible mode inspired this research project to take a closer look at standby's specifics. Similar to other transport infrastructures, terminals display a repetitive pausing form, a *circular* movement. Waiting in the classical sense is often characterized as a teleological process that serves some goal and ends with its achievement, even if further waiting often follows (Schweizer, 2008). Yet, the *specific waiting form of standby as a pause* lacks such a grand finale. Standby includes continuous transformation where each mode incorporates the following: standby embodies full operation, full operation embodies standby. An image that illustrates this 'turn around'<sup>2</sup> is the hourglass. In art it serves as a symbol of transience honouring the moment and pointing out that everything will eventually be over (Jünger, 1954). In everyday life, it is more familiar as a mundane instrument to measure time. In the form of a kitchen alarm, a toothbrush or sauna clock, it also emphasizes an approaching yet desired ending. A given amount of loose sand grains trickles from one glass through a constriction into another. As soon as all has reached the bottom, the process ends. The *architecture* of the hourglass, however, allows, even demands refusal of this ending; it demands to ephemerize it straight away by turning the hourglass upside down and start the game all over again. (Terms, like 'to set a watch', point to the entrance of this mechanics into the use of language (*ibid*: 131)). Two identical sides allow the change and interchangeability of beginning and ending at every moment within the process without changing the function of the hourglass. This interplay illustrates the circularity of the process between standby and operation. Infrastructure formulates the ending as always only temporary – the hourglass (only) sleeps (*ibid*).

---

<sup>2</sup> The arrival and leaving of a ship and the exchange of all of its guests at one port is called 'turn around'.



This continuous folding of time, the recurring deconstruction of beginning and ending, urges us to engage with moments of transition. Standby's technical origin suggests engaging with transition as a change of *tensions*. Simondon's techno-philosophical idea of metastability (2009) dedicates attention to transformation processes and declares tension as their condition: every system possesses conflicting energies, which are the driving force of change. Thus

[t]he individual as Simondon conceives it is not opposed to difference but is born out of tensions and sustained by tensions - it even evolves thanks to these tensions. (Hoel, 2018: 260)

Simondon describes these tensions as metastability, 'which is very different from stable equilibrium and from rest' (2009: 6). Transformation and the (always only partial) actualization of potential means the re-organisation and re-distribution of materiality and the modification of systems (*ibid.*; Combes, 2013; Hoel, 2018). Thus, tension is a prerequisite for transformation, and for changing cooperations. Similar to how Berlant describes objects as loosely organized patternings (Berlant and Seitz, 2013), the specific mode of standby can be addressed as a form of *infrastructuring looseness*: the infrastructuring of *loose patterns* that makes change possible without running the risk of losing everything (*ibid.*).

## Infrastructuring looseness

Standby does not necessarily mean reduced energy expenditure. On the contrary, maintaining metastable states may require as much energy and tension as operating at full capacity. To stand by, to be reachable, stilled, yet reliable means doing something. Similar to what Manning (2009) has shown for dancing bodies and Easterling for urban infrastructures (2014), holding a pose requires tension and balance work, so that the (infrastructural) body pulsates but neither flashes nor collapses. When it comes to terminals, holding a pose involves the maintenance of heterogeneous connections and disconnections (Knox et al., 2015). Susan Leigh Star (1999) already emphasised the relationality and perspectivity of infrastructures: one's infrastructure is another one's workplace. And mobility studies add, one's speed is another one's slowdown. This reminds us that speed 'is a hard-won and by no means automatic

accomplishment' (Jackson, 2017: 183). Speeding up *and* switching into a mode of standby and enduring it requires the orchestration of various processes of weaving and unweaving (Ingold, 2015).

When cruise terminals loosen their relations and transform into standby they carefully disentangle threads formerly tightly coupled and patterned (see Schweizer, 2008, on unravelling): after cruise service, soft infrastructural parts, transfer shuttles, check-in staff and media coverage – all tightly ordered during the presence of a ship – disconnect, pull back and become loose threads re-orienting within other compositions. Via technologies like protocols, timetables, contracts and incentives they remain connected to the process of cruise shipping, guaranteeing their availability when needed. Every relation within this interplay contains a specific latency time – the time needed to get ready for use – which is highly structured and ordered by port operations: for example, keeping check-in personnel in readiness involves the engagement of a port-service agency which keeps employees available all year round (often via minor employment contracts), the usage of a *morally* binding operation schedule filled in at the beginning of the season and an availability check four days in advance of the ship's arrival via WhatsApp. Employees need to appear two hours before the clocked arrival of the ship and need to be prepared and 'on standby' (as they call it themselves) at their counter 30 minutes before disembarking begins<sup>3</sup>.

Inert infrastructural elements managed and controlled by Hamburg's public company CGH like terminal buildings, quay walls and internal IT systems remain in place when turning into standby mode. Their standing-by may include various processes, from idle waiting to re-usage within other contexts. Pausing is often used as a period of weaving together: to maintain, repair, test and regularly run dry infrastructures in order to remove traces of slow but

---

<sup>3</sup> After their shift, they 'take off their uniform' within the staff's wardrobe, leave the building to the subway or ferry and on several (research) occasions do not even recognize the colleagues they just worked with and now anonymously join for their ride home (author's research).

continuous decay (Edensor, 2005) and to guarantee availability and ‘clear ground’ in time (at least 10 hours before arrival<sup>4</sup>).

Standby thus works as a ‘structuring mechanism’ which requires the work and techniques of loosening and tightening, of unweaving and weaving. It orders and maintains the disconnection and distancing of various elements and secures their responsiveness in time (Anderson, 2015). Loose relationality is not a dysfunctional state, but a way to deal with complexity, as Stäheli (2018) points out with reference to Karl Weick’s work on loose couplings in organizations. It directs attention to intermingling relations and also the spaces in-between: loose spaces, which may contain latency, indirect relations and also sudden changes.

These sudden changes become traceable when engaging empirically with infrastructural standby. An early translation of standby power as ‘leaking electricity’ (Sandberg, 1993) already identifies subversive energy as its constitutive part and reminds us that standby operations also have to handle unplanned incidents. A short example may help to picture this contingency within this specific port and terminal context: In June 2016, one of the largest cruise ships able to dock in Hamburg was expected. Timing had to orient on high tide to enable the crossing of the Elbe river’s flattest point. Yet, bad weather conditions delayed its movement and it was unclear if crossing was still possible the moment the ship made it to the threshold. Notes from the next morning describe the discussion of the event in retrospective as follows:

The conversations of the employees (especially port agents) revolve around the weather conditions of the last night, which almost made the arrival of the cruise ship impossible. Container ships have already been rejected and remained outside the port area; however, the cruise ship was allowed to pass. The staff on shore followed this decision making live (via GPS until early morning). One port agent expresses her last nights’ ‘fear’ about what to do if the ship would arrive with a massive delay and the case Hamburg could not be called (‘I already planned its re-routing to Bremerhaven in my head’). (Notes from the author)

When one takes into account the infrastructuring of natural elements, like water and air, the idea of a simple stilling and holding in readiness of terminal

---

<sup>4</sup> Timetable for stakeholders provided for the author by port authority’s Cruise Gate Hamburg (CGH).

infrastructures becomes insufficient. Instead, infrastructures move and transform, sometimes contrary to planning efforts. Transforming in and out of standby modes, thus can be conceived as an orchestration of relations, which vary in their controllability and responsiveness. Contingency remains and flexibility is needed even though – or because – un/weaving follows closely timed plans and protocols. Organization thus needs to be re-thought as a ‘contingent and always-incomplete outcome of complex order(ing)s and disorder(ing)s’, as Knox et al. (2015: 1) summarize for an airport terminal context.

The specific challenge of ordering standby modes may lie in the often-vulnerable processes of metastable relations. The will and possibility to pause regularly is based on the confidence to be able to get back into the process at a targeted time and this guarantee constantly has to be remade. Similar to what Jackson (2017: 173) describes for processes of decay, standby is thus less marked by ‘the absence of form than by its multiplication and diversification: a profusion, rather than attenuation, of order.’ The logistical surplus of standby as a mode of pausing then may be the ability of probing and correcting over and over again. Practicing under conditions of *full capacity* distinguishes standby-as-pausing from standby within other context<sup>5</sup>. Although contingency can also never fully be eliminated within transport contexts, the serial character of pausing contains the potential (and the challenge) for adjustment in every episode: the repetition of the very same (yet always slightly varying) events enables an infrastructural composition to restart, to transform, to optimize and to connect the threads even better at each iteration.

---

<sup>5</sup> Referring to alternative banking architectures, Pawley describes their waiting as preparedness for an undesired yet potentially actualizing situation at a prior site. These disaster infrastructures are repeatedly maintained, tested and actualized in order to respond to terror, fire, cyber-attacks, natural catastrophes or illness. Yet, repetition and seriality actualize as testing. Instead of a recurring demand, a potential threat builds the legitimization to regularly maintain stilled infrastructures and keeping them on standby, thus transforming training and testing into relevance-making practices (Dewille, 2021).

## Interrupting repetitive rhythms

This on-going repetition helps with building confidence. Cruise shipping became a prosperous and global business and the possibility that a terminal's standby period extends from regular and short pauses into longer periods of unproductivity seemed far away. Operations were based on a surplus of destinations, often enabling cruise ship companies to dominate the negotiations on docking conditions (Kühn, 2017). An always-present potential of re-routing and abandoning of destinations meant a financial and existential threat for remote and economically weaker areas, which tied huge parts of their welfare to the cruise industry<sup>6</sup>. Yet, within a running business, as was the case in Hamburg, the possibility of being abandoned (for logistical, economic or political reasons) was perceived as a possibility that could be minimized by strategic and planning actions, such as international networking and the extension and use of modern sustainable technologies (*ibid.*). During ethnographic fieldwork, the participants showed great confidence in the international standing of the port of Hamburg and in a sustained demand for cruises. Interview questions regarding (extended) standby phases were mostly answered with amusement and/or expressions of boredom, although on some occasions a moment of thoughtfulness and silence emerged.

COVID-19 made this silence audible. Beginning with outbreaks on the British-registered Diamond Princess in January 2020, it soon turned out that cruise ships were an excellent base for the virus to spread. They were quickly labelled as 'contagion communities' (Gehm, 2020, trans. AK) and perceived as a threat to port cities. One port after the other closed its doors for the otherwise popular ships – around 400 worldwide (NDR, 2020), which were now often gathering off the coasts of their former destinations. This intervention turned power relations between ports and cruise ship companies upside down, but it also all of a sudden put cruise ship terminals on standby – this time indefinitely.

---

<sup>6</sup> For example, Caribbean Islands (e.g. Grenada, St. Kitts and Nevis, Antigua and Barbuda) made high investments in cruise infrastructures (often financed by loans from the shipping companies) which tie these islands to the business despite exploitative practices by huge shipping companies (Economist, 2019).

This crisis lent itself to ethnographic research, yet a request to Hamburg's terminal operators CGH in March 2020 was turned down: times were perceived as too uncertain; anyhow they did not have any answers at the moment and besides that, the wait-and-see periods were incredibly busy. The unexpected interruption of a prosperous business, its radical deceleration and muting seemed to call for intensive work and the terminal operators were not ready to share their effort, processes and timings. However, soon thereafter Hamburg's terminals became populated again, sometimes with seven ships anchoring simultaneously. But it turned out that during pandemic conditions, the arrival of a cruise ship did not necessarily transform terminals from standby into service mode: besides the core team, workers stayed at home, passengers did not show up and baggage belts were kept resting. During COVID-19 highs, ships and terminals intermingle into a standby assemblage. This composition lingered with engines turned on, crew members on-board and port agents regularly on site, but without handling departures regularly.

The unexpected interruption of COVID-19 thwarted the planned transformations between standby and service. Docking a ship does not simply turn the relationship between active/passive, mobile/standby upside down. Rather, port and ship infrastructures interact in an extended version of standby - both *keeping their engines on* while waiting for the next move.

## Conclusion

This last example, once again, emphasizes the work needed to keep infrastructures available. The loose relations of standbys' always risk a disordering of future cooperation. Infrastructures' fraying out, (partially) disconnecting and moving make it much more precarious to organize their availability (Lovink and Rossiter, 2018). The maintenance work needed to keep standby systems running can best be described by the feminist notion of 'care' (see e.g. Baraitser, 2017; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017): caring involves a 'staying with in time and place' and a re-orientation to various rhythms and flows of others, writes Jackson (2017: 183) with reference to Puig de la Bellacasa. Care work starts from the recognition of vulnerability and fragility of bodies; it sustains individuals in a wider network of value and relationality and it contains

affective attention – ‘a “listening forth” organized around a radical openness to the state and status of others’ (183).

Caring for standby infrastructures then means a complex ordering of *loose relations and spaces* in-between on and off, yes and no, interest and indifference. Movement, effort and activity cannot be attributed to one side or single factors, but need to be traced carefully. The slowing down of some means the enduring and rising efforts of others – yet, interestingly, this relation tends to complicate itself continuously. Caring, thus, is no dead time of repetition and meaningless labour. Rather, caring for standby infrastructures means *caring for the possibility of repetition*: the on-going infrastructuring of loose relations without linking it directly to progress or movement (Baraitser, 2017).

A preoccupation with standby reveals the constitutive role of deceleration and disconnection processes for infrastructural movement and functioning. It helps to undermine the idea that speed always lies at the heart of logistical and capitalist world-making (Bear et al., 2015: online). For future engagement, it is worth looking closely at standby’s ticking rhythm between precarity and boredom (Berlant, 2011): does standby’s constant seriality contain the potential to hold together entities and processes or does it make us blind to subtle but continuous change (Kemmer et al., forthcoming)? What are the thresholds at which operational pauses turn into pressing compositions? Transposing the practical, political and affective planes of care work to the idea of standby helps to engage with complex and changing relations (Kemmer et al., 2021). It enables us to follow the intermingling of temporal folds and operational mechanisms and to draw connections to the affective planes of infrastructural looseness.

## references

- Adey, P. (2006) ‘If mobility is everything then it is nothing: Towards a relational politics of (im)mobilities’, *Mobilities*, 1(1): 75–94.
- Adey, P. (2010) ‘Airports: terminal/vector’, in T. Cresswell and P. Merriman (eds.) *Mobile geographies*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Amin, A. (2016) ‘On urban failure’, *Social Research*, 83: 777–798.

- Agier, M. (2018) 'Betriebsamkeit der Hilfe – Länge des Wartens. Zur Temporalität in den Lagern der Gegenwart', *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History*, 15(3) [<https://zeithistorische-forschungen.de/3-2018/5617>].
- Anand, N., A. Gupta and H. Appel (eds.) (2018) *The promise of infrastructure*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Anderson, B. (2015) 'Governing emergencies: The politics of delay and the logic of response', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 41:14-26.
- Baraitser, L. (2017) *Enduring time*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Bear, L., K. Ho, A.L. Tsing and S. Yanagisako (2015) 'Gens: A feminist manifesto for the study of capitalism', *Cultural Anthropology Website* [<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/gens-a-feminist-manifesto-for-the-study-of-capitalism>].
- Berlant, L. (2011) *Cruel optimism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Berlant, L. and D. Seitz (2013) 'On citizenship and optimism. Laurent Berlant, interviewed by David K. Seitz', *Society and Space Open Site* [<https://societyandspace.org/2013/03/22/on-citizenship-and-optimism/>].
- Berlant, L. (2016) 'The commons: Infrastructures for troubling times', *Environment and Planning D*, 34(3): 393-419.
- Bissell, D. (2007) 'Animating suspension: Waiting for mobilities', *Mobilities*, 2(2): 277-298.
- Bissell, D. (2015) 'Virtual infrastructures of habit: the changing intensities of habit through gracefulness, restlessness and clumsiness', *Cultural Geographies*, 22(1): 127-146.
- Bissell, D. and G. Fuller (2011) *Stillness in a mobile world*. New York: Routledge.
- Bowker, G. (2015) 'Temporality' in H. Appel, N. Anand and A. Gupta (eds.) *The Infrastructural Toolbox* [<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/temporality>].
- Bürgerschaft der Freien und Hansestadt Hamburg (2013) 'Drucksache 20/9819. Schriftliche Kleine Anfrage des Abgeordneten Dr. Anjes Tjarks (GRÜNE)', posted on 04-11-13 to [www.buergerschaft-hh.de](http://www.buergerschaft-hh.de) [<https://www.buergerschaft-hh.de/ParlDok/dokument/42878/drittes-kreuzfahrtterminal.pdf>].



- Combes, M. (2013) *Gilbert Simondon and the philosophy of the transindividual*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Denis, J. and D. Pontille (2020) 'Why do maintenance and repair matter?', in A. Blok, I. Farías and C. Roberts (eds.) *The Routledge companion to actor-network theory*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Deville, J. (2021) 'Waiting on standby. The relevance of disaster preparedness', in L. Kemmer, A. Kühn, B. Otto and V. Weber (eds.) 'Standby: Organizing modes of in|activity', *ephemera* 21(1), online first [<http://www.ephemerajournal.org/contribution/waiting-standby-relevance-disaster-preparedness>].
- Easterling, K. (2014) *Extrastatecraft. The power of infrastructure space*. London: Verso.
- Economist (2019) 'Island shopping. Cruise-line companies are building private Caribbean play zones'. Posted 08-08-2020 on *The Economist Website* [<https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2019/08/08/cruise-line-companies-are-building-private-caribbean-play-zones>].
- Edensor, T. (2005) 'The ghosts of industrial ruins: Ordering and disordering memory in excessive space', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 23(6): 829-49.
- Gehm, F. (2020) 'Bricht das Virus aus, wird die Kreuzfahrt zur „Infektionsgemeinschaft“'. posted 30-01-20 on *WELT Website* [<https://www.welt.de/wirtschaft/article205481259/Coronavirus-Experten-warnen-vor-Infektionsgemeinschaft-auf-Kreuzfahrten.html>].
- Gordillo, G.R. (2014) *Rubble. The afterlife of destruction*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Graham, S. and N. Thrift (2007) 'Out of order: Understanding repair and maintenance', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 24(3): 1-25.
- Hannam, K., M. Sheller and J. Urry (2006) Editorial: Mobilities, immobilities and moorings, *Mobilities*, 1(1): 1-22.
- Harvey, P (2012) 'The topological quality of infrastructural relation: An ethnographic approach', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29(4-5): 76-92.
- Harvey, P. and H. Knox (2015) *Roads: An anthropology of infrastructure and expertise*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

- Hoel, A.S. (2018) 'Metastability', in R. Braidotti and M. Hlavajova (eds.) *Posthuman glossary*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Hönke, J. and I. Cuesta-Fernandez (2017) 'A topographical approach to infrastructure: Political topography, topology and the port of Dar es Salaam', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 35(6): 1076-1095.
- Ingold, T. (2015) *The life of lines*. London: Routledge.
- Jackson, S.J. (2017) 'Speed, time, infrastructure: Temporalities of breakdown, maintenance, and repair', in J. Wajcman and N. Dodd (eds.) *The sociology of speed: Digital, organizational, and social temporalities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jeffrey C. (2008) 'Waiting', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 26(6): 954-958.
- Joronen M. (2017) 'Spaces of waiting: Politics of precarious recognition in the occupied West Bank', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 35(6): 994-1011.
- Jünger, E. (1954) *Das Sanduhrbuch*. Frankfurt: Klostermann.
- Kemmer, L., A. Kühn, B. Otto and V. Weber (forthcoming) (eds.) 'Standby: Organizing modes of in|activity', *ephemera*, 21(1).
- Kemmer, L., A. Kühn and V. Weber (2021) 'The temporal politics of pandemic times. An interview with Lisa Baraitser', in L. Kemmer, A. Kühn, B. Otto and V. Weber (eds.) 'Standby: Organizing modes of in|activity', *ephemera* 21(1), online first [<http://www.ephemerajournal.org/contribution/pandemic-times-conversation-lisa-baraitser-about-temporal-politics-covid-19>].
- Knox, H., D. O'Doherty, T. Vurdubakis and C. Westrup (2015) 'Something happened: Spectres of organization/disorganization at the airport', *Human Relations*, 68(6): 1001-1020.
- Kühn, A. (2017) 'Elements on standby. The latency of contamination', paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Geographers, Boston, USA, 5-9 April.
- Manning, E. (2009) *Relationscapes: Movement, art, philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

- Manpreet, J.K. and A. Bandak (2018) *Ethnographies of waiting. Doubt, hope and uncertainty*. London: Bloomsbury.
- McCormack, D.P. (2016) 'Elemental infrastructures for atmospheric media: On stratospheric variations, value and the commons', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 35(3): 4185-4437.
- McCormack, D.P. (2021) 'Scenes of the bystander', in L. Kemmer, A. Kühn, B. Otto and V. Weber (eds.) 'Standby: Organizing modes of in|activity', *ephemera* 21(1).
- Merriman, P. (2016) 'Mobility infrastructures: Modern visions, affective environments, and the problem of car parking', *Mobilities*, 11(1): 83-98.
- Meier, A. and H.P. Siderius (2017) 'Should the next standby power target be 0-watt?' *ECEEE 2017 SUMMER STUDY Proceedings* [[https://www.ecee.org/library/conference\\_proceedings/ecee\\_Summer\\_Studies/2017/7-appliances-products-lighting-and-ict/should-the-next-standby-power-target-be-0-watt/](https://www.ecee.org/library/conference_proceedings/ecee_Summer_Studies/2017/7-appliances-products-lighting-and-ict/should-the-next-standby-power-target-be-0-watt/)].
- Munster, A. (2016) 'The monkey selfie', paper presented at the Techno-Collectivities Conference, Konstanz, Germany, 9 -11 June, author's notes.
- NDR (2020): Viele Schiffe wegen Corona außer Betrieb, *NDR online*, 31 May [<https://www.ndr.de/nachrichten/hamburg/Viele-Schiffe-wegen-Corona-ausser-Betrieb,schiffe292.html>].
- Peters, J.D. (2015) *The marvellous clouds: Toward a philosophy of elemental media*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Puig de la Bellacasa, M. (2017) *Matters of care: Speculative ethics in more than human worlds*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lovink, G. and N. Rossiter (2018) *Organization after social media*. New York: Minor Compositions.
- Sandberg, E. (1993) 'Electronic home equipment – leaking electricity', *Eceee Summer Study*. European Council for an Energy Efficient Economy.
- Schweizer, H. (2008) *On waiting*. New York: Routledge.
- Simone, A. (2015) 'Passing things along. (In)completing infrastructure', *New Diversities* 17(2): 151-62.

- Simondon, G. (2009) 'The position of the problem of ontogenesis', trans. G. Flanders, *Parrhesia*, 7: 4-16.
- Söderström, O., S. Randeria, D. Ruedin, G. D'Amato and F. Panese (2013) *Critical mobilities*. London: Routledge.
- Stäheli, U. (2018) 'The mediality of looseness', *Cybernetics and Human Knowing*, 25(4): 15-24.
- Star, S.L. (1999) 'The ethnography of infrastructure', *American Behavioral Scientist*, 43(3): 377-391.
- Star, S.L. and G.C. Bowker (2002) 'How to infrastructure?', in L.A. Lievrouw and S. Livingstone (eds.) *Handbook of new media: Social shaping and social consequences of ICTs*. London: Sage.
- Starosielski, N. (2012) "'Warning: Do not dig": Negotiating the visibility of critical infrastructures', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 11(1): 38-57.
- Stewart, K. (2014) 'Road registers', *Cultural Geographies*, 21(4): 549-563.
- Stoler, A.L. (2008) 'Imperial debris: Reflections on ruins and ruination', *Cultural Anthropology*, 23(2): 191-219.
- Venkatesan S., L. Bear, P. Harvey, S. Lazar, L. Rival and A. Simone (2018) 'Attention to infrastructure offers a welcome reconfiguration of anthropological approaches to the political', *Critique of Anthropology*, 38(1): 3-52.
- Weszkalnys, G. (2017) 'Infrastructure as gesture', in P. Harvey, C. B. Jensen and A. Morito (eds.) *Infrastructures and social complexity*. London: Routledge.

## acknowledgements

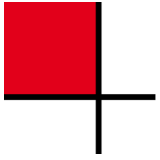
I would like to thank the editors of this open issue as well as the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful und invaluable commentaries on previous drafts of this piece. Also, I would like to thank the research collective emerging around the topic of standby, especially Laura Kemmer, Vanessa Weber and Birke Otto, the contributors to our Special Issue on 'Standby: Organizing modes of in|activity' forthcoming with *ephemera* as well as the participants and audiences at the 'Standby Infrastructures' panel at the American Association of Geographers 2017 Annual Meeting in Boston and the 'Standby. On sociomaterial modes of organizing' panel at the virtual 4S EASST 2020 conference for inspiring conversations and collaborations.

**the author**

Annika Kühn works as a researcher, author and filmmaker in the fields of critical infrastructure studies and sustainable urban mobilities. She has organized international conference panels, screenings and workshops on the affectivity, temporality and dis/connectivity of urban mobilities. She is co-editor of the Special Issue on 'Standby: Organizing modes of in|activity', forthcoming in *ephemera*, and author of #standby, an internationally screened short film, also available on *ephemera*'s website [<http://www.ephemerajournal.org/contribution/standby>].

Email: [Annika.kuehn@hcu-hamburg.de](mailto:Annika.kuehn@hcu-hamburg.de)





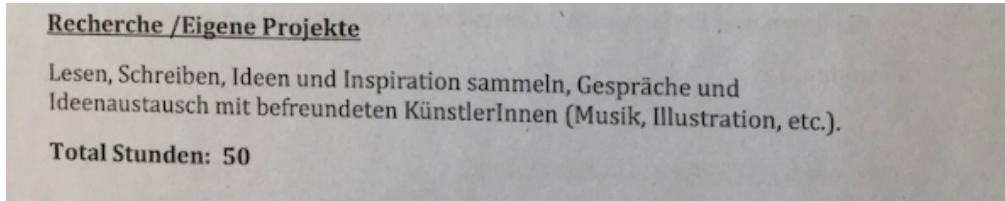
# Giving an account of one's work: From excess to ECTS in higher education in the arts

Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt

## abstract

Within the last 10 years, the implementation of the Bologna Process in higher education in the arts has introduced a time-based economy – the counting of ECTS points. Through a reading of protocols of self-study in the bachelor programme Dance, Context, Choreography at the Inter-University Centre of Dance in Berlin, I will show how art students are trained in accounting for leisure time as study time, for life as work. An institutionalised meritocracy is thus turning hours outside art school into ECTS points. In this note, I analyse the performativity in the protocols of the students. Protocolling working hours outside the curriculum with extreme accuracy, the students are led into what I call a meritocratic paradox: they are complicit with neoliberalism when they subject themselves to counting hours 24/7, and at the same time, some of them exercise a feminist critique of the same neoliberal economisation when they over-perform the imperative of calculation and collect *grey-zone hours* in their life as work. Deciphering the performativity of the protocols of self-study, I demonstrate how the infrastructural demands of meritocracy from the Bologna Process change, challenge and politicise the temporality of artistic work and the production of artistic value during artistic education.

## Introduction



Research/ Own Projects

Reading, writing, collecting ideas and inspiration, conversations and exchange of ideas with befriended artists (music, illustration etc).

Hours in total: 50<sup>1</sup>

What counts as labour and what counts as life, as hard work and as passion, what is networking and what is friendship? How do we measure? Artistic practice is a merging ground between work and life and conceptual artists and performance artists have since the late 1960s put on display how their ideas, bodies and social relations generate value in capitalism (Bryan-Wilson, 2010 Kunst, 2015). Artistic education is a founding institution in the ecology of the artworld, training students to become professional artists in the frame of their historical present. With the implementation of the Bologna Process in higher education in the arts, the neoliberal economisation of the artist's practice between work and life has become explicit: the rationality of calculating hours of study and off-study is manifested in the counting of ECTS points and this measuring rationale has been installed into the concept of what it means to make art.

On the bachelor programme Dance, Context, Choreography at the Inter-University of Dance in Berlin, where I was teaching in the years 2011-2016, students write protocols recording hours of cultural consumption, reading and conversation *outside the school*. As part of assessing modules in *project work* the students are trained to calculate their hours of *self-study* at home, in the museum or with a friend and turn them into ECTS points. Every term they give an account of their work. During my period of teaching in Berlin, it

---

<sup>1</sup> My translation. All the samples from the protocols cited in this text are printed with permission from the anonymised students.



became striking to me how the counting of hours was forming the notion of artistic work that the students learnt during their study of dance and performance art. Knowing the numeric form of self-accountancy brought about by the ECTS-system and having observed the daily subjectivation through the measurement of time, I decided to depart my PhD research from the implementation of the Bologna Process in higher education in the arts (Schmidt, 2019). The central question in this note is consequently how measuring standards of the Bologna Process are responded to and performatively subverted by art students.

I have looked at the self-study protocols in Berlin from the period 2011–2015: the protocols of approximately 45 students develop from recording somewhat private time in the first term – e.g.: dinner conversations, *resumés* of theories read at night, lists of very diverse activities from ‘sauna practice’ to a walk in the park – to more professionalised activities in the final term, such as rehearsals with colleagues and application writing. Yet the students’ practice of measuring self-study has a friction of submission and resistance: it is complicit with neoliberalism, because it instils measuring governmentality in future art workers, but it also acts as a critique of neoliberalism when art students overdo the demands of calculation, and thereby become increasingly aware of the time-economy of *grey zone hours*. I will refer to the two interpretations as a meritocratic paradox of complicity and critique. I will read the protocols of self-study as a socio-aesthetic form: a form that reports on and performs the distribution of time between artistic study and private life in the material encounter of excel spreadsheets and diary notes. The procedure of writing protocols – from the institutional request to the everyday practices – shows how Dance, Context, Choreography motivates a continuation of the reflection and discourse on art as work started in the 1960s. I propose to analyse the performativity of this socio-aesthetic form – the protocol. Methodologically, I lean on performance theory stemming from Jacques Derrida, who understands all utterances, signs and intentions as iterable. Thereby, meaning can change from context to context, despite any original meanings when first introduced (Derrida, 1982: 320). With my materialist analysis of samples of protocols from dance students, I want show that exactly the performativity of the protocols is what the students take

advantage of when they start questioning and over-performing the imperative of measurement.

### **Art historical context: Maintenance work**

Large areas of artistic production have – similar to domestic labour and affective work – traditionally been invisible and consequently unnoticed and unpaid. For freelance artists, who are both their own employers and employees, ‘extra hours’ or ‘night work’ – making connections with potential collaborators, networking, writing emails and applications, researching for future works through cultural consumption and conversations, evaluating finished projects – are notched up on top of the *actual* artistic work, for example, in the studio or performances in institutions (Sholette, 2011; Kunst, 2015; Krikortz et.al., 2015). These *grey-zone hours* of rather profane and exhausting work are not part of the picture painted of the artist genius. Often this profane work does not figure in the budget of an application. Further on, in the life of professional artists, grey-zone hours are not counted as regular working hours because they fall ‘between projects’. Not only do artists always get paid for less hours than they actually work, but also the grey-zone hours potentially produce a structural precarity for them: in the social security system artists are registered as unemployed despite working 24/7. As Maurizio Lazzarato has pointed out, the reality of working in capitalism – as artists, cultural producers, start-ups, journalists etc. – includes periods of official unemployment while continuing the basics of freelance work ‘self-realization, identity-formation, and social recognition’ (Lazzarato, 2014: 121).

Looking closer at the relation between art and life in art history and art theory in the 1960s, there is a difference between the expansion of the artwork and an expanded notion of what artistic work is. For example, conceptual artist Allan Kaprow works outside the museum and downsizes the status of painting for the sake of art moving closer to life, to the everyday, in the happening and the site-specific assemblage works. When Kaprow looks at *nontheatrical performances* in public spaces by amongst others Fluxus artists Wolf Vostell and George Brecht, he does so in order to show how art is researching into the conditions of life (Kaprow, 1976). The nontheatrical happenings and

researching performances and scores, however, he appreciates as 'very impressive and very elegant' (*ibid.*, 168), and he defends artistic virtuosity, inspiration and independence when defining what performance art is. To my regard, Kaprow still represents and defends the exceptional position of the artist as genius, or the artist as a genius researcher, being more interested in the originality of the deterritorialised artwork than in the sociality and temporality of working. In other words, Kaprow expands the notion of art, but not of the artist as worker and consequently, I would state that he represents a rather conservative, modernist position. Another example is Chris Burden's *Bed piece* exposing the sleeping, in-bed-lying artist in a gallery in New York for 22 days in 1972. The work plays with the exposure of private life in public and launches the intimacy of the artist's life as the core of performance work. But whereas Kaprow and Burden are genius-affine in their self-promotion, -reflection and -exposure of their conceptual performance art in the 1960s and 70s, the feminist artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles proposes including childcare and cleaning as artistic work, saying: 'Everything I say is Art is Art' (Ukeles quoted in Jackson, 2011). She starts counting the artist's hours of care work *outside* the art gallery. Similar to Art Workers Coalition, collectively focussing on the psychically draining and socially demanding entanglement of art workers in capitalist economy (Bryan-Wilson, 2010: 15), Ukeles politicises what counts as artistic work, particularly from a feminist perspective. She uses her performative power as an artist to shed light on the unrecognised *maintenance* work of the artist. Her *Manifesto for maintenance art 1969!* (1999) expands the modernist, male conception of *everyday inclusion* to cover not only the everyday objects and situations but also the demanding, invisible everyday life of the working artist: art is happening in the unfettered, domestic field and in the fields of preparing, cleaning, archiving and maintaining art in public buildings, claims Ukeles. Not only does the original and surprising objects and events by traditional and conceptual (male) artists count as work but also the production of art in all its dull, repetitive and boring forms – this must be considered as well.

Polemically, Ukeles opposes 'maintenance' to 'development' in her manifesto: where the development-artist being the '*avant-garde par excellence*' creates the big changes and 'the new', the maintenance-artist has 'little room for alternation', she writes. 'Maintenance is a drag; it takes all the

fucking time (lit.)' (Ukeles, 1999: 122-123). Thereby Ukeles moves the perception from the originality of the *avant-garde* artwork to the unsexy shadows – no 'fucking time' – of artistic production, from the object to the temporality of the making. Her aim of writing the manifesto at a time where she also becomes a mother is to draw attention towards unrecognised hours of work within the temporality of domestic, artistic and capitalist production. Ukeles' artistic manifesto from 1969 can be regarded as a prelude to the second wave feminist fight in the Wages for Housework movement, also fighting for unrecognised hours of invisibilised work, but mainly in the domestic field (Federici, 1975).

### Accounting for life

The attention to the temporality of making and the time-economy in the arts can be revisited in the frame of the neoliberal university understood as a space of economisation of the self (Petersen and Davies, 2005; Brown, 2015). I will now analyse of the specific practice of registering what can count as artistic work, trained and defined during artistic education.

I spent three days at Inter-University of Dance in Berlin in January 2018 to read through so-called *protocols of self-study*, which students hand in to staff in order to give an account of their artistic study outside the curriculum. In Germany, compared to the Nordic Countries, the registration of students' activity is offline: the archives in Berlin therefore contain big plastic folders full of A4 pages, partly printed, partly handwritten, in which the protocols of self-study are officially attached to the assessment papers in the files of graduated students. Compared to registering students' activities online, the very materiality of the handwritten, printed and collected requires registration and archival practices as additional work of staff and students. It keeps bureaucratic and meritocratic tasks tangible and present, and the registration literally takes time. Not only is the off-line paperwork a demanding task in the everyday, also the registration could be perceived as unnecessary. Usually in higher education, self-study is not explicitly controlled and measured, but only assumed and then assessed at the end of the term.

In the protocols of self-study, I noticed a variety of recorded activities belonging to the broad spectrum of what it means to study – and with this, learning to work within – the arts: meetings, mail correspondences, rehearsals, watching performances, movies and exhibitions, making applications, but also more personal and affective work like conversations with friends, reading or dreaming at night. In the protocols, the avant-garde dissolution of boundaries between life and work appears on a discursive and material level. Over three pages, one student categorises her activities in the following headlines:

PRACTICE/ VERDAUUNG. IMPROVISATION SAUVAGE / EMBODIMENT.  
VORTRAG/LECTURE. GESPRÄCH. ÜBERLEGUNG. COACHING HOURS.  
MUSEUM. PROJEKT/ MITARBEIT. ON VIEW. THEATRE. DIVERS.

*PRACTICE/ DIGESTION. WILD IMPROVISATION / EMBODIMENT. LECTURE.  
CONVERSATION. CONSIDERATION. COACHING HOURS. MUSEUM. PROJECT/  
COLLABORATION. ON VIEW. THEATRE. DIVERSE.*

In a mix of French, English and German vocabulary the categories show how inner and outer activities count: motifs from inner bodily processes ('digestion') merge with rather simple descriptions of cultural consumption through the naming of an activity ('lecture') or an institution ('museum', 'theatre'). Not only do the borders between life and work dissolve but also those between the private and the public body, between the person and the institutions, and between making and reflection. The calculation of artistic study – and hence, artistic work – obviously traverses a complex temporality and physicality.

Throughout the education, the understanding of artistic work is formulated and iterated as *projects*: students interviewed for my research generally talk about what they do as 'projects'.<sup>2</sup> Project work figures in the study regulations literally named as 'Project Work' (Ger. *Projektarbeit*) and unfolds as the most

---

<sup>2</sup> A deviation is students in their 4th year (i.e. students who have prolonged their 3-year study), who are explicitly informed by the discourse on artistic labour as defined by, amongst others, art theorist Bojana Kunst (Kunst, 2015). The 4th-year students are presumably informed by this discourse when they talk about their 'practice' or their 'work' and avoid the term 'project' – a term that has been extensively criticized by Kunst. See also Schmidt, 2019.

substantial discipline in the programme in three modules of total 62 ECTS points, i.e. over a third of the total 180 ECTS points of the bachelor degree education. In the study regulations, the number of hours of self-study within the modules of project work is high, around 80%. But how do we actually measure and survey this 80% of self-study? How are the students taught what to record? Interestingly, the teaching staff in Berlin have a checklist of what counts, so that students can calculate their project work:

Rehearsals and organisation of rehearsals (studio booking, communication, finding material, pre-meetings)

Developing concepts

Meetings within the study programme and in relation to projects

All kinds of research

Applications, requests

Video-filming, photography, editing

Costume

Attending others' performances, trainings, workshops and exhibitions

Working on other projects (paid and unpaid)

Mentoring hours.<sup>3</sup>

The list above is from 2017 and is circulated in written form amongst staff and students. The list informs about a wide range of activities entailed in the profile of the future freelance dancers and choreographers; they are trained in artistic generalist skills (filming, documenting, making costumes etc.) as well as learning to *project* and invest in the future and manage productions (pre-meetings, writing applications, requesting etc.). There is a remarkable parenthesis: '(paid and unpaid)'. When *paid* work outside the school counts in the ECTS economy, this means that the students' hours count twice: once in money and once in ECTS points. This gives an advantage to students who

---

<sup>3</sup> Official list for internal circulation received via email correspondence with student helper Verena Sepp 30.1.2017 (my translation).

already have paid work during their education: they develop their career and fulfil their education obligations within the same hours.

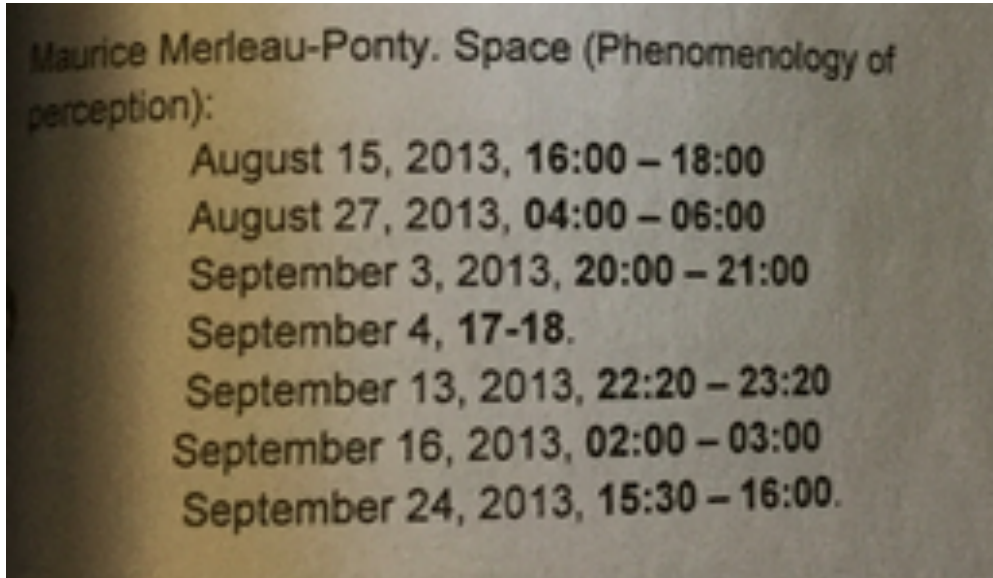
The checklist epitomises and exercises the meritocratic paradox. First, the practice of accounting is complicit with neoliberal demands of calculation and investment: an economisation of all spheres – as Wendy Brown's definition of neoliberal rationality has it (Brown, 2015) – through the counting of hours spent nearly anywhere; it is even possible to make hours count twice. Second, the institutional checklist and the attentive practice of recording work offer a critique in the form of a de-mystification of artistic work. When becoming aware of all the grey-zone hours spent with maintenance work, in communication and application writing, the less glamorous work of artists is recognised and politicised as an invisible part of the cultural economy.

### **Temporality formed by the protocol**

A protocol is a formal or official record of scientific experimental observations, a way of tracking something seen or experienced. Protocols have a very dry language – originating from the scientific laboratory – and are kept in short and efficient sentences, often linked to a progression in time. A protocol requires an object, an activity or a process to be observed, an observer/writer and an authority to collect, compare, approve and store the protocol. The writer of the protocol simultaneously obeys directions from the institution and becomes conscious of their practice. A protocol in higher education is thus part of a larger infrastructural logic: it implies a chain of meritocratic tasks distributed among staff and students and continues into institutional recognition ending with a graduation certificate.

The institutionalisation of protocols of self-study urges students in Berlin to count the unrecognised and traditionally unpaid hours, legitimising and offering legibility to what artist and writer Gregory Sholette has called 'dark matter' of artistic production (2011). I suggest understanding the protocol of self-study as a socio-aesthetic, subjectivising form structuring time in the context of the neoliberal university. Accounting for one's activities is known from the academic field when publishing online profiles on the university's website, writing applications for funding and counting points for publishing

articles. Impact is listed in the narrative form of the individualised portfolio (Brown, 2015: 33), where private life is also a part of your professional identity in the knowledge economy.<sup>4</sup> When the students in Berlin register their protocols, an economy of time structures the rhythm of the page. A student accounts for her reading activity with dates and exact hours spent:



Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Space (Phenomenology of Perception):

August 15, 2013, 16:00 – 18:00

August 27, 2013, 04:00 – 06:00

September 3, 2013, 20:00 – 21:00

September 4, 2013, 17-18

September 13, 2013, 22:20 – 23:20

September 16, 2013, 02:00 – 03:00

<sup>4</sup> In their research on subjection within academia Bronwyn Davies and Eva Bendix Petersen have – through several *poetic representations* of daily life’s ‘painful, risky, and passionate attachment’ (2005: 52) to work – revealed how private life is colonised by neoliberal rationalities and governmentality.



September 24, 2013, 15:30 – 16:00

This student is protocolling her reading hours in a print form possibly written in an excel spreadsheet. The temporality of work formed through her protocol of self-study is dictated by the clock. The protocolisation demands a self-surveillant activity even when the lights are out. The romantic Marxist ideal of the worker writing poetry and reading philosophy at night celebrated by Jacques Rancière in *La nuit des prolétaires* (1981), has been taken to its extremes when the student records her activities by clocking in and out of work at night. The accuracy in the recording of minutes in the sample above – twenty minutes past ten in the evening, half an hour in the afternoon – and the nighttime activities show an intense performance of self-governance.

At Dance, Context, Choreography, the protocol depicts exactly the union of professional and private: it unites the excel spreadsheet and the handwritten diary notes, computer registration and writing by hand in bed. This materiality reflects the encounter between standardised meritocracy and intimate *memoires* for oneself. The union of life and work is, as already argued, old wine in art history, but the institutionalised form of registration transposes this union from an avant-garde way of producing to a neoliberal way of measuring. Through the ECTS, a legibility of the temporality of study is structured, and a calculable and comparative time-based economy is proposed.<sup>5</sup> The protocol as a socio-aesthetic form captures the encounter between the rhythm of everyday life and the temporality proposed by the Bologna Process. Absurdly enough, while the student above is studying phenomenology at the library in the afternoon and in bed at night, the private space and biorhythm is occupied by the meritocracy of the Bologna Process.

---

<sup>5</sup> Two overall aims of the Bologna Process in higher education are comparability and mobility: programmes should be able to easily exchange students between the EU countries. The comparability is made possible through modularisation of study and the calculation of hours into European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) points. Studies – within Europe – are divided into working hours counted in ECTS points, where 1 ECTS point is approximately 25–30 working hours. One year of study consists of 60 ECTS points. However, it differs from study programme to study programme how ECTS points are accounted for. Mostly, self-study is not documented and thereby this is an illustration of an extreme case.

To quantify one's artistic study and work by counting hours could be characterised as what media theory scholar Sarah Sharma has called a 'power-chronography', a 'micropolitics of temporal coordination and control' (Sharma, 2014: 139). Sharma proposes in her book *In the Meantime* (2014) that we pay attention to the specific power interests and technologies of control layered in temporalities of everyday work and life under capitalism. She opts against the dystopian discourse of 'The world is getting faster' by left-wing speed theorists such as Paul Virilio, Frederic Jameson, David Harvey and Jonathan Crary. Instead, she sets out to analyse the particular grids of 'temporal power relations' (Sharma, 2014: 9). Following Sharma's call for descriptions of particular temporalities of work under capitalism, I would describe the temporality of work trained by students of dance in the protocols of self-study as a performative grid that can lead to a constant self-measurement and self-surveillance. This performative grid is politically initiated by the Bologna Process and possibly inscribed in a greater neoliberal technology of the self. To be accounting for one's life in hours as part of one's study to become an artist proposes an occupational temporality of potentially always being at work, as seen in the example of reading Merleau-Ponty at night. It is probably 'a drag', as Ukeles describes the maintenance work, and usually not an activity the students would consider to be central to their actual artistic *oeuvre*. Perhaps it is draining and boring but, as I will show below, also allows a feminist politics of work where unrecognised hours of maintenance count.

### **Naysaying, healing, caring**

In Autumn 2018, when I return to the Dance, Context, Choreography programme in Berlin to have a look at recently written protocols, I come across new kinds of recorded work:

18.1.2018	listening to travis	1
21.1.2018	taking time off to heal, total so far:	6
21.1.2018	listening to travis	2
21.1.2018	pillow	3
22.1.2018	taking time off to heal	3
23.1.2018	taking time off to heal	3
23.1.2018	flat earth cinema business	2
26.1.2018	cabaret at sophiensæle	2
28.1.2018	reading THE BLAZING WORLD	3
29.1.2018	looking at korean dance on youtube	1
29.1.2018	pillow (failed)	3

*Screenshot from a digital list handed in by a student, showing self-study of project work in module 11, 'Project Work'.*

The student writes down twelve hours of 'taking time off to heal'. The inclusion of the healing of an injury is far away from the image of the actively working, virtuoso dancer, yet it is a very concrete and time-demanding obstacle in the everyday of both dance students and professionals. Waiting for the injury to heal, doing nothing, enduring the pain, does not match the imagined effort of everyday training attached to the dancer. It is not even clear what exactly she is healing from reading the few words in the protocol; it could be the healing of love wounds or, what I immediately supposed, the healing of an injury she got during training or rehearsals.

Despite the uncanny tendencies of neoliberal subjection learned during artistic education when students survey and calculate their activities, I also – in line with Ukeles' expansion of what artistic work includes – read a feminist critique in the protocols because they make visible, count and de-mystify the unrecognised and invisible working hours of the dancer. Besides the feminist expansion of the notion of work presented through Ukeles' notion of maintenance, a second feminist strategy occurs: the strategy of 'naysaying'

understood as the practice of saying ‘no’ to virtuosity, ‘no’ to the harming demand of hyper-productivity, ‘no’ to the ideology of constant strokes of the genius. The choreographer Yvonne Rainer suggests naysaying to artistic virtuosity, to the star-image and the heroic artist-figure in her *No Manifesto* in 1965. The 1970s feminists such as Silvia Federici and Shulamith Firestone and more recently, Kathi Weeks, have been arguing on a theoretical level against positive affects – love, happiness and passion – as compensation for work (Federici, 1975; Firestone, 2015 [1970]; Weeks, 2011). The second wave feminist theorists reveal the private household as an obscure component in the economic model, where even Marx never counts domestic work as part of the greater calculation. Love and happiness have traditionally been the wages for housework.

In a post-Fordist era, this kind of romantic relation to hours spent with children, in the kitchen or groceries shopping, has travelled into other spheres of work. The entrepreneurial subject’s desire to self-fulfil is similarly fuelled and mystified by love and passion and often accompanied by the image of the creative, innovative force of artists.<sup>6</sup> Feminist research has shown how the mystified relation to work – in households as well as for the entrepreneurial subject – masks the role of economic motives and utilities. To put it simple: when artists are immersed in passionate projects, they do not count hours or ask for social security. Love is an ‘unlimited individual resource’ and only economic worries will distract from enjoying work (Weeks, 2017: 45). I am intrigued about Rainer’s naysaying to artistic virtuosity and the naysaying to unpaid invisible labour. The two feminist ways of saying ‘no’ bring together resistances against the divisions of being on-stage and off-stage, of recognised production and unrecognised production, of soloist value production and necessary work in the background. The strategies of artistic and feminist naysaying dismantle a romance with artistic work, both when spectacularly performed on stage and when exploited by one’s own passion.

Kathi Weeks sums up a feminist approach to work: ‘The first step in any critical project is to make the familiar strange’ (Weeks, 2017: 42). Alienation

---

<sup>6</sup> Within Theatre and Performance Studies the actor as model for the engaged, self-fulfilling employee has taken its extremes in Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore’s (1999) *The experience economy*.

from the romance with work means in an artistic context to translate a mystified imaginary of artistic excess and virtuosity into a pragmatic counting of hours spent at work. Not only does counting profane the artist genius and the aura of artistic practice but it also exposes what kind of material practices artistic work actually covers. Sitting still and waiting for an injury to heal is, as in the protocol above, on the one hand, maintenance work, caring for the production apparatus, which is the dancer's own body, and on the other hand, it is a protesting practice of bodily naysaying: while sitting immobile and enduring the healing process, the dancer is inactive yet at work. By noting down the hours of self-study as 'taking time off', she says 'no' to the physical possibility of working (or studying) passionately 24/7. The naysaying allows the dancer to win time for herself while working. But is it a 'win' to sit around immobile and injured or rather a painful act of maintenance work?

A less ambivalent version of naysaying becomes clear when the same student records one hour with '8.11.2017: helping Katla with homework'. Where the healing time is still in a field of necessary work in order to dance (again), the student here frankly 'wins' time for friendship with her hours recorded as work. A few days later she notes spending an hour with '11.11.2017: emotional hangover poetry'[sic]. While possibly referring to a moment of writing poetry in a state of hangover blues, in my view, she may actually challenge the boundaries of what can count as artistic work. Is hangover poetry not just junk? Or where does the 'great inspiration' start if not in the shadow of a bottle of alcohol? Thinking back to Ukeles' question on which aspects of the everyday have been included in the image of artistic work, a gendered and idealist ideology is performatively re-examined, exposed and mocked: the artist in excess and on drugs, dealing with mental issues, producing artistic objects (poetry), but not including time to heal physical and rather profane injuries. This polemic, naysaying protocol, being the most recent sample in my analyses of protocols of self-study, performatively explores what counts as artistic work by including regenerative work, friendship and hangover poetry. With mocking self-irony towards the image of a romanticised, semi-drunk artist genius excessively creating out of the dark sides of the soul combined with a serious longing for what has been excluded from the artist's life when working conditions 24/7, namely both friendship and time off to heal, this student questions the premises of artistic value production.

## Feminist politics of work

By opening with the question ‘what counts as work?’ I have analysed the *temporality* of the everyday of the art student after the implementation of the Bologna Process: how the temporality of artistic study and the notion of artistic work are formed by the educational infrastructures and questioned by students’ application of feminist politicisation of unrecognised hours of work. When students write protocols of self-study within project work during their artistic education, their days and nights are interpellated by a temporality of measurement and calculation proposed by the local interpretation of the Bologna Process. I have analysed samples of the protocols of self-study understood as socio-aesthetic form that carries information about the context but are also always-already iterable, making exaggeration and denaturalisation possible. I have thus demonstrated how giving an account of one’s artistic study and work is a performative act exposing a meritocratic paradox in higher education in the arts. The institutionalised overmeasurement of work can be seen as extreme self-governance, but also used in resistance, as naysaying to an obscured economy within the arts and an insistence on time without work – for friendship, healing and caring.

When reading the protocols of self-study through a feminist perspective, I interpret them as an institutional demystification of artistic work as well as a particular recognition of the dancer’s work with themselves as production apparatuses. Through the act of accurate protocolling of grey-zone work, students are reclaiming an influence on the temporality of production and maybe even a re-installment of the division between life and work. The protocol politicises the dark matter of artistic study and thereby exposes a profane temporality of the dance student’s workday and night, in the studio and in bed, in cultural institutions and at home, with colleagues, friends and family. While the blurring of life and work of the avant-garde artist of the 1960s was both expansive and exhaustive, the protocol as institutionalised accountancy is a new socio-aesthetic form, potentially capturing the concrete deficits of the avant-garde blur: the romantization of passion, excess and availability. Can the calculation and over-measuring of time become an advantage of the future (artist)worker? Could there be a moment of solidarity in counting individual, but structurally similar hours ‘in concert’?

## references

- Brown, W. (2015) *Undoing the demos*. New York: Zone Books.
- Bryan-Wilson, J. (2010) *Art Workers. Radical practice in the vietnam war era*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Derrida, J. (1982) 'Sinature Event Context', in J. Derrida *Margins of Philosophy*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Federici, S. (1975) *Wages against housework*. Bristol: Power of Women Collective and The Falling Wall Press.
- Firestone, S. (2015) *The dialectic of sex* [1970]. London: Verso Books.
- Jackson, S. (2011) *Social works*. New York: Routledge.
- Kaprow, A. (1976) 'Nontheatrical Performance (1976)' in J. Kelly (ed.) *Essays on the blurring of art and life*. Berkley: University of California Press.
- Krikortz, H., A. Triisberg and M. Henriksson (eds.) (2015) *Art Workers*. Berlin / Helsinki / Stockholm / Tallin.
- Kunst, B. (2015) *Artist at work: Proximity of art and capitalism*. New York: Zero Books.
- Lazzarato, M. (2014) *Signs and machines*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Petersen, B. E. and B. Davies (2005) 'Intellectual workers (un)doing neoliberal discourse', *The International Journal of Critical Psychology*, 13: 32-54.
- Pine, J. and J. H. Gilmore (1999) *The experience economy*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Rainer, Y. (1965) *No Manifesto*. <http://manifestos.mombartz.com/yvonne-rainer-no-manifesto/>
- Rancière, J. (1981) *La nuit des prolétaires*. Paris: Fayard.
- Schmidt, C.U. (2019) *Everybody counts*. University of Copenhagen (PhD dissertation).
- Sharma, S. (2014) *In the meantime*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Sholette, G. (2011) *Dark matter*. London: Pluto Press.

Ukeles, M. L. (1999) 'Manifesto for maintenance art 1969! Proposal for an exhibition "CARE"' in Alberro, A. and Stimson, B. (eds.) *Conceptual art: A critical anthology*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Weeks, K. (2011). *The Problem with work*. Durham: Duke University Press.

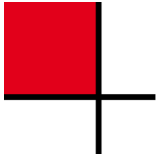
Weeks, K. (2017) 'Down with love: Feminist critique and the new ideologies of work', *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, 45 (3 & 4): 37–58.

## **the author**

Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt is an assistant professor in Performance Studies and Cultural Studies and deputy director at The New Carlsberg Foundation research center Art as Forum, based in the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, University of Copenhagen.

Email: c.u.schmidt@hum.ku.dk





# Enoughness: Exploring the potentialities of having and being enough

Gabriela Edlinger, Bernhard Ungericht and Daniel Deimling

## abstract

With this note, we offer an invitation to those who live in affluence to explore enoughness – an experience of inherent contentment that has the potential to undermine a doctrine of ‘moreness’. We begin with a brief critical description of the prevailing cultural obsession with growth, which lacks consideration of sensible limits and meaningful purpose. In the remainder of the manuscript we describe enoughness as an alternative condition that is rooted in the prosperity of a good enough rather than in the lack of wanting more per default. We argue that this condition of having and being enough is accessible for everyone and that it has a liberating quality and emancipatory potential. Enoughness is not presented as a solution, but we believe that exploring and cultivating a perspective of enoughness can support a cultural departure from ‘always more’ and a move toward a post-growth economy and society.

## Introduction

Enoughness denotes a state or condition of having and being enough, thereby negating the need for an external reference point and avoiding comparability, as we will show in this note. When enoughness is the focus, standards and ideals are replaced by questions concerning characteristics, circumstances and reasons for something being enough. We first came across this phenomenon in interviews with business leaders who avoided growing the size of their businesses to protect certain qualities of their business’s status

quo that they considered of higher value than an increase in profits. Essentially, they did not want more (or different, for that matter) simply because they experienced contentment with what they had. The specific qualities these business leaders did not want to jeopardize were close personal connections with various stakeholders, connectedness to place and nature and a feeling of personal integrity.

Appearing in texts that offer perspectives on a sustainable, post-growth economy (Dietz and O'Neill, 2013; Princen, 2005; Reichel, 2017), the term enoughness is usually seen as one of the necessary conditions for 'a post-growth economy: an economy beyond the growth imperative, beyond scarcity, and beyond consumerism' (Reichel, 2017: 109). Similarly, Alexander calls for a 'philosophy of enoughism' to depart from a culture of always more and ask questions about what and how much we actually need (Read et al., 2019). With this text, we seek to contribute to this line of thought.

### **The problem with limitless improvement**

Demands, opportunities and ways to improve or to increase everything – from income, impact and knowledge to looks, health and happiness – permeate our everyday lives with a doctrine of seeking and striving (Cederström and Spicer, 2015; Charitsis, 2016; Cremin, 2010). While there is nothing wrong with improvement per se, its motivations and directions demand critical attention, particularly in a consumer society and economy that simultaneously contribute to and depend on a sense of things never being (good) enough (Bloom, 2017). In this context, improvement is frequently used synonymously with more; with an increase in numbers being employed to capture, compare and maximize an economic value. The numerical change resulting from such measurement turns the complex qualitative question of what something's value is into a simple quantitative given. Consequently, improvement that equates to better numbers is not fundamentally concerned with a development's implications regarding social, ecological, spiritual, aesthetic and moral values. Increasing quantity is an end in itself, instead of a substantive improvement of value. Any status quo is tainted by the thought that there is always the potential for more and that numbers can grow infinitely. In an endless quest, every temporary success raises the bar without

any regard for the question of purpose. Irrespective of how good something is, the omnipresence of a 'more' prevents it from seeming enough (Dietz and O'Neill, 2013). In a doctrine of moreness, being content with anything short of affluence carries the stigma of a lack of ambition or capacity and evokes suspicion of a lack of competitiveness or diligence. And if those who have more also get more respect and recognition, having more and being more become inextricably intertwined. This creates a divisionary social environment fundamentally rooted in comparison, within which people look enviously up to those who have more and anxiously down on those who have less. The glorification of moreness and the coinciding absence of a positive outlook on moderation justifies greed and selfishness (critically: Galbraith, 1958) and fuels excess production and excess consumption. It therefore contributes to the deepening of social divisions between the poor and the wealthy and is fully at odds with a proclaimed necessity of slowing down and producing and consuming less in the face of finite planetary resources (Alexander, 2015; Kallis et al., 2012).

Following Deleuze's (1988) recommendation that we remain critical of what is, and imaginative about what might be, this text explores the experience of *enoughness* as a space beyond lack and excess that emerges in the absence of an insatiable desire for more and better.

## What enoughness is

Enoughness resides in a *good enough*, which according to John Lachs covers a range from 'the upper reaches of what will do' to things being truly good or 'even great, in fact so good that they do not need to be better' (Lachs, 2009: 2). Enoughness describes one's experience of a situation as being perfectly fine at a given moment in time, an experience that does not depend on that situation's objective degree of perfection. Rather, the experience of enoughness is rooted in the absence of a desire for something bigger, better or more.

A feeling of enoughness, of having and being enough, is based on the subjective perception of a moment as adequate. In a sense, this means to view it independently from alternatives and potential, simply for what it is. In a

moment of enoughness, what or how something was before or what it could be is irrelevant. Something that is experienced as good enough is independent from favorable comparisons and trajectories. It is context-bound, subjective and momentary, drawing its validity from an intrinsic assuredness and not from any external reference point. A home-cooked meal that is plenty good and thus good enough might not compare favorably to a dish prepared by someone else or at a restaurant, but in a condition of enoughness this is irrelevant. If anything, the experiencing of enoughness is confirmed by a lack of desire to be in a different place (a restaurant) or eating a different meal. Enjoying a home-cooked meal does not depend on its quality reaching professional standards, or on it tasting better than the food you had the day before. Indeed, even a less good meal might be gloriously satisfying, for instance if it comes close to the taste you associate with childhood experiences in your grandma's kitchen or if you share it with those close to you.

A sense of enoughness thus stems from a situation's intrinsic value, which can be based on perceived comfort, on the sensuality of touch, on the smell and taste of ingredients, on fond memories, on a feeling of self-efficacy and on an indeterminable range of other subjective elements that contribute to a moment's integrity. Here, it is important to emphasize again that enoughness is neither bound to objectively identifiable features, nor to outshining an earlier point in time. Enoughness celebrates singularity: it is what it is, simply for what it is – not for what it is not, nor for what it could be. This is the acknowledgement of an intrinsic value that is not subject to any standard but its own. It is a value that arises from within a subject rather than being created and assigned to an object. Intrinsic value is not the outcome of measurement. It is not an outcome at all; it is inherent to a situation. A situation's intrinsic value is both a singularity (hence incomparable) and a plurality (hence immeasurable). Intrinsic value does not lend itself to comparison and measurement; it is never an object to anything. As a subject it can be acknowledged or ignored, but neither action affects its substance in the least.

Of course, this is not at all to say that each situation is, or can be perceived as, adequate: if someone's true needs are not met due to genuine lack, this is simply and unquestionably a situation of not having enough. But what we would like to draw attention to is that in a condition of affluence – beyond the

threshold of an enough – feelings of having and being enough are purely subjective, situational and momentary. They result from personal judgement based on occurrences, actors and their values (Lachs, 2009: 4). However, these individual values are themselves contextual (Daoud, 2010: 1222) and people are constantly both exposed to and subjected to logics of quantification and measurement. Rather than having enough and being enough, the dominant paradigm of growth and a culture of individualization rely on striving for more and being better, as well as idealizing maximization and perfection. This begs the question: what can give rise to experiences of enoughness – even in the face of a doctrine of ‘moreness’ (Princen, 2005)?

### **How enoughness might arise**

Access to the experience of having and being enough is intuitive for some people, in that it is a process of returning to connectedness and immersing oneself in presence. For others, enoughness can be initiated by a shift in perception, a process of affectively and cognitively becoming aware of and moving beyond limiting standards. We will first describe the intuitive pathway to enoughness and then the shift in perception.

Overcoming a tyranny of ‘more’ requires emancipating oneself from an obsession with utility. It requires presence and connectedness to focus on the wealth and prosperity of the moment. As demonstrated by our recollection of moments when enoughness simply happens to us, such presence and connectedness are neither unrealistic nor hard to achieve. When we stand on top of a mountain or at the ocean shore, or when we look at any other stunning scenery, we are drawn in. We cannot help but be overwhelmed by the present, and all comparisons become irrelevant and inappropriate. For a short moment, our minds do not wander. Experiencing nature seems to give us easy access to enoughness, as does being socially connected. Small children in particular demand our undivided attention and, if we are willing to release ourselves from our preoccupation with ‘musts’ and ‘wants’ for a moment, they can take us with them to a realm of openness and presence.

Connectedness (with nature and humanity) subtly provides us with a strong, intuitive frame of reference that is substantially different to economic

doctrines of rationality and utility (Dietz and O'Neill, 2013: 6). The essence of connectedness is a love and appreciation of nature and a strong sense of community, both of which are an inherent part of who we are. Thus everyone has the natural ability to experience enoughness. Rather than being something we need to learn, it is something to return to after it was superimposed by concepts that are further removed from and further remove us from pure intensities of life and presence.

The more deeply we are caught up in the prevailing culture of moreness and comparison, the harder it is to acknowledge simple everyday moments as wonderful opportunities to experience enoughness. Practicing mindfulness by being present can help restore our ability to immerse ourselves in the plentitude of qualities. In an interview, performance artist Marina Abramović (2013) recounted a lesson she learned about being present from theater director Bob Wilson. Wilson criticized the actors for lacking presence in the moment because they were already focusing on their next movement. This was when she realised that it was impossible to think ahead without taking something away from the present moment and ending up 'actually missing that moment of presence'. Ever since she has used the simple example of consciously and slowly drinking a glass of water to illustrate the richness and sensuality of being present in a moment and fully immersing oneself in an experience. Drinking water is a useful example, because it is a regular process to which we normally pay no attention; therefore, an exploration of the qualities found in the process of drinking water can beautifully illustrate that the intensities of life are immanent to everything at all times. We have the potential to immerse ourselves in every chosen moment, dive into it and swim in it, stretch it and delve into it. For example, if you look at a glass filled with cold water, you might notice some drops of water on the brim that reflect the light surrounding them. There is always a slight shimmering in drops of water if you look closely. If a drop of water trickles down the side of the glass, you might feel a sense of arrival in the moment when the drop reunites with the body of water. Then, if you consciously and slowly touch the glass, you will likely do so in full appreciation of its vitality. At this point, your perspective will have changed and, with it, your experience. Once you have acknowledged the inherent qualities of cool fresh water, taking a sip of it not only quenches your thirst, but it fills your body with the water's vitality.

One can immerse oneself in everything. The decision of what to immerse oneself in is a personal one. ‘Be drunken continually. Drunken with what? With wine, with poetry, or with virtue, as you will,’ suggests Baudelaire (1945/1869) in his poem ‘Envirez-vous’. In this poem, Baudelaire unequivocally advocates that we open ourselves up to experience so much that we allow life to intoxicate us with its intensities. Hence, Baudelaire’s notion of drunkenness is not an escape from reality but rather a pathway to freely and fully experience life. In his view, such a condition enables you to appreciate the richness of what you have and forget what could be. This experience lifts your spirits beyond its duration and reshapes your outlook on the world.

In addition to the pathways that lead to enoughness through connectedness, presence and immersion (see also Burch, 2013), we can also access enoughness through an affective and cognitive process of becoming that starts with ‘achieving the freedom of understanding, through the awareness of our limits, of our bondage’ (Braidotti, 2006: 134). In reflecting upon limiting sets of standards – upon what we feel we cannot do and what we must do – we begin to explore what drives our passions and to stop ourselves from blindly pursuing needs and wants that are not entirely ours (Daoud, 2011; Lachs, 2009). In so doing, we open up space for a continuous *ethical transformation* of our desires. What is it that we value? What nurtures our souls, our bodies and our minds? Outside a realm of general demands, needs and expectations, the answer to this question is based on singular experiences of what each of us perceives as good enough. These ‘enoughs’ cannot be compared to a specific standard or frame of reference. Every enough feels right, because ‘the experience of the good enough is valuable on any level of sophistication’ (Lachs, 2009: 5). In the dismissal of universal standards and measures, enoughness requires and re-establishes an unmediated relationship between people and qualities of experience. This inherently shifts the focus from moreness to good measure, which denotes a space beyond lack and excess. Measurements don’t provide for good measure. Why would we even feel the need to put qualitative phenomena – even feelings like love – into an imaginary measuring cup? Just consider declarations like ‘I love you so much’ and ‘I love you more’. Wouldn’t it add to our experience if we could forego the drive to compare and maximize, allowing our loves be joyous,

fundamental, passionate, free, fervent, lively, safe, magical, playful, easy, crazy or something quite different altogether? An infinite array of possibilities, incomparable and thus each in itself enough in their essence. The habitual use of comparisons and quantifications to describe personal experiences is one example of how moreness discursively permeates our lives. Against this backdrop, every individual decision to account for the qualities within an enough can be regarded as a form of resistance against a language of moreness, since every verbalized account of enoughness reflects the possibility of qualitative wealth within a quantitative enough.

This is one reason why enoughness, as a way of avoiding quantification, can be powerful: Enoughness exposes morenesses' obliviousness to qualities. It shows us that measurement compares things that cannot be compared meaningfully. Enoughness also tells us that maximization increases some things by taking away from others, maybe from things we value. For example, why would you and should you increase your materialistic wealth if this comes at the cost of a reduction of your already meagre leisure time? The subjectivity of enoughness opens up questions you have to answer yourself, whereas the proclaimed objectivity of measurement shuts them down.

### **Why enoughness matters**

Enoughness undermines the tendency to limitlessly and meaninglessly want more; therefore, it is a remedy for excess. As such, enoughness is desirable on a personal level because a mentality of never (good) enough diminishes one's life satisfaction (Hamilton and Denniss, 2005). It is also important on a global level because of the problematic ecological and social consequences of unbridled growth (Alexander, 2015). In conditions of abundance, 'more' does not correspond to improvements – neither with regard to personal life satisfaction (Naish, 2009), nor in terms of ecological sustainability, public wealth and social equality (Galbraith, 1958). In the richest nations, economic growth has become 'uneconomic' in the sense that, overall, it is more detrimental than beneficial (Daly, 1999).

Calls for limits, for a reduction and a slow-down in consumption and production (D'Alisa et al., 2015; Korten, 2010; van den Bergh and Kallis, 2012)



are indispensable in response to present and impending individual, social and ecological problems that are induced by an insatiable thirst for more in private lives, in consumption and in business (Sekulova et al., 2013). In this context, sufficiency relates to the quantifiable biophysical limits of the planet. However, while sufficiency is a necessary response, critical alternatives to moreness, growth and measurement must not stop here. There is a need for visions that contribute to ‘shifting the minds and the imaginaries [...] from one that sees ever-present scarcity and is constantly preoccupied with things running out to one of “we already have enough”’ (Chertkovskaya et al., 2017: 193). This is to say that rich nations should leave room for growth in poor nations, where the benefits of growth are evident (Meadows et al., 2004). But it seems unlikely that this objective can be achieved within a paradigm of quantities, because the inherent doctrine of moreness in measurement is a reality that is neither to be neglected nor ignored. Within the confines of a doctrine of ‘more’ concepts of sufficiency are stigmatized with notions of sacrifice and deprivation. In the context of a culture in which having more equates with being more (Daoud, 2011) such claims easily resonate negatively with those ‘looking enviously at those above them and anxiously at those beneath them’ (Riesman, 1981: 287) and sabotages any quest for ‘less and different’ (Kallis, 2011; Kallis et al., 2012).

Indeed, on a socio-economic level, a doctrine of moreness seems to be associated with inequality, resource conflicts, competition and a mentality of plundering. Meanwhile, societies that keep their needs modest are said to be more peaceful (Schumacher, 1993). The indigenous peoples’ activist Rebecca Adamson uses the term enoughness to describe indigenous philosophy and advocates for a sufficiency economy consistent with this culture (Adamson, 2016; First Peoples Worldwide, 2013). Paralleling this indigenous account, photographer Cristina Mittermeier also describes an inherent orientation toward sustainability in traditional indigenous societies that stems from a culture of enoughness (Mittermeier, 2013). A philosophy of enoughness – as the essential reference point in these accounts – is deeply rooted in the experience of connectedness with nature and humanity. It therefore nurtures compassion and solidarity and elicits socially and ecologically sensible behavior.

We encountered responsible conduct based on the concept of enoughness in an empirical study we recently conducted on business policies related to growth (Edlinger et al., 2020; Raith et al., 2020). We met several business owners whose entrepreneurial strategies are informed by a sense of enoughness. These individuals regard running a business as a means to contribute to a well-lived life, and their understanding of a well-lived life extends beyond the quality of their own and their co-workers' personal and professional lives to supporting the well-being of other stakeholders (e.g., suppliers, residents, customers and competitors) and preserving the natural environment. From this perspective, a business is fundamentally connected to its immediate environment and limits are regarded as thresholds to a loss in quality of life. For example, the owner and manager of a timber business considered it essential to only use timber that could be locally and sustainably harvested, not mainly because of global ecological concerns but simply because of his personal connection to the place. This individual's deep appreciation of nature and attribution of noneconomic value to trees led him to use medium quality timber for his business, because this kind of timber is normally used as firewood and is thus unnecessarily wasted. When the owner of a small sawmill in a neighboring village wanted to copy this idea, our interview partner encouraged him to do so. The timber business owner believed that supporting another business owner in the local community was of higher value than market shares. Indeed, several entrepreneurs in our study consistently and unwaveringly transferred their personal values, such as fairness and frugality, to the business sphere. These individuals' sense of enoughness leads them to naturally accept confined markets and cooperatively share markets with other businesses. They are persistently oriented toward successful stagnation in terms of their company sizes because their understanding of success extends beyond economic viability to personal integrity, purpose, solidarity, loyalty, reciprocity and respect. The business owners' perspectives illustrate that the cultivation of enoughness can induce changes that align with aims of the degrowth movement. Our empirical data reflects this alignment in the context of business; however, a similar relationship between enoughness and degrowth can be found in the sphere of consumption, where enoughness facilitates a departure from consumerism.

The freedom of positive passions is akin to a quiet, unspoiled confidence in having and being enough. Meanwhile, what lies beyond enoughness changes the essence of our passions from a vantage point to a quest. In this sense, enoughness can be seen as liberation, because ‘ethical behaviour confirms, facilitates and enhances the subject’s *potentia*, as the capacity to express his/her freedom’ (Braidotti, 2006: 134). It counters the lure of opportunity, which can otherwise ‘ruin our satisfaction with what is clearly excellent and therefore good enough’ (Lachs, 2009: 4). Enoughness can lead to a lifestyle of voluntary material simplicity, an ‘individual political choice’ (Zamwel et al., 2014) that is an alternative to consumer culture (Alexander, 2009, 2011; Alexander and Ussher, 2012). According to Elgin (1993: 93), it is the main goal of voluntary material simplifiers ‘to unburden ourselves [...], to establish a more direct, unpretentious, and unencumbered relationship with all aspects of our lives [...], to live with balance in order to realize a life of greater purpose, fulfilment, and satisfaction’ and to pursue ‘a manner of living that is outwardly simple and inwardly rich.’ This agenda is sometimes critically perceived as a feel-good movement for the materially well-off. But while some choose to live simply to escape moreness for the sake of their own well-being, some cultivate this way of living in accordance with their social and ecological conscience (Etzioni, 1998). Regardless of motive, voluntary material simplicity is associated with a reduction of material wants and needs, and it therefore contributes to a reduction of material throughput. The cultivation of a sense of enoughness supports sufficiency as a new sociopolitical paradigm because it provides access to the qualitative and immaterial dimensions of the good life. It simultaneously opposes the stigma of scarcity or forced abstinence that are associated with being content with a material ‘enough’.

Within a paradigm of moreness, which manifests as a cultural and economic obsession with growth, measurement, maximization and optimization, enoughness has a liberating potential on the individual level and a subversive potential on the collective level, as it questions and potentially undermines the dominant view that more is better and opens up possibilities for the political agenda of degrowth to unfold. Enoughness puts *good measure* in the place of right measure and herewith stimulates an ethical reflection of what we value. In this way, Princen (2005: 18) identifies ‘a sense of “enoughness”’ as an essential precondition for sufficiency. The reduction of want, slowing

down and producing and consuming less are the likely effects of enoughness, which shifts our focus from scarcity and wanting to abundance and being. This focus on qualitative wealth supports individual sovereignty in evaluating one's needs from a place of confidence and connectedness, not from a place of restlessness and isolation.

## references

- Abramović M. (2013) *Marina Abramović: Advice to the young*. Humlebæk, Denmark: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art [https://channel.louisiana.dk/video/marina-abramovic-advice-young].
- Adamson R. (2016) *Enoughness: Indigenous economics 101*. Conference 'Sustainable Wisdom: Integrating Indigenous Knowhow for Global Flourishing', St. Joseph County, Indiana.
- Alexander S. (ed.) (2009) *Voluntary simplicity: The poetic alternative to consumer culture*. Whanganui, NZ: Stead & Daughters, Ltd.
- Alexander S. (2011) 'The voluntary simplicity movement: Reimagining the good life beyond consumer culture', *The International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic & Social Sustainability*, 7: 4-20.
- Alexander S. (2015) *Prosperous descent: Crisis as opportunity in an age of limits*. Melbourne: Simplicity Institute.
- Alexander S. and S. Ussher (2012) 'The voluntary simplicity movement: A multi-national survey analysis in theoretical context', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 12(1): 66-86.
- Baudelaire C. (1945/1869) *Le spleen de Paris: Ou les petits poèmes en prose*. Montreal: Parizeau.
- Bloom P. (2017) *The ethics of neoliberalism: The business of making capitalism moral*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Braidotti R. (2006) 'The ethics of becoming-imperceptible', in C. Boundas (ed.) *Deleuze and philosophy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 133-159.
- Burch M.A. (2013) *The hidden door: Mindful sufficiency as an alternative to extinction*. Melbourne: Simplicity Institute.

- Cederström C. and A. Spicer (2015) *The wellness syndrome*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Charitsis V. (2016) 'Prosuming (the) self', *ephemera*, 16(3): 37-59.
- Chertkovskaya E., A. Paulsson, G. Kallis, et al. (2017) 'The vocabulary of degrowth: A roundtable debate', *ephemera*, 17(1): 189-208.
- Cremin C. (2010) 'Never Employable Enough: The (Im)possibility of Satisfying the Boss's Desire', *Organization*, 17(2): 131-149.
- D'Alisa G., F. Demaria and G. Kallis (eds.) (2015) *Degrowth: A vocabulary for a new era*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Daly H.E. (1999) 'Uneconomic growth: In theory, in fact, in history, and in relation to globalization', *Clemens Lecture Series*, 10: 1-15.
- Daoud A. (2010) 'Robbins and Malthus on scarcity, abundance, and sufficiency', *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 69(4): 1206-1229.
- Daoud A. (2011) 'The modus vivendi of material simplicity: Counteracting scarcity via the deflation of wants', *Review of Social Economy*, 69(3): 275-305.
- Deleuze G. (1988) *Foucault* translated by Seán Hand. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Dietz R. and D. O'Neill (2013) *Enough is enough: Building a sustainable economy in a world of finite resources*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Edlinger G., D. Deimling, D. Raith and B. Ungericht (2020) 'Erfolgreiches Wirtschaften jenseits quantitativer Wachstumsgrößen: Unternehmerische Strategien und deren Implikationen für mögliche Formen von Unternehmertum in einer Postwachstumswirtschaft', paper presented at Momentum Kongress 2020: Republik, online, October, 16.-17.
- Elgin D. (1993) *Voluntary simplicity: Toward a way of life that is outwardly simple, inwardly rich* 2nd rev edition. New York: Harper.
- Etzioni A. (1998) 'Voluntary simplicity: Characterization, select psychological implications, and societal consequences', *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 19: 619-643.
- First Peoples Worldwide (2013) *Enoughness: Restoring balance to the economy*. Fredericksbrug, VA: First Peoples Worldwide.

- Galbraith J.K. (1958) *The affluent society*. New York: Mariner Books.
- Hamilton C. and R. Denniss (2005) *Affluenza: When too much is never enough*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Kallis G. (2011) 'In defence of degrowth', *Ecological Economics*, 70: 873-880.
- Kallis G., C. Kerschner and J. Martinez-Alier (2012) 'The economics of degrowth', *Ecological Economics*, 84: 172-180.
- Korten D.C. (2010) *Wealth to real wealth: From phantom wealth to real wealth*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Lachs J. (2009) 'Good enough', *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 23(1): p 1-7.
- Meadows D.H., J. Randers and D.L. Meadows (2004) *Limits to growth: The 30-year update*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Company.
- Mittermeier C. (2013) 'Enoughness and the wisdom of indigenous people: How to develop an internal yardstick for contentment' [<https://cristinamittermeier.com/engage/enoughness/>].
- Naish J. (2009) *Enough: Breaking free from the world of more*. London: Hodder Paperback.
- Princen T. (2005) *The logic of sufficiency*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Raith D., D. Deimling, G. Edlinger and B. Ungericht (2020) 'Growth strategies for businesses beyond growth: A case for cooperation', paper presented at the Vienna Degrowth Conference 2020, online, May, 29-June, 1.
- Read R.J., S. Alexander and H. Norberg-Hodge (2019) *This civilisation is finished: Conversations on the end of empire – and what lies beyond*. Coburg, Melbourne, Victoria: Simplicity Institute Publishing.
- Reichel A. (2017) 'Shape of things to come: From the «Laws of Form» to management in the postgrowth economy', *ephemera*, 17(1).
- Riesman D. (1981) 'The dream of abundance reconsidered', *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 45(3): 285-302.
- Schumacher E.F. (1993) *Small is beautiful: A study of economics as if people mattered*. London: Vintage Books.
- Sekulova F., G. Kallis, B. Rodríguez-Labajos, et al. (2013) 'Degrowth: From theory to practice', *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 38: 1-6.

van den Bergh J. and G. Kallis (2012) ‘Growth, a-growth or degrowth to stay within planetary boundaries?’, *Journal of Economic Issues*, 46(4): 909-920.

Zamwel E., O. Sasson-Levy and G. Ben-Porat (2014) ‘Voluntary simplifiers as political consumers: Individuals practicing politics through reduced consumption’, *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 14(2): 199-217.

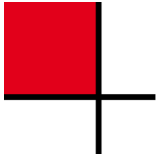
## the authors

Gabriela Edlinger, Bernhard Ungericht and Daniel Deimling are researchers with a background in business studies and an interest in questions of ethics and sustainability. Together with their colleague Dirk Raith they recently conducted a qualitative study on business policies concerning growth. The heterogeneity of perspectives and strategies found in this investigation of 32 businesses has led them – amongst other things – to acknowledge voluntary material simplicity and sufficiency as possible foundations for entrepreneurial action. The business models and strategies employed by a-growth or degrowth businesses are currently at the center of their joint research at the University of Graz.

Email: [gabriela.edlinger@protonmail.com](mailto:gabriela.edlinger@protonmail.com), [bernhard.ungericht@uni-graz.at](mailto:bernhard.ungericht@uni-graz.at) and [danieldeimling@web.de](mailto:danieldeimling@web.de)







# Filtering data: Exploring the sociomaterial production of air

Vanessa Weber

## abstract

Inspired by contemporary visions of the omniscience of data, this note questions the idea that data are raw, untreated, numeric replications of the world, available for immediate use at any particular moment in time. Instead, I argue that data are produced by different sociomaterial practices and therefore are neither raw replications of the world nor available instantaneously. Based on ethnographic research on environmental monitoring, this note explores the practices of filtering massive amounts of environmental sensor data produced in European cities in recent years. First, it reveals how the ongoing efforts to produce environmental data on air quality are enabled through increasing implementation of sensor technologies in the urban realm, whereby the assemblages of human and nonhuman actors and their interplay are unfolded. Second, the examination of the sociotechnical ‘sensing’ of air quality within different spatiotemporal techniques of filtering inevitably casts doubt on the distinction between the terms ‘data’ and ‘information’.

## Introduction

At first we feel nothing, we are insensitive, we are naturalized. And then suddenly we feel not something, but the absence of something we did not know before could possibly be lacking. (Latour, 2006: 105)

Although air is a necessary and substantive part of life – it surrounds us; it flows into us and out of us – most of the time we are unaware of its existence.

Even though we generally know air's chemical composition and some of us measure its humidity and temperature in our living rooms, we almost never perceive it. Thus, the possibility of actually perceiving air may be understood as inherently intertwined with the technical infrastructures that produce our relation to it. However, air still remains abstract to us, something that cannot be grasped, something universal and yet not present, as Peter Adey (2015: 71) puts it: 'An element like air occasionally obtrudes into appearance, but most of the time it is endured and worn, and particularly difficult to abstain from because of its anteriority'. Although air's quality and components for the most part remain intangible to us, in the modern era air has seemed to be an immovable part of our world and our life, even a solid substance – a thing: '[D]uring the period of what we call scientific modernity, we have taken to the air in our tendency to take the air as an object of scientific, technical and philosophical concern' (Connor, 2010: 9). On the one hand, it strikes us as a colourless, odourless, transparent whole and simultaneously as nothingness. On the other hand, we are deeply intermingled with it. Air enters our bodies with every breath we take; it merges with our bodies, and its components are filtered by our vital systems. These components are distributed in different concentrations within our surroundings and our bodies (cf. Choy, 2016). Air itself is both a momentary state and a transforming event. It is simultaneously material and inorganic; natural and anthropogenic; intimate and distributed; freely accessible and political.

Today there is an increasing awareness of the threat that fine dust particles pose to air quality and health. Due to the rise in motorized traffic, mass production and coal-fired power stations, air is bursting with particles that contaminate it, and in many European cities the levels of particulate matter in the air are reaching or exceeding legal limits. Simultaneously, with advancements in sensor technologies and the means of capturing environmental data,<sup>1</sup> public awareness is on the rise. More and more often,

---

<sup>1</sup> The term 'data' is expressed in the plural following the scientific usage, as explained in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED): 'In Latin data is the plural of datum and, historically and in specialized scientific fields, it is also treated as a plural in English, taking a plural verb, as in 'the data were collected and classified' (quoted by Kitchin, 2014: Note).

therefore, air and its potential contamination are appearing not only on the political agenda of European cities but also within public discourse.

## Exploring the sociomaterial production of air

Both globally and locally, environmental monitoring is mainly structured and run by state institutions and their infrastructures. Due to the lack of formal monitoring methods, up to the 1940s the most widespread observations of urban air pollution were simple descriptions of chimney smoke. Even though '[t]hrough the 1920's and 1930's government agencies were designing a range of air pollution monitoring equipment: the jet dust counter, lead candle (SO<sub>2</sub> deposit), filterpaper black smoke monitors and the bubblers' (Brimblecombe, 1998: 16), use of these apparatuses did not become widespread. Like the early measurements of polluted air undertaken by some enthusiasts by the end of the nineteenth century, these efforts were too sporadic and inaccurate to take hold. Only after the London smog of 1952 did the urban monitoring infrastructure of European cities increase substantially (cf. *ibid.*: 16f.). Today the amount of particulate matter in cities' air is primarily measured by permanent and fixed air-monitoring stations. In Germany, for instance (as in many other European countries), the Federal Environment Agency is in charge of the main stations in rural areas. These ground stations are connected to a growing network of European satellites.<sup>2</sup> In addition to these main stations, within the different cities there are a small number of permanent monitoring stations run by the federal states. These ground stations are installed at specific hubs only; many places remain unmonitored. To increase flexibility regarding where data on air quality is captured, recently so-called 'sentient boxes' have been installed on lampposts and other objects of built infrastructures. They are tested by the cities' governments in cooperation with start-up companies that offer cost-effective, flexible solutions of capturing environmental data through sensors.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Copernicus, Atmosphere Monitoring Service: Air quality, <https://atmosphere.copernicus.eu/air-quality>, 28.04.2020.

<sup>3</sup> These descriptions are based on my ethnographic research on air monitoring in Hamburg, Germany, and Copenhagen, Denmark (2016-2018).

In addition to these institutional strategies and start-up programs, there are further actors entering the environmental-monitoring stage: a growing number of citizens' grassroots initiatives are also producing environmental data. For the past few years these collaborations have been producing their own nonregulated, open data on air quality and air pollution (see also Gabrys, 2014; Gabrys et al., 2016). They are building their own sensing devices to cover more spots in public spaces; in fact, these sensors now outnumber the permanent stations in Germany.<sup>4</sup> I have done empirical research on one of these initiatives: the OK Lab Stuttgart, part of Code for Germany, a program of the Open Knowledge Foundation.<sup>5</sup> The OK Lab comprises local citizens who are interested both in technical tinkering and in the level of air pollution within their city and are building a sensor web across different European cities. The centrepiece of the project's infrastructure is a network of air sensors installed in the environment combined with an open map which shows all of the sensors and their measured data.<sup>6</sup> Anyone who wants to capture environmental data is welcome to participate in the project. The sensing devices consist of inexpensive hardware components: sensors, a microcontroller, cables, a weatherproof case and open-source software. The codes used are also open source and already prewritten. In addition to the map, the website provides a shopping list with instructions for assembling your own environmental sensing device. People who want to collect data in

---

<sup>4</sup> In Germany 365 ground stations are measuring data on air quality on a permanent basis: <https://www.umweltbundesamt.de/en/data/air/air-data>, 28.04.2020. The OK Lab registered more than 1.000 DIY sensing devices, increasing daily: <https://luftdaten.info>, 28.04.2020.

<sup>5</sup> The OK Lab was founded in Stuttgart, Germany, and reached its peak in 2015. Its initiatives are part of my ethnographic research on different practices of using sensors to produce environmental data in Hamburg and Copenhagen. As part of this research I became a member of the makerspace Attraktor in Hamburg, where people meet who are interested in building their own technical devices that are not connected to the big players of the market. I learned how to tinker with sensors and microcontrollers myself to experience technically mediated environments. The following findings are mainly based on interviews and participatory observations. From January 2016 to December 2018 I conducted about 30 interviews with responsible persons from governmental bodies (in Germany and Denmark) and the European Union, as well as with people from bottom-up initiatives.

<sup>6</sup> <https://luftdaten.info>, 28.4.2020.

front of their house can build their own movable monitoring station for about US\$30.

## Filtering data

Data are ephemeral creatures that threaten to become corrupted, lost, or meaningless if not properly cared for. (Ribes and Jackson, 2013: 147)

In my ethnographic research on these different practices of air monitoring by both state institutions and grassroots initiatives, I observed that data are produced by manifold processes of transmitting, processing and storing. I also found that data production is primarily based not on data collection but on processes that attempt to reduce data quantity and improve data quality. To manage large amounts of data, it is necessary to decrease their number and volume, and constant work must be undertaken to constrict the so-called ‘data deluge’, for the mere volume of data being collected exceeds institutions’ capacity to handle it. Within the data-capturing process itself, the algorithmic filtering techniques are given primary importance.

A filter (from the Latin ‘filtrum’, used in early alchemists’ language) is a ‘piece of felt ... for freeing liquids or impure matter’ (Hoad, 1996 [1986]: 171) as expressed in the Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology. The two basic functions of the filter device are letting pass and blocking. In this regard, filtering can be characterized as a separating process that subtracts some entities from the total. When incorporated into a certain environment, filters emerge as complex operative systems – as media rather than mere objects – evoking different functionalities like bounding and reducing materials, splitting surfaces, smoothing pressure and temperature gradients, or channelling frequencies. Hence, the consideration of physical, chemical or informational filters is instructive for thinking about the fabricatedness of data. Yet ‘filtering’ refers not only to the operating mode of sensors in their contact with air but also to the technique of using computerized informational processes to try to make data available. As they are performed by human and nonhuman actors, these processes become social practices.

With the example of air monitoring, the different layers of filtering – physical, chemical, and informational – become quite obvious. Air, as viewed by the

sciences, is the global atmospheric composition of chemical greenhouse gases, reactive gases, ozone and physical aerosols. It does not exist in a 'pure' form, and as a substrate it is neither unified nor solely natural *or* human-made. And in contrast to the ancient view of air as one of the four elements (along with earth, water, and fire), in contemporary science air is understood as a microcosm composed of many elements in different distribution and based on an intense exchange of matter and energy. The particulate matter consists of solid and fluid elements that derive, for example, from stones and the sea as well as from anthropogenic residues (e.g., the black carbon that emerges in industrial burning processes). To gain insight into the density, dispersion, and distribution of particulate matter, researchers filter elements out of the air in different dimensions, by means of complex technologies installed as sensors in the urban realm.

In the ground stations, particulate matter is isolated via physical filters. The filter, with its membrane, is sensitive to the materiality of particulate matter. Material substances are either blocked on the membrane or allowed to pass through. Based on these residues – which have to be dried, as they contain humidity – the density of air pollution is measured and transformed into data. In the temporal and movable do-it-yourself sensing devices used by the OK Lab, the included sensors also serve as filters for measuring particulate matter. In contrast to the physical filters in the ground stations, these filters block light to measure the density and size of particulate matter: reflection on the surface indicates the amount of particulate matter. Both the data-gathering practice itself and the density of air pollution reduce and clean the measured data through informational filters. Specific algorithms such as Kalman filters reduce statistical noise and other inaccuracies by removing redundant or unwanted data. Outliers and scattered data are cleared up, and missing data are added.

These practices of sensing the quality of air within the different spatiotemporal techniques of filtering – in order to capture data – are performed by different actors. In particular, the increasing implementation of sensor technologies in the urban realm enables assemblages of human and nonhuman actors and influences their sociomaterial interplay – based on the notion that computing systems are not only *acting* virtually but are also 'suffused through and through with the constraints of their materiality'

(Blanchette, 2011: 1042). A lot of work needs to be done to hold these complex assemblages of people, places, materials and technologies in place to produce scientific data. The exploration of the different practices of filtering environmental data proves that, as Lisa Gitelman (2013) states, there are no 'raw data'. Data undergo different stages of processing: they are collected, compressed, transmitted, cleaned, visualized, stored and probably also deleted. Thus, they are the result of a series of filtering processes. Unpacking the practices of filtering and thereby focussing on the produced-ness of data makes it clear that data are neither objective (Gitelman, 2013) nor immaterial (Blanchette, 2011). Instead, they arise from a distributed agency of human and nonhuman actors and are produced within the entanglement of environment and technology. The production of data is bound to very different infrastructures and therefore relies on different practices. Data, as elaborated within the concept-metaphor of 'broken data' (Pink et al., 2018), are incomplete, inaccurate and dispersed. A lot of work needs to be done by both humans and nonhumans to produce what is generally thought to be just measured in the sense of recorded. And 'in this context, data ... become a sort of actor, shaping and reshaping the social worlds around them' (Ribes and Jackson, 2013: 148).

This view of data contradicts the contemporary assumption that data are both neutral and omniscient, an assumption that triggers manifold efforts to transform the world into continuous streams of virtually distributed data that are available at any time. Recently, based on the idea of the 'data revolution' (Kitchin, 2014), the 'new promise of omniscience' (Geiselberger and Moorstedt, 2013) and the 'end of coincidence' (Klausnitzer, 2013), the notion of causality has been replaced by a belief in the power of algorithmic correlation of data. The apparent infallibility of large amounts of data has inspired far-reaching predictions of individual and collective futures. The widespread fascination with data's omniscience is driven by the conviction that data are raw, untreated, numeric replications of the world, both keeping it in place available for immediate use at any particular moment in time. The ubiquitous narrative of their power of representation and immediate availability is closely linked to the legitimacy of their incessant capture. But contrary to these common assumptions about captured data, my empirical case study of air measurement indicates that data are neither raw nor

objective; rather, they are produced, and they thus necessarily rest on certain assumptions about the composition of the world. Data are highly reduced through the processes of algorithmic filtering and therefore always have a delay, as the time of the event in the world (e.g., the distribution of particles) is not synchronous with the time of its transformation in data. Filtering, in this regard, becomes a sociotechnical practice that systematically transforms the input into an output – not only by making connections but also by cutting them off.

### **Data practices becoming political**

Bringing these thoughts into dialogue with the different practices of air monitoring indicates that data practices and, concomitantly, the ways of producing scientific facts may become highly political. The aim of the DIY sensing project is to empower people to participate in scientific practice, to encourage a broader understanding of how scientific facts are produced – not only by citizens but also in collaboration with sensing devices, software code and the natural environment. In turn, public authorities of the cities operating the official and fixed monitoring stations have continually contested the data produced by the portable DIY sensors. Their main argument is that the data produced by these devices are vague and not as precise as those produced by the more expensive sensors in the fixed stations. The DIY sensing community dismisses this objection, holding that although the data produced by the individual DIY sensing devices may be a bit less precise, the large number of sensors allows the makers to correct this vagueness<sup>7</sup> – mainly through various filtering processes.

Another aim of the project is to make data accessible for everyone. Before the emergence of the open data policy (which specifies that data need to be available for public use), the project members saved the data sets of the cities' main stations, which were uploaded on a daily basis before being deleted, and

---

<sup>7</sup> As Jennifer Gabrys et al. (2016: 11) observe, '...citizen-gathered data is often "just good enough" to establish patterns of evidence that can mobilise community responses in terms of communication with regulators, requesting follow-up monitoring, making the case for improved regulation and industry accountability, and keeping track of exposures both on an individual and collective level'.



leaked them online. They collected these official data sets and correlated them with their own measurement results. After a few months, they had collected enough data to make a political argument: by correlating the official data with their own, they could show that, in the cities observed, there were several places not yet on the main stations map where legal limits for particulate matter were frequently exceeded.<sup>8</sup>

Rather than the usual data narrative – data as given and immediately available – what I offer here is a notion of data as ‘temperamental and delicate creatures, whose existence and fraternity with one another depend on a complex assemblage of people, instruments and practices dedicated to their production, management, and care’ (Ribes and Jackson 2013: 164). Data may become either publicly accessible or secretly held government knowledge, or they may just go out of date and be forgotten when the next technical advance in distributed storage facilities takes place. Mostly, they remain on hold until they can be useful in political contestations, in commercial cycles or as scientific information. The citizens engaging in the OK Lab experience for themselves that data are produced, are material and are delayed in time. Some data are missing, some are unclear and none are replications of the world; rather, they are translations of existing processes. They are not available instantaneously but need care, and they shape and reshape social worlds.

What I have illustrated here is that within the described sociomaterial assemblages, algorithmic filtering becomes *the* crucial practice in our contemporary world, as massive amounts of data are captured every day, in the environmental monitoring realm and many, many others. The problem we arrive here is that algorithms ‘are opaque in the sense that if one is a recipient of the output of the algorithm ..., rarely does one have any concrete sense of how or why a particular classification has been arrived at from inputs’, as Jenna Burrell (2016: 1) puts it. Data do not just exist; they have to be produced – processed, managed, stored, analysed and utilized. Unless we account for these practices, especially the practice of filtering, the data production

---

<sup>8</sup> In this context, Nerea Calvillo (2018) brilliantly elaborates how air becomes political based on a study of the latest conflict in Madrid, where a location change in one official monitoring station caused a drop in the city’s average pollution level.

process remains unclear. Thus, as Nick Seaver (2014: 8) writes, ‘the apparent simplicity and determinism of algorithms in theory does not account for their features in practice’. If we direct more attention to the different ways in which algorithms filter, and thereby produce, the data we work with, it will become obvious that data are neither in constant use nor available immediately. At the moment of data collection, it is often not yet clear to what extent the data may be used or, in fact, whether it will be used at all. As a computer scientist for one of the public authorities states in an interview: ‘We do not yet know how to deal with these massive amounts of data. We try to store as much as possible, but most of the time the captured data are not needed or available in the moment. Our storage facilities are kind of a data cemetery’. Data are being kept on hold until the day they may be of use, and if this never happens, the data may just be deleted or forgotten.

Consequently, these findings force us to reflect on the hopes and presumptions attached to the concept of ‘big data’. The idea behind capturing large amounts of data is that different kinds of data sets may be correlated to produce additional information. But the ability to work well with such massive data sets is still limited because the technologies for correlating the data do not yet reach as far as the theories do. Thus, for now these data are simply stored within distributed and networked infrastructures, whereby their existence is very much tied to their medium of storage. Before the moment they become useful in a productive sense they stay ‘unbound’ within the data warehouses, only loosely related to the information they might reveal in the future. Assuming that information is organised data, what does this new concept of data imply for the notion of information? If data are already organised through the processes of transmitting, processing and storing – all of which involve filtering – then what interpretational act transforms data to information? In line with what has been expressed before, I follow David Beer (2017) in arguing that we need to reveal the technical and material presence of data and the algorithms processing it to understand the emerging worlds we are intermingled with.

## references

- Adey, P. (2015) 'Air's affinities: Geopolitics, chemical affect, and the force of the elemental', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 5(1): 54–75.
- Beer, David (2017) 'The social power of algorithms', *Information, Communication and Society*, 20(1): 1–13.
- Blanchette, J. (2011) 'A material history of bits', *Journal for the American Society for Information and Technology*, 62(6): 1042–1057.
- Brimblecombe, P. (1998) 'History of urban air pollution', in J. Fenger, O. Hertel and F. Palmgren (eds.) *Urban air pollution: European aspects*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Burrell, J. (2016) 'How the machine "thinks": Understanding opacity in machine learning algorithms', *Big Data and Society*, January–June: 1–12.
- Calvillo, N. (2018) 'Political airs: From monitoring to attuned sensing air pollution', *Social Studies of Science*, 48(3): 372–388.
- Choy, T. (2016) 'Distribution', in *Theorizing the Contemporary, Fieldsights*, January 21. [<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/787-distribution>]
- Connor, S. (2010) *The matter of air: Science and art of the ethereal*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Gabrys, J. (2014) 'Programming environments: Environmentality and citizen sensing in the smart city', *EPD, Society and Space*, 32(1): 30–48.
- Gabrys, J., H. Pritchard and B. Barratt (2016) 'Just good enough data: Figuring data citizenships through air pollution sensing and data stories', *Big Data and Society*, July–December: 1–14.
- Geiselberger, H., and T. Moorstedt (2013) *Big Data: Das neue Versprechen der Allwissenheit*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Gitelman, L. (ed.) (2013) *'Raw data' is an oxymoron*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hoad, T. F. (ed.) (1996 [1986]) *The concise oxford dictionary of english etymology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kitchin, R. (2014) *The data revolution: Big data, open data, data infrastructures and their consequences*. London: Sage.

Klausnitzer, R. (2013) *Das Ende des Zufalls: Wie Big Data uns und unser Leben vorhersagbar macht*. Salzburg: Ecwin.

Latour, B. (2006) 'Air', in C.A. Jones (ed.) *Sensorium: Embodied experience, technology, and contemporary art*. Cambridge, MA.

Pink, S., M. Ruckenstein, R. Willim and M. Duque (2018) 'Broken data: Conceptualising data in an emerging world', *Big Data and Society*, January–June: 1–13.

Ribes, D., and S. Jackson (2013) 'Data bites man: The work of sustaining a long-term study', in L. Gitelman (ed.) *'Raw data' is an oxymoron*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Seaver, N. (2014) 'Knowing algorithms', *Media in Transition* 8. [<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55eb004ee4b0518639d59d9b/t/55ece1bfe4b030b2e8302e1e/1441587647177/seaverMIT8.pdf>]



Figure 1: My tinkering kit

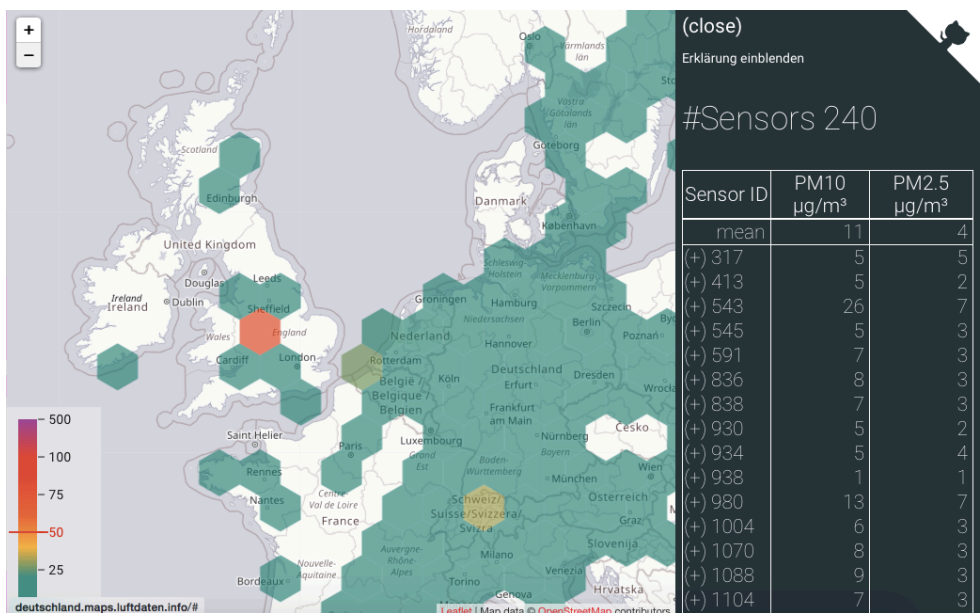


Figure 2: Sensor map with cleared-up data (15.06.2018 luftdaten.info)

1	Station,HabichtstraÙe,HabichtstraÙe,HabichtstraÙe,HabichtstraÙe,HabichtstraÙe,HabichtstraÙe,HabichtstraÙe
2	Komponente,CO,NO,NO3,,Benzol,Toluol,NO (4m),NO3,,(4m)
3	Einheit,mg/m³,µg/m³,µg/m³,µg/m³,µg/m³,µg/m³,µg/m³,µg/m³
4	Messzeit,Stundenwerte,Stundenwerte,Stundenwerte,Stundenwerte,Stundenwerte,Stundenwerte,Stundenwerte
5	
6	30.03.2017 18:00,0.8,127,120,,81,101
7	30.03.2017 17:00,0.63,163,123,2.9,106,104
8	30.03.2017 16:00,0.6,194,118,1.7,5.6,119,102
9	30.03.2017 15:00,0.6,172,100,1.3,2.3,115,90
10	30.03.2017 14:00,0.71,155,96,1.5,6.2,119,91
11	30.03.2017 13:00,0.5,116,82,1.1,4.5,91,79
12	30.03.2017 12:00,,93,79
13	30.03.2017 11:00,,140,85
14	30.03.2017 10:00,,173,96
15	30.03.2017 09:00,0.99,275,121,2.4,8.1,249,118
16	30.03.2017 08:00,1.07,281,123,2.9,8.5,257,120
17	30.03.2017 07:00,0.92,224,108,,203,105
18	30.03.2017 06:00,0.44,91,71,1.3,4.3,79,69
19	30.03.2017 05:00,0.22,34,41,0.5,1.4,28,40
20	30.03.2017 04:00,0.1,16,31,0.7,3.4,11,29
21	30.03.2017 03:00,0.21,12,33,0.7,3.6,9,31
22	30.03.2017 02:00,0.24,5,21,0.5,1.4,2,20
23	30.03.2017 01:00,0.22,10,31,0.5,1.4,7,29
24	30.03.2017 00:00,0.25,19,36,0.6,1.5,12,32
25	

Figure 3: CSV data uncleared (Monitoring station Habichtstraße 30.03.2017, 6pm, luft.hamburg.de)

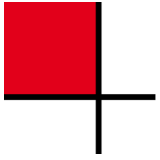
Einheit	CO <sup>(1)</sup>	NO <sup>(2)</sup>	NO <sub>2</sub> <sup>(2)</sup>	Benzol <sup>(2)</sup>	Toluol <sup>(2)</sup>	NO (4m) <sup>(2)</sup>	NO <sub>2</sub> (4m) <sup>(2)</sup>
Messzeit	mg/m <sup>3</sup>	µg/m <sup>3</sup>	µg/m <sup>3</sup>	µg/m <sup>3</sup>	µg/m <sup>3</sup>	µg/m <sup>3</sup>	µg/m <sup>3</sup>
30.03.2017 18:00	0.8	127	120	1h	1h	81	101
30.03.2017 17:00	0.63	163	123	2	9	106	104
30.03.2017 16:00	0.6	194	118	1.7	5.6	119	102
30.03.2017 15:00	0.6	172	100	1.3	2.3	115	90
30.03.2017 14:00	0.71	155	96	1.5	6.2	119	91
30.03.2017 13:00	0.5	116	82	1.1	4.5	91	79
30.03.2017 12:00						93	79
30.03.2017 11:00						140	85
30.03.2017 10:00						173	96
30.03.2017 09:00	0.99	275	121	2.4	8.1	249	118
30.03.2017 08:00	1.07	281	123	2.9	8.5	257	120
30.03.2017 07:00	0.92	224	108			203	105
30.03.2017 06:00	0.44	91	71	1.3	4.3	79	69
30.03.2017 05:00	0.22	34	41	0.5	1.4	28	40
30.03.2017 04:00	0.1	16	31	0.7	3.4	11	29
30.03.2017 03:00	0.21	12	33	0.7	3.6	9	31
30.03.2017 02:00	0.24	5	21	0.5	1.4	2	20
30.03.2017 01:00	0.22	10	31	0.5	1.4	7	29
30.03.2017 00:00	0.25	19	36	0.6	1.5	12	32

Figure 4: Same data after being filtered: outliers have been reduced and missing data added (Monitoring station Habichtstraße 30.03.2017, 6pm, luft.hamburg.de)

## the author

Vanessa Weber is researcher in the project „Digital Curation in the City“ (funded by the German Research Foundation) at City Science Lab of HafenCity University, a cooperation with MIT. Her research interests lie in the field of cultural sociology and related disciplines such as media studies and science and technology studies (STS). In particular, she is interested in algorithmic cultures and the materiality of the social as well as their aesthetic, sensory, and affective dimensions.

Email: [vanessa.weber@hcu-hamburg.de](mailto:vanessa.weber@hcu-hamburg.de)



# Deserting academia: Quitting as infrapolitics

Phil Hedges

## abstract

‘Quit Lit’ is a genre of confessional blog posts that outline why many academics abandon academia. Drawing on sympathetic readings of these testimonies, this note argues that quitting can be understood as what James C. Scott labels ‘desertion’. Desertion is the covert twin to mutiny. Rather than stay and openly protest to improve conditions, the deserter steps quietly away, resolving their situation through exit. Having deserted academia in this way, Quit Lit testimonies are then written from a space beyond sanction where the author is freer to reveal their experiences of the ivory tower – meaning that these testimonies are a resource for those studying workplace resistance. I begin by examining Quit Lit in more detail before outlining Scott’s work on covert resistance – what he labels ‘infrapolitics’. I discuss his theoretical framework before focusing on desertion as an infrapolitical act. Having done so, I outline some methodological concerns related to infrapolitical theory, arguing that Quit Lit offers an additional way to access the covert space away from the dominant where actors can express their feelings more openly. I then focus briefly upon temporary academics whose contracts expire and chose to leave the profession. I conclude by highlighting both the many voices missing from Quit Lit testimonies and the need to create a sustainable and nurturing academy.

## Introduction

The summer before embarking on my PhD study, I read Francesca Coin’s research note ‘On quitting’ (2017) with morbid fascination. Work and activism

meant that I was aware of some of the issues academics faced before I returned to formal study. I knew that staff had struck that year over changes to their pension scheme, a dispute unofficially fuelled by:

... a long list of other issues including: precarity, pay (and the gender pay gap), institutional sexism and racism, workload modelling that bears little if any relationship to reality, stress and bullying, the pointlessness of REF (a way of comparing research outputs) and TEF (the teaching version), the attempt to make academics act like border officials, racist policies like Prevent, and so on. (Woodcock, 2018)

Put that way, academia didn't sound like an entirely positive a career move. As someone who could only envision themselves in the ivory tower thanks to a transformative experience of trade union education, I brought a lot of baggage to the academic environment. Was a PhD really the right choice for someone like me? Was my success at Ruskin College, studying on the only Masters course of its kind in the UK, largely down to its unique approach (Manborde, 2019)? After a period as an associate scholar, I talked it through endlessly and fretted at length about applying.

Eventually, tentatively, I settled on returning to study. I then I stumbled across Coin's note and found out that a whole genre of blogging existed purely to outline how damaging academic labour can be and I went back to wondering: *is this really what people like me do with their lives?*

## Quit Lit

'Quit Lit' is 'a new genre of literature made up of columns and op-eds detailing the reasons why scholars – with or without tenure – leave academia' (Coin, 2017: 707). These blog testimonies outline the reasons why academics abandon an increasingly neoliberal university. Once I decided that it was better to go into the academy with my eyes firmly open, I was open to the idea that for students of worker resistance, Quit Lit is actually a resource. Unlike others staring down binary love-it-or-leave-it rhetorical questions (Taylor, 2013: 853), these academics actually left. However we may feel about that, these are the stories of workers who, pushed to a limit, say no (Coin, 2017: 714-715). What do their testimonies tell us? This essay then is an attempt to



expand upon this realisation, as well as a plucky attempt to look at my always-muddled future with a steely gaze.

## Saying no

For Coin, exit from academia represents ‘a sense of powerlessness before the growing demands of neoliberal academia’, a ‘weakness before the invasive demands of market competition’. But it is also ‘an attempt to interrupt the neoliberal discourse’; a ‘desire to rebel against its values’ (Coin, 2017: 707) by saying no. Exit means crossing a barrier – in Camus’ terms, a ‘borderline’ or a Foucaultian ‘uprooting’ (*ibid.*: 714-715). The potential damage from staying within academia forces a response, wrenching the actor over a symbolic line into refusal-as-exit.

Coin’s reading can be placed at one end of a continuum (Dunkles, 2017; Goldin, 2018; Loussikian, 2016) in opposition to explorations of why academics shouldn’t quit (Morris, 2015; Toly, 2015). This opposition sometimes bleeds into outright condemnation – including describing Quit Lit as ‘Why didn’t anyone tell me unicorns don’t exist? essay[s]’ (Campbell, 2015).

For me though, exit in Coin’s sympathetic reading is comparable to desertion; incompatible with the status-quo, finally forsaking systemic change, the actor disappears beyond the reach of power. It is choosing exit over voice. This observation is my starting point for understanding quitting as what James C. Scott labelled ‘infrapolitics’. Simply put, infrapolitical acts such as these improve the position of the actor without challenging the dominant authority. Instead of costly open confrontation, a successful infrapolitical act is like an infrared wave, existing beyond the spectrum of what is seen and invisible to the powerful (Scott, 1990: 183-184). They are hidden challenges to domination, acts of resistance that seek to achieve covertly what under more favourable circumstances would be achieved openly.

## Understanding infrapolitics

Scott outlines infrapolitics in *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts* (1990). This text is inspired by observations made during the

ethnographic research that underpinned his previous empirical study. This experience attuned Scott to understanding that poor villagers behaved differently around the wealthy out of fear of the consequences of voicing their opinions imprudently (*ibid.*: ix-x). *Domination...* is a theoretical exploration of this understanding, a ‘dialectical and dynamic theory of interpersonal and intergroup power relations’ (Sivaramakrishnan, 2005: 324).

Infrapolitics exists within and is nurtured by what Scott labels the ‘hidden transcript’. This exists in contrast to the ‘public transcript’. Scott’s theory is complex, drawing on a range of social theorists from Foucault to Habermas, Bourdieu and Jameson (Scott, 1990: xv) – but I’ll outline a working sketch of these concepts to illustrate the discussion.

The public transcript can be understood as ‘a short-hand way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate’. This ‘public performance’ (*ibid.*: 2) is inline with how the dominant – in this case, those more powerful in the university than the deserting academic – ‘wish to have things appear’ (*ibid.*: 4). It is a product of domination, an often ‘stereotyped, ritualistic’ (*ibid.*: 3) presentation created for when presenting true feelings would be detrimental. This is not to say that the dominant are open in their contribution to the public transcript as they ‘often have much to conceal’ (*ibid.*: 12). But interaction between the dominant and subordinates is largely – although never entirely (*ibid.*: 4) – defined by the wishes of the former over the preferences of the latter. It is:

...the *self* portrait of dominant elites... [a] highly partisan and partial narrative... designed to be impressive, to affirm and naturalise... to conceal or euthanize the dirty linen of their rule. (*Ibid.*: 18)

The public transcript is the outcome of on-going, constant struggle (*ibid.*: 14). Despite this, it presents a view that is relatively free of conflict. Rather, subordinates will attempt to covertly subvert the power relation without forcing a response whilst the dominant judge how far this can be allowed to continue whilst still maintaining an image of control.

The public transcript might be the meeting between the academic and their manager in which they bite their lip and tell the boss what they want to hear rather than how close they are to walking away. Conversely, the hidden

transcript might be the conversation that the academic has with friends in the pub about how shit their job is and how much they want to quit. It can be understood as a space away from the view of the dominant – ‘a privileged site for nonhegemonic, contrapuntal, dissident, subversive discourse’ (*ibid.*: 25). The hidden transcript, created in response to domination, is limited to physical locations away from the ‘direct observation of power holders’ (*ibid.*: 4) and shared only between specific actors (*ibid.*: 14). It can be conceived as an ‘off-stage’ space, where discourse and action are ‘produced for a different audience and under different constraints of power than the public transcript’ (*ibid.*: 4-5).

If the public transcript is largely what the dominant want to hear, the hidden transcript is closer to expressing how actors really feel, typically articulated amongst trusted companions and safe from the consequences of being overheard. It is a ‘collective cultural product’ (*ibid.*: 9) reflecting the relations of power. Many Quit Lit testimonies suggest that academics have access to confidants with whom they can share their concerns beyond their managers’ earshot. There are arguably examples of these hidden transcripts both within (Anonymous Academic, 2014; Doctor Outta Here, 2012; Lindsay, 2018; Maren Wood, 2013) and outside of academia (drbillyo, 2013; Hocutt, 2014; Larson, 2013; nicoleandmaggie, 2014; Peterson, 2014).

Finally, infrapolitics can be understood as ‘the circumspect struggle waged daily by subordinate groups’ (Scott, 1990: 183). These struggles remain hidden from the dominant in order avoid recrimination. This is the ‘infra-red’ already described – the ‘invisible act’ (*ibid.*: 183). But it is also the ‘infra’ of ‘infra-structure,’ the foundation what one day might become open politics (*ibid.*: 184). In this way the hidden transcript is a ‘*condition of practical resistance rather than a substitute for it*’ (*ibid.*: 191). It is resistance as guerrilla war (*ibid.*: 192), forever pushing the boundaries of what is possible without provoking a punitive response.

This is in opposition to ‘safety valve’ theories where the same low-level transgressions work to stop dissent spilling over into something more serious (*ibid.*: 184-192). Contu’s (2008) ‘decaf’ resistance is arguably a sophisticated variation of this. Here discursive acts that Scott would consider foundational are understood as falling short of the benchmark of disrupting – rather than

parodying or otherwise subverting – the ‘sociosymbolic network’ (*ibid.*: 374) and are therefore discounted as ultimately pleasurable but risk-free gestures.

## Mutiny and desertion

For Scott ‘each of the forms of disguised resistance... is the silent partner of a loud form of public resistance’ (1990: 199); overt politics has an infrapolitical equivalent. Instead of challenging material appropriation through land invasions, this might mean squatting; rather than challenging ideological dominance with public counter-ideologies, the slaves and peasants Scott draws heavily upon might respond with subversive folk tales. Although Collinson in ‘Strategies of resistance: Power, knowledge and subjectivity in the workplace’ is critical of the rational, ‘authentic’ resistant actor that underpins Scott’s model (Collinson, 1994: 53-56), to the challenges to ideological, material and status appropriation outlined in *Domination...*, we might add the control and appropriation of knowledge considered of value within the organisation (*ibid.*: 30).

In this overt/covert schematic, desertion is mutiny’s infrapolitical twin (Scott, 2012: 11). Here etymology is revealing. ‘Mutiny’ draws upon the Middle French *meute* meaning ‘a revolt, movement’; ‘desertion’ from Late Latin *desertionem*, meaning ‘a forsaking, abandoning.’<sup>1</sup> The mutineer risks reprisals to speak truth to power; the deserter eventually gives up on change and solving their own problem, slips safely away. Desertion ‘makes no public claims, it issues no manifestoes; it is exit rather than voice’ (*ibid.*: 10). This formulation is in clear opposition to demands that academics stay to make things better (Little, 2015) – but without in turn embracing a reactionary position. Instead, I understand desertion in a way Boldt might approve of when he asserts:

I’ve heard so many tales from people who feel victimized by the academy that I can’t help but feel a twinge of excitement when someone escapes an exploitative situation. (2014)

---

<sup>1</sup> Etymological information from Online Etymology Dictionary, [www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com).

## Reading resistance – a methodology

E.P. Thompson had such a profound influence on Scott's early thought that he can recall the chair he sat in when he read *The making of the English working class* (Cerezales et al., 2013). Likewise, I remember perching on an old chair rescued from a derelict office, reading *Domination...* whilst working on my Masters thesis and *feeling* as much as thinking: *there's something 'right' in what Scott argues*. Perhaps this emotional response is what's needed to maintain a sustained relationship with an author's canon. Certainly, I've been fascinated by Scott's writing ever since and, having run like a backbone through my MA research, he forms a starting point for of my PhD.

This is not to argue that infrapolitical theory can be applied directly to contemporary organisations, despite taking inspiration from workplace relations (Scott, 1990: 20-23). Most of the examples of domination that Scott draws upon are horrifically more brutal than these contemporary cases – and that's before factoring in that deserting academics remain relatively privileged workers. Rather, *Domination...* presents a captivating but problematic map that orientates me towards particular questions, concepts and considerations.

One key issue that infrapolitical theory presents is methodological: how can I access the hidden transcript? Without this access, it is difficult to understand the emotions and actions of the dominated. Fortunately, there are creative ways for researchers to access hidden transcripts. These include, as I did in my Masters thesis, studying cases of infrapolitics forced calamitously into public view; understanding interviews as taking place within the hidden transcript at an 'off-stage social site' (Anderson, 2008: 257); curating focus groups that could be read as simulating a similarly 'off-stage' context (Stroeback, 2013); and undertaking ethnographic research of the kind that allows access to the working lives of the dominated (Kaminer, 2018).

Quit Lit testimonies present another way to resolve this methodological concern. Quit Lit is a public narrative, a testimony that for Coin, 'transfer[s] quitting into a political process' (2017: 707). As Dunn highlights, Quit Lit 'demonstrates that saying goodbye is becoming an increasingly public act' (2013) – but a key feature is that this 'goodbye' is no longer an 'insider'

account. Written from outside of academia, the testimony appears once the deserter is beyond sanction from the employment institution. Thus desertion only becomes a political narrative once it is safe to do so. In this way, quitting can be understood as passing through a metaphorical gateway to a space beyond harm.

After all, the ‘escape’ Boldt (2014) mentions is not an invisible act – *but it can be a disguised act*. How many deserters are open about their feelings and experiences until they are long gone? What crossover is there in content between Quit Lit testimonies and resignation letters? How many deserters confess why they’re leaving academia in face-to-face confrontation with authority? As Tindall outlines:

...how much of your reputation do you want to risk in resigning? Among the questions to ponder before you start writing any resignation letter: Do you really want to burn bridges? (2016)

A decent reference is still useful even when plotting a career change.

Scott argues that it can be inferred from the practice of mass poaching that secret discourses away from the powerful were a crucial part for sustaining a mass wave of disobedient acts (1990: 190). The Quit Lit testimony can be understood as a similarly visible act of resistance but one where the dominated are no longer protected by anonymity or deniability (*ibid.*: 139) but through moving beyond reach of sanction. Given the testimony can provide context for and description of desertion then it is insightful to echo this process of inferring, to use the testimony to look back at the deserters’ experiences prior to exit.

This is the process I undertook as part of drafting this essay, which is empirically underpinned by 50 Quit Lit testimonies from academics working in the USA and the UK. This dataset initially drew upon a Google Doc spreadsheet curated by Chronicle Vitae that signposted to testimonies; further examples were then identified by searching online. Seeking testimonies from 2015-2018 absent from this spreadsheet, I included any that appeared in the top 20 search results by year generated using the terms ‘Quit Lit Academic’; although somewhat arbitrary, search engines at least reveal the most popular material first. This larger dataset was then analytically filtered.

Criteria for inclusion were that the academic had quit after 2007; the testimony could be reduced to a single post, even where the author had written extensively; and the deserter had actually quit mainstream academic work rather than simply taken a break. This dataset was subjected to top down thematic analysis using apriori codes relating to desertion and infrapolitics (Gibson and Brown, 2009). Put another way, coming to understand Quit Lit as the end point of a process that can be ‘inferred’ backwards invited me to build upon my initial observation of Quit-Lit-as-resource and ask: *what is revealed through coding a Quit Lit dataset for themes that draw on concepts found in Scott’s work?*

### Quietly stepping away

One observation prompted by thematic coding is that for some academics on temporary contracts, there are seemingly limited structural opportunities to impulsively ‘mutiny’. Here desertion might mean walking away after failing to achieve a goal or a gradual transition where the deserter slowly drifts into other activities. Contracts are allowed to expire or are not secured and exit becomes permanent.

For example, keen to be closer to her mother, Lord had accepted a visiting professorship 40 miles from home, a backwards step in terms of career progression:

The job had an expiration date, but so did I. When that date came, I changed careers, left academe, and moved to Washington, D.C., to live in an area I had always wanted to live. (Lord, 2012)

Rader meanwhile came to slow conclusion that his career wasn’t going to be as successful as he hoped:

I wish I could say that my departure was a dramatic and righteous middrop. Really my departure was a slow fizzle... It started to dawn on me around 4 years out that I might have passed my sell-by date... In my final year on the market... I had only one interview. And I’m not working there now. (Rader, 2017)

Walking away can involve missing self-imposed deadlines for achieving career benchmarks. Here there is a sense of a target not met, a deadline too personally costly to ignore:

That afternoon I hit the brick wall. I had spent three years on the academic job market and felt further away than ever from my goal. Was I to work yet another year as an adjunct, scraping by, with no promise that the next year would be any better than the previous three? (Maren Wood, 2013)

...I got an email telling me my last (and best) hope for a tenure-track job this year had evaporated. I'd promised myself that this would be my last year on the market. Now, I'd promised myself that *last* year, and I'd decided to try again, but this time, I knew it was over. (Bartram, 2018)

These cases highlight how desertion, whilst emotionally complex, is for some academics structured in a way that potentially minimises confrontation. There is the opportunity to quietly step away from a damaging situation.

These testimonies foreground that it is never just a particular employment relationship that is exited; for precarious academics, contracts are finite and exit arguably viewed mutually as an inevitability, pushing the limits of desertion as a metaphor. Here a second more fundamental desertion takes precedence – desertion from the profession. Rather than seeking reemployment, the deserter exits the occupation and therefore avoids enduring further mainstream academic labour.

Again, Quit Lit might be understood as an attempt to turn this muted exit into a resistant one having reached a position of safety, belatedly ensuring the meaning of the exit is clear through 'making a spectacle' and/or demonstrating solidarity with those left behind (Kirkpatrick, 2019: 136). The need to accept domination and suppress the resultant anger is effectively removed. Beyond sanction, the deserter might now demand a cathartic public satisfaction for past experiences (Scott, 1990: 213-215).

## A positive ending?

I read a lot of Quit Lit in drafting this essay. My head spinning from the testimonies of heartbroken academics, it was helpful to remember that there are many *other* voices missing from this study. To what degree is Quit Lit shaped by genre conventions and what do these conventions omit from – or over-emphasize within – the testimonies? And what about those leaving academia who don't write Quit Lit? Why do they choose not to publish their narratives? What about those, like Coin herself, who stay within academia?



What are the factors, beyond economic coercion, that differentiate between those who desert and those who stay? What else keeps academics within the ivory tower?

There is a parallel task to analyse the testimonies of academics struggling-but-managing to nurture a progressive pedagogy (e.g. Askins, 2008) and to survive in hostile conditions (e.g. Robinson, Ratle and Bristow, 2017). I am grateful that others are undertaking this work, not least because I was lucky enough as a student to benefit from a decidedly progressive educational environment. Before its tragic demise (Ledwith, 2017), the Masters in International Labour and Trade Union Studies at Ruskin College adopted a consciously Freireian approach. My lecturers attempted to create a space where activists and organisers could support each other with the project of trade union renewal and the ‘hidden injuries’ that result (Manborde, 2019). This experience was genuinely life-changing. It is this gift that underlines for me the importance of continuing to ask how a progressive approach to higher education is nurtured and protected – and how future deserting academics might instead sustain a home here.

## references

- Askins, K. (2008) ‘From enthusiasm to exhaustion: A day in the life of a human geography lecturer’, *ephemera*, 8(3): 312-321.
- Anderson, G. (2008) ‘Mapping academic resistance in the managerial university’, *Organization*, 15(2): 251-270.
- Anonymous Academic. (2014) ‘Academics anonymous: Why I’m leaving academia’, *Guardian*, 1<sup>st</sup> May.
- Bartram, E. (2018) ‘The sublimated grief of the left behind’. [<http://erinbartram.com/uncategorized/the-sublimated-grief-of-the-left-behind/>]
- Boldt, J. (2014) ‘Stripping was the easiest and quickest solution’. [<https://chroniclevitae.com/news/492-stripping-was-the-easiest-and-quickest-solution>]

- Campbell, H. (2015) 'Quit Lit: Academics discover there's real science outside universities'. [<https://www.acsh.org/news/2015/09/14/quit-lit-academics-discover-theres-real-science-outside-universities>]
- Cerezales D.P., D. Duarte, J.M. Sobral and J. Neves (2013) 'Interview with James C. Scott: Egalitarianism, the teachings of fieldwork and anarchist calisthenics', *Análise Social*, 207(2): 446-463.
- Coin, F. (2017) 'On quitting', *ephemera*, 17(3): 705-719.
- Collinson, D. (1994) 'Strategies of resistance: Power, knowledge and subjectivity in the workplace', in J.M. Jermier, D. Knights and W.R. Nord (eds.) *Resistance and power in organizations*. London: Routledge.
- Contu, A. (2008) 'On misbehaviour, cynicism, and desire in liberal workplaces', *Management Communication Quarterly*, 21(3): 364-379.
- Doctor Outta Here. (2012) 'Why I'm leaving academia'. [<http://doctorouttahere.wordpress.com/2012/07/26/leaving-academia-a-letter-of-explanation/>]
- drbillyo. (2013) 'Leaving academia'. [<https://drbillyo.wordpress.com/2013/07/24/leaving-academia/>]
- Dunkles, B. (2017) 'Coffee with recovering academics'. [<https://medium.com/@bdunkles/coffee-with-recovering-academics-328730eb20e3>]
- Dunn, S. (2013) 'Why so many academics quit and tell'. [<https://chroniclevitae.com/news/216-why-so-many-academics-quit-and-tell?CID=VTKT1#sthash.2IJLtEqE.dpuf>]
- Gibson, W.J. and A. Brown (2009) *Working With Qualitative Data*. London: Sage.
- Goldin, R. (2018) 'The rise of "Quit Lit" and the end of the infinite game'. [<http://goldinlarsen.com/richardgoldin/wp/index.php/2018/03/12/the-rise-of-quit-lit-and-the-end-of-the-infinite-game/>]
- Hocutt, F. (2014) 'I didn't want to lean out'. [<https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/i-didn-t-want-to-lean-out>]
- Kaminer, M. (2018) 'The Oksana Affair: Ambiguous resistance in an Israeli warehouse', *Ethnography*, 19(1): 25-43.

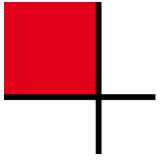
- Kirkpatrick, J. (2019) 'Resistant exit', *Contemporary Political Theory*, 18(2): 135-157.
- Larson, P. (2013) 'Leaving academia: One chapter ends, another begins'. [<https://runblogger.com/2013/04/leaving-academia-one-chapter-ends.html>]
- Ledwith, S. (2017) 'Ruskin, the trade union college, is under siege'. [<http://column.global-labour-university.org/2017/06/ruskin-trade-union-college-is-under.html>]
- Lindsay, S. (2018) 'My Quit Lit post'. [<https://www.intoresurrection.com/2018/02/quit-lit>]
- Little, A. (2015) 'Tired of academic Quit Lit? Another view on academic labor'. [<https://historiann.com/2015/10/07/tired-of-academic-quit-lit-another-view-on-academic-labor/>]
- Lord, A. (2012) 'Location, location, location'. [<https://www.chronicle.com/article/Location-Location-Location/134264>]
- Loussikian, K. (2016) 'Feeling undervalued, overworked top reasons for academics quitting', *Australian*, 29<sup>th</sup> June.
- Manborde, I. (2019) *Learning, knowledge and trade union renewal: An analysis of the student experience of the MA in International Labour and Trade Union Studies, Ruskin College, Oxford (2006-2016)*. Unpublished PhD thesis. London Metropolitan University.
- Maren Wood, L. (2013) "The afternoon I decided to leave academe" – and what happened next'. [<https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/phd/2013/08/08/the-afternoon-i-decided-to-leave-academe-and-what-happened-next>]
- Morris, A. (2015) 'A professor writes back: why I stay'. [<https://amandamorrisphd.com/2015/11/19/a-professor-writes-back-why-i-stay/>]
- nicoleandmaggie. (2014) 'The shoe drop't'. [<https://nicoleandmaggie.wordpress.com/2014/06/04/the-shoe-dropt/>]
- Peterson, K. (2014) 'My long academic goodbye'. [<https://jfruscione.wordpress.com/2014/08/11/my-long-academic-goodbye-guest-post/>]

- Rader, R. (2017) 'Leaving the academy isn't easy – but it is liberating'. [<https://eidolon.pub/leaving-the-academy-isnt-easy-but-it-is-liberating-fbc728bc7a24>]
- Robinson, S., Ratle, O. and Bristow, A. (2017) 'Labour pains: Starting a career within the neoliberal university', *ephemera*, 17(3): 481-508.
- Scott, J.C. (1990) *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. London: Yale University Press.
- Scott, J.C. (2012) *Two cheers for anarchism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Sivaramakrishnan, K. (2005) 'Introduction to "Moral Economies, State Spaces, and Categorical Violence"', *American Anthropologist*, 107(3): 321-330.
- Stroebeak, P. S. (2013) 'Let's have a cup of coffee! Coffee and coping communities at work', *Symbolic Interaction*, 36: 381-397.
- Taylor, P. (2013) 'Putting theory to work – A.K.A. "if you don't like academia, why don't you leave?"', *ephemera*, 13(4): 851-860.
- Tindall, N. (2016) 'How to resign'. [<https://chroniclevitae.com/news/1473-how-to-resign>]
- Toly, N. (2015) 'Oliver Lee Bateman, Quit Lit, and the higher education "staypieces" we really need'. [<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/missionwork/2015/09/oliver-lee-bateman/>]
- Woodcock, J. (2018) 'Six points on the eve of the UCU strike'. [<http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/blog/six-points-eve-ucu-strike>]

## the author

Phil Hedges is a graduate of the final International Labour and Trade Union Studies Masters cohort at Ruskin College, Oxford (MA ILTUS 2016). At the time of writing, he is currently completing his second year of part time PhD study in Applied Social Sciences at the University of Brighton. Phil remains pleasantly confused by how he got there, and would like to extend sincere gratitude to the reviewers of this note for their advice and kind words and to the editors for their patience and support.

Email: P.hedges2@brighton.ac.uk



## Pleasure as a political ethics of limits

Roberto Sciarelli

### review of

Godani, P. (2019) *Sul piacere che manca. Etica del desiderio e spirito del capitalismo*. Roma: DeriveApprodi. (PB, pp. 160, €13, ISBN: 9788865482773)

Kallis, G. (2019) *Limits. Why Malthus was wrong and why environmentalists should care*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. (PB, pp. 168, \$14, ISBN: 9781503611559)

One of the problems of the last few years, one of the reasons why we have missed different opportunities, is that... we had a stoic, Spartan left, which did not raise the problem of pleasure, understood as dignity for all. A left which has not reasoned differently from the religious message, which promises you a Paradise after death, because our world is a world of suffering. The message of this left is the same: we must suffer now and after the revolution we will be able to conquer happiness. And changing this culture is difficult. From this point of view, the initiatives that claim dignity, *buen vivir*, good governance, the environment, are a minority. They grow systematically, but they still remain a minority. This discourse, on the other hand, must become universal and the message must sound clear: life is short, good, and there is a fundamental right which is the right to happiness. A right which does not manifest itself and should not be confused with a sort of natural right to become rich, or to overwhelm others. Let us talk about another happiness. Small satisfactions, which however are worth a lot. (Sepúlveda and Petrini, 2014: 8)

How do you understand if someone is stoic or Epicurean? It's a very simple matter: the stoics love the great objectives established beyond life and for these

objectives they are ready to die... Christians are stoic, yes, because what do Christians want? They want eternal happiness, and yet they say: we are born to suffer... Marxists are stoic, because they want justice for all and for this justice they are ready to withstand the dictatorship of the proletariat and the revolution which, just between us, are two really uncomfortable things. Cazzaniga is stoic, he wakes up at half past six in the morning every day because he wants to become general director of the Alfa Romeo. Not us, we are Epicureans, we are satisfied with little, as long as this little is given to us as soon as possible.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction: a good life in a degrowth society

This review addresses theoretical issues which are central to degrowth theory: the issue of limits and the values of idleness and frugality. It does so by bringing together two recent books written by authors which do not read each other, but nonetheless complete each other's thinking incredibly well, offering very congruous interpretations of contemporary thought and ancient Greek philosophy. The selected books are *Limits* (Stanford University Press, 2019) written by Giorgos Kallis, and *Sul piacere che manca* ('On the lacking pleasure'), by Paolo Godani (DeriveApprodi, 2019).

The chosen books come from very different theoretical fields: Kallis conducts research on degrowth theory and political ecology, while Godani on aesthetic and political philosophy, until his arrival to Epicureanism. However, the two works are linked by the fact that both authors propose a critique to the ideologies of limitlessness – unlimited growth, development, but also human wants and desires – followed by an apology of democratically defined limits and limited pleasures, inspired by ancient Greek thought. The similarities between these books provide the opportunity of bridging the gap between bodies of literature which rarely interact with each other, reopening the conversation between degrowth and the ancient Epicurean school, a path already ventured by Serge Latouche (2011).

Reading these two books together means to combine political, ecological and economic questions with ethical and moral ones, exploring innovative interpretations of classical theoretical issues, such as the relationship

---

<sup>1</sup> Quotation of Luciano De Crescenzo from his movie *Così parlò Bellavista* (1984).

between limits and scarcity, pleasure and desire. The economic and political stances taken by Kallis result strengthened by Godani's philosophy, while the ethical argument proposed by the latter could be put into practice by the degrowth movement.

Are limits to growth a sad physical reality which should be overcome or something which should be democratically established in order to ensure a fairer and more sustainable future for humanity? Is it true that human wants are unlimited, requiring unlimited growth and consumption? What can we learn on limits from Greek politics, philosophy and ethics? Kallis starts his argument by criticizing Malthusian and neo-Malthusian thought, showing how Malthus shall not be considered a theorist of ecological limits, but instead a supporter of infinite capitalist growth. He then elaborates Cornelius Castoriadis' interpretation of ancient Greek culture and politics, showing how a collective ethics of limits (to personal wealth and political power) can be a founding stone for democracy and freedom. Godani's book starts, in turn, by criticizing Freudian understanding of the concepts of 'pleasure' and 'desire', as well as Deleuzian exaltation of the latter, which Godani considers a driving force of capital accumulation. *Sul piacere che manca* proposes to recover the Epicurean ethics of limited pleasures as an antidote to the psychological and social mechanisms of subjugation to ambition, need for recognition and unlimited, unnecessary wants, typical of contemporary capitalist societies.

I will present and compare the most relevant critiques and proposals offered by the authors, showing how their respective arguments enrich one another. Kallis' writing style is quite direct and straightforward, and this allows me to cover all the main passages of his argumentation. Godani, instead, ponders over a more diverse array of subjects, some of which are not particularly relevant for the purposes of this comparison. I will highlight the chapters of *Sul piacere che manca* which contains the essence of Godani's reasoning, with the objective of showing that his criticism towards psychoanalytic theory is the same which Kallis points towards Malthusian thought, and that he finds in Epicurean philosophy the same answers which Kallis searches in classic Athens. Nonetheless, every chapter offers original points for reflection and is coherent with the perspective of a frugal life based on shared simple pleasures and leisure.

## Modern, anti-modern and classical cultures of limits

*Limits* structure is the following: the first chapter, 'Why Malthus was wrong', builds the foundations for the whole book, criticizing Malthus' theory of natural limits and scarcity and unveiling its reactionary meaning, to which Kallis counterposes his own proposal of democratically established limits to growth. The second ('Economics: scarcity without limits') and the third chapter ('The limits of environmentalism') show how Malthusian notions kept living in contemporary political economy and modern-day environmentalism. The third chapter also offers a review of different conceptions of natural and social limits elaborated by the international environmental movement, and compares them both to Malthusian understanding of limits and to the positive vision of natural abundance and free self-limitation proposed by Romantic and anarchist thinkers. The fourth chapter describes the exemplary 'culture of limits' produced by the people of ancient Greece, while the fifth is dedicated to 'The limits of limits', that is, the examination of the limits of Kallis's own case for limits. The book ends with an epilogue, 'In defense of limits', which serves as a synthetic but touching manifesto for the cause of limits and degrowth.

The whole argument proposed by Kallis is built around a game of oppositional couples, the most important being the following: natural/democratic limits; scarcity/abundance; need for growth/need for limits; heteronomy/autonomy. His objective, as stated in the introduction, is 'to reclaim, refine and defend the notion of limits' [2] and to 'dissociate limits from what in scholarly jargon we call Malthusianism' [2]. So, the first chapter of the book criticizes Malthusian understanding of limits as well as the usual understanding of his work. We all know that in his *An essay of the principle of the population as it affects the future improvement of society*, published in 1798, Malthus argued that while population grows geometrically, food production only follows an arithmetic progression. This fact would then lead towards either a 'Malthusian trap', in which population growth exhaust the means for improving welfare, or a 'Malthusian catastrophe', made of famine and disease. Kallis invites us to dig a bit deeper into the *Essay*, challenging the description of Malthus as a surpassed prophet of doom, and to show how he was in fact a very modern (and reactionary) advocate of infinite economic growth, whose



understanding of scarcity and human wants are actually at the base of current economic thought.

Although Kallis claims to have no intention of rewriting the history of political economy, the first chapter of *Limits* does shed a different light over Malthusianism. Kallis points out how Malthus' was quite optimistic over the possibilities of technological development, and that he strongly advocated economic growth. Kallis' main point is that the real legacy of the *Essay* does not strictly regard overpopulation. In his interpretation, what Malthus left behind is a long-lasting discourse regarding the relation between natural scarcity and human needs. Malthus considered such needs unlimited, therefore he believed that nature could never fully satisfy them. In Kallis words: 'Malthus conceives a world that is naturally limited because the needs of our bodies are naturally unlimited' [13]; and 'from the facts that humans need to eat and have sex and that it is easier to have children than to provide for them, Malthus concludes that there is not, and will never be, "enough for all above a decent share"' [13].

Kallis reminds us that the political objective of the *Essay* was to demonstrate the mathematical necessity of class division and the impossibility of a society of equals, showing that 'revolutionary ambitions to eradicate poverty go against science' [14]. First of all, Malthus argued that poverty is a natural consequence of population growth, since this phenomenon does not leave a sufficient amount of resources for everyone. Then, he wrote against redistributive policies, such as the English Poor Laws, because contrasting poverty would mean to remove the only motivation humans have to produce more: freeing the poor from hunger means that they will not work; and if nobody works, everyone will fall back into misery and starvation. *Limits* succeeds in showing that Malthus was only invoking the specter of natural limits to advocate economic growth, described as the only viable path left to humanity. If equality is discarded, then the suffering produced by poverty can only propel us to produce more, allowing us to grow in numbers. Dreading scarcity was just a way to justify productivity.

In the second chapter, Kallis notices how Malthus' thinking continued to live in modern political economy, reaching even neoclassical theory: this, too, postulates scarcity, and the idea behind scarcity is that humans have

unlimited wants. In the third chapter, instead, Kallis continues his analysis pointing out that mainstream environmental thought has also somehow reproduced Malthus' argument. *Limits to growth*, the 1972 report commissioned by the Club of Rome, is addressed as one of the culprits: '*Limits [to growth] did not claim only that growth... had terrible consequences; rather it predicted that growth will come to an end, and that this would be a terrible consequence*' [54]. Capitalism had to be reformed in order to avoid clashing with limits to growth. In this narrative, what really matters is to keep growing.

Kallis' assessment, instead, is that ecology needs a different, positive vision of limits: the environmental movement should free itself from the vision of external limits imposed by nature (scarcity) and reconsider the vision of collectively established social limits to growth and to the exploitation of nature, considered as conditions for a shared abundance. This is the way to guarantee enough resources to everyone, to respect metabolic cycles and to experience nature as a source of joy. Such vision is gleaned from the different traditions of thought presented in the third chapter: from Romantic poetry, Kallis draws the praise for frugality and for the enjoyment of simple pleasures, linked to the idea that 'nature is scarce only if there are excessive wants' [52]; from the writings of the anarchist political activist Emma Goldman, he takes the notion of birth control as an autonomous form of self-limitation, aimed at retaking control of reproduction from the State and capital in order to live love freely. The 'ethos of living within limits while believing in abundance' [52], Kallis notices, is also shared by societies of hunter-gatherers, which maintain abundance by sharing resources, therefore limiting the accumulation of wealth and power.

But Kallis' main inspiration comes from classic Greek thought, in which he finds an elaborate vision of democratic self-limitation. In the long and interesting fourth chapter, he describes an ancient culture in which the ultimate wisdom was the ability to limit oneself. Kallis follows the idea that the Greeks' attention to moderateness was born as a reaction to the advent of money. The power of an unlimited source of value, coupled with the power of the rich class, was at risk of disrupting society and so it had to be limited. From pre-Socratic philosophy to Aristotle, passing by the different constitutions of Athens and the tragedy, ancient Greek thought was focused on the concept of the infinite, and on how to limit it. The same applied to ethics: the Greeks

accepted all passions, not considering any of them bad for itself. Evil was seen in the excess, in the self-harming inability to find a limit, which makes people lose autonomy and freedom.

Like he did in other books, also in the third and fourth chapter of *Limits* Kallis finds inspiration in the work of Cornelius Castoriadis. In particular, Kallis draws from his fellow modern Greek thinker the idea of *self-limitation*, discussed in the work *A society adrift*. Self-limitation is what sets heteronomous and autonomous societies apart: the former attributes the definition of limits – what cannot be done, what is considered an excess – to external, unquestionable sources, like the gods; the latter instead can freely discuss such limits or define new ones. For Castoriadis, capitalist societies motivate the necessity of economic growth relying on unquestionable sources of truth such as science, technology or the mechanism of free market. The environmental movement had the crucial role of maintaining the autonomous and democratic spirit alive by trying to set political limits to growth. For both Castoriadis and Kallis, to collectively discuss limits means to question what we want, and this ‘is what autonomy and democracy are all about’ [56].

### **Pleasure beyond and against desire: A class in the Epicurean garden**

Godani dedicates the first chapter of his book, ‘On the present state of things’, to introduce the issue of the ethics of capitalism and its valorization of the desiring subject, to which he opposes the political proposal of the refusal of work, related to an ethics of leisure. The second chapter, ‘Blanda voluptas’, and the third, ‘Désir’, criticize Freudian, Deleuzian and Lacanian theories regarding the subsumption of pleasure to the mechanism of desire. The fourth chapter, ‘Hedoné’, contains the central argument of the book, presenting the Epicurean theory of an autonomous, static and limited pleasure, opposed to the ‘false opinions’ of vain desires. The fifth chapter, ‘God’, connects various theories of pleasure expressed by different philosophers, and the sixth explores the specific matters of love and ‘The pleasures of the flesh’. The seventh, eighth and ninth chapter (‘Scholé’, ‘Laughing and philosophizing together’, ‘Plebeia vestis’), dig deeper into the themes of limits and liberation

of pleasure from the constraints of production, valorization and ambition, examining the Epicurean writings on friendship and politics.

Just like Kallis, also Godani engages classic authors in an intense confrontation, proposing innovative critical interpretations of their thought. He, too, works on the oppositional couple infinite/limits in relation to the issue of human wants. In this case, such opposition is expressed by the contrast between 'desire' and 'pleasure' (and by their re-definition). From the first chapter of his book, Godani criticizes the concept of desire for its current ties to the infinite process of capitalist valorization. Instead, he (re)proposes an ethics of limited pleasures, based on frugality and leisure, considered as liberating factors from an anxious life entirely put to work.

In the second chapter, Godani commence his critique to the Freudian vision of human desire. Godani starts examining Freud's earlier works, in which he investigated the issue of the meaning of life, analyzing what people manifest of their wants through their behavior. Of course, he concluded that people desire happiness, but he described it as a sequence of momentary pleasures. For Freud, these moments are just 'discharges' of compressed tensions which produce intense feelings, and which need to be followed by other ones. The persistence of pleasure can only produce mild feelings, while it is intensity and contrast that we really enjoy. In this way, the cycle of desire and momentary pleasures appears to be endless.

Godani observes that Deleuze, too, revealed a similar position on this matter. In a debate with Foucault, the co-author of the *Anti-Oedipus* explained his aversion for the concept of 'pleasure', saying that he considered it as nothing more than an interruption of the immanent process of desire. That desire is a tendency which renovates itself after every satisfaction is a perspective shared by Lacan (at least in some moments of his reasoning). Desire appears as a sort of 'power of infinite', a yearning which cannot be fulfilled. This is the vision of 'desire as lack', in which desire is understood as a question which cannot be answered, a void which cannot be filled by any enjoyment. What emerges from the second and third chapter of *Sul piacere che manca* is that for Freud, Deleuze and Lacan the engine of human desire appears unlimited and unstoppable, the product of a machinic activity which can only intensify.

Godani's intention is to explore a different path. On desire, his position is clearly stated from the introduction of the book: even if social movements of the '60 and '70 aimed at freeing desire from repression, now there is nothing revolutionary in its perpetual motion. This motion is currently subsumed by the machine of capitalist valorization. Animating the research of satisfactions and gratifications, desire is connected to the process of self-valorization: pushed by desire, we are in a condition in which ambition and competition never end, so that we keep working to valorize ourselves, to increase our 'human capital'. From the second chapter, Godani follows Foucault in posing a distinction between pleasure, which is empirical, tied to bodily sensations, and desire, which is connected to the interiority of individuals. His objective is to find a different form of pleasure, something that is not continuously generated by an infinite desire, something that is not a neurotic quest for satisfactions.

The teacher of this pleasure is Epicurus, the hedonist philosopher which lived between the fourth and third century before Christ. Epicurus taught a life ethics based on the research of pleasure. In the fourth chapter of his book, Godani stresses the fact that this kind of pleasure has precise limits. In his *Letter to Menoeceus*, Epicurus instructs his disciple about the happiness of the gods: they are blessed, because they achieved a pleasure which is indestructible and imperturbable; but humans can do the same, because this pleasure has nothing to do with the infinite time and power of the immortals. In Epicurean philosophy, the limit in greatness of pleasure (that is, divine blessing) is the detraction of all pain. Pleasure is not something which is added to a steady state of life, but it is innate to life itself, once this is liberated from painful sensations. 'Pain is always a lack: to remove pain means to fill the lack from which it originates' [62], Godani explains. And filling a lack means to reconduct the body to the innate condition of pleasure, which does not require anything more.

The fourth chapter of *Sul piacere che manca* seems to answer to both Malthus and Lacan. It proposes a vision in which once the needs are satisfied, pleasure persists. For Epicurus, the infinite greed of the stomach is nothing but a false opinion: hunger can be satisfied. Once pains are eliminated, the highest possible pleasure is reached and the act of living itself becomes the greatest blessing. This, for Epicurus, is what gives meaning to life. Such pleasure is

achieved through the '*katastasis*', a state of stable and calm safety and constant peacefulness. There is no need for an infinite time and infinite new satisfactions to reach it.

Godani continues his reasoning explaining what, for him, is the 'secret nucleus of Epicurean doctrine' [65]: once the pain caused by lacks and needs is eliminated, the pleasure of the body cannot increase in quantity, but only change its quality. The limit in greatness of all pleasure is given by the peacefulness of the *katastasis*, and it cannot grow any higher. This is why Epicurus made a distinction between natural and unnatural desires. The second ones, like the desire for wealth and honors, are vane and empty, 'because they exceed the limit to pleasure' [70]. They derive from the tendency *ad infinitum* of desire, which Epicurus recognized, but put in relation to 'the foolish opinions of men'. People who seek such satisfactions will never have enough of them, and will only gain a restless, agitated life, the opposite of a good life based on serenity and leisure. As a consequence, Epicurean thought too, just like degrowth theory, praises the value of frugality and simplicity, as Godani furtherly shows in the seventh chapter. Quoting the author, it is as if pleasure tried to tell us: 'you cannot be any happier than a lizard under the sun' [110].

The fourth, seventh and eighth chapter of *Sul piacere che manca* clarify that Epicurean understanding of pleasure does not only prescribe the satisfaction of basic bodily necessities, since natural desires also include physical exercise, friendship and cultural activities. The point is that such desires are functional for conserving and varying the condition of peacefulness. Epicurean pleasures are always *static*, and Godani really urges his readers to aim for stability and peace, without falling prey to ambition and competition, which are the fuel of capitalist valorization and the cause of our anxieties and psychoses. His message is that to oppose the submission of life to the process of valorization we shall claim the right to a pleasant ethics of idleness.

## Conclusions: Wearing a *plebeiam vestem* and pulling the emergency brake

Giorgos Kallis proposes to put democratically established limits to economic activity at the core of contemporary political action, in order to oppose the growth paradigm and to realize a more sustainable and fair society for all; Paolo Godani suggests to put the research of a limited pleasure and the center of our ethics, to avoid being caught in the circuit of valorization and to live a more peaceful and serene life. Both proposals are based on the values of frugality, simplicity and leisure, as opposed to private wealth, frenzy and growth. For both, limits are not a sad necessity but a way to improve human life at all levels.

Malthus, Freud, Deleuze, Lacan, together with neoclassical economists, interpreted utility, desire and pleasure as parts of a process of punctual satisfactions, which can never satiate the need to search more and more of them. For Epicurus there is only one pleasure, which corresponds to happiness and can be reached through a frugal and simple life. The desire for more, for reputation and affluence, can only conduct to a restless life, deprived of peace. Likewise, the infinite cycles of valorization and unlimited economic growth are destroying and privatizing the resources and commons which could guarantee welfare and abundance, if only they were shared and if their exploitation was limited.

It is no coincidence that both Godani and Kallis, in these and other books (see Godani, 2016 and Kallis, 2018), dedicate many pages to discuss the value of friendship, to describe the shared passions of a 'common life', to stress the relevance of relational goods in guaranteeing people's happiness. These goods do not consume themselves, do not increase social metabolism and are alternative to the logic of growth and competition. The *vera voluptas*, the real pleasure taught by the Epicurean philosopher Lucretius, consisted in a friendly frugality. And if a frugal life with friends is enough to reach the greatest pleasure, then nature is not scarce, but abundant and fecund, like the one narrated by the romantic authors quoted by Kallis, which were contemporary to Malthus and his enemies. *Limits* and *Sul piacere che manca* largely confirm Serge Latouche's (2011) intuition on the connection between degrowth and Epicureanism: if pleasure is innate to life and nature is

abundant, there is no reason to desire, produce and grow more, and we shall just pull the emergency brake.

## references

- Castoriadis, C. (2010) *A society adrift*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Godani, P. (2016) *La vita comune: per una filosofia e una politica oltre l'individuo*. Roma: DeriveApprodi.
- Godani, P. (2019) *Sul piacere che manca: etica del desiderio e spirito del capitalismo*. Roma: DeriveApprodi.
- Kallis, G. (2018) *Degrowth*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda Publishing.
- Kallis, G. (2019) *Limits: why Malthus was wrong and why environmentalists should care*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Latouche, S. (2011) *Vers une société d'abondance frugale: contresens et controverses de la décroissance*. Paris: Fayard/Mille et Une Nuits.
- Malthus, T. R. (1992) *An essay on the principle of population*, ed. D. Winch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Meadows, D. H., Meadows, D. L., Randers J. and Behrens W. (1972) *The limits to growth*. New York: Universe Books.
- Sepúlveda, L. and Petrini, C. (2014) *Un'idea di felicità*. Parma: Guanda/Slow Food Editore.

## acknowledgements

The work on this article has been made possible by the funding provided by the Portuguese Foundation on Science and Technology (FCT) for the doctoral scholarship of the author.

## the author

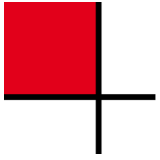
Roberto Sciarelli is a PhD student of the Centre for Social Studies – University of Coimbra. Research interests include political ecology, subaltern studies and the commons. He is part of the political experience of the *Scugnizzo Liberato*, the co-



research collective *Ecologie Politiche del Presente* and the Permanent Observatory on the Commons of Naples.

Email: [r.sciarelli@gmail.com](mailto:r.sciarelli@gmail.com)





# Economic theology: Is economy a subfield of theology

Enrico Beltramini

## review of

Stefan Schwarzkopf (ed.) (2019) *The Routledge handbook of economic theology*. London: Routledge. Pp. xxii + 396. ISBN 9781315267623

## Background

Almost twenty years ago, Stephen Long published *Divine economy: Theology and market* (2000), a book in which he attempted to engage economics from a theological standpoint. The project was complicated by a fact — Long noted in his introduction—that theologians and economists operate on completely different assumptions: economists base their work on the fact-value distinction; theologians do not (Long 2000: 3). And that is not all.

I now realize that my inability to ‘get inside’ economics as a discipline is in large part due to my self-conscious work as a theologian and my effort to maintain the priority of theology in assessing its relationship with economics (Long 2000: 2).

In Long’s opinion, a question of priority is hidden in the relationship between theology and economics: which discipline positions the other? To put it differently, economists consent to a dialogue with theology as long as theologians submit to the secularization thesis and to the primacy of the

secular in the public domain. The secularization thesis, or argument, assumes the differentiation of 'the religious' and 'the secular,' including economics, and a hierarchical relationship between the two in which the former is subordinated to the latter. As a matter of fact, in 2000 – when Long published his book – as much as today, much work has been done at the intersection of theology and economics; this work, however, is firmly built on the assumptions of the privatization of the religious and the primacy of the secular.

Long is a theologian and a member of Radical Orthodoxy, a variety of *ressourcement* theology seeking to recover the riches of patristic and high medieval Christian orthodoxy in order to address contemporary theological, philosophical, political and cultural concerns. To understand his attempt, one must remember that Long was working in the shadow of John Milbank, an Anglican political theologian who has challenged social theory by arguing that theology is already social theory, and therefore a social theory independent from theology is questionable. Milbank's *opera magna*, *Theology and social theory: Beyond secular reason* (1993) is a theological critique to social theory's self-definition as a secular discourse. In *Divine economy*, Long wanted to replicate Milbank, with a specific focus to economics. Milbank organized a session ('Theological Readings of Economics') at the 2007 annual conference of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in which he exhorted theologians to get a second doctorate in economics and engage economics from the angle of theology. He also suggested the birth of a new group within AAR dedicated to the theological inquiry of economics. As far as I know, the suggestion was not followed.

This somewhat lengthy introduction is to show that the interface between theology and economics (and business) has a history, and that history is a subject of its own. It is also to prove that the interface presupposes a choice between two options, a choice that is decisive to contextualize each and every work operating at the intersection of the two disciplines. The first option denies the idea of economics as an autonomous secular realm, completely transparent to rational understanding. The second, of course, confirms the idea. To put it differently, the first option assumes that theology positions economics, namely, theology is a metanarrative; the second option presumes that economics assimilates and ultimately governs theology. In his book, Long

addressed both options, to conclude that the first option shows, in his view, the greatest promise because it refuses to subordinate theological knowledge to autonomous socio-scientific research. Most scholarly work, however, has been done based on the second option. In a recent article, Anthony Michael Charles Waterman (2021), professor emeritus of economics with personal and academic interests in theology, has provided a list of scholarly journals dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of economics and business, on one hand, and theology and religion, on the other. Most of the articles published in these journals, however, concede the latter to position the former.

The publication of a highly specialized book in political theology, *The kingdom and the glory: For a theological genealogy of economy and government* (2011) has attracted new scholarly attention to the relationship between theology and economy. The author, Italian political philosopher and theorist Giorgio Agamben, is investigating the deeper causes of the crisis of the liberal order. The book, however, has taken on a life of its own. It has been influential well beyond political philosophy, being analyzed in various disciplines including biblical studies, history, and obviously, economics and business. Agamben is not interested in economics (the discipline) but economy (the concept). He offers a genealogy of the concept and identifies the economy of the Trinity as the theological *locus* in which that genealogy begins. This beginning, so to speak, is not innocent. By recognizing the theological origin of the ‘economy,’ Agamben rejects the notion of a purely ‘natural’ human ordering of economic life, that is, he rejects the secularization thesis. ‘Economy’ itself is a Christian concept. The patristic and medieval ‘economy’ (*oikonomia*) was a form of management, the providential-governmental paradigm that administrates God’s creation. God’s invisible hand, namely, the angels, became in modern times the market’s invisible hand. Thus, the concept of economy is constructed from the deformed materials of Christian theology.

The term ‘economic theology’ has entered scholarly conversation through Agamben’s *The kingdom and the glory*. According to Agamben, economic theology is a paradigm distinct from, and complementary to, political theology. Both, however, belong to a discipline named ‘political theology.’ In general, the term ‘political theology’ means that there is a relationship in the theological sphere on the one hand—where ‘theological’ refers to theology, religion, and sacred—and on the other, the sphere of politics, where ‘politics’

stands for both political institutions and theoretical reflections on policy. The term 'political theology' is polysemic, therefore there are several ways to frame the relationship between theology and politics. Here I list the five most important ways. First, Political Augustinianism believes in the primacy of theology over politics, so that theology is the foundation of institutions and political action. Second, authors like Jan Assmann argue the opposite, that is, the primacy of the political over the theological, to the point that theological concepts are the result of a process of religionization of political concepts. Third, authors like Karl Löwith, Eric Voegelin, and Hans Kelsen propose the assimilation of theology within politics and the development of secular religions. Fourth, Rousseau is the initiator of the idea of civil religion. Finally, authors such as Carl Schmitt and Agamben sustain that the interpretation of political modernity must pass through a critique of the notion of secularization. This last approach is the discipline traditionally labeled 'political theology.' According to this discipline, political modernity cannot be interpreted according to the notion of a political independent from the theological. Political modernity is the result of a decision internal to theology, that is, a transformation of God into a transcendental being and the replacement of a providential order with the juridical order. Political theology therefore stands for a theory of politics as dependent from both theology and a decision within theology. The second point reveals the irrational origin of politics. In summary, 'economic theology' is a specific approach within the discipline of political theology. In this context, 'economic theology' can be defined, by analogy, as a rejection of economy as a product of secularization and as a rational enterprise.

## The book

In his anthology, *The Routledge handbook of economic theology*, Stefan Schwarzkopf has put together a complex and sophisticated collection of scholarly papers on 'economic theology.' Among the authors, there are theologians, religious scholars, philosophers, political theorists, economists, historians, sociologists, and business scientists. The anthology is complex in the sense that it assembles not only views from different disciplines but also from different interpretations of economic theology. The book is sophisticated as most of the contributors show an interest, if not a sensibility

or even training, in both (theology and economy) fields. Schwarzkopf is an associate professor in the Department of Management, Politics, and Philosophy at Copenhagen Business School; this school alone provides four contributors. The contributions of Northern American, Western European, and Australian researchers form the core of the book.

The anthology is composed of an introduction and five sections. The introduction, which Schwarzkopf wrote, offers a definition of economic theology ('the study of the forms of interaction between theological imaginaries on the one hand, and economic thought and economic-managerial practices on the other [4]); a brief history of the academic efforts to connect economy and business to theology; a digression on the nature of the subdiscipline ('polemic or method' [7]); and priceless lists on resources included in the book and elsewhere.

The first section, named 'Theological concepts and their economic meaning,' includes contributions from professional theologians such as Michael Dempsey, Daniel Bell Jr., and Wolfgang Palaver, and management scholars Sigmund Wagner-Tsukamoto, Mads Peter Karlsen, Kaspar Villadsen, Tom Boland, and Ray Griffin. The theological concepts under investigation are providence, eschatology and eschaton, confession, purgatory, faith and trust, justification, and salvation. The difference between the chapters written by theologians and those written by management scholars is evident. For example, Michael Dempsey explains that 'providence cannot be understood according to an economic theory derived from natural theology. It must be founded in Scripture and tradition and seen as the continuing work of God in history' [19]. A few pages later, Sigmund Wagner-Tsukamoto argues that 'a further principle of economic eschatology is the idea that the market economy is governed through institutional and constitutional economic systems' [30]. In this second example, God is gone.

The second section, titled 'Economic concepts and their theological anchoring,' analyzes concepts such as profit and interest, money, debt and credit, free choice, and consumer sovereignty. The contributors are sociologists, management scholars, literature experts, theologians, and religious studies researchers. The chapters of this section assume a variety of

forms: a theological critique of economic theories and practices (i.e., Christina McRorie's article on property and ownership); recontextualization of theological concepts (*corpus mysticum*) within neoliberal theory (i.e., Stefan Schwarzkopf's contribution on free choice and consumer sovereignty); and theological genealogies of economic institutions (Mitchell Dean's article on government). The third section focuses on society, management, and organization. It is only partially related to theological reflection. The fourth section ('Genealogy of economic theology') is a list of various instances of contextualization of economic theology (Jewish, late antiquity, high Middle Ages) and a collection of cases of religionization of economic concepts *à la* Jan Assmann (Marxist, Keynesianism, neo-liberalism). The last section, named 'Exit,' is made up of one single chapter on Islamic banking and finance.

## Content

As the title says, this book has been conceived as a handbook, a comprehensive entry point into the diversified, multidisciplinary subfield of economic theology. It is a fascinating and illuminating book. Schwarzkopf has put together forty-nine leading scholars at the intersection between religion, on one hand, and, on the other, economy and business, offering forty-two dense contributions to the subfield. By doing so, he has produced what will become a major reference book on the topic. In my view, this book is important not only for itself, a fine mixture of religious, historical, and socioeconomic thought, but also for the research it will inspire. Religious scholars, philosophers, and historians of religion should not leave economic and business issues and their technicalities to social scholars. Quite the contrary: the former should confront the latter and demonstrate that those technicalities cannot be properly addressed without contextualizing them against the background of their religious assumptions and implications.

The anthology covers every theme related to economic theology, which begs the question: what is economic theology for Schwarzkopf and his colleagues? Economic theology is, admittedly, a somewhat ill-named field, and thus it is ill-defined. The juxtaposition of the two terms and the relation of noun and adjective makes one think initially of an economically engaged theology (i.e., 'economic theology' as part of 'theology'), or, as one might more efficiently



call it, *theology*. This is the first definition. A second definition is based on the idea that economic theology refers to treating economy as though it were theological: *economic* theology as opposed to economic *theology*. Here the emphasis is genealogical studies of the interface between political and theological concepts in a particular historical era or tradition. A third definition assumes that economic theology stands for the study of the very relationship between economy and theology, centering on analogies and conceptual exchanges between the two fields. Schwarzkopf's anthology mixes all three versions to some extent but in terms of organizational principle shows a preference for the third. In his *Apocalyptic political theology* (2019), Tommy Lynch offers a useful elaboration of the definition of political theology. He states that the subfield can be defined as follows:

political theology is a methodology focused on the relationship between political and theological concepts. It seeks to understand the political history and significance of theological ideas, the theological history and significance of political ideas and to use theological ideas to explore the nature of the political. [7]

Once the reader replaces 'political' with 'economic,' he/she has a useful definition of the economic theology as it is applied in Schwarzkopf's anthology. Thus, the anthology is *a study of the very relationship between economy* (and economics, and economic institutions, theories, and authors) *and theology*, centering on light to deeper correspondences and conceptual exchanges between the two disciplines.

In his introduction, Schwarzkopf provides the definition of 'economic theology' in terms of analogies and conceptual exchanges between the two fields of theology and economy. His anthology, however, covers a much wider range of topics, and can be probably seen as a work at the intersection between religion (broadly interpreted) and socio-economic thought. The choice of this specific approach offers the advantage of a broad scope of inquiry. In his 'Profit and interest,' Christoph Deutschmann, a German sociologist, proposes a compact overview of the teaching of the Abrahamic religions on capital profit. Religious scholar Brian Hamilton reframes 'poverty' in Christian terms. Jeffrey Mahan and David Worley, two religious scholars, present a case study on the relationship between media and religion. Alistar Mutch, a Scottish accountant by training and now a historian and scholar of management at

Nottingham Trent University, ventures into a parallel between accounting (in management) and accountability (in religion) in a chapter properly titled 'Accounting and accountability.' Independent scholar Dotan Leshem proposes a brief history of the concept of *oikonomia* in Greek and Christian thoughts in an article on the subject. Microeconomics professor Luigino Bruni addresses the 'spirit of capitalism' in the Roman Catholic lands of southern Europe ('The southern spirit of capitalism'). The curious reader can find chapters on 'confession,' approached mostly through the reading of Michel Foucault, 'purgatory,' and 'guilt,' each of them an example of rigorous scholarship and serious investigation of interesting subjects. Chapters on Jewish economic theology, with reference to Rudolf Otto (but not to Walter Benjamin), and on medieval economic theology contribute significantly to a genealogy of economic theology.

## Limits

As said, Schwarzkopf frames 'economic theology' in terms of analogies and conceptual exchanges between the two fields of theology and economy. Schwarzkopf, however, neither supplies the reader with the alternative scholarly definitions at hand so that the reader can orientate him/herself in the forest of the variety of meanings linked to the concept of economic theology, nor does he offer a rationale for having picked this particular definition over the others. I offer an example: Tommy Lynch defines political theology in terms that resonate with Schwarzkopf's definition of economy theology. However, he does not stop here; he complicates things by adding a qualification to his definition. In his book, in fact, Lynch offers a second, more crafted definition: 'Political theology, in the narrow sense, is a method of philosophical thinking that uses theological concepts to critique the world' (Lynch 2019, 35). Three points deserve mention here. First, Lynch returns on his idea that political theology is a method. Second, he qualifies this method in the context of philosophical thinking. Third, he orients this thinking in terms of a critique of the (liberal, secular) order. The last point is, for the sake of this review, the crucial one: Lynch complicates things; Schwarzkopf does not. Economic theology, this might be a potential translation of Lynch's definition of political theology, is a methodology of philosophical (historical, social) thinking that uses theological concepts to critique the liberal (and

eventually neoliberal) order and its economic (capitalism, market) institutions. One may or may not agree with this definition, but to avoid a discussion at this metatheoretical level impedes the examination of the available options. In other words, the anthology skips the level of the metatheory, the theoretical discussion on the theory of economic theology. It is a pity as a scholarly discussion at the level of the metatheory would provide the reader of both a matrix to contextualize the contributions in the subfield and an evaluating principle to assess the content of the anthology.

The absence of a metatheoretical context in which the single chapters can be placed misses the opportunity to add value to the anthology. I want to show how by drafting an elementary matrix made of three relevant criteria. First, the anthology misses the important debate on who positions whom, namely, the primacy of theology over science and vice versa. The economists and the business scholars contributing to the anthology would probably be horrified by the option to deflect scientific results in the name of faith. But the problem of the apologetical theologian is potentially even greater because if the theologian no longer articulates the word of the Almighty God, he/she articulates the voice of some finite oracle. And the most dangerous oracle is that of an autonomous secular realm, completely transparent to rational understanding and independent from God's will. Second, the anthology skips the issue of the relationship between economic theology and liberal order. Reading some of the chapters of the anthology, one cannot escape the impression that their authors maintain a friendly relationship with liberal order and its institutions (democracy, capitalism). This is legitimate, but it would be more correctly interpreted as the readers would know that other authors have pursued an archeology of a submerged counter-modern modernity embodied in a non-liberal tradition. Third, the anthology does not engage in the nature of economic theology as a western construction, so that its relationship with non-western cultural and religious traditions, including Islam, cannot be taken for granted. The discipline 'political theology' (and therefore its subfield 'economic theology') is a conversation about the validity (or not) of the secularization argument within the West. As an analogy, it can eventually be applied to an Islamic reality, although some cautionary explanations would help the reader appreciate the difficulty of relating Islamic economic theology to economy.

## Conclusion

‘Economic theology’ is a ramification of an established scholarly discipline called ‘political theology.’ In this anthology, however, it becomes a vehicle for dialogue between two fields of study: religion, theology, biblical studies, philosophy and history of religion, on one hand, and economics, economy, finance, business and management science, and history on the other. Spanning a wide range of topics across space and time, the authors pose basic questions behind the meanings of biblical, theological, and religious concepts in the realm of economy and business. The anthology as a whole, however, misses the opportunity to address some questions such as the primacy of the religious over the economic or vice versa. Scholars are so used to assume the primacy of the secular disciplines over the religious ones to forget that such a primacy is, in effect, far from being written in stone. The work of authors such as Agamben, Milbank, and Long, to mention a few names, have been instrumental in opening a debate on the legitimacy of such a primacy. If not in this anthology, the debate needs to continue somewhere.

## references

- Agamben, G. (2011) *The kingdom and the glory: For a theological genealogy of economy and government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa and Matteo Mandarini. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Long, S. (2000) *Divine economy: Theology and market*. London: Routledge.
- Lynch, T. (2019) *Apocalyptic Political Theology: Hegel, Taubes and Malabou*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Milbank, J. (1993) *Theology and social theory: Beyond secular reason*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Waterman, A.M.C. (2021) ‘On Economics, Theology, and Religion,’ *Journal of Economics, Theology, and Religion*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 13-24.

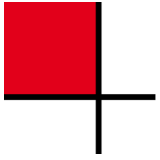
## the author

Enrico Beltramini is in the faculty of Notre Dame de Namur University in California, where he teaches and researches primarily in the fields of theology and religious

history. He holds doctoral degrees in theology, history, and business. Dr. Beltramini maintains a secondary interest in management theory. His work on management has been published in academic journals including *AI & Society*, *ephemera*, *Philosophy and Technology*, and *Philosophy of Management*. He is currently working on a book titled *Based on Math, not Social Science. Management in the Age of Technology*, under contract with Lexington.

Email: ebeltramini@ndnu.edu





## **Economic theology: a question of academic primacy? A response to Beltramini**

Stefan Schwarzkopf

I would first like to thank Enrico Beltramini and the editors of *ephemera* for giving me the opportunity to respond to the review, which I found to be a very thoughtful and balanced piece. The review raises a number of substantial issues. Most importantly, it laments a supposed absence of meta-theoretical reflection in the Handbook. My concern is that the review's call for meta-theory is in fact not much more than an insistence on the academic and intellectual primacy of theology over what Beltramini calls the 'secular disciplines' of the social sciences. Another reviewer of the Handbook, Boston University theologian Nimi Wariboko, expressed a somewhat similar view when observing that my definition of economic theology rendered it essentially a subfield of economic sociology. Looking at a number of chapters in the Handbook, I am not certain that these assessments are correct. Even so, the perceived absence of grand theory serves a particular purpose. The Handbook's target audience – secular social scientists and economists, that is people who often think that theology has nothing to tell them – simply switches off when they hear 'economic theology'. A major reason for this rejection is that the term 'theology' is often understood to be associated with nothing more than a religiously and morally infused critique of the neoliberal order and capitalist institutions. Scaling back on this does emphatically not mean however that the Handbook's authors enjoy what Beltramini calls a 'friendly relationship' with capitalism and the liberal order. A careful reading will show that very much the opposite is the case. A critique of the market and

of economic values having become the only arbiter in social life is present explicitly in practically all of the chapters.

I wonder, however, why engaging in meta-theory should imply that theology has to assert its primacy over economics. What gain does the reviewer precisely envisage? It is worth remembering that the stark opposition of religious and secular academic subjects that Beltramini invokes here is the outcome of specific, and itself rather ‘earthly’, events that took place at the University of Paris during the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, when the Bishop of Paris attempted to assert his authority over what was being taught at the University’s faculties. It is a possibility, an option, but not an absolute necessity, to base religious arguments on an established theology. Church fathers like Augustin saw no such need: for them, ‘theology’ referred to narratives of Greek mythology. Admittedly, what Beltramini calls ‘God the Almighty’ is not centre-staged in most of the chapters. This, in turn, has to do with the fact that our target audience – the archetypical Western academic – has since the late 13<sup>th</sup> century become conditioned to think of theology as something different from and even opposed to their own trade, as dogmatic and mindless summaries of church teachings. Would a deliberate front-staging of God in the Handbook have overcome their indifference? Most certainly not: ‘god-talk’ tends to reconfirm the acquired self-permission to switch off and thus provides excuses for not having to pick up this Handbook.

This brings me back to question as to what would be gained by opening economic-theological debates only to those who agree with the primacy (or superiority?) of theology over economics and other social sciences. Not only does such an attitude risk alienating the very people I would like to engage with. *Fiat iustitia pereat mundus* is a motto that will win debates, but often leave you alone in the room. Much more importantly, however, there is even in theological terms no absolute necessity for it either. This can be shown by pointing at the long tradition of thinking a theology without God. The possibility of such a theology was accepted even by Thomas Aquinas and became resurrected in Georges Bataille’s notion of ‘atheology’, or acephalous theology. Hence, talking about God on the one hand, and talking about theology or in terms of theology on the other, does clearly not have to mean the same thing. If the debate really is to continue, a hope stated in the last sentence of the review, theologically minded people might be well advised to



first kindle curiosity rather than to insist on the illegitimacy of liberal secularism as the outcome of the debate.

### **references**

Wariboko, N. (2020) 'The Routledge Handbook of Economic Theology', *Religious Studies Review*, Vol. 46, No. 4, 519-521.

### **the author**

Stefan Schwarzkopf is Associate Professor at the Department of Management, Politics and Philosophy, Copenhagen Business School.

Email: [ssc.mpp@cbs.dk](mailto:ssc.mpp@cbs.dk)