Capitalist unrealism

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

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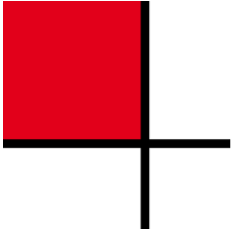
theory
ephemera encourages contributions that explicitly engage with theoretical and conceptual understandings of organizational issues, organizational processes and organizational life. This does not preclude empirical studies or commentaries on contemporary issues, but such contributions consider how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

Capitalist unrealism: Countering the crisis of critique and imagination

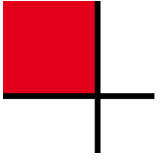Nick Butler and Bernadette Loacker

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Nick Butler and Bernadette Loacker

Introduction: Capitalism, unpacked

How does capitalism – in its various guises – capture the value that we produce in society? There are many ways to answer this question, because capitalism has many ways to extract value from us (Chertkovskaya et al., 2016; Hanlon, 2017). On the surface, everything above board. Businesses erect factories and offices for us to work in; workers sign contracts and receive wages for their daily efforts; and shareholders put in the capital and get a return on their investments. But below the surface, things are not quite so straightforward. Like a many-tentacled sea beast, contemporary capitalism also roams the depths and devours whatever it finds: public utilities ('let's privatize it!'), the counterculture ('let's brand it!'), conceptual art ('let's monetize it!'). Even when we highlight its injustice and inhumanity, capitalism just nods along and wonders how it can turn protest into profit. This is the new spirit of capitalism that Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) describe, a spirit that feeds off the energy of its adversaries like a parasite. Capitalism is not monolithic; it is, by definition, a hybrid form – and it's this very hybridity that gives our economic order life and longevity, despite (or because of) all the dirt that's slung in its direction.

Traditionally, capitalism has used violence to lay claim to everything that escapes from it. This is what Marx (1976/1990) called 'primitive

accumulation', a process that involves forcibly appropriating land, property, and labour. Primitive accumulation has played out most brutally in the history of European colonialism: the conquest of foreign lands, the looting of natural resources, and the enslavement of indigenous populations. There is nothing subtle about primitive accumulation, and its violence is explicit.

This violence remains with us today (Birch and Springer, 2019; Harvey, 2003; Robinson, 1983/2000). But it is complemented by more insidious forms of coercion, one that is based as much on seduction and pleasure as it is on cruelty and oppression. We now work for capitalism as much in our free time as we do when we are being paid – not because we have to, but because we *want* to (Beverungen et al., 2013). We give our labour freely to our employers whenever we reply to emails or take part in Slack conversations outside of working hours. We give our labour freely to tech giants like Google, YouTube, and Meta whenever we search online, watch a video, or post a comment. And we give our labour freely to property developers whenever we make our neighbourhoods safer, cleaner, or hipper. Capitalism appropriates and hoovers up this value much like a 1980s stockbroker doing lines of coke at lunchtime: habitually, excessively, and without any concerns of an ethical nature.

How do we respond to a capitalism that is relentless in its pursuit of profit from untapped sources? Resisting capitalism today is like living out Don Michael Corleone's famous phrase from *The Godfather Part III*, a phrase that reflects the ageing mobster's inability to extricate himself from the world of hoods and gangsters: 'Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in'. Capitalism seems to be like a mafia boss to whom you owe a debt that can never be repaid. It wants everything from you: your ideas, your relationships and love, your loyalty, and every single penny you make (see also Hoedemaekers et al., 2012).

Yet modes of subversion do exist; forms of resistance are possible (Vandenberghe, 2008). Whether or not they are effective is a different matter. While some people and organizations try to subvert capitalism from the outside, others seek to unsettle it from the inside (Böhm and Spoelstra, 2004) – using its own logic to subdue it, like political-economic jiu-jitsu. The promise and limitations of both approaches seem evident if we look, for

example, to the world of artistic production, especially in its non-institutional, guerrilla forms.

The street art produced by the anonymous graffiti artist known as Banksy exemplifies the never-ending tug-of-war between capitalism and its discontents. Banksy's art addresses themes that are explicitly political in nature and often satirical in tone, taking aim at the cruelty and venality at the heart of contemporary capitalism. His most famous works include 'One Nation Under CCTV' (a commentary on the pervasiveness of state surveillance in the UK); 'Flying Balloon Girl' (a silhouette of a girl being lifted up by balloons that's painted on the side of the Israeli West Bank barrier, symbolizing a desire for freedom from occupation); and 'Slave Labour' (a stencilled image of a child labourer who is sewing together Union Jack bunting, criticizing the British use of overseas sweatshops) (Ross, 2016). Yet notice how easily Banksy's artworks are gobbled up by the economic order they set out to challenge. If they are not defaced or destroyed, or preserved for posterity beneath a sheet of Perspex, the murals are often removed from the public spaces in which they appear – a process that involves specialized crews removing entire sections of wall – and sold off in auctions for hundreds of thousands of pounds, dollars, or euros. In other words, the labour that Banksy freely gives is turned into pure profit by the very system that is subject to critique.

The irony is not lost on Banksy. Perhaps in response to the commercialization of street art, Banksy tried to turn the tables on market forces and give capitalism a taste of its own bitter medicine. In 2018, a framed copy of his iconic mural 'Girl with Balloon' was sold at the renowned auction house Sotherby's for just over one million pounds. Immediately after the auctioneer struck his gavel, the artwork began to self-destruct. Initiated by remote control, the canvas was shredded by a mechanism that had been built into the frame (although the mechanism jammed and the destruction was incomplete). The destruction of the artwork has echoes of Michael Landy's 2001 performance piece, *Break Down*, which involved putting all of the artist's belongings – over 7,000 items, including his previous artworks – into a mechanical crusher and grinding them into obliteration (Sooke, 2016). The point, of course, was to question the basic tenets of consumer capitalism by initiating a process of de-accumulation (see also Caffentzis, 2010). Although

Banksy takes aim at the rarefied art market, rather than the consumer products market, the same principle underpins his Sotherby's stunt.

Whether it was a genuine attempt to disrupt the commodification of art or an elaborate hoax played on a gullible public is irrelevant. What matters is that, far from interrupting the capitalist feeding frenzy, the stunt only increased the value of Banksy's original artwork. In 2021, the half-shredded painting was sold for over 18 million pounds under its new title, 'Love is in the Bin' (Palumbo, 2021). Carnivorous capitalism, smelling fresh meat, takes another bite.

The lesson seems to be this: you cannot escape from the tendrils of contemporary neoliberal capitalism, no matter how hard you try to wrest yourself free. This was, at least, Mark Fisher's message in *Capitalist Realism*: there is no alternative to capitalism because the 'alternative' becomes a part of the power it seeks to countermand – or sold to the highest bidder. As Fisher (2009: 6) puts it, 'capitalism is very much like the Thing in John Carpenter's film of the same name: a monstrous, infinitely plastic entity, capable of metabolizing and absorbing anything with which it comes into contact'. Just as in the film, it is difficult to know how to respond to something that takes on the shape and dimensions of everything around you. Do you try to provoke it or outwit it?

Much has changed, though, since Fisher's text was written: Britain's exit from the European Union, Donald Trump's election to high political office, a global pandemic, the hollowing out of civil rights and environmental protections by the US Supreme Court, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the destabilization of the world economic order being only the most prominent examples. So, as society undergoes a protracted period of crisis and transformation, we might ask whether there are, in fact, alternatives that cannot be (fully) usurped by capitalist motives (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014). Can we inject capitalism, in other words, with a dose of healthy 'unrealism'?

In this open issue, we suggest potential answers to this question. The open issue consists of three articles and one note (as well as two book reviews), each reflecting on how we might challenge the dynamics of contemporary capitalism. The contributions suggest that, by reclaiming the commons and

by reconfiguring our creativity and imagination, it might be possible to short-circuit the inner-wiring of capitalism…at least locally and temporarily. Before we outline the contributions, in the remainder of the editorial, we flesh out – in more nuanced, theoretical terms – what this introduction has only hinted at: the push-and-pull of being and becoming, solidity and liquefaction, and power, counter-power and critique in work relations, organizational forms, and society in general.

Struggles with and over appropriative capitalist logics

There have been numerous attempts over the years to commodify and capitalize on what lies at the heart of 'communicative capitalism' (Mumby, 2016), not least our relationships, our subjectivities, and our creative capacities. There are, however, obstacles and limits to such appropriation attempts. In other words, there seems to be always 'something that flees the system, something that is not controllable' (Vandenberghe, 2008: 878) or manageable (Cameron, this issue; Karppi et al., 2016).

One reason for this, following Karakilic and Painter (this issue), is the ontological 'primacy of process', a privileging of movement over substance and stasis (Chia, 1999). For scholars inspired by process philosophy, being is constituted by its *becoming* (Whitehead, 1929). Such a perspective implies that organizations are not, or no longer, considered fixed entities but temporarily stabilized patterns of relations, forged out of an 'underlying sea of ceaseless change' (Chia, 2014: 10). In particular, a process-based ontology points to the limitations of management's attempt to appropriate and control organization, an insight that Chia (1999: 224) reflects on:

> Organization acts to arrest and convert the otherwise wild and infrangible forces of nature into a more predictable and, hence, liveable world. Acts of organizing, much like the ceaseless building of sand-dykes to keep the sea at bay, reflect the ongoing struggle to tame the intrinsically nomadic forces of reality.

Try as it might, organization can, from this point of view, never quite domesticate the nomadic forces that shape it, constitute it, and give it structural form. We must hence recognize that there are always 'fleeting forces' (Cameron, this issue) that subvert the attempt to fully absorb and

neutralize the disorder(s) within corporate organizations (Plotnikof et al., 2022). Indeed, as Foucault and critical scholars, more overall, remind us, any type of governmentality (neoliberal or otherwise) will inevitably trigger modes of opposition, insubordination, and resistance, i.e., 'resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power' (Foucault, 1982: 221; Donzelot and Gordon, 2008).

While economic market logics dominate the contemporary 'spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005), such logics are, as above-mentioned, neither absolute nor invulnerable. This is also shown by the contributions to this issue. The contributions by Kioupkiolois (this issue) and Zechner (this issue), in particular, suggest that the commons, both digital and IRL, have the potential to undermine capitalization and economic valorization. Meanwhile, the contributions by Cameron (this issue) and Karakilic and Painter (this issue) illustrate that 'production factors' that are core to communicative-immaterial capitalism, including creativity and affect, also threaten to undermine management and regulation (see also Karppi et al., 2016). Qualities such as difference, surprise, multiplicity, heterogeneous becoming, and indeterminacy, which are immanent in constructs like creativity, mean that 'something unorganisable' (Karakilic and Painter, this issue) is always a part of creative processes. This does not mean, of course, that attempts to enclose and 'contain what is not containable' (Karakilic and Painter, this issue) are dissolved. But it does illustrate that, within contemporary capitalism, power and control do not operate in a unidirectional manner; they are polyvocal and accompanied by variegated tensions and struggles (Foucault, 1982). After all, dynamics and adaptability are not only a characteristic of the current capitalist configuration (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; De Angelis, 2007), but also a part of modes of insubordination and subversion at work (Hoedemaekers et al., 2012; Vandenberghe, 2008).

Struggles over capitalist, managerial logics manifest in multiple forms, as the contributions to this issue make clear. They can manifest in more or less explicit *critique* and problematization of extant socio-economic structures and conditions. As constellations of struggle, the commons, e.g., provide sites of, specifically, feminist critique and counter-conduct that challenge appropriative, exploitative practices of (re)production central to

contemporary capitalism (Federici and Caffentzis, 2014; Caffentzis, 2010). In this issue, for example, Kioupkiolis and Zechner illustrate how political strategies and tactics can subvert uneven, constraining social hierarchies, orders, and divisions in the virtual spaces reclaimed for peer-to-peer production (in the former case) and urban spaces reclaimed for self-organized child-care (in the latter case). These contributions demonstrate how it is possible to build powerful 'counter-empires' that allow 'not being governed or…not being governed *like that* and at that cost' (Foucault, 1997: 29).

Subversion and resistance can, however, also be expressed in more *creative-explorative* forms that foreground imagination and experimentation, forms that are guided by an interest in creating new ideas, possibilities, and 'ways of seeing, being, and relating' (Perini, 2010: 183) – and, hence, inventing alternatives to the status quo (see also Karakilic and Painter, this issue). A core concern of creative practices of contestation is, in light hereof, an engagement with the question: what could be(*come*) (Dey and Mason, 2018)? Such engagement is often found in cultural-artistic initiatives, types of creative production that involve imagining other possible worlds – just think of the surreal landscapes of Salvador Dali or the polka dot installations of Yayoi Kusama. There are, further, examples of artistic projects that intervene on both a creative-aesthetic and a critical-political level. The *Yes Men* collective is an exemplar in this regard, a 'culture jamming' effort that produces artefacts in order to counteract the practices of corporate and political elites. In this way, the Yes Men seek to re-envision the popular social imaginary as well as contest dominant political-economic orders (*ibid.*; Perini, 2010). The latter is, specifically, grounded in the idea of 'power to' and differs, as such, from traditional positional power (Hales, 2001).

We commonly assume that orthodox organizations are characterized by formal hierarchies and institutional structures, exerting authority over those who work within them. Such positional power is often referred to as 'power over' (many others), or power from above (Hales, 2001). The idea of 'power to', however, entails a different approach (Clegg et al., 2006). 'Power to' foregrounds the dynamic and relational components of power. It asks how power can be reduced to a minimum of domination and, moreover, be used to mobilize ideas, action, change, creativity, and people – not least their energies, desires, attitudes, and inclinations (*ibid.*; Hardt, 2001).

In 'building movements which are aimed at changing conditions and structures' (Perini, 2010: 193), critical-political *and* creative-experiential interventionists like members of the Yes Men seem indeed guided by such questions. This, further, holds true for movements such as the commoning movement (Zechner, this issue), aiming to undermine the instrumental-appropriative logics of capitalist market economies and work towards social transformation. In doing so, they acknowledge that there is no outside to power. Individuals and groups are rather always implicated in power, in one way or another, whereby power can be enacted in multiple ways in social relations and organizational forms (Foucault, 1982). That said, rather than considering power an object or an end in itself, movements inspired by the idea of 'power to' view power as a productive capacity – a way to foster new modes of organizing and of relating to oneself and others (Weiskopf, 2021). The following section elaborates in more detail on what such alternate forms of organizing and relating could look like.

Organizing and relating differently: Assembling an affirmative-transformative critique

In accordance with the contributions to this *ephemera* issue, we now want to raise the question: what types of organizing might allow us to go beyond capitalist appropriation and, hence, foster 'new kinds of social relationships, new kinds of relationships to the commodity' (Perini, 2010: 195), and new kinds of, affirmative-transformative, critique?

The work of post-Marxist scholars (e.g. Hardt, 2001; Hardt and Negri, 2004, 2009; Virno, 2004) as well as critical process thinkers and philosophers (e.g. Chia, 1999, 2014; Deleuze, 1988; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) is helpful in addressing this question. Such work allows us to see, think, and speak 'differently' about organization and its politics. In particular, concepts such as the 'multitude', introduced by Hardt (2001), provide an organizational image that moves us beyond traditional ways of thinking about organizations, such as fixed boundaries, formal hierarchies, divisions of labour, and techniques of classification that divvy up tasks, responsibilities, and privileges within the organization. In contrast to this traditional organizational image, the idea of the multitude highlights the 'internal

multiplicity of organization' (Linstead and Thanem, 2007: 1487), and reminds us thereby that our working lives are inherently fractured and many-faceted and, hence, that the structures of command-and-control are full of polyphonic cracks and clefts that can never be plastered over. More specifically, the idea of the multitude emphasizes difference, singularity, creativity, and openness, and views them as immanent to and constitutive of organization itself. As Hardt argues, organization is 'the composition of creative forces' and, as such, 'always an art' (Hardt, 2002: xv) – that is, an ongoing process of giving form to heterogeneous elements and relations, one that is counter-posed to self-containment and enclosure (Weiskopf, 2012).

The idea of the multitude not only points to the creative qualities of organization, though. It also illustrates that organization is infused with and surrounded by politics. In other words, the multitude is 'multiplicity made powerful' (Hardt, 2001: 392). The 'politics of multiplicity' (Deleuze, 1988), specifically, plays out in activities that seek to challenge and modify established conditions, to enact 'the multiple' and spur it into action (see also Cameron, this issue). The contributions of Kioupkiolis (this issue) and Zechner (this issue) elaborate on this enactment by portraying the politics of multiplicity as an irreducible part of commoning practices. Such practices foster an ethos of organization that is grounded in ideals like participation, solidarity, equality, care, and open-ended democracy. By this means, the practices described by Kioupkiolois and Zechner create interventions into the socio-economic fabric in critical and creative ways. These interventions present a central part of the politics of multiplicity that, following Linstead and Thanem (2007: 1487), essentially advocates 'a creative pluralism of organization (based on enfoldedness, relational connections and becoming) against a controlling pluralism of order (based on positions, interests and governmentality)'.

Against this background, we would like to conclude our discussion with some reflections on an *affirmative* kind of *critique* that seeks to destabilize and re-create contemporary socio-economic and organizational worlds – from within. In comparison to conventional notions of critique, such a form of critique does not come from a superior position and is, thus, not interested in assessment and judgement from outside (Loacker, 2021; Weiskopf, 2012). It rather proposes to closely engage with the specific field and conditions that it

challenges (Böhm and Spoelstra, 2004) and assumes – in consonance with the idea of 'power to' – that *local* engagement is the most productive kind of engagement (Kavanagh, forthcoming). Consequently, an affirmative critique is 'more akin to appreciation than fault-finding' (*ibid.*) and not that 'shy about making...proposals for change' (*ibid.*).

An affirmative critique thus extends beyond a focus on problematization; it also engages with the question of how alternatives (to capitalist economies, to traditional management, to established organizational forms, etc.) might be developed and furthered. Dey and Mason (2018) remind us in this context about the 'transformative capacity' (*ibid.*: 88) of creative *imagination*. By envisioning other forms of the social, new modes of thinking and acting – and along with them, 'new realities' (*ibid.*) – may, indeed, become possible. Such a task is not solely an individual endeavor, of course. It is a task for collective mobilization – and the cultivation of shared hope (*ibid.*). As Perini (2010: 196) puts it, imagination is a phenomenon that allows us 'to link our private experiences to broader collective struggles, social institutions, and our society's position'. If there is any obstacle to socio-economic change and transformation, then it mainly lies, from this vantage point, in the 'crisis of imagination caused by the orthodox social imaginary' (Dey and Mason, 2018: 97), and less with our actual ability to build alternative, more participatory and sustainable forms of organization and social life beyond capital/ism (see also Birch and Springer, 2019; Federici and Caffentzis, 2014).

In light hereof, the purpose of critique becomes the creation and dissemination of 'new possible worlds' (Dey and Mason, 2018: 88), something that Foucault recognized many years ago:

> I can't help but dream about a kind of criticism that would not try to judge, but bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea-foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgments but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep. Perhaps it would invent them sometimes – all the better...Criticism that hands down sentences sends me to sleep. I'd like a criticism of scintillating leaps of the imagination. It would not be a sovereign or dressed in red. It would bear the lightning of possible storms. (Foucault, 1980/1997: 323)

The contributions to this *ephemera* issue seek to engage in exactly the kind of affirmative-transformative critique that Foucault had in mind. They involve leaps of the imagination that question the capitalist complex in which we live. In doing so, they acknowledge that 'imagination is not an untroubled space...but acquainted with uncertainty' (Perini, 2010: 196) and, yet, they purposefully envision and propose alternatives for living with, organizing, working alongside, relating to, and caring for one another beyond the logics of extraction and appropriation (Caffentzis, 2010). There are no sentences handed down in what follows; only the lightning flashes of creative imagination, creating cracks and building subtle openings into the process.

The contributions

In her article 'Childcare commons' (this issue), Manuela Zechner asks what a community-based form of childcare might look like – and how it might change the city in which it takes place. Based on a four-year research project in Barcelona, Zechner explores how informal parental networks emerge and develop in an inner-city neighbourhood. Such networks provide support for parents that the state does not (or cannot) offer, based on the principle of mutual solidarity. Self-organized nurseries, workshops, healthcare centres, and cooperatives are just some of the elements of this complex, grassroots 'ecology of care'. But these parental networks – composed primarily of mothers and to a lesser extent fathers – do more than provide help and assistance to those with children. They also challenge the dominant logic of municipal childcare and the top-down diktats of local government. Child-care is typically sequestered from public view; in the capitalist division of labour, the work that goes into social reproduction is atomized, invisible, and under-valued. The parental networks in Zechner's study make visible this work of social reproduction and, in so doing, transform the act of care into a form of radical feminist politics – one that goes decisively 'against and beyond capitalist economies of capital' (Zechner, this issue). In this way, informal parental networks challenge what it means to *care for* but also *care about* children in an urban context.

In his article 'Digital commons, the political, and social change', Alexandros Kioupkiolis reflects on the political significance of the digital commons. The

digital commons is a virtual space in which goods and services are produced and exchanged freely in a de-centralized, non-capitalist manner, facilitated by peer-to-peer (P2P) technology such as free and open source software. P2P ensures that anyone can contribute to and benefit from a shared resource. This means that, for its advocates, the digital commons promises to challenge the hierarchies and enclosures of private property in capitalist society and advance a radical democratic alternative. However, as Kioupkiolis reminds us, the digital commons risks being hijacked and co-opted by the very forces it seeks to counter. What is needed, therefore, is 'broader ranging politics of counter-hegemonic contest' (Kioupkiolis, this issue), one that seeks to disentangle P2P technology from capitalist markets and so makes it impossible to profit financially from the digital commons. Drawing on Gramsci, Kioupkiolis (this issue) urges us to push back against the dominant hegemony of capitalist production by adopting an attitude of 'conscious struggle', an attitude that's embodied in digital cooperatives like Enspiral, Sensorica, and the Guerilla Media Collective.

Emrah Karakilic and Mollie Painter open their article, 'The (un)surprising nature of creativity: A Deleuzian perspective on the temporality of the creative process', with the question whether or not creativity is manageable. Inspired by the work of Deleuze, Karakilic and Painter specifically engage with the paradoxical and contested nature of creativity and, concomitantly, suggest that creativity is 'capable of yielding temporal surprise' (Karakilic and Painter, this issue). To this extent, creativity allows for novel perspectives and unpredictable experiences to emerge. By this means, the authors cast into doubt utilitarian-instrumental approaches to creativity that we typically find in capitalist organizations. Karakilic and Painter also foster a processual perspective on creativity 'at work', which emphasizes the temporal dimensions of the creative process. Karakilic and Painter's analysis, particularly, shows how temporal dynamics in the creative process subvert managerial programming, design, and orchestration within and through time. On this basis, the authors conclude that temporal *becoming* is central to the creative process, allowing us to understand organizational creativity and practice 'differently' – that is, taking into account the surprise, serendipity, difference, and multiplicity that is immanent to creativity at work.

In her note, 'Point of difference: The lost premise of creativity in "creative work"', Alexia Cameron challenges the ubiquitous demand for creative ideas, products, and labour that constitutes specific experiences and 'atmospheres' within so-called affective capitalism. In particular, Cameron problematizes the typical instrumental-managerial approach to 'being moved' and affected. Using the example of a report from *Slack Technologies*, the note points to tensions, intricacies, and limitations that accompany current attempts to unify, measure, and align creativity, emotion, and affect at work. With reference to Spinoza, Cameron argues that the very premises of creativity – such as difference, exploration, and heterogeneous becoming – are denied by many organizations. This poses a challenge to the emergence of genuinely creative work that affects workers in a non-determined, open manner. Cameron's note concludes with a plea for an opportunity for 'being moved' and 'becoming moving', which might undermine managerial attempts to appropriate and define creativity and instead foster alternative forms of creative labour that allow for 'emancipatory potentials' to emerge and unfold (Cameron, this issue).

The open issue is completed by two book reviews. In the first, 'A posthumanist approach to practice and knowledge', Laura Lucia Parolin reviews the second edition of Sylvia Gherardi's *How to conduct a practice-based study*: *Problems and methods*. Focusing on the similarities and differences between the first and second editions, Parolin reiterates the main pillars of Gherardi's practice-based approach, including the notion of situatedness, knowing in practice, embodied and aesthetic knowing, and technological, discursive and social infrastructures. In particular, Parolin considers the distinction between humanist practice approaches and posthumanist approaches, focusing 'on the very process of connecting' (Parolin, this issue) variegated elements and practices, a main contribution of the book. The second edition of *How to conduct a practice-based study* thus serves to enrich the current debate on (post)humanist approaches to practice and knowledge within MOS and the social sciences more generally.

In the second, 'From biased robots to race as technology', Inga Luchs' reviews *Race after technology: Abolitionist tools for the New Jim Code* by Ruha Benjamin. With reference to Benjamin, Luchs reflects on the role of media technologies in governing and regulating individual and social life, paying particular

attention to how new technologies 'reproduce and increase social inequalities under the guise of apparent objectivity and efficiency' (Benjamin, 2019: 5f.). Luchs, moreover, asks what we can do to more effectively counteract the discrimination that underpins contemporary media technologies and 'their entanglement with structural racism inherent in society' (Luchs, this issue). Indeed, what an emancipatory, alternative approach to technology might look like seems to present one of the most pressing questions that scholars from the social sciences and beyond will in future need to address.

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Childcare commons: Of feminist subversions of community and commune in Barcelona

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abstract

This paper explores childcare as a matter of social reproduction and the commons, in tension with some ethical and political questions regarding the status of children as political actors. How can we think through the political practice and significance of childcare commoning? What might a radical politics of childcare look like? Looking at three modalities of childcare commoning in the neighbourhood of Poble Sec in Barcelona – mothers' networks, self-organized childcare groups, and municipal policies of childhood – this text emphasizes the role of neighbourhood networks and municipal institutions in childcare commoning. Narrating examples of transversal and sympoietic organizing across the private, public and commons spheres, the paper situates the organizing of childcare in the contemporary feminist and municipalist context of Barcelona, in which I myself partake. It points to agents and dynamics that are under-explored in extant organizational and commons studies: mothers, midwives, post-partum classes, creches, playgrounds, municipal offices, neighbourhood chat groups, and not least children. This raises the question: Who is the subject of childcare, and how might we envisage subjectivity and political agency differently, learning from social ecosystems of care? This paper offers a novel look at how emergent feminist politics articulate autonomy and interdependence, as well as the commons and public systems in alternate ways.

Introduction: Childcare commons as a vector of political change

> Writing to the mothers' *Whatsapp* group is better than calling 112.
> (Urban saying amongst mothers in Poble Sec)

In this paper, I shall be discussing childcare as a matter of social reproduction and the commons, at the same time as displacing the meaning of childcare towards expanded notions of political subjectivity and agency. Looking at childcare through the lens of reproductive commons and commoning as set out by, e.g., Federici, Caffentzis and de Angelis, I will propose that commons can be altered and subverted via feminist politics that claim different notions of political subjecthood. I take this as an occasion to ask, 'who cares?', not just in a sociological or anthropological sense, but also through a feminist alterontological lens (Puig de la Bellacasa 2015, 2017; Papadopoulos, 2018). In my approach, this means to question ascribed notions of who is the subject and object of politics across a range of levels: institutions, social movements, self-organized nurseries, mothers' networks and children. It implies a focus on a transversality of connections, efforts and intentions that offer a complex picture of agency in care, looking across different phases of care and extending them towards children (Tronto, 1993, 2009). This approach seeks to articulate commons theories with care ethics and the politics of social reproduction towards feminist perspectives on institutions and knowledges. As such, I seek to contribute a novel approach to thinking childcare (asking not just 'how' but also 'who') as well as municipalism (asking not just 'what' but also 'how'). The 'critical' merit of this consists in asking what makes collective projects stay alive or die, what and how bodies constitute and sustain them, and what forces affect and threaten them. My theoretical framework strongly builds on emergent feminist social movement analyses from the Spanish context, in which the question of the *sustainability of life* has been central (Pérez Orozco, 2014).

The paper's empirical analysis is based on a 2017-2020 research project on childcare commons in the neighbourhood of Poble Sec, Barcelona that I conducted via an extended co-research and autoethnographic process as a

local mother.[1] My project comprised four years of feminist situated research in Barcelona, looking at intertwining matters of (child)care, micropolitics and municipalism (Zechner, 2020, 2021). It builds on co-research, ethnographic as well as autoethnographic methods, featuring interviews, participant observation, collaboration and focus group workshops – conducted across self-organized nurseries, mothers' networks and neighbourhood spaces in Poble Sec. A key moment in it was the 'Comunes y Crianza' colloquium (2018), which I co-organized with other local parents, activists and researchers and from which I draw many quotations.[2] This colloquium, and my project overall, took place in a context of new municipal politics of the commons in Barcelona (when Barcelona en Comú was elected to local government), implying great collective organizing and intelligence as well as new struggles over the definitions and processes that shape policy. Many of my key collaborators in this project work at the intersection of neighbourhood activism, public pedagogies, care feminism and municipalism, and were interfacing (like me) with Barcelona en Comú in various ways. This paper tells a story of childcare commons across the dimensions of maternity, neighbourhood activism and municipalism. Before discussing the complex dynamics encompassing childcare commons in more detail, I now introduce the key literature and conceptual ideas that guide my analysis.

Thinking childcare commons: Key literature and its socio-political context

My analysis mainly draws on feminist literature regarding care and childcare, and on feminist-Marxist analyses of commons in contexts of social

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[1]   The academic context for this was the Heteropolitics research project on commons (heteropolitics.net), which has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement 724692).

[2]   I have translated all citations from this colloquium, as well as from my interviews, from Spanish or Catalan into English here. All persons cited here are aware of my writing and a majority have given feedback on my research outcomes. I do not anonymize the names of my different co-research partners for obvious reasons: to not render them invisible and to open to the possibility of research into their work.

reproduction, as well as looking towards ontological-ecological refigurings of care from the environmental humanities (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Papadopoulos, 2018). In what follows, I go through three levels of childcare commoning: (1) mothers' networks and local solidarity economies, (2) self-organized nurseries (*grupos de crianza compartida*), and (3) the feminist municipalist politics of childhood of Barcelona en Comú. Together these levels constitute a sympoieitic ecosystem of childrearing and care, operating as slow, profound and far-reaching processes of social and political transformation. As I offer a situated account of this context of transformation, I draw on key feminist literature on the feminist ethics and politics of care (Gil, 2012; Pérez Orozco, 2014), feminist-Marxist politics of social reproduction (Federici 2012; 2013), and neighbourhood and municipalist solidarity (Ezquerra and Mansilla, 2017; Zechner, 2016).

Together, these socio-political currents articulate and prefigure a paradigm of conviviality and commons democracy that thinks care in political as well as ecological ways. Overall, my paper gives account of a social *ecosystem* of childcare, as implicated in local networks, struggles, debates, politics. Feminist, autonomist, neighbourhood and municipalist politics evolve interdependently in my account here. My approach draws on analyses of commons as systems, relations and processes rather than things (Barbagallo et al., 2019; De Angelis, 2017, 2019). It refuses to separate resources from relations, internal from external dynamics, and micro- from macro-political dynamics, thereby insisting on the importance of seeing variegated dimensions as a dynamic whole. One basic tenet in this kind of research is an interest in relations, conjunctures and tactics, rather than a search for broadly generalizable organizational principles or grand strategies. No commons without context, complexity, contradictions – and indeed no commons without conditions, change, care. Once we understand commons as social systems, we realize that the tension between commons' endogenous and exogenous forces is a tension that necessitates productive articulation rather than categorical differentiation and contraposition (De Angelis, 2019). This requires transversal perspectives and a sense for complicities as well as tensions.

As such, my analysis owes much to autonomist-feminist theories that grapple with commons as constellations of struggle (Federici and Caffentzis, 2014)

that are embedded within broader dynamics of capitalism, neocolonialism, patriarchy, ableism and so forth (see Barbagallo et al., 2019). Like other commons, contemporary feminist childcare commons too must be seen in the context of neoliberalism. As one of the key authors on childcare politics, Carolina del Olmo (2013), notes, generations of women who grew up in neoliberal economies and are now parenting are well aware of the triple burden they face – housework, waged work, and childcare all at once. They are also aware of their slim chances of gaining stable employment in today's economies of precarity, particularly as women and mothers, in an economic context like that of Spain. To embrace motherhood and childrearing via networks of mutual support is a political act that also reflects a refusal of precarious labor and triple-burden exploitation, and a collective desire to invent and defend other ways and infrastructures of caring and living. Del Olmo writes about how new forms of motherhood (*nuevas maternidades*) question narratives that equate waged labor to empowerment and label 'staying at home' to care as regressive:

> Some go home to be care-givers, others choose professions of less prestige and less salary that leave them more free time...For sure one has to ask why some do this and others that, but it's not enough to pose that question whilst taking for granted that the ones over here win and the ones over there lose, that the ones over here are being submissive whilst the other ones choose. (Del Olmo, 2014, my translation from Spanish)

Questioning discourses of choice in childcare and neoliberal contexts is an important matter for feminism (Barbagallo, 2016). Mothers are all too easily patronized and underestimated. In the context of Spanish feminism, a new wave of politicization of motherhood and parenting has been driven by the generation of the powerful 15M anti-austerity social movement that took squares and reinvigorated neighbourhoods across Spain, in tandem with militant analyses of austerity and precarity, feminist economics and theories of the commons and of care (Del Olmo, 2013; León, 2017; Merino, 2017; Vivas, 2019). The approach to reproductive and waged labor that del Olmo (2013) describes above shares much affinity with some theories and economies of the commons, privileging the creation of autonomous – and interdependent – circuits of value generation over women's integration into existing job or financial markets. As we shall see, autonomism is given a feminist overhaul in the spheres of practice and theorization, as advocating for organizational

models that transcend the state and the market, yet are solidly based in affirmations of mutual dependency and vulnerability (Gil, 2012; Pérez Orozco, 2014).

Childcare commoning thus emerges in the context of a new wave of feminism based in affirmations of interdependency, care, diversity and post-work imaginaries that point to mutual aid and defense networks (on *Ni una Menos*, see Mason-Deese, 2018), community and commons infrastructures (see the work of Raquel Gutierrez or Silvia Federici for instance, see Vega Solis et al., 2018), new social rights (basic income, care income), and feminist economics (Pérez Orozco, 2014). These have brought forth many new politicizations of care, childcare and feminist motherhood (León, 2017; Llopis, 2015; Merino, 2017; Vivas, 2019). They shift political emphasis from work to life, from integrating women into existing systems to redefining those systems altogether, and from addressing the state at large to transforming municipal and public institutions in particular. As the examples of self-organized nurseries will show, this allows for some aporias around care and public systems to be overcome, opening up to new contradictions and challenges. My account of the complex dynamics encompassing childcare commons now starts with mothers' networks, to show how these enable and produce self-organized childcare groups, as well as alliances with public institutions and municipal policies for childcare commoning.

Mothers' rearguard and digital networks

There is one dimension that connects and underpins all the childcare-related organizing in Poble Sec: the more or less informal networks of mothers (and, to a very limited extent, of fathers). These networks emerge across different encounters and shared spaces: pre- and post-partum classes in public healthcare centers; public, private and common-based nurseries; playgrounds, squares and streets in the neighbourhood; local events and workshops in public or commons-based social centers; as well as chat platforms like *Whatsapp*. As such, mothers' networks operate as dispositifs of commoning that create lively links between public institutions and spaces (health centers, playgrounds, nurseries), commons spaces (*grupos de crianza*,

social centers, cooperatives), and the private spaces so pivotal to childcare (the home, family, chat groups).

Though mostly informal and non-committal, mothers' networks often end up being stronger spaces of reference than both public and family systems. Facing limitations or absences of biological family and other support structures, many women seek each other for advice and help regarding childrearing and childcare. Events for babies or parents, pre/post-partum classes and friendships give rise to the formation of groups. Platforms like *Whatsapp* or *Telegram* make this mutual support very instant, immediate and dialogical. Unlike advice from a single source, like a doctor or family member, mothers' chat groups provide a myriad viewpoints and recommendations on any single issue. Such groups are increasingly important sociotechnical assemblages (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) that take the loneliness out of parenting and motherhood in particular, much like *the grupos de crianza* do:

> The current rise of the *grupos de crianza compartida*, created and self-managed by women, is a response to the loneliness that many urban mothers suffer from, but also to the model of society and city that liberal capitalism imposes. Those groups…are conceived in order to give support to women around the first months of a baby. Yet the connection [*vínculo*] between the participating mothers is so intense that it comes to transcend this period, and establishes itself as a support for childrearing, with the spirit of what we ancestrally could have identified as 'tribe' [*tribú*]. (Puerto, 2019, my translation from Spanish)

The Spanish version of 'it takes a village to raise a child' is '*para educar a unx niñx hace falta una tribú*'. Contemporary childcare commoning redefines both 'village' and 'tribe'. Against the grain of its exoticizing and familialist ring, the notion of '*tribú*' is used by mothers to affirm broad solidarity and care, as radical mutualist networks that in fact transcend the family.[3] These networks are local and neighbourhood-based, constituting village-like dynamics in large urban contexts prone to alienation: an extended family of sorts, existing in relation to a specific common territory and revolving around the care for its young as well as elders. In the Comunes y Crianza colloquium (2018), we tried to tackle what enables us to make childcare a matter of commoning: asking 'does it take a Poble Sec to raise a child?', we discussed and mapped the

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[3]   A more recent example of this includes the pandemic neighbourhood solidarity network 'Somos Tribú Vk' in Vallecas, Madrid.

ways in which networks, generations, commons and territories interact in Poble Sec.

Across the neighbourhood, family trajectories are crisscrossed by breakups, rent raises, moves, job loss and search, illnesses, moments of depression, displacement, and so forth; the ties they build fluctuate, vary, weaken. Accompanying the emergence and (dis)continuities of familial ties, childcare groups and mothers' networks come to be rich in knowledge and understanding of different rhythms, cycles and generational processes. Generational consciousness is strong in Poble Sec's childcare commons, leading to a development of organizational intelligence about the cycles of ageing, institutional passage, health, relationships and groups. This is a dimension much overlooked in commons research: the ways in which bodily, seasonal, economic, political, and many other kinds of rhythms intersect with processes of generation, organization and resurgence (Michon, 2007). The mothers' networks for instance renew every half year or so, with generations overlapping, as midwife Pepi Dominguez knows:

> Every half year more or less there's a new *Whatsapp* group; summer and Christmas holidays are natural moments of generational change, though there is always a continuity of people and some groups even keep meeting during the holidays without me.

Through online chats, mothers exchange advice, things, information, arrange meetings, joint walks, playdates, talks and workshops, organize or join baby blocs, disseminate campaigns and events, and discuss all sorts of matters from medical to political to personal. Not requiring moderator functions, these groups are inclusive of anyone wanting to join (within the technical limit of 256 participants in *Whatsapp*) and refuse any regimentations of political, personal and practical debate. To the subjects involved – mostly women[4] – this does not amount to chaotic or unserious communication but means the conscious embracing of a politics that does not cut out the background noise

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[4]   In the 2016/17 generation's *Whatsapp* group of 86 members, which I have been part of as a mother, there is one cis male member who has, in the course of three years, sent about three messages; all other correspondence is between mothers. In 2021, some fathers of this generation finally set up their own group (their children now aged 5 and close friends).

of life (far from Arendtian notions of political rigor!). Chat groups act like a digital background or murmur that nourishes and sustains everyday encounters and lives.

These groups don't just make the personal political, but also bring the political down to the embodied level, reflecting on ways of being affected, situated and response-able in relation to different problems or policies. Public systems, municipal politics, administrative procedures, modalities of exclusions: all those are analyzed and debated. As such, seen through Tronto's care phases, these chat groups channel concern or 'caring about' but, moreover, also organize action as *taking care of*, facilitate *care-giving* as sharing care work and practice, enable the sharing of vulnerability and uncertainty to affirm *care-receiving*, and foster *caring-with* as feminist or neighbourhood solidarity. *Caring-about* corresponds to concern, as the moment of recognizing a need; *taking-care-of* corresponds to action, to address the need; *care-giving* corresponds to practice and labor, as continuous and embodied care; and *care-receiving* corresponds to being vulnerable and shaping interdependency (Tronto, 1993). *Caring-with*, which Tronto (2009) added to her influential theory later on in the context of her work on caring democracy, corresponds to solidarity. Holding those five phases together, mother's 'networking' functions on premises well opposed to those of neoliberal networking for jobs or status. It is reproductive commoning par excellence, as diffuse, multilayered and multitasking cooperation and collective care. Such reproductive commoning thrives on addressing multiple and changing needs, rather than centering on a single resource or task.

Mothers' networks and chat groups are key motors of the contemporary movement of rearguard or *retaguardia* politics in Spain (Malo et al., 2016), which articulate a new feminist politics of mothering (Del Olmo, 2013, 2014; León, 2017; Llopis, 2015; Merino, 2017; Vivas, 2019). A powerful response to female precarization, the loneliness of nuclear family and solo parenting, as well as to the neoliberal fragmentation of care, space and time (Del Olmo, 2013), this movement – perhaps a 'social nonmovement' (Bayat, 2010) – is silent and barely visible to the public eye. Like most movements of reproductive commoning and care, the recent movement of childcare commoning is however well aware of itself and the predicaments it struggles to overcome. From economic, material, social and subjective phenomena to

the shortcomings of second wave feminism's orientation towards wages and labor market integration, the new feminisms emerging after the 15M want to build different relations and scenarios of reproduction. Activists began to politicize the notion of the *retaguardia*, the rearguard:

> How do we make the revolution starting from the rearguard? The mothers alone. Crisscrossed by the crisis, by the generalized looting of all that's public, but also by a social awakening that's more pressing each time. (Malo et al., 2016)

The struggle for public infrastructures and institutions is as much part of these new feminisms as the invention of new modes of commoning care. With the new municipalist governments in Spain, feminist actors also bring these anti-neoliberal struggles into public institutions – as we shall see below. For now we move on to look at the more formally organized childcare commons that emerge out of mother's networks, with a special focus on the *grupos de crianza compartida*, self-organized nurseries.

Self-organized childcare groups in Poble Sec

Defining care and childcare

What is childcare? Right before and after birth, childcare is about learning to care for small humans, and childcare groups are about mutual support and advice, as babies are strongly attached to their primary carers and birth-givers. As babies grow bigger, childcare also comes to refer to the care that other people or institutions can provide a child with, as parents do reproductive or waged work for instance. The *grupos de crianza* seek to facilitate a smooth transition between these two moments of care and build solid and durable communities around them. Their aim is to keep practical, ethical, pedagogical and organizational matters together, in as much as possible and desirable. They try to hold the care cycle, as Tronto describes it, together: to avoid alienating separations between *caring-about, taking-care-of, care-giving, care-receiving*, and indeed also *caring-with* (Tronto, 1993, 2009).

With Tronto we learn that one reason why care cycles are fractured is that different aspects or phases of care are neither distributed nor valued equally in our societies. In raising children, the emotional and organizational aspects

of care – as *caring-about* – are mostly left to mothers as the infamous mental load (planning meals, birthday parties and gifts, doctors' visits, playdates, observing well-being, minding and sustaining relations, etc.). This mental, emotional and relational labor is very intensive, and requires continuous movements of *taking care of*, as observation of mother's activities shows. Moreover, the very material, physical and skin-to-skin/hands-on aspect of care – as *care-giving* – is also highly invisible and undervalued while done mostly by women, migrants and indeed female migrants.

Where patriarchal and capitalist divisions of care remain naturalized, most reproductive work remains invisible and undervalued, as feminist economists have pointed out for decades (see e.g. Pérez Orozco, 2014; Knittler and Haidinger, 2016). Caring gestures and roles associated with privilege and power – often with men, wealth and whiteness – receive ample attention and praise, no matter how sporadic or deficient they are: think of the visibility of doctors over nurses; of the gesture of the person who 'takes care of the wine' versus the unspectacular labor of the person cooking or indeed cleaning up; the generosity attributed to the person who buys a fancy birthday gift versus the respect for the person organizing the party; or the admiration for dads taking kids for a walk versus the public attitude towards mothers walking with prams. Care is neither equally distributed nor equally valued.

Tronto's description of care cycles matters greatly to mapping out the subversive as well as sustainable potential of collective models of (child)care provision, as it allows us to detect power inequalities and divisions of labor, visibility and valorization. Her emphasis on *care-receiving* and *caring-with* – moments of vulnerability and solidarity often ignored in debates about care – urge us to also consider *the other(s)* in care, thereby adding a crucial ethical dimension. Alongside analyses of global care chains (Lutz, 2011; Gil and Pérez Orozco, 2011), feminist economics (Pérez Orozco, 2014; Vega Solis, 2014; Knittler and Haidinger, 2016) and women's commons (Federici, 2013), Tronto's phases of care provide a powerful means for analysis.

So who looks after children in Poble Sec?

In 2017, Poble Sec had 40,358 inhabitants, out of which approximately 1200 were children aged 0-3. Roughly half of them were taken care of by their

parents or in informal care arrangements, some 20% went to local public nurseries (there were about 209 places in 3 local publicly run nurseries), about 18% went to private nurseries, while 8% (ca. 100 children) were part of *grupos de crianza* (Comunes y Crianza Colloquium, 2018). These self-organized childcare projects thus account for a considerable proportion of early-age childcare in Poble Sec.

Another way to answer the question about who looks after children is to say, again: mothers. In Spanish-Catalan society, in general, and in the *grupos de crianza* in particular, mothers are still the main protagonists of childcare. Maternity leave lasts only 4 months in its statutory form in Spain, leaving women with an abysmally short time frame to establish modalities of relation, childcare and mutual support to fall back on when back at work. Fathers or co-parents can barely make use of parental leave in Spain, leading to a focalization of childcare with mothers. So strategic and forward-looking as they are, many mothers invent minor 'dispositifs' of childcare-sharing, starting from the strong support networks built around birth and baby-care.

Mother's networks in turn give rise to a desire to create more integrated, intimate and open options of continuous early-age childcare, especially when public and private childcare systems fail to offer places or affordable rates. Having experienced feminist solidarity, many mothers cannot turn back: they struggle to set up more stable collective childcare solutions, such as *grupos de crianza compartida*. In a nutshell, *grupos de crianza compartida* are groups of parents allied with educators, who run self-organized nurseries, mostly in rented shopfront spaces. If they are initiated by parents, they form a shared vision and define shared needs, usually find a trained educator to accompany them (an *acompañante*), constitute an association, find a space, and begin a routine of daily childcare. If they start from educators, the process is similar but group formation is often slower and facilitated more strongly by educators. Groups might shift from being more parent-run to being more teacher-run and vice versa, and involve different degrees of sharing the work of childcare as well as organization. What defines them is the notion of childcare as a common matter that requires sharing work – as care work and/or organizational work – and building community.

The more organically, carefully and slowly these groups can constitute themselves – the less market-like – the more likely they are to thrive, by building good collective process, debating doubts and tensions, getting information, taking legal and administrative steps in time, getting the children used to the educators slowly, finding and equipping a space, and reaching out to the neighbourhood to fill places and gather support, dealing with people leaving and joining the project. *Grupos de crianza* lead parents, educators and children to work together and constitute a strong care network as well as neighbourhood *tribú*, focusing care both inward (*tribú*) and outward (neighbourhood). They recognize that modern urban parenting is an individualizing and precarious matter that requires new support structures.

Child-care commoning

The *grupos de crianza* combine and articulate matters of pedagogy, care and organization in ways that can transform all of these three dimensions, building sustainable alternatives to both private and public nurseries. Like the mother's networks, they combine concern (*caring-about*) with action (*taking care of*) and labor (*care-giving*) in reciprocal ways that center on children as subjects and agents (*care-receiving*), as well as solidarity-based relations to the neighbourhood and beyond (*caring-with*). They constitute ecologies of care in the neighbourhood, linking different phases of care as well as generational processes. They may be seen as social-familial-local ecosystems that try to weave spatialities and temporalities of care together responsively, supporting one another in the daily struggle to extend lives and families beyond the nuclear and individualist paradigm (Zechner and Rübner Hansen, 2019).

Life, work and struggle mix in the *grupos de crianza compartida*. They are part and parcel of post-work, care-based feminisms that center on politicizing care as work *as well as* 'placing life at the center' (Pérez Orozco, 2014). As Christel Keller Garganté (2017), a mother, activist and childcare researcher in Barcelona, emphasizes at the Comunes y Crianza Colloquium:

> The *grupos de crianza compartida* are indeed useful for socially valuing care, which in this sense is a claim that many different feminisms have made, about the visibilization of care work and so on. The *groups de crianza* indeed *do* work when it comes to making this a common matter and therefore to give it [care] a central space in social life – which is also to do with their given capacity of

weaving community networks.

What makes *grupos de crianza compartida* so relevant in sociopolitical terms is that they also engage Tronto's (2009) 5th phase of care, *caring-with*. They are spaces of neighbourhood as well as feminist and children's solidarity. Invisibly yet powerfully, they are linked into local networks and events, picking up problems, needs and wider social affectivities. Many groups have been participating in the feminist strikes of the 8th of march since 2017 and partake in the activities of local social and solidarity economy networks, as well as in neighbourhood assemblies and protests. Struggles *to* and *for* care (Zechner, 2021) link with different activisms in these groups, as they advocate for children's rights, spaces for free play and a politics of care in the city and its social movements. More than commons *of* childcare they are also commons *for* care: we may indeed want to take the interlinking of all phases of care as a definitional criteria for any transformative commons. For how radical or transformative can commons be, if they do not articulate reproduction and care work (*care-giving*), the sharing of vulnerability (*care-receiving*), and *caring-with* as solidarity, alongside concern (*caring-about*) and *taking-care-of* (action)?

The neighbourhood and childcare

Poble Sec's childcare groups initially grew out of the boost in neighbourhood and feminist self-organization that came with the 15M movement of 2011. In a context of economic crisis after 2008, high unemployment meant that people had more time to organize, reflect and experiment, at the same time as harsh austerity measures affected the accessibility and quality of public nurseries. Austerity and precarity produced an increasing demand, capacity and desire for self-run projects of childcare that could provide alternative support networks and forms of education. To avoid childcare falling back onto mothers specifically, isolating them and reinforcing patriarchal structures, communitarian alternatives were needed.

The 15M movement led to a flourishing of political experimentation and new cooperativisms that also extended to care. Out of feminist debates at Poble Sec's neighbourhood assembly within the 15M, around 2011, a workshop to discuss childcare-sharing groups was organized, leading to the formation of

the 'Poble Sec network of community-based childrearing' (*xarxa de crianza compartida Poble Sec*) that sought to federate different collective childcare initiatives. This brought forth two collectively run nurseries: one based on a more family-driven model (*Babàlia*), and the other on a more educator-driven model (*Petit Molinet*), inspiring a new generation of childcare groups. Poble Sec went from having 1-2 parent-run daycare projects after 2007, to having around 5 after 2011, around 7 in 2016-18, and 5-6 between 2018-21.

In 2017, taking up the spirit of the *xarxa de crianza* in the face of the new municipalist experimentations, the majority of existing childcare commoning projects formed the PEPI platform together, a new network to provide each other mutual support and gain political leverage vis-à-vis the local policies of Barcelona en Comú. Many local activists in Poble Sec (as elsewhere in Barcelona) got involved in the movement-driven electoral campaigns of Barcelona en Comú in 2015 and continued to be (critical) accomplices and observers of the municipalist governments. Of those that had children during this time – a fair few – many got involved in *grupos de crianza*. As Javier Rodrigo, a parent-neighbourhood activist, said of the PEPI (Platform for Education and Participation of Infants) at our jointly organized colloquium, *Comunes y Crianza*:

> The PEPI is a heterogeneous group…that matured in two moments I think: on the one hand, there had already been previous meetings between the educators [*acompañantes*] of the *grupos de crianza compartida*. In 2014-15 they met several times to speak about issues and we were also lucky, in this case because of Carolina [a local councilor of Barcelona en Comú] who started to talk to us all. One of the first things she told us – and that was also a bit in the air – was that instead of her talking to us one by one we should try have a 'voice', a platform with which we can start negotiating with the city council in order to see what opportunities were opening up in Poble Sec. That was towards the end of 2016. It's very important to note that at PEPI we go slow, very slow, extremely slow, and so it's hard for us to have a meeting every month and a half…We're more or less 6 or 7 organizations there. We did a first count of families and came to some 100-110 families in 2017.

The name PEPI does not only stand for 'Platform for Education and Participation of Infants', but is also is a pun in reference to the midwife Pepi Dominguez. Pepi is a midwife in the local public health center of Poble Sec (CAP Hortes) and runs pre/post-partum classes there. Her role as 'meta-mother' and enabler of childcare- and mothers' commons is of prime

importance, and widely recognized in the neighbourhood. Thanks to her initiative, the public health center provides pre/post-partum classes as an open and engaging space of encounter and collective interest formation. Pepi practices a feminist pedagogy of getting mothers to self-organize and mutually support one another. The origin of commons-based nurseries thus also lies in the public system, thanks to the feminist strategies of agents like Pepi, who encourage fluidity rather than opposition between commons- and public organization. Here we come to a crucial point.

Just like councilor Carolina López, who we will hear more from below, Pepi weaves relations and transversal connections between institutions, the private lives of families, and initiatives of commoning. As translators, traffickers of knowledges and resources, matchmakers or mediators, these women play an important role in a social ecosystem like the one described here. Creating fluidity between the public and the commons is an art, but not one that's practiced in isolation. It depends on the strength, claims and resilience of self-organized initiatives (such as the PEPI and the *grupos de crianza*), which allow public-based agents to open spaces and resources up to commoning, and vice versa. Far from defending a rigid autonomism, the childcare commons projects in question here defend linking public and commons-based systems as a political challenge that requires ongoing negotiation. Radical municipalism brought an opportunity to again undo the contraposition of *either-or* narratives between public and commons systems, and led into ways of valuing and encouraging crossovers, bastardizations and hybrids.[5]

Economies of care within, against and beyond economies of capital

The micro- and macropolitical dynamics of childcare also collude with broader neoliberal dynamics, impacting the neighbourhood level. In the period of my research, which falls between the economic crises of 2008 and 2020, rents went up and up – leading to a harsh dynamic of displacement in Poble Sec, as well as to a powerful struggle against evictions and real estate speculation (via the neighbourhood union *Sindicat de Barri*, the *PAH* anti-

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[5]   Those hybridizations had been longer in the making, as movements had pushed for 'monster institutions' or 'institutions of the commons' (see Zechner, 2021).

eviction movement, and the renters union, *Sindicat de Llogaters*). Real estate speculation made it hard for many families to stay put, and for childcare groups to find appropriate spaces. Increasing rents have also led to an influx of middle class families with more disposable income into the neighbourhood, which sometimes join *grupos de crianza* and potentially trigger complex dynamics. Higher income families are able to pay higher fees, meaning they can pay educators more fairly and potentially help make groups financially more sustainable, but at the same time they make general fee rises seem more legitimate, potentially leading to the exclusion of more precarious families.

It can't all be blamed on 'the gentrifiers' though – in fact maybe hardly so. During the period that my research covers, unemployment went down in Catalunya, and long-standing locals too found more waged work, reducing time available for self-organization. This is one of the most significant factors in how much self-organization and transversal care the *grupos de crianza* are able to muster: the level of employment and income of families, as well as the kind of employment (public sector workers tend to engage with the politics of childcare commoning more than workers used to private sector hierarchies and ethos).

The problems of inclusion and privilege, as well as the struggle for anticapitalist and feminist urbanistic models, are not unfamiliar to the *grupos de crianza* and related networks of childcare commoning. On the contrary, these groups are engaged in critiques and struggles against the neoliberalization of education, work, care and public services and spaces. They know the complexity of the situation requires more than a return to purist principles of autonomy: it's a matter of enmeshing, transforming and reclaiming public institutions for the commons.

Childcare commons and public institutions: Synergies and tensions in municipalist Barcelona

As Javier Rodrigo argues, reducing the debate around self-organized childcare to a polarity between private vs. public means to miss out on a lot of things. Firstly, because *grupos de crianza* are spaces of democratic learning and experimentation, and their 'direct governance is very efficient, with

commissions, democracy: it's a school for mothers and fathers', as Rodrigo affirms (Comunes y Crianza Colloquium, 2018). Secondly, the practices and knowledge produced in these groups spill and cross over into the public system, influencing their democratic politics with grassroots methods of self-management. Most children go from the *grupos de crianza* into the public school system at the age of 3 (or in rare cases 5), bringing habits, expectations, alliances and knowledges that also transform the public schools.

The question of public institutions became very concrete and tangible after Barcelona en Comú won municipal elections in 2015. A lively time of experimentation with modulations between public and commons systems ensued, requiring a rethinking of habituated positions. The vibrant social and political climate in Poble Sec enabled debate and averted polarization, not least when it came to the question of childcare. The question of how *grupos de crianza* should relate to the municipality, and vice versa, is however far from resolved. Within the *grupos de crianza*, there are different tendencies as regards demands to the city council and the question of whether it should grant free use of spaces or give funding. Marc Alcega (2016) from the network of free education in Catalunya (XELL) was interviewed by the *Tribú en Arganzuela* [6] project in 2016 about his network's demands towards the administrations, such as granting the use of spaces, give some kind of subsidy, etc. He notes:

> There's a debate about that. In our surroundings there are movements that absolutely want to do without the state and its mechanisms, and others that say 'no, we're part of society, the state also represents us'. In this case, what can we ask of them [the state]? For now we'll get them to not persecute us, that they leave us in peace and help us with things that don't cost them money. This is where licenses come into play: to find one that serves us for regularizing the spaces of our schools.

For some however, there are problematic and possibly insurmountable contradictions when it comes to the relation between commons and state in childcare. Raquel Gallego, head of a Barcelona-based hub of social-movement related policy research and co-coordinator of various projects on care provision, institutional and non-institutional models of early-age childcare,

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6   On self-organized childcare in Madrid see: https://tribuarganzuela.tumblr.com/.

says of 'innovative' non-institutional models like the *grupos de crianza compartida*:

> The problem is that if they don't want to be regulated, how will they demand public spaces...? That's contradictory: you can't demand to make use of public resources if you don't accept to be regulated; it's contradictory because if you're not regulated then you're outside...On the other hand, if the government – the local one for instance – regulates it [self-organized childcare], then it's taking on responsibility, and we also don't know if it wants to take that on. So here's there's a certain difficult match on both sides.

In the case of Poble Sec's groups and the PEPI, the notion that childcare groups would not want in any way to be regulated is questionable. The closeness of many activists and parents to the commons debates and policies means that there is a critical openness regarding possibilities for municipal support and regulation. A sense of potentiality and invention prevails, based on public-commons partnerships in other areas. As Laia Forné Aguirre (2019), working on participation in Barcelona's city hall, put it:

> One of the challenges of municipalism is to build a new form of public institution that's based on trust and commitment between the institution and citizens, for the development of a framework of *public-communitarian* collaboration. A collaboration that maintains and respects the autonomy of communities while at the same time guaranteeing the public function of resources via criteria of access, sustainability, social returns, territorial rootedness and democratic governance of common goods. (my translation from Catalan)

The 'Urban Commons' policies (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona 2017a, 2017b) that regulate spaces such as the Can Battló community center show that public-commons agreements need not pass via total control and permanent audits. Spaces are being handed over rent-free to local communities (as associations) and new modalities of accompaniment and ongoing evaluation are being elaborated: this model could also work for childcare groups. Yet from another viewpoint, there are also concerns about the use of public resources for commoning experiments. For example, Raquel Gallego ponders:

> It's very curious because with experiences like those of social innovation we realize that they don't help with the problematics of people who really suffered from the crisis. Rather they answer to the aspirations of people who have a high educational level, that have a medium but sufficient socioeconomic level...Not

just that, I think it [alternative economies] isn't even known [to this most affected population]. And I doubt that if they knew it, they would choose it…I'm afraid I might say that even the term itself, of social and solidarity economy, is misleading, because it's not thought for the disadvantaged sectors of the population.

For Gallego, who has followed a host of research projects on solidarity- and commons-based economies at the IGOP research center, the (non)accessibility of self-run childcare projects reflects a broader problem with social and solidarity economies. This contradiction can indeed also be seen in the social, cultural and ethnic composition of Poble Sec's childcare projects. They are largely made up of white people with a relatively high level of education and lower-middle class incomes. This is self-critically confirmed by Poble Sec based cooperativist and activist Xavier Latorre Tapis, speaking about his many years of working in the social and solidarity economy networks in Poble Sec:

> We also have a self-critique…in our spaces the majority are 'whities' [blanquitos]…we always say that our networks are having trouble opening to more of the cultural diversity in the neighbourhood. We're conscious that we're not reaching all the diversity that exists in the neighbourhood, we're mostly white people.

Here we encounter a blind spot of much commons theory and anthropology, which often fails to address questions of race, class and gender. If commons are to be transformative social practices that lead not just to more democracy but also to more equality, then what basic requirements must they meet? Is it enough for commons initiatives to practically (not just discursively) address one of the great axes of inequality – bringing justice in terms of class, gender, race, age or ability for instance? These questions are at the forefront of municipalist debates on the use of public resources.

Barcelona en Comú's municipalist politics for childhood

How, if at all, should childcare groups feature in municipal policy? Carolina López, the local Barcelona en Comú councillor of Poble Sec, recounts the troublesome path this question has taken. The struggle around policies of the commons as regarding childcare happens between three major areas of municipal politics, López says at the Comunes y Crianza Colloquium:

> The ongoing debate is basically about a confrontation between [the] Education and Economy [municipal departments]. But then comes a moment where Feminisms [as a municipal department] also come into the debate.

López recounts how childcare groups end up being caught in a field of tension between different policy areas, narrating herself as defender of these groups who fought hard to have them included in the electoral programme in 2014 and now finds herself frustrated:

> When Education comes into play and tells us that they won't support, under no circumstances, the *grupos de crianza compartida*...we decide to talk to Economy because that's the cooperatives, it's the community economy, it's the economy of care, it's feminism and economic feminism. So we thought to tackle it from the viewpoint of furthering cooperatives, of promoting associative culture around this issue, and we made a lot of headway because in Economy we are putting all our possible efforts into creating cooperatives and community economies...But feminisms also stop us and say that we can't do anything whatsoever until we have clarity about what can be done, that again stalls the process.

For the education department, the *grupos de crianza compartida* are a threat to the public system, looking too much like private initiatives. For the feminist department, they are too marked by traditional gendered divisions of labor and lack of cultural and ethnic diversity. So they end up in the 'economy' category, where commons policies are developed in relation to the social and solidarity economies and urban commons. The policy pilots on 'urban commons and citizen heritage' are key referents here (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, 2017a, 2017b). Rodrigo can't see any reasons why these models should not be expanded towards childcare:

> The city of Barcelona, to put it simply, promotes long-term agreements with organizations to which it grants the use of an infrastructure...The question is: Why can this model not be applied to childcare when there are already these other models? The city of Barcelona has some 50 neighbourhood community centers and playspaces, out of which 80% are managed by citizens: it's not such a rare thing. The problem is that when we talk about education we're very quick to generate a binary opposition between the private and the public.

It is the activists and parents themselves who push for change and new policies concerning early childhood, and it's often them – still close enough to Barcelona en Comú after many of them had participated very actively in drawing up the electoral programme of 2015 – who expect a municipal

government to produce new commons frameworks. The families who pioneered radical collective childcare infrastructures after 2011 are now organizing around primary schools, making Bcomús second mandate a key opportunity to promote continuity across commons-based and public education. Transversal and transgenerational transmission of childcare commons knowledges is a key issue: both across institutional typologies, linking public and commons, as well as within and across commons infrastructures, since new groups often find themselves reinventing the wheel, when they could learn so much from predecessors. A network like PEPI sets out to address both levels.

The right to play in the city: Interweaving public and community space

The new municipalists' preferred strategy for democratizing the city with and for children has so far been more focussed on the habitational and relational spheres and on urban planning (Zechner and Rübner Hansen, 2015).[7] The 'playable city' (*Ciutat Jugable*) (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, 2018) is a concept taken from the Italian pedagogue Francesco Tonucci and centers on rendering urban public space child-friendly and 'playable' as a whole (Institut de la Infancia, 2016). This does not mean more gated playgrounds, but focuses on valorizing the democratizing force of children in public space. Lucía Zandigiacomi, a mother, activist and cooperative urban planner of Poble Sec has contributed to the policy via workshops. At the Comunes y Crianza Colloquium, she points out how the very nature of space can change:

> There are studies that say that if there's kids playing in the streets then neighbourhoods are more thriving, the life and health of the community that lives in the neighbourhood is better, the relations between neighbours are better. This is a bid to create unity in public space. I think upon a first reflection we could exchange this idea of 'making a public space/making a space public' for 'communitarian space' as a place of encounter.

Reclaiming urban space for everyday life and sociality – by removing commercial enclosures and toxic and dangerous obstacles like cars – is key for enabling resilient communities and commons. The neighbourhood, as a vital dimension for the commoning of care and childcare amongst many other

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7   Mayor Ada Colau (2019) interpellates children as 'allies and agents of change', giving them platforms and tasking them with co-designing spaces.

things, needs ample spaces for play, chatter, sociality, rest and slow movement. Poble Sec's care networks thrive on squares, streets, parks and playgrounds, as spaces of encounter between people of different backgrounds. The mothers, *grupos de crianza* as well as municipality have a myriad ways of activating such encounters: the former run free markets for kid's clothes in a square, the latter periodically bring free play tents to squares. Here too the possibilities for learning and synergies are ample and alive.

By way of concluding: Redefining subjecthood

Looking at childcare through the lens of commons and care feminisms, I have sought to relay some of the embodied and situated understandings that the vivid political moment between Spain's 15M movement and the 'new municipalisms' has brought forth (see also Zechner, 2021). This cycle of political experimentation, and its politics of the commons, have been variously analysed and exemplified through the lens of policies and political alliances yet largely failed to be understood in their reproductive, embodied and everyday dimensions. Its feminist strategies have been rendered in English as a feminization of politics, rarely giving account of their micropolitical wealth – their very source of power and innovation in my view. Rather than looking for splits, dramas or successes/failures of the commons, I have sought to emphasize interdependence in my account of the dynamics and actors that make up the commons ecosystem at stake here, showing webs of mutual becoming and support that run across families, neighbourhood and city. As we have seen, childcare is more than an anecdotal aspect to this moment of political experimentation, it is a key horizon of feminist transformation and for sustainable commons (Garganté, 2017; Ezquerra and Mansilla, 2017).

I have tried to offer a radically (rootedly) transversal analysis here, for grasping how power is built and (re)negotiated collectively, from below and through care. For this we need perspectives and analyses that look across the domains of relational, organizational, habitational and representational power at the same time, in order to map and envision transversal strategies for change (Zechner and Rübner Hansen, 2015). Looking across informal networks, self-organized spaces and municipal policy-making vis-à-vis

childcare commoning enabled me to point to connections and shifts that build power transversally and sympoietically (which is not to say without tensions, differences or conflicts). The worlds of childcare commons described here exemplify ways in which different domains of practice and power can come to mutually strengthen and amplify one another. This affirmation of interdependence, as articulated with autonomy, is part and parcel of a broader feminist paradigm change that revolves around ethics, politics, economics and ecologies of care (Bärtsch et al., 2017; Gil, 2012; Pérez Orozco, 2014; Zechner, 2021), in the sense of a transformation of subjectivities (Guattari and Rolnik, 2006) as well as a re/definition of subjecthood (Pérez Orozco, 2014; Vega Solis, 2014; Zechner, 2016).

Bringing together feminist-autonomist and alterontological ways of understanding care, I want to propose a deeper questioning of subjects and objects in care. This implies understanding how mothers are powerful political subjects that interface with institutional dimensions in complex ways, but also how child-care[8] may feature children as *subjects* rather than just objects of care and politics. Just like politics, care is not just for those endowed with freedom of choice or independence. Grasping children as political subjects in this sense doesn't necessarily mean to ascribe them a free will or the capacity to reason, as in the enlightenment paradigm, but crucially also to ascribe them the capacity to care. This capacity is what the *grupos de crianza* and mother's networks seek to enhance across all of their levels of organization. The point of self-organized childcare is that it doesn't simply leave the question of children's subjectivities to pedagogy, but also engages organizational care in order to transform divisions of subjects and objects.

Childcare commoning thus shifts from being a matter merely of having children looked after, to one where children are commoners and co-care for the world we inhabit in common. *Child-care* can thus also transform how we think and do organization. It leads us to question the adultcentrism of much politics and research, and to ask why 'children are not seen as competent social actors', even 'commonly seen as an obstruction to work' and seen as

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[8] I introduce a hyphen here to emphasize the connection as well as space in between these two terms, when I question whether the 'child' here is a subject or object.

subaltern in the sense that they are seen but not heard, their speech acts not recognized (Kavanagh, 2013: 1488-1490). The *grupos de crianza* are more than just 'child friendly', they do more than just posit children as customers instead of subalterns, they focus not just on the child but on everyone else around, on creating social (and indeed at best more-than-human) ecologies that take children's influences and contributions into account (and not just their supposedly wilful ones). This challenges us to rethink political subjectivity and agency as guided by care ethics, towards more-than-adult politics and organization as well as more-than-human ecologies (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).

This is a deeply ecological matter. Speaking with Tronto's (2009) care theory, we must thus learn to see how children too *care-about*: indeed they are able to articulate this as soon as they begin to speak, yet they are not heard in their expressions of care. Coincidentally, children's expressions of care often concern plant and animal life and welfare, ascribing subjectivity to living things that are not just human: this sensitivity of children, this 'animism' that adults try so hard to exorcise from them, is a crucial element for ecological change. Further, aside from shifting attention from *taking-care-of* and *care-giving* as supposedly adult-only acts,[9] we need to develop much more deep and radical understandings of *care-receiving* as a form of interdependent agency. *Care-receiving* is often misconstrued as passive dependency, at least in 'dependent' subjects like children, people with disabilities, ill people who cannot construe their care-receiving as acts of consumption or choice. And yet we are all care-receivers. Those of us more reliant on care, whether old or young, know our needs best and are best placed to design processes and infrastructures of care. We often ignore how care-receivers reciprocate care, in sometimes singular ways. Child-care commoning crucially respects how kids want their needs met and encourages collaboration.

In Barcelona's childcare groups as well as feminist municipalisms, children are drawn into processes of everyday collaboration and co-design (of nursery

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[9]   Needless to say, children can also *take care of* tasks and do *care-giving* work where enabled, encouraged or obliged to.

or urban spaces), in dialogue with families, educators and planners. [10] Facilitating ways for children not just to co-decide but to co-care is a powerful way of nourishing liveable futures. This means enabling children to care in more than one modality, allowing them to articulate *caring-about*/concern with *taking-care-of*/taking action, with *care-giving*/sustaining, with *care-receiving*/being vulnerable, with *caring-with*/solidarity. Understanding children as care-full rather than care-free, and learning to foster and rethink care rather than merely think of protecting children, is a key dimension of the feminist and ecological approach emerging across the contexts I have mapped out above. A political-social as much as pedagogical methodology, this shift concerns organizational as well as relational dimensions.

In a similar epistemic and ontological shift, self-organization in our examples of childcare commoning here has turned out to always be sympoietic. The 'self' that organizes is always a larger, diffuse collective subject, rather than an autonomous unit. In the practices described here, be they at the level of informal networks, associations or policy making, there is no attempt at cutting out the noises, affects, complexities or 'others' of everyday life, in order to arrive at a more pure or efficient political subject. This realization is part and parcel of feminist epistemologies based in interdependency and vulnerability, embracing political subjectivities that look far beyond the liberal ideal of the white, independent male (Pérez Orozco, 2014; Vega Solis, 2014), and indeed beyond the human and individual (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Haraway, 2016). In this context, autonomy is no longer a fantasy of separateness or sovereignty, but a means to deal with various interdependencies and processes of co-emergence as one tries to self-govern. Self-organization or commoning are about carefully interweaving moments of autonomy and interdependence, and isn't assumed to happen beyond the realms of the public or indeed private. The approaches to commons

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[10]   Examples in urban space include children co-designing their playgrounds in 2018 as well as the participation of children in designing the Barcelona Zoo in 2017. Those are part of the larger vision of the *Ciutat Jugable* policy, based in redesigning urban space to make the city 'playable' and safe for children. Lucia Zandigiacomi has worked on this policy via the Raons Publiques urban planning cooperative (see https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/dretssocials/es/innovacion-social/ciudad-jugable).

(self)governance and public-commons partnerships we have seen here all go in this direction. When they then take care seriously, in its different phases, commons can avoid mystifying their own reproduction and develop sustainable micropolitics. Commoning care must never be separate from commoning collective power (Zechner, 2021).

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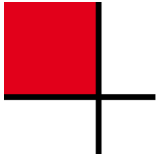
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Digital commons, the political and social change: Towards an integrated strategy of counter-hegemony furthering the commons

Alexandros Kioupkiolis

abstract

The peer-to-peer (P2P) or digital commons school has propounded a 'socio-centric' view of historical transformation by advancing a far-reaching argument which delves into long-term innovations in the economy, technology and the mode of production, beyond digitally facilitated political mobilization. This paper reflects on the appearances of the political in the digital commons literature and puts forward an argument with three main planks. First, the prevalent understanding of social change in this body of thought, particularly at its earlier stages, is misguided by a technocratic conception of historical transitions. In a second, recent stage, proponents of the peer-to-peer 'revolution' acknowledged the decisive role of politics in instigating structural shifts and sketched out a political project for the commons. Yet the reintroduction of the political is still wanting, calling for a fully-fledged strategy of hegemony which deeply integrates technology, political economy and political activity proper. The paper sketches out such a counter-hegemonic strategy by drawing on the political thought of Antonio Gramsci.

Introduction

At the dawn of the new millennium, certain theories of digital commons and peer production – or 'commons-based peer production' (Bauwens, 2005a,

2005b, 2009; Benkler, 2006, 2011; Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006; Bollier, 2008) – made the case that new digital technologies are capable of eliciting structural social change, which would profoundly reshape the dominant modalities of social organization in the economy, culture and politics. They would give rise to an entire new social configuration, in which organizational patterns of free collaboration, sharing, openness, plurality and collective self-government will occupy center stage. From the outset, these early accounts of digital commons and peer-to-peer bear significantly on the politics of social organization along three dimensions. First, they argue that an epochal shift is underway, fostering radical democratic values across all social fields: individual autonomy combined with enhanced collaboration, participation, collective self-rule, pluralism, mutuality and openness. Second, they outline a certain political process of societal transformation and historical change, which is powered by digital technologies. Finally, they envision a refoundation of the political system in the narrow sense and of prevalent modes of governance, more broadly.

The present paper sets out to shed light on these appearances of the political – the politics of organizing production, self-governance and historical transition – in specific fields of the digital commons literature and puts forward an argument with three main planks. To begin with, the prevalent understanding of social change in this particular body of thought, especially at its earlier stages, misses out on the political in crucial respects, misguided by a technocratic conception of epochal shifts. The emergence of a new mode of digital, networked production, legal reforms and 'social entrepreneurship', i.e., technological, legal, and managerial fixes, are considered the mainsprings that occasion historical transformation on a large scale. Typically, political processes of collective dis-identification with hegemonic relations and new identification, movement-building, issues of political organization, political struggles around the state, intense conflicts with political and economic elites receive less consideration.

In a second, recent stage, salient proponents of the peer-to-peer 'revolution' (Bauwens and Kostakis, 2014; Bauwens et al., 2019; Bollier and Conaty, 2014; P2P Foundation, 2017) have come to acknowledge the decisive role of political organization in instigating structural shifts and they have sketched out a political project to underpin the expansion of the commons. Yet – this is the

third and key plank of the argument – their reintroduction of the political in the envisioned process of system change is still wanting, calling for a fully-fledged strategy of hegemony, which deeply integrates technology, political economy and political activity proper. The paper sketches out such a counter-hegemonic strategy of organizing for societal transformation by drawing on the political thought of Antonio Gramsci. Besides any specific policy proposals which are now put forward in abundance by several proponents of digital commons, what is required for broader transformations towards the commons is a potent collective actor, a new *hegemon*, which will be able to reverse prevalent policies which serve dominant elites and powerful interests by plundering and privatizing the common and the public.

There is a large body of research into the impact of new digital technologies on political mobilization and organization (see e.g. Castells, 2012; Feenstra et al., 2017; Forestal, 2021; Gerbaudo, 2012, 2017, 2018; Tufekci, 2018). This has shown how digital media upgrade the communicative power of people to speak for themselves and to take political initiatives. New social software and distribution systems have sparked an autonomous formation of social networks, increasing connectivity in our societies and enabling leaderless and horizontal, non-hierarchical movements to get off the ground. However, most political action through the digital commons has not crystallized in enduring forms and has not attained systemic socio-political effects or even the egalitarianism and flat hierarchies that it claims (Tufecki, 2018). Even 'digital parties' (Gerbaudo, 2018) do not seem to escape the conventional molds and limits of 20th century parties (see e.g. Kioupkiolis, 2016, on Podemos).

The peer-to-peer (P2P) school has advanced, in effect, a broader argument which is not focussed on digitally facilitated political mobilization but delves into long-term innovations in the economy, technology, the mode of production and social relations in these fields (see e.g. Bauwens, 2009, 2011; Benkler, 2006; Bollier, 2008), propounding a view of historical transformation which is 'socio-centric' and 'immanent'. Political 'revolutions', in the sense of a radical re-institution of political systems, are held to be conditional upon earlier, economic, technological and social trends. In certain respects, their line of thought is akin to Hardt and Negri's (2004, 2009, 2017) reading of our era, according to which 'immaterial labor' and the 'common' produced by a self-organized 'multitude' across the world are increasingly hegemonic and

potent, laying the groundwork for an epochal leap beyond the empire of capital. This contention has come in for heavy criticism by several theorists and analysts (see e.g. Caffentzis, 2013; De Angelis, 2007; Rancière, 2010), who have castigated the idea of an already organized 'multitude', countering that the political force of struggle for the commons remains yet to be properly constructed, as the laboring strata of the population are still deeply caught up in capital's regimes of domination and exploitation.

The 'digital commons' or P2P theory of an imminent transition to a new, freer and more collaborative mode of social organization rests on more empirical detail and has received less attention from political theory, despite its political implications and its pronounced 'political turn' in recent years. The present paper contributes to the critical discussion of this particular account of world-changing processes in our times by arguing that attention to the social micro-physics and the actual tendencies of historical mutation can further the cause of democratic empowerment. Technological and economic innovations (P2P), the gestation of new schemes of organization in the womb of existing social systems are components of a multi-layered strategy of counter-hegemony for democratic renewal. But they do not suffice. They need to be inscribed into a more nuanced and complex scheme of political strategizing. A hegemonic activity of collective subject-formation, all-round struggle and political organization is the decisive supplement. By critically considering a digital commons' take on 'revolution', we will set out this argument, which is also relevant for Hardt and Negri's grand historical thesis and any other contemporary aspirations to deep social renovation which bet a lot on new technologies and developments in the political economy of late capitalism.

Introducing digital commons, P2P and new democratic revolution

The 'commons' or 'common-pool resources' (Ostrom, 1990: 30, 90) or 'commons-based peer production' (Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006: 395) comprise goods and resources that are collectively used, shared and produced. The common good is managed in egalitarian and participatory ways by the communities which manufacture or who own it. Crucially, what marks off certain goods as 'commons' is the collective and near-egalitarian mode of

self-organizing their production, management and distribution.

There are many different types of common goods, from natural common-pool resources (fishing grounds, irrigation canals etc.) to common productive assets, such as workers' co-operatives, and digital goods, such as open source software (Ostrom, 1990; Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006). Their common denominator is precisely that they involve shared resources which are governed, produced and distributed through collective participation, on terms which break with the logic of both private-corporate and state-public property (Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006; Hardt and Negri, 2012; Ostrom, 1990).

In her breakthrough in the contemporary research on the commons, Elinor Ostrom (1990) dwelled on natural *Common Pool Resources* (CPRs), which are small-scale and located in a single country. Their communities have worked out collective norms of proper conduct, which secure their long-term interests. The homogeneity, the close ties and the boundedness of the relevant communities underlie the effective self-organization of the commons in these cases (Ostrom, 1990, 2008). Since the turn of the century, however, with the spread of new digital technologies and the Internet, a large body of thought and action has shifted attention to the 'immaterial' commons of culture, information and digital networks (Bauwens, 2005b; Benkler, 2006; Bollier, 2008). Technological change has originated new modes of production and collaboration, which realize novel patterns of association and self-governance. These new modes reinvent and disseminate the commons as a culture of co-creation, social sharing and pooling productive knowledge and other resources on a global level, beyond their traditional settings of fisheries, forests and grazing grounds (Bauwens, 2005b; Bauwens et al., 2019; Benkler, 2006; Bollier, 2008; Frischmann 2013, 2014).

The new digital commons display considerable affinities with the 'traditional' ecological commons explored by Elinor Ostrom (1990). They constitute a tripartite system which is made up of a self-governing community of users and producers; a common good, ranging from free software and music to encyclopaedias and social communication platforms; and equitable, self-legislated norms of access, use and collective self-management (Bauwens, 2005b; Benkler, 2006; Bollier, 2008). They likewise nourish a culture of decentralized collaboration, co-operative nonmarket production, sharing or

'pooling', creativity, concern with the common good and collective autonomy. They stage thus an alternative to both the profit-driven, competitive practices of the market and the top-down, hierarchical command of the state (Bauwens, 2011; Benkler, 2006, 2011; Bollier, 2008).

However, they radically depart from the historical commons of nature highlighted by Ostrom in politically salient ways. The goods that they manufacture and use are not depletable and rivalrous (Bauwens, 2005b; Benkler, 2006). Their consumption by one person does not make them less available for consumption by others (Benkler, 2006). In effect, they are often antirival, that is, their increasingly shared use yields increasing benefits to all users (see Olleros, 2018). Second, their communities appear to be internally heterogeneous, open, inclusionary and potentially global rather than local, homogeneous and bounded (Bauwens, 2005b; Bauwens et al., 2019). Finally, and foremost from the standpoint of democratic politics and change, 'digital commoners' claim that the networked information commons revolutionize the commons paradigm. They actually incarnate a new, emergent mode of peer-to-peer production, which promises to install decentralized nonmarket co-operation at the core of contemporary economy, society and government, reconstructing a wild diversity of fields, from music to business, law, government, education and science, after the logic of open, plural, creative, collaborative and participatory commons (Bauwens et al., 2019; Benkler, 2006; Bollier, 2008).

Hence, advocates of digital commons and peer production visualize a broader system change or historical paradigm shift. This is presumably facilitated today by the rise of the network society and new technological developments around the Internet, which open up the horizon of a more democratic, commons-based society. Their thesis is that the activity of instituting new social orders, which is political in a fundamental sense (Arendt, 1998; Lefort, 1986), can lean today on advanced peer-to-peer (P2P) technologies in the contemporary machinic infrastructure and economy.

Yochai Benkler (2006, 2011) has been among the first prophets of the new socio-economic system, which is allegedly taking shape in digitally networked environments. His style of reasoning is echoed in the earlier writings of Bauwens (2005a, 2005b, 2009) and Bollier (2008). In sum, new digital

commons pioneer an alternative mode of collective organization whereby strangers collaborate, interact and self-manage their activity on a global scale. This new modality has been spawned by the latest technologies of the Internet, the distributed digital networks in which individuals can collaborate directly without passing through obligatory nodes. The new, digital mode of production generates knowledge and other cultural goods by mobilizing patterns of co-ordination that do not rely on market pricing and managerial hierarchies. At the same time, digital commons fashion new forms of social relationship, interaction and virtuous subjectivities (Bauwens, 2005b; Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006; Bollier, 2008).

Peer-to-peer (P2P) captures, more specifically, the new, digitally enabled systems in which any human agent can participate in the making and the maintenance of a shared resource, while benefiting from it. Signature examples include *Wikipedia*, open source and free software projects, open design communities and community currencies (Bauwens, 2005b; Bauwens et al., 2019). Through P2P practices, people voluntarily and cooperatively construct a commons according to the communist principle: 'from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs' (Bauwens, 2005b).

P2P projects produce use value which satisfies directly specific needs and wants, rather than exchange value, that is, the value of commodities in market exchanges through which profit can be made. They do so through free cooperation, rather than by coercing the producers. They constitute, thus, a 'third mode of production', which diverges both from market/profit-driven production and from public/state management. P2P systems are self-managed by the community of peers itself rather than by state or market hierarchies. Hence, they also practice a 'third mode of governance'. And users on a global scale have free access to the use value that is being created, through new regimes of common property. This is a 'third form of property', distinct from both private and state property (Bauwens, 2005b, 2014).

In terms of its political implications, Benkler (2006) has argued from early on that networked peer production broadens the horizon of the feasible by nurturing pivotal democratic values of individual autonomy, democratic participation and social justice. Bauwens (2005b) has likewise affirmed that the 'third mode of governance' in peer production is 'characterized by flexible

hierarchies and structures based on merit that are used to enable participation'. Digital commons promote transparent processes, consent, direct access, participation, individual freedoms and respect for community norms. We can imagine these values infusing 'conventional politics' with an 'ethic of open accountability' and consent. Their political sensibilities can further 'freedom without anarchy, control without government, consensus without power' (Lessing quoted in Bollier, 2008: 9).

To draw out their political effects, we should notice, first, how the new digital commons of information and culture embody and cultivate other forms of community, which tend to be more open, free, diverse and egalitarian. Peer production is situated 'in a libertarian and abundance-oriented global network with equipotential rights of participation of everyone in every field of human endeavor' (Bauwens, 2005b). No one owns the collective project, and no one can exclude others from its use or its co-production (Bauwens et al., 2019; Benkler, 2006; Bollier, 2008). It should be noted, however, that in recent years this celebration of openness, egalitarianism, inclusion, diversity and flat hierarchies in digital commons has been increasingly questioned in the case of *Wikipedia* and more broadly (see e.g. Lerner and Lomi, 2017; Tkacz, 2015; Tufekci, 2018).

Wikipedia illustrates the new communities of the digital commons which have sprung up at an advanced stage of Internet development, branded 'Web 2.0', which 'amounts to a worldview that celebrates *open participation* as a way to create valuable collective resources' (Bollier, 2008: 133; emphasis added). The building blocks of these digital commons are a shared sense of common purpose, free interaction, transparency, collective judgement, and mutual peer review, which account for the efficiency of collaborative activity and the quality of the common good (Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006).

The bounds of such digitally enabled communities are permeable, and hierarchies tend to be flatter and reversible. As opposed to the local eco-commons, collaboration and interaction in the digital context can spread across social and national boundaries, across geographical space and political divisions. The digital commons can thus fruitfully couple translocal cooperation and commoning with diversity, individual autonomy, singularity and creativity (Bauwens et al., 2019; Kostakis and Ramos, 2017).

The second political force of new digital technologies lies in the democratizing effects that they can induce within the wider public sphere today, despite their several limitations. The Internet provides individuals with access to global publics, affording multiple outlets for the public expression of individual views, for critical and diversified information, for investigative journalism, for extensive, continuous debate among citizens, and for political organization. Fundamentally, the new communication technologies enable many-to-many communication to an unprecedented extent. They can catalyze, thus, massive self-organization up to a global scale, a potential that has been realized in many late mobilizations, including the Arab Spring and the Spanish 15M movement in 2011 (Bauwens et al., 2019; Castells, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012).

The third political dimension of commons-based peer production (CBPP) lies in the core political values of democracy which CBPP itself enacts, such as participatory government, free collaboration, equal freedom in the co-production of collective processes and projects, individual autonomy and creativity (Bauwens, 2005b). Peer projects themselves are self-managed by the community of peers. Authority to act lies with individual actors. There is no fixed authoritative center – of a state bureaucracy or firm managers – which dictates and co-ordinates action. Hence, the 'third mode of governance' in digital commons is directed by open input and a participatory process of coordinating work (Benkler, 2006; Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006). Peer governance may also involve a 'transparent heterarchy', whereby maintainers or 'editors' undertake quality control and refuse contributions which imperil the integrity of the system (Bauwens, 2005b; Bauwens et al., 2019).

This appears to be, in a nutshell, the political thrust of commons-based peer production according to its champions. The peer production of digital commons is suffused with radical democratic values and practices, which it both presupposes and it further cultivates: individual autonomy (self-selection and self-reliance), collaboration in and through diversity, reciprocity, active participation and creativity in decentralized settings which are free of rigid hierarchies (Benkler, 2011; Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006).

The techno-politics of digital commons: missing out on the political

Benkler (2006) and Bauwens (2005b, 2009, 2014) have assigned to technological developments a pivotal role in veering the course of history towards the commons. As Benkler (2016: 18) has put it: 'I place at the core of the shift the technical and economic characteristics of computer networks and information'.

The expansion of the digital commons since the turn of the century is grounded in the widespread access to networks and personal computers, which have made possible a decentralized, free collaboration in the production of information and cultural goods. Furthermore, the Internet and peer-production processes were built upon deliberately designed architectures, which allow them to pool diverse individual efforts. At the basis of these technical and organizational architectures lies 'modularity', the capacity to integrate many small and specific contributions through the technical infrastructure, through social and legal norms, and even through meritocratic hierarchies which enjoy a voluntary respect (Benkler, 2006; see also Kostakis, 2019).

Yet neither Benkler nor Bauwens are naïve believers in technological determinism. It is the interaction between technological-economic 'feasibility spaces' with social responses to them, in the guise of institutional regulations and social practices, which configures the prevailing structures and modes of life in a certain period (Benkler, 2006). For Bauwens (2005b), transformative practices that will carry peer production beyond the 'immaterial sphere' in which it was born, will not spring forth automatically. They call for the deployment of concrete tactics and strategy (see also Bollier, 2008).

Currently, moreover, Bauwens explicitly holds on to a 'mild techno-determinist' view, according to which technology is not fully deterministic or univocal in its effects. The Internet has widely distributed three paramount capacities. First, a capacity for many-to-many communication. Second, a capacity for massive self-organization that rests on permissionless communication. Finally, the creation and distribution of value in new ways,

which stem from the enhanced ability to self-organize. These amplified capacities are claimed and contested by capital, governments and civil society, which can employ them for different purposes. Bauwens has outlined, thus, a deliberate project of social change, which would promote a commons-based political economy (Bauwens et al., 2019).

However, to glimpse a *lack of the political* – as massive mobilization, political organization and struggles in and over the state – in the earlier digital commons literature, it is worth plunging into some details of Benkler's and Bauwens' picture of the political field where the battle of the commons is fought out. This 'political arena' stages 'the making of copyrights, patents and similar exclusive rights' (Benkler, 2006: 456). It pits mainly rent-seeking private industries, such as Microsoft and Walt Disney, lobbyists, governments and courts, against individuals and groups developing or using open-source material. On the commons side, the battle is waged through public advocacy, the introduction of commons licences (Creative Commons etc.), open source material and peer-to-peer networks, and the disregard for exclusive property rights through file sharing etc. In the closing remarks of Benkler's seminal tract-manifesto on CBPP, we are told that 'Perhaps these changes will be the foundation of a true transformation toward more liberal and egalitarian societies' (Benkler, 2006: 473). So, in the end, the key motors of the transition towards a commons-based society are technology and the economy, assisted by law and the initiatives of groups in civil society which disseminate their alternative practices.

Bauwens concluded one of his earliest accounts of a 'Common-ist' evolution of P2P) with a list of the key conditions that will enable the new commons to flourish more broadly (Bauwens, 2005b). All these terms are technological and economic or financial. Despite allusions to 'Common-ist' movements, we are left completely in the dark as to how these will be built, how they will reach a critical mass, how they will topple the 'neoliberal dominance' and how they will reform the state and the market. Hence, Benkler and Bauwens (along with Bollier, 2008) converge on *a techno-legal and economic approach* when they envision a historical shift in the direction of the commons. Any 'political and social phase transition' can occur only when a sufficient number of 'digital knowledge workers' will revolt against the limits foisted on the hyperproductivity of peer production by outmoded capitalist practices

(Bauwens, 2011).

This is the epitome of the technocratic framing of the commons which has prevailed from the beginning of the millennium in the digital commons discourse. Its motto has been 'change things by producing a new model which makes the existing model obsolete' (Bollier, 2008: 294), not by fighting existing reality. Historical transformation is seen mostly not as deliberately political, rebellious and oppositional, but as incremental, immanent – arising from within actual social relations and heightened productivity, and prefigurative – transcending the old social order by foreshadowing a new world to come (Bauwens, 2009; Bollier, 2008). If one takes away the revolutionary flame and the vanguard role of the industrial proletariat, the idea of an immanent transformation which issues from technological and economic evolution and is attributed to rising productivity is, actually, a very classic Marxian one, summarized in the famous 1859 preface to *A contribution to the critique of political economy.*

A narrowly techno-economic perspective on historical transformation is likely to lose sight of the power politics of hegemony, through which dominant values, concepts and power relations construct a wide-ranging system which pervades an entire social formation and would require collective counter-hegemonic contestation to challenge and reconfigure it. Critical theorists and analysts (see e.g. Berlant, 2011; Dardot and Laval, 2013; De Angelis, 2010), have noted how individualist, competitive, consumerist and a-political or conservative values exert their grip on the mind of broad social sectors of the middle and the working classes, impeding thus the formation of majoritarian social blocs and alliances that can act to transcend the present hegemonic order. The hold of neoliberal capital on both the activity and the minds of commoners is now recognized explicitly by Bauwens et al. (2019), preventing commoners from turning towards new, commons-centered social systems.

In a deeply relevant way, critics have shown how the alternative practices, relations and values of digital commons are vulnerable to co-optation or corrosion by hegemonic values, forces and institutions, underscoring thus the need for deliberate collective orientation, organization and action. For instance, 'sharing platforms' relying on digital technologies, such as

Couchsurfing, have introduced explicit or implicit price mechanisms, which corrode the 'alternative' commons values of pooling and sharing for mutual benefit (Ossewaarde and Reijers, 2017). Opposition to such practices drives commoners to alienate themselves on a personal basis and to migrate to new niche platforms without collectively resisting and affecting the broader value system and practices of 'neoliberal hegemony in a meaningful way' (Ossewaarde and Reijers, 2017: 618). Likewise, the hacker ethos, which opposes proprietary software and associated intellectual property rights, surveillance and censorship, has been partly 'hacked' itself by corporate forces and state institutions which integrate hacker products and processes (modular software codes, mesh networks etc.) in capitalist infrastructures that lie outside their control (Delfanti and Soderberg, 2015).

Hence, a techno-economic imaginary of social change is likely to show little concern for the challenge of organizing broad-based socio-political movements in robust *counter-hegemonic* blocs and patterns of collective action which could effectively counter the power relations and values of vested interests and state elites, and would strategically forward an alternative project of social reconstruction. The impotence of both technology and law in reshuffling the order of power in contemporary societies has been partly grasped by 'digital commoners' themselves (see Benkler, 2006; Bollier, 2008).

The next sections will argue, thus, that furthering social transformation with the aid of digital commons would require a broad-ranging politics of counter-hegemonic contest, which would integrate but also exceed what critics and advocates of digital commoning have so far envisaged as 'the creation of a politics of digital commons: a political process of organizing digital commoners in ways that would allow them to democratically govern the digital platforms through which they interact' (Ossewaarde and Reijers, 2017: 623). This conception of a politics of digital commons has been endorsed by Kostakis in his 'In defense of digital commoning' (Kostakis, 2018).

Recent political awakenings in digital commons and the need for an integrated strategy

In recent years, a growingly political drive has inflected the thought of Bauwens, the P2P Foundation and their fellow travellers. To illustrate, Bauwens and Kostakis (2014) have come around and seen that the free software and culture movements lack the political philosophy that would set them on the course of a commons-based social order, and they are often prone to the start-up business model. Accordingly, 'The question is whether Commons-based peer production...can generate the institutional capacity and alliances needed to break the political power of the old order' (Bauwens and Kostakis, 2014: 357).

In the latest work of Bauwens and his partners, antagonisms between commons and capitalism itself, and the ensuing necessity of a counter-hegemonic struggle to pave the way for a commons-based society, come into sharp relief. Commoners should strive for their autonomization from the capitalist economy in order to reverse the current balance of power (Bauwens and Kostakis, 2014; Bauwens et al. 2019). This is the definition of a politics of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971; Laclau, 2000a, 2000b) which raises its head in the horizon of current commons thinking.

Significantly for the 'politicization' of the P2P technology, Bauwens and his collaborators have taken pains to more sharply disentangle capitalist from common-ist orientations in the contemporary muddled landscape, where peer production is intertwined with capitalist firms and markets in complex ways. 'Adopting this or that form of P2P technological infrastructure [e.g. the models of *Bitcoin* or *Wikipedia*] is the locus of social conflict because the choice between them has consequences for what may or may not be possible' (Bauwens et al., 2019: 6).

Contemporary 'cognitive capitalism' appropriates and commodifies information, data, design and knowledge for private profit and capital accumulation. On the contrary, the global and local commons are 'generative'. They create added value for communities and the environment by mutualizing resources, knowledge and products. *Wikipedia,* for instance, builds a global knowledge resource open to all. *GNU/Linux* yields a global

alternative to proprietary operating systems. Yet, CBPP is still only the prototype of an emergent mode of production, which now depends on capital that takes advantage of P2P for its own gain (Bauwens et al., 2019).

'Transvestment' is a strategy of 'reverse co-optation' that Bauwens and Kostakis commend in order to transfer value and resources from the capitalist market to the sphere of the commons (see Bauwens and Kostakis, 2014). Another key prong of their broader strategy for a commons transition turns on the development of commons in the domain of the services and 'physical' production, in which free, non-reciprocal sharing is impossible or unfair. Hence, reciprocity rules should be established and fostered through open cooperativist schemes of production and allocation. As a full mode of production, commons-based peer production allies the free and open 'new' commons of digital technologies with cooperativism (Bauwens et al., 2019). A third new component is 'cosmolocalism', which knits together local commons in translocal networks of collaboration and harnesses the open resources of global digital webs (knowledge, software and design) for more localized manufacturing. The objective is to enhance ecological sustainability and to assemble global counterpowers by weaving transnational networks of local commons (Bauwens et al., 2019; Kostakis and Ramos, 2017).

Transvestment, open cooperatives and cosmolocalism are still predominantly economic, technical and technological practices. But they are politicized insofar as they integrated into a *conscious struggle for a new hegemony* of the commons. Noticeably, however, the latest writings of Bauwens, his P2P Foundation and his collaborators (see e.g. Bauwens and Kostakis, 2014; P2P Foundation, 2017) evince an explicit appreciation of political mediations in a narrower sense. They affirm that 'a successful commons transition strategy requires tackling the issue of political organization and influencing the form of the state head on' (Bauwens et al., 2019: 42). Such a strategy aims at a radically reformed state that will become the steward of the commons, and it pursues progressive coalitions on the urban, regional, state and international level. These alliances will push for policies that boost the capacity of citizens and commoners for autonomous life and self-government (Bauwens et al., 2019: 65). The spreading enclosures of neoliberalism, the authoritarian policies of alt-right governments, precarity and austerity compress the space which remains available for commoning by productive communities. Hence,

it is imperative to combine technological and economic commoning (the pooling of resources, open cooperatives, open-source design etc.) with institutional engagements (P2P Foundation, 2017).

The 'partner state', which would end its subservience to the capitalist markets and would devolve its top-down, centralized power, will be forced by social movements and progressive political coalitions in alliance with the commons and CBPP. These movements and coalitions will gain a real leverage on the state through radical democratic practices, grassroots participation and public-commons partnerships. But, in order to take on global challenges such as climate change, the reformed state should be complemented with transnational institutions and networks (Bauwens et al., 2019; P2P Foundation, 2017).

While this political strategy for social renewal is multi-scalar, it singles out the city context as particularly apt for initiating commons transitions. Citizens-led municipal coalitions in cities like Barcelona enact the commons politics of the future as they are keen on citizen participation, transparency, open-source technologies and the forging of international networks (P2P Foundation, 2017). Moreover, city administrations can help set up commons-based platforms, such as *Fairbnb* (in Amsterdam). They can build commons repositories of knowledge, software and design, they can 'commonify' urban services, and so on. Hence, in recent years, P2P researchers and activists have put together detailed institutional proposals for the advancement of digital commons with the aid of city administrations, which would set up 'Commons city labs' fostering commons initiatives, legal support services, physical incubator infrastructure, a bank for the commons, and so on (see Bauwens and Onzia, 2017). In turn, transnational coalitions of cities can put in place translocal and global pro-commons institutions (Bauwens et al., 2019).

At the local and regional level, 'Chambers of commons' and 'Assemblies of the commons' could fuel the switch towards a commons-centric economy, society and polity. The Chambers would bring together various commoners, would give voice to commons-oriented enterprises and would provide a forum to exchange experiences and ideas. The Assembly would advance a political agenda for the commons, it would work for public-commons partnerships, it would accrue civic power and would bolster social and political forces which

further a commons transition. Assemblies and chambers of the commons could assemble the required translocal and transnational networks by forming federations at higher scales. The pro-commons movements and institutions would coalesce with new political organizations, such as the *Barcelona en Comú* platform, and new or older political parties, such as the *Pirates* and the Greens. The objective would be to weld together majoritarian commons-oriented coalitions of specific forces of the commons and existing political actors, who would converge over a commons agenda at all levels up to the global scale, in order to amass counter-hegemonic power and to effect global systemic change (Bauwens et al., 2019; P2P Foundation, 2017).

What is sketched out through these political guidelines is, in effect, a strategy of counter-hegemony that configures a new collective agency for change. In the classic manner of Gramsci's and Laclau's hegemony (Gramsci, 1971; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), we are called upon to diffuse a new discourse and vision in order to push forward a 'commons transition'. Woven around the nodal point or signifier of the 'commons', this innovative discourse will articulate three core signifiers of progressive political trends today: 'openness', 'fairness', and ecological 'sustainability'. The strategy will also compose practices of grassroots participation, institutional reform and the expansion of the commons (P2P Foundation, 2017). In order to advance the cause of the commons today, the strategic objective would be to craft convergences and synergies between pro-commons actors in the economy, political expressions of these actors and cognate emancipatory movements or political forces (P2P Foundation, 2017).

However, a fully-fledged politics of counterhegemony would require a deeper politicization of the commons than contemporary P2P advocates seem willing to promote. The constitution of a new massive political actor vying for hegemony, whose need is now vocally acknowledged by Bauwens and his partners, should be consistently pursued as a decisive activity and should not be expected to occur as a more or less 'spontaneous' outcome of the growth of CBPP. Such a spontaneity is still intimated in some moments of their argument, in ways which tend to underestimate the strenuous political effort that still needs to be put into shaping a collective subject for the commons:

> The expansion of the commons…in turn forms a new basis for more powerful movements… Therefore, social movements, which emerge from the shift towards CBPP will exert pressure on the state. (Bauwens et al., 2019: 52)

> There is ample data to support the kind of prefigurative existence of a growing number of commoners who could form the basis of a…subject at the forefront of this phase transition – *a very strong start.* (P2P Foundation, 2017: 47; emphasis added)

Hence, the rudiments of a counter-hegemonic strategy for assembling collective power, which are drawn by Bauwens and his P2P partners, should be further worked out and amplified by tapping into political theories of hegemony and the formation of hegemonic collective subjects. In this process, the current P2P strategy for historical transition should be further politicized, bringing counter-hegemonic politics to bear on CBPP, social forces and prefiguration. Today, Bauwens and his partners (Bauwens et al., 2019) subscribe to Kojin's Karatani theory of epochal transformation, according to which political and social revolutions occur in the aftermath of structural changes rather than being prior conditions of such changes. In the same manner as the growth of capitalist markets within feudalism antedated social and political revolutions and enabled eventually capitalism to gain ascendancy,

> [there] have to be commoners for the commons to become the core of the next system… The current form of transition, therefore, entails strengthening the autonomy of the commons modality…and makes it differ from the previous approaches that were (and still are) based on the conquest of state power by classical 'labour movements'. (Bauwens et al., 2019: 50)

This strategic premise translates more specifically into a prioritization of economic and productive activity around the commons (Bauwens et al., 2019). This is a lop-sided perspective which underrates the part of intellectual, cultural and political agency in bringing about paradigm shifts. It also misleadingly extrapolates from a singular historical incident – the rise of capitalism – to human history in general and the future. Even if it accurately renders the rise of capitalist society out of the womb of feudalism, there can be no certitude about the historical reiteration of the birth of capitalism. This mindset fails also to catch sight of political activity beyond the formal political institutions and classic political revolutions or mass movements. In an enlarged sense, politics implies social action upon existing social relations

and interactions, which is not confined to the narrower sphere of the 'political system' of government or the state and can take place in any social field and on any scale.

Importantly, the perspective in question deflects attention away from the conscious political activity that must unfold within any social space, including the economy and technology, to reconstitute subjectivities, relations and practices so as to effectively swerve them towards deeper democracy and game-changing objectives. Without such political agency it is unlikely that subjectivities, economic practices, relations and technologies, which remain attached to hegemonic structures and suffused with ruling values and ideas will 'spontaneously' act to erode hegemonic systems.

Nurturing such a consciousness and a new social imaginary around the commons is a precondition for actual commoners to commit themselves to objectives and modes of organization which would occasion the transition towards to a commons-based society. Otherwise, the current hegemonic grip of neoliberal capital on both the activity and the minds of commoners, recognized now explicitly by Bauwens et al. (2019), is likely to maintain its hold and to prevent commoners from turning towards new, commons-centred social systems. Propagating a commons-centric imaginary and re-edifying subjectivity are quintessential political endeavours, which call for a dedicated collective agency and political organization to orchestrate them. The recent work of P2P proponents and other advocates of digital commons (see e.g. Wittel, 2013, on the basic income) has advanced detailed policy plans and specific political or economic measures which could effectively contribute to a broader social transition towards a commons-centred society. But to realize such pro-commons policy agendas what is essentially required is currently lacking: a collective, powerful agent of change to alter the balance of forces and to push for significant state reforms which would promote the commons against and beyond bureaucratic, top-down state logics, neoliberal privatization policies and predatory markets.

Towards an integrated, political-material strategy of counter-hegemony that furthers the commons

Antonio Gramsci was among the first to outline such a comprehensive, truly 'multi-modal' strategy of (counter-)hegemony. His first insight is that concrete and many-sided political action holds the key to a new social formation. This political action should also take on the state, but it should be firmly anchored in civil society and begin from there (Gramsci, 1971). In this respect, Gramsci displays close affinities with Bauwens (2005a, 2005b, 2011) and Hardt and Negri (2004, 2009), who place the main accent on socio-economic transformations, but with a crucial twist. In addition to work on new economic practices and technologies in civil society, a properly political agency is in order, which will skew social activity towards a broader direction of radical change, will co-ordinate dispersed, heterogeneous forces and initiatives, and will put together a broad-based socio-political front by configuring new, inclusive collective identities (Gramsci, 1971). In all these respects, Gramsci's strategic reasoning can remedy the lacunae of strategic thought brought out above.

For Gramsci, the historical formula of revolution must extend to 'civil hegemony', which intervenes in social relations to realign the balance of forces in a multiplicity of social spaces before taking state power. In these dense and multi-layered social structures, the morality and the worldview of hegemonic groups have deeply infused the values and the common sense of subaltern social strata. According to Gramsci, then, in socio-historical contexts of increased differentiation under a given hegemonic structure, a bloc of social forces can set in motion a process of radical social renewal only by becoming first the moral and intellectual leader of kindred and allied groups, before gaining governmental and coercive power. Social 'leadership' is given priority over state power in the politics of hegemony. Consequently, this is a composite strategy for revolution, in which rupture is subsumed under a long-term process of contention, opposition, ongoing social reformation and the organization of counterpowers. Hegemony is not bent primarily on a grand revolutionary event and the conquest of state power (Gramsci, 1971).

More specifically, a certain social group can rise and start reconstituting society in line with its worldview only when it transcends the 'corporate limits of the purely economic class' (Gramsci, 1971: 181). A group aspiring to hegemony generalizes its interests so as to recruit other subaltern groups, to weld together a massive force and to figure a collective will which tends 'to become universal and total' (129). This is the starting point of the hegemonic struggle and the 'most purely political phase' (181). At this moment, the ideology of the aspiring hegemon must be propagated throughout society and must concoct a unity not only of economic and political objectives, but also of morality and ideas. It is such a 'self-transcendence' of contemporary commoners, who will go beyond the narrow horizon of their specific activity and will also assume broader political tasks, that provides the launching point of counter-hegemonic contest and can yield the basis for a counter-hegemony of the commons.

For Gramsci, intellectual and moral reform, the diffusion of new ideas and values, lays the foundation for a national-popular, or majoritarian, collective will, which can give rise to a new modern civilization, a novel social order (Gramsci, 1971). Under conditions of heightened social diversity, multiple entrenched powers and resistances, structural reconstruction can come about when a certain political agency steps up and becomes a decisive center which composes dispersed social actors, assembling a sizeable alliance of social movements and individuals against the ruling regime. It achieves this convergence of different groups by articulating their grievances and aspirations into a coherent alternative discourse, vision, ethic and program, that is, by shaping an effective collective identity and by co-ordinating their activity. Undertaking intellectual and moral innovation and shaping the collective will are two main tasks of a hegemonic contender in Gramsci's politics (Gramsci, 1971).

Crucially, in Gramsci's integrated strategy, the formation of a collective will, intellectual leadership and moral leadership should be coupled with interventions in the political economy. The political counter-hegemonic operations should be buttressed by a program of economic improvements in the material position of allied social groups. The economic program is, in effect, the concrete form in which the moral and intellectual reform casts itself. Gramsci's hegemony is ethico-political, but it must also be economic,

leaning on the decisive role of the hegemonic contestant in core economic activities. However, he proclaims overtly that the 'two basic points – the formation of a national-popular collective will...and intellectual and moral reform – should structure the entire work' (Gramsci, 1971: 133) of the modern Prince. Hence, hegemony involves at the same time an endeavour to deeply and consciously politicize economic relations, infrastructures and processes themselves for the purposes of social emancipation.

Like Bauwens and Hardt and Negri, Gramsci holds that politics is born on the organic ground of economic life and draws sustenance from an economic plan. But in contrast to all three, Gramsci assigned a leading and irreducible part to hegemonic politics, which not only exceeds the terrain of the economy, but pervades this terrain, too, and sets out to reshape it, to mobilize it politically and to incorporate it in a broader, politically fashioned hegemonic bloc and project. The proper task of hegemonic politics is permanent action, political organization and the construction of collective identities. Politics must bring into play passions and aspirations which overflow any narrow calculus of profit and forge a 'national-popular collective will towards the realization of a superior, total form of modern civilization' (Gramsci, 1971: 133). The concept of hegemony and its corollary theory of the political party are put forward in explicit opposition to economism and in clear recognition of the material force of popular beliefs. Hence Gramsci's concern with the politics of ideology, which furnishes a motor and a glue for counter-hegemonic struggle. No doubt, Gramsci's (1971) identification of the aspirant emancipatory *Hegemon* or *Prince* with a centralized working-class party needs to be deeply reconsidered in our times, holding on mainly to the directive and organizational function and questioning its particular forms (for such a rethink of hegemony, see Laclau and Mouffe, 1985).

Indeed, from this specific angle, the very research activities and publications of the P2P Foundation, including the latest *Peer to peer: The commons manifesto* (Bauwens et al., 2019), appear to belong to the hard core of the ideological politics of hegemony, the dissemination of new ideas and 'intellectual leadership' that aims at re-orienting common sense in a particular, pro-commons direction and propounds a new vision in ways that can appeal to people's passions and aspirations.

Hence, an adequate strategy for democratic change in the direction of the commons will be composite. It will combine autonomous grassroots mobilization, the building of alternative institutions and relations, the constitution of counterpowers, prefiguration, the discursive and affective battle to engage common sense, institutional contestation and reform. A renewed strategy of hegemony would form a massive collective actor by aggregating many social forces, it would lead political action and it would represent general demands and aspirations. A counter-hegemonic agency for the commons will be embodied in a complex ecology of diverse modes of action and organization. Enhanced cohesion and efficacy could be attained by a plural and shifting assemblage of actors if they mobilize around a common vision of another world and around a collective strategic plan which advances a comprehensive agenda of change, while dividing labor and distributing functions – from street protest and accruing counterpowers to tackling existing institutions – according to different capacities and inclinations.

Hence, a political critique of the technocratic vision of the commons need not, and should not, prompt us to discount the significance of political economy and 'seed forms' of productive commons. Indeed, the 'prefigurative' practice of crafting alternative relations and institutions, which inaugurate another world within the old, can help to cultivate alternative values. It can also stage an appealing example that points to another future and serves to win over larger swathes of the population. Moreover, new institutions and techno-economic practices may help to put in place a material infrastructure which reduces dependence on dominant structures and elites, supplying the base for an effective counter-hegemonic bloc. But 'the political' needs to be alive and kicking throughout, even within the techno-economic transformative processes. If, for instance, 'open communities of peer producers are largely oriented towards the start-up model and are subsumed to profit maximization' (Bauwens and Kostakis, 2014: 358), how are they going to rally around the cause of an autonomous and self-sustaining peer production of the commons without a political articulation of a conscious commons vision and a deliberate collective organization around it?

As opposed to the politics of ideological indoctrination and top-down instruction by political vanguards or party armies, the politics of hegemony sets out to win over the consent of social majorities. Therefore, hegemony

weaves actual social demands into 'chains of equivalence' (Laclau, 2000b: 302) and strives to connect organically with common sense. The political strategy of hegemony taps into the old *or emergent* elements of people's mind and consciousness which are most akin to its political project, and, starting out from them, it labors to nudge and reframe existing common sense in a certain political direction.

Accordingly, the political operation of infusing digital commons with a distinct political orientation and the vision of a post-capitalist turn should proceed organically by relating to, and building upon, existing trends in the discursive and value-framing of CBPP. Significantly, a rising political consciousness imbues recent fermentations in commons-based cooperativism, confirming the relevance of a counter-hegemonic politics of digital commons. In recent years, 'platform cooperatives' have been championed as an alternative to capitalist online platforms such as *Uber* and *Airbnb*, which underpin the extractive 'sharing economy' or 'platform capitalism' of our times. This is advocated as a deliberate strategy of struggle through which peer producers break their bonds of dependence on the capitalist economy, and weld together digital and labor commons in new schemes of cooperativism that further a new cooperative movement vying for economic hegemony (see Dafermos, 2020; Scholz and Schneider, 2016).

'Open cooperatives', such as *Enspiral* and *Sensorica*, are platform cooperatives which are not only under worker or multistakeholder ownership, but they also mutualize digital platforms and deploy free software. They incorporate thus the principles of traditional cooperativism, but they also upgrade and renew them. Open cooperatives are more strongly attuned to the common good. They internalize negative externalities affecting communities and the environment. They adopt multi-stakeholder models of governance. They manufacture immaterial and material commons, and they are animated by global social and political concerns (Pazaitis et al., 2017). Through their conscious orientation towards commoning open cooperatives aspire to act counter-hegemonically, resisting the forces of competition and entrepreneurialism which threaten to domestic and co-opt platform cooperativism (Sandoval, 2020).

Likewise, *Distributed Cooperative Organizations (DisCOs)* is a highly relevant proposal which couples from the outset the economic, the digital and the political. This is pursued today by the *Guerilla Media Collective*, a commons-centered cooperative, which consists of three nodes: *Guerilla Translation*, *Guerilla Graphic Collective* and *Guerilla Agitprop*, which campaigns for pro-commons activist organizations and projects. A part of the proceeds of the paid work remunerates reproductive and care labor for the community, and it finances the social mission by retroactively compensating translators for their voluntary translations (Troncoso et al., 2019). The collectivity seeks to diffuse and 'turbocharge' politically the principles of traditional and open cooperativism so as to instigate a transition to post-capitalist futures. *DisCOs* clearly define their identities and politics (Troncoso et al., 2019), gearing peer technologies and cooperatives towards core political ends.

These include: radical workplace democracy that distributes power; fight against economic and social inequalities, which is waged from the bottom-up through paradigm-shifting alternatives; feminism; mutual support and care; aggregating political and cultural counterpower against the corporate capitalist economy through transnational collaborations; the scaling-up of cooperative culture to the next level through transnational, digitally enabled networks and large-scale governance; the formation of a new political subject, the 'commoner', encompassing all those who co-manage collective resources according to commonly defined norms.

Technology nerds, commoners, ordinary citizens and political actors should converge, through media and assemblies in physical settings, in order to incubate processes of transformation in concert. To this end, *DisCOs*, the commons and peer production should join forces with post-capitalist movements such as municipalism, ecofeminism, degrowth, anti-austerity protests, which will take political and legislative initiatives, including public-common partnerships, will breed the social and solidarity economy, and will promote bottom-up public provision (Troncoso et al., 2019).

DisCOs purport to consciously politicize digital technologies, and, more specifically, distributed ledger technologies or 'blockchain', while they vocally dismiss any techno-determinism or techno-solutionism. Distributed ledger and peer-to-peer technologies are susceptible to co-optation by profit-

seeking, capitalist factions and corporations, but *DisCOs* seek to harness their potential for prioritizing care and for devising new and radical forms of ownership, governance and production that combat economic inequality (Troncoso et al., 2019). By encoding their principles, from their socio-environmental mission to federation, into secure ledger technologies, they can reinforce their values and they can make transparent their fulfilment in practice.

DisCO commoners hold firmly that cooperative practices should never bet everything on technology, protocols, governance models, legal and institutional forms. These make up a *structure*, which should be deeply informed by a specific *culture*, the vision, the shared motivations and the principles of *DisCOs*. This is the nub of the politicization of digital commons, which is embedded into the *DisCO* model of open cooperativism. Change does not come about randomly or mainly by way of developing a new mode of production. Restoration of the planet and human relationships turn on transnationally networked and radically democratic workplaces. Critical and transformative commoning must be a deliberate project that guides cooperativism (Troncoso et al., 2019).

DisCOs' core objective is to educate, to empower and to partner with those affected by socio-economic inequalities in order to marshal a global, networked counterpower (Troncoso et al., 2019). This is quintessentially a counter-hegemonic intervention, which seeks to put in motion a new bloc of forces committed to historical change, it formulates a unifying vision, and it strives to resonate with the minds and the hearts of broader constituencies. *DisCOs* illustrate, thus, what politicized, counter-hegemonic commons could be in the new digital economy. As such, they are an apt plug-in for any broader counter-hegemonic coalition, in which social movements and political activists close also ranks with institutional actors in the political system.

Endnote on the digital and the political

The initial triumphalism about the revolutionary march of commons-based peer production has wisely subsided and given way to a more prudent reckoning with messy and ambivalent gestations under the hegemonic rule of

capital and state. Peer-to-peer technologies, platforms and digital commons have altered the patterns of interaction and co-production in the digital and cultural realm. But they have not supplanted the dominant capitalist mode of production and allocation – nowhere near it. They are subject to co-optation by the contemporary 'netarchical' capitalism, from *Facebook* to *Airbnb* and *Uber* etc. They have infiltrated and modified 'physical' production -industrial, agricultural etc- but under the ruling regimes of production and allocation. CBPP technologies furnish enabling infrastructures for commoning and cooperativism. But they also serve financialized capitalism, which siphons off the collaboration, the creativity and the free labor of millions.

To set off a social shift towards commons-centric formations, digital commons should actively engage in restructuring material production, more widely. They should be also driven by conscious political choices, vision and action. They would need, moreover, to pursue synergies with social movements, institutions and political actors to hold back market forces of enclosure and to benefit from favourable legislation, infrastructure and the transfer of resources. At the same time, they should form political identities which will steer them away from the reproduction of neoliberal capitalism. Insofar as they aim at commons-based progressive change, peer-to-peer advocates have become increasingly alert to all these points. But they still tend to prioritize the making of peer-to-peer commons over politics, driving a wedge between social innovation, prefiguration and political activation, a wedge which should be dislodged. Political principles, objectives, discourse, vision and identities should permeate prefigurative commons-building itself in order to amplify its scope, to free it from its economic and ideological dependence on capitalism and to sharpen its sense of direction.

Peer-to-peer technologies and digital commons could further social change if they form part of a multi-layered, extensive counter-hegemonic strategy. In the Gramscian view, such a counter-hegemonic agency can refigure civil society, the economy and the state by assembling massive social forces around a shared vision of change, by organizing their diverse, multi-level interventions in the economy, everyday culture, education, state institutions, and by manufacturing a firm material basis. So, in a fully-fledged strategy for a society built around the commons, political economy and material innovation hold crucial keys, but if they are situated in, and oriented by, a

broader political consciousness and alliance, and if the significance of parallel political activity in civil society, the economy and the state is duly acknowledged.

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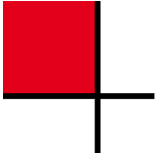
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The (un)surprising nature of creativity: A Deleuzian perspective on the temporality of the creative process

Emrah Karakilic and Mollie Painter

abstract

This paper offers a Deleuzian account of the paradoxical nature of creative surprise in order to explore what this may mean for organisational life. We argue that creativity is capable of yielding *temporal surprise*, which is as much *un*surprising in its emergence through embodied duration, as it is capable of generating surprising new perspectives and experiences. The paper employs two strategies: Firstly, we review the critical literature on creativity to reveal the need to resist certain instrumental approaches, precisely because they cannot meaningfully account for the temporal dimensions of the creative process. Secondly, we reconceptualise what happens in the creative process by offering a Deleuzian analysis of how the temporal-relational dynamic serendipitously, yet (un)surprisingly, generates what seems to be unexpected, un-programmable and unmanageable becomings within and through time. Finally, we suggest that understanding the (un)surprising temporal becomings that are central to creativity, could be helpful in recrafting organisational theories of creativity, as well as informing organisational practice going forward.

Introduction

Creativity is not a new concept in business and management. During the early 1960s, it was already emerging as a new buzzword in the field, especially in advertising (Frank, 1997) However, from the 1990s, given turbulence and

discontinuous change in contemporary markets, it has come to be regarded as one of the key factors in the success of organisations (Gogatz and Mondejar, 2005; Proctor, 2005; Williamson, 2001). It has been considered a source of 'superior performance' (Minocha et al., 2014: 137), competitive advantage (Anderson et al., 2014; Zhou and Shalley, 2003), thereby securing the survival of businesses in the long term (Parjanen, 2012). In the age of 'creativity explosion' (Osborne, 2003: 508), 'authors, academics, and consultants have described the benefits of creativity with almost evangelical zeal' (Pech, 2001: 562, also Schlesinger, 2007) such that 'creativity has become the modern mantra' (Jeanes, 2006: 128).

In the mainstream management scholarship and business practice, creativity has not been seen as 'something you just hope to encounter' (Osborne, 2003: 509). Rather, it has been understood as something scholarship can 'purify' and businesses can 'control' (Rehn and De Cock, 2009: 224). Indeed, Sawyer's desire to witness the development of 'a science of [creativity and] innovation' (2012:33) to predict, prescribe, and generalise how novel and valuable ideas could be generated has been well reflected in the management and organisation studies field that has largely engaged with creativity as another how-to subject as evidenced, for example, in Andriopoulos's (2001), George's (2007), and Anderson et al.'s (2014) highly cited literature reviews covering decades of creativity research in the field.

However, critical voices have pointed out the paradox inherent in this way of thinking. Bilton has traced how various disciplines have attempted to contain what had mostly been seen as un-containable in a 'manageable form', ignoring 'the unpredictability of creative process, people and products' (2010: 255). Jeanes has argued that 'we are seeing an engineering of the creativity…[whereby] we are losing the very ability to be truly creative' (2006: 130). In a similar vein, Osborne (2003: 507) has underlined how 'the compulsory valorisation of the putatively new' has displayed complicity with 'conservative' norms. In our view, these critical voices point to 'the ontological paradox of creativity research', that is, an endeavour to *enclose* what is, by definition, about 'going beyond, exploring that which might be not so obvious and clear-cut and challenging the taken-for-granted…uniqueness from that which existed before' (Rehn and De Cock, 2009: 222). A whole series of binary oppositions, such as new versus old, original versus conventional,

have come to underpin our understanding of creativity, which are in need of being problematised. If not, our capacity to resist a quasi-normative understanding of creativity as naturally better, necessary, and politically neutral is undermined.

Furthermore, we problematise the kind of thinking that constructs management as a given thing or an entity, which can seemingly be either good or bad. As O'Doherty and Ratner remind us, management is a set of 'contingent' practices, 'distributed across humans, standards, mundane technologies and artifacts' (2017: 231). The enactment and maintenance of management entails its making, but also its breaking and remaking, which allows the possibility of the emergence of creativity as an immanent and even constitutive element of organising. The interrogation of the creative process, therefore, also affords us the opportunity to address a tension in theory, i.e., the relationship between mainstream management theory and critical management theory. To view this as a divide is certainly not helpful in rejuvenating management studies, since it makes it impossible to appreciate those creative and critical processes inherent in all management. As O'Doherty and Ratner (2017) argue, there is great potential in unpacking critique as central to management itself. Exploring the ways in which process-thinking allows us to interrogate management's engagement will be part of the contribution that we hope to make towards the end of the paper.

From our perspective, 'thinking creatively about creativity' (Rehn and De Cock, 2009: 223), and concomitantly, thinking more creatively about management, entails at least two strategies. The first is that of resisting existing conceptualisations and their implications, as Jeanes (2006) has insisted. One may even explore the possibility that creativity has become one of what Alvesson and Blom (2021) call 'hembigs', an acronym for hegemonic, ambiguous, big concepts. One may argue that it remains vague and paradoxical, yet ambitiously big in its deployment, and in many ways hegemonic in how it functions, since it seems that being creative has become an imperative that crowds out many other ways of operating. Yet resisting this hegemony is not simple, precisely because creativity resists simplicity. Our second aim, therefore, is to work through what is happening within the creative process, steering clear of the temptation to allow our resistance regarding its instrumental use to swing the pendulum towards extremes, and

in the process, becoming what it resists. Resistance and reworking are always part of the ongoing process of organising and dismantling. With these two strategies, this paper aims not only to contribute to the critical perspectives on creativity research but also to the process-oriented studies on creativity in the field of management and organisation studies.

In the first part of the paper, we align ourselves with the critical literature on creativity in order to lend force to resist its instrumentalisation, as we believe that simplistic instrumentalism does not allow for the experimental play of difference that is central to creative flows. Our target is the way in which the mainstream literature on creativity deals with the notion of the *creative process,* which we think is at the centre of the *enclosure* which critical scholars speak of. We argue that the idea of the creative process is conceptualised in a too straightforward manner. We agree with Driver who noted more than a decade ago that 'research on creativity is typically…not on describing the complexities of the creative process' (2008: 187). As we shall discuss, the creative process is often conceptualised as a stage-based *teleological* path where uncertainty, serendipity or surprise finds little place. Some of our resistance finds its fuel in creativity's capture by neoliberal instrumentality (Yoon et al, 2019). Yet, instrumentality cannot be completely shirked… The work must continue despite the risk of one's analysis performing what it criticises. We do hope to show that thanks to time/timing, we may be afforded that which is timely and appropriate precisely because it is (un)surprising (Holt and Johnsen, 2019).

In the second part of the paper, we approach the creative process through process philosophy, whose application to the creativity research in our field is surprisingly limited (Sonenshein, 2016). And, within the latter temporality is acknowledged to be either absent or considered secondary (Hernes et al., 2013; Langley et al., 2013). We draw upon Deleuze's (1991, 2004) reading of Bergson (1988, 1992, 1998) to explore the serendipitous nature of the creative process to speculate that there is something unorganisable about the creative process that also defies its instrumental deployment. We hold that the creative process is the result of temporal dynamics that brings, unsurprisingly, ideas and interventions that were always-already latently present. It is the idea of time, and timing, that allows for creative transformation, which constitutes not a 'difference to or from', but 'a

difference in itself' (Parr, 2010a: 59). As such, it is a creative inheritance which does not lend itself to easy measurement nor chronological, outcomes-driven management, but challenges management to find its critical force in its own processes. The way in which what always continues to emerge as qualitatively multiple, preserves both the delights and the trauma of surprise, unmanageable as these experiences may be. To understand the (un)surprising nature of the creative process, an analysis of its unfolding over time is required. Time is often a luxury that managers do not have; studying phenomena in and over time is a challenge with which management scholars often grapple. As such, both theoretical and practical questions are left unanswered, and it is our task in this paper to delve into these questions.

Resisting the instrumentalisation of the creative process

According to Lubart (2001), the first model of the creative process in the long history of creativity research was developed by Wallas in 1926. By researching how scientists discover, Wallas (1926) offered a four-stage model of the creative process: i) preparation; ii) incubation; iii) illumination; and iv) verification. In brief, Wallas suggested that any creative process, ending up with a creative act, product, and so forth would typically go through four stages: i) a preliminary analysis of a problem; ii) a mental work on the problem; iii) sudden enlightenment or a flash moment when an illuminating idea breaks through the conscious awareness; and iv) evaluating, refining, and developing the idea.

For Sawyer (2012), Guilford's (1950) keynote speech marks the beginning of modern creativity research (see also Chan, 2013). Guilford's keynote was viewed as an important moment in creativity research not because he problematised the 'agreement that the complete creative act involves four important steps' (1950: 451) but because he urged scholars in the creativity field to work more systematically on subprocesses and factors that shape or feed into these commonly agreed stages. Since the 1950s, Lubart (2001) demonstrates, the main concern of wider creativity research has been to refine the stages and analyse subprocesses and factors (micro-meso-macro factors) of the creative process in a more systematic way.

We hold that this has mostly been the case in mainstream management and organisation theory. From the outset, we agree with Bilton (2010) and Chan (2013) that research on creativity has moved from a heroic or person-based model to a complex structural model, integrating organisational, social, cultural, historical and geographical factors into the agenda of creativity research. For example, Amabile (1988, 1996) has integrated organisational components such as material and immaterial organisational resources into her study of individual/small group creativity dynamics. Woodman et al.'s (1993) interactionist perspective has looked at how individual, group, and organisational characteristics interact in the creative process. Some scholars have underlined the importance of and integrated more macro aspects such as cultural and geographical differences, urbanisation, national policies, and so forth into the research agenda (Chiu and Kwan, 2010; Zhou, 2006; Zhou and Su, 2010).

More recently, Fortwengel et al. (2017) have offered practice-based approach to organisational creativity. Practice, defined as the collective and recurring patterns of organisational behaviour, has been understood as a medium-term in the duality of structure and agency. Mobilised by human agents, practices have been argued to be structured by macro entities such as organisational rules, resources and forms. The main argument has been that a certain set of organisational practices may enhance or constrain the creative process. The priority in studying creativity then becomes analysing and investing in those structural entities that drive human agents to engage in creativity-enhancing practices. For example, the authors refer to the work routines, time constraints, and working-day programmes as some examples of structural elements whose configuration might bring about creativity-enhancing practices (e.g., 'inducing slack and waste (in 3M corporation)') (Fortwengel et al., 2017: 10).

We recognise this substantial theoretical development in the field. Nevertheless, we argue that it has not fundamentally changed the way in which the creative process has been understood and adopted. In general, as Anderson et al.'s (2014) state-of-the-science review demonstrates, each component or factor (from individual to national, from organisational to geographical) has been broken into operationalisable variables to test how they interact with the different stages of the creative process. Indeed, the

creative process these studies adopt has essentially remained stage-based, which are not fundamentally different from Wallas' 1926 model, which is also implied by Lubart (2001) in his review of 50 years of creative process research.

For example, Ancelin-Bourguignon et al. (2020) have studied, among others, how art-based literature and management literature approach the creative process (differently). They have acknowledged Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) five-step creativity process as one of the dominating models in the business and management scholarship: i) preparation; ii) incubation; iii) insight; iv) evaluation; v) elaboration. The componential theory of creativity, quite influential in the field, has formulated the creative process as a five-stage process, starting with the 1st-stage of problem identification and ending with the 5th-stage of outcome assessment (Amabile, 2013: 135). We cannot do better than Botella et al.'s (2018) literature review on the existing models of the creative process (the most adopted models), demonstrating that many studies remain committed to identifying the distinct stages of the creative process, thereby solidifying a fragmented, linear approach to time that cannot account for what is always already in the process of becoming.

Our concern is that the idea of the *process* in creativity research seems to 'draw on either life cycle metaphors predicting linear progressions or on teleological models establishing normative step-by-step guides' (Langley et al., 2013: 9). In Chia and King's words, the creative process seems to be construed as 'the simple, linearized and cumulative movement of discrete entities from one definite place to another' (1998: 462). We presume that what prompts management scholars to approach the creative process in this way might be related to the everlasting ambition in the field to purify and control what is uncontainable (Bilton, 2010). It appears to be a matter of producing a perfect recipe for organisations to serve creative acts. This mode of thinking makes understanding the creative process in a more rigorous sense hardly attainable, for it assumes 'an entitative conception of reality in which clear-cut, definite things are deemed to occupy clear-cut, definite places in space and time' (Chia and King, 1998: 463).

The extant literature shows little sign of interest in ontological questions regarding the creative process. Instead, what we find in most cases are descriptive accounts of the creative process based on a set of unarticulated

and unquestioned assumptions. As Hassard (1991) describes it, we have been socialised in complex patterns of temporal structuring and remained hostage to the time disciplines that are entrenched in and through our membership of various forms of social organisation. So, in a very real sense, our understanding of being and becoming within and through time has been disciplined out of us, with important implications for how we would experience and engage with it. Time has been socially constructed in organisations in ways which foreclose our understanding of, and engagement with creative surprises. As Fouweather and Bosma's (2021) account makes clear, codes or order words can either create illusions of fixity, stability, and determination, or, and this is our hope in this paper, it can disrupt such illusions and enact new possibilities. In the next part, we move beyond resisting the existing conceptualisations of creativity, towards articulating what happens in the creative process within and through time/timing.

Doing creative work: Temporal surprise as creative-becoming/becoming-creative

We agree with Tsoukas and Chia (2002) according to whom the central assumption of process philosophy is grounded in the notion of becoming. The principle of process, in other words, is that the being of an entity is constituted by its becoming (Whitehead, 1929). As Hernes et al. affirm, 'the fundamental goal of process theorising in organisation studies is to come to grips with organisations as a continuous process of becoming' (2013: 3). This applies to what creativity brings about too. That is, the new cannot be thought of as independent from the creative process which constitutes it, and this process is an interminable and heterogeneous becoming rather than a homogenous and teleological path.

We acknowledge the influence of the deployment of process philosophy in management and organisation studies (Helin et al., 2014; Linstead and Mullarkey, 2003), in which the notion of becoming is positioned as one of the key ontological principles (Bergson, 1988; Deleuze, 2014, Whitehead, 1929). Yet, as Sonenshein (2016) acknowledges, even though there are now many studies that apply process philosophy and the notion of becoming to various organisational phenomena, its application to creativity is limited (for

exceptions see Duff and Sumartojo, 2017; Hjorth et al., 2018; Styhre and Sundgren, 2005). And, within the latter temporality is either absent or considered secondary, and this shortage has been underlined aptly (Hernes et al., 2013; Langley et al., 2013). We argue that *temporality* lies at the heart of process philosophy; that is, if there is something called creative process, it should be grasped as *creative-becoming/becoming-creative*, and temporality is central to this understanding. In what follows, we will revisit the insights of Deleuze (1991, 2004) and his reading of Bergson (1988, 1992, 1998) on temporality to make better sense of the complexity of creative-process-as-becoming and, thereby, offer a conceptual contribution to process-oriented studies on creativity in the field of management and organisation studies.

Multiplying surprise(s) through embodied experimentation

To place Deleuze's thinking about the relationship between agency and temporality in context, and as such, to gauge what this may offer us in terms of understanding creativity, one needs to take account of his sources of inspiration. Parr (2010a) explains that Deleuze combines insights deriving from Bergson's notion of 'creative evolution', with Spinoza's emphasis on the 'body', and Nietzsche's concept of the 'eternal return'. This rich triad allows us to appreciate the intimacy between creativity and temporality that is essential in appreciating the (un)surprising nature of the creative process. What all of these influences help Deleuze to articulate, is that the way in which our bodies operate in and through time is central to the understanding of how human beings undergo creative transformations. Our embodiment, over time, allows us to experience difference and experiment with what it brings about. And this is precisely where pleasurable surprise(s) may originate.

Life, as a force that persists over time, entails experimental, spontaneous and open processes of transformation. Deleuze (1991) draws inspiration from Bergson's (1998) creative evolution to suggest a system of involution, which moves away from determination or essences that persist over time. Instead, time allows for differences to register themselves within bodies, and it is the experimental interaction between the bodies (human, animate, organic) that generates creative transformations. Drawing on Nietzsche's (1954) conception of the eternal return, Deleuze offers a perspective on how the past

always returns to offer us a way to live differently. This entails rejecting passivity or sad passions and opting for active experimentation with our bodies and their relations to other bodies and entities within particular space-time configurations. Experimentation is about trying out new techniques and methods without a specific end-goal in mind. It consists in experiencing different forces, desires, and powers in different combinations. Yet it is not a kind of anything goes, but rather a proper method, which could even be described as an investigative procedure, like that which one would use to test the quality of a material. It involves the affective experience of disassembling existing relations and connections and assembling new combinations. As such, it does not involve a completely random engagement in embodied experiences, but a particular discipline, which Deleuze (1991), drawing on Bergson (1998, 1992), refers to as philosophical intuition.

Deleuze (1991) explains that Bergson's (1998, 1992) view of intuition is far from being something ineffable or vague. Instead, philosophical intuition operates as a rigorous method, which allows one to become aware of the flowing of temporal experience within oneself. The relationship between duration and the multiple embodied experiences emerging from the past, persisting and emerging in new forms in the present is central to consciousness, and as such, any kind of creativity. Duration allows for the multiplicities to emerge, but some discipline is needed. But not the kind that yields a creative product in a predictable fashion, but rather one that clears the conceptual confusion of false problems away, embraces affective experiences and rigorously tests what bodies are capable of. From this account, we can see that to understand creativity as a laid-back waiting for something new to emerge would be a mistake. It is an active emergence in experiences; an application of philosophical intuition and the embrace of multiplicities that allow something surprising to emerge. In this sense, surprise emerges in time, in and through what our bodies already knew, and are coming to know.

(Re)iteration: The coexistence of past and present

We are well acquainted with the specific conceptualisation of time, the clock-time or linear time, infinitely divisible (i.e., an endless division of instants) and extended (i.e., there is always an instant before/after an instant). Time,

from this perspective, is spatialised as a linear, instant-by-instant path. In this view, there exists only *now* as an ideal point or as a 'knife-edge' (Mead, 1932: 171). The past is conceived as no-longer-instants and the future as yet-to-come-instants. Accordingly, 'there is only an ideal point [i.e., living-present]' (May, 2005: 46) as 'the past, present, and future are outside of each other' (Hernes et al., 2013: 3).

Indeed, what appears *real* to us is the living present, for it is all that is given to living perception. However, there exists another dimension of real lying *within and beyond* the state of immediate perception, namely the past. According to Deleuze (1991: 55), 'the present is not; rather, it is pure becoming'. He writes that:

> The past and present do not denote two successive moments, but two elements which coexist...The past does not follow the present, but on the contrary, is presupposed by it as the pure condition without which it would not pass. (Deleuze, 1991: 59)

An account of the ontological past of an individual (including both conscious and unconscious elements), small group or organisation and their temporal interactions are largely absent in the mainstream theorisation of creativity. Each step of the creative process happens in the present and should ideally be repeated in the future from scratch. Let us consider Amabile's recurring example of how a creative idea comes to one:

> Jacobson was relaxing on a beach one day in 1995 when he finished the book he was reading and realised that he had no additional reading material...Jacobson spent the rest of the afternoon coming up with the basic concept of an electronic book. (2013: 137)

The only information we have about Jacobson's whole past is that he graduated from physics. Here, a new idea descends into the mind of a human at the present to solve an immediate problem. From this perspective, the past is absent in the managerial analyses of creativity, aimed at instrumental problem-solving. Its blind spot lies in not acknowledging the multiplicity of the past that remains present in multiple ways and is sucked into whatever creative force emerges.

The creative event is not a spatialised moment in time, but a point of consciousness that pulls in all that exists in various time dimensions towards what can be new and surprising. In (not so) simple terms, every creative present is already past when it is present. Also, the creative future, made present in the creative process, is always already past. Understanding the creative process, therefore, means realising that the new is emerging in the present, as the future, from the past that in a sense we already knew, but yet remains surprising. How this remains possible, is what we explore next.

Differenciation: The virtual and the actual in the creative process

Deleuze (2014) cautions against the mistake of associating possible/real *duality* with the virtual/actual *duo*. Not looking at these concepts carefully may lead to a whole series of misinterpretations about the creative process. We may end up with the idea that what is new, is just a possibility that does not exist but can be made real. This is apparently a common understanding in the mainstream creativity discourse, that is, creativity is all about producing something that does not exist. The possible/real duality is grounded in the idea that the possible might become real, but as yet has not. Simply, it is based on the mistaken belief that if something has an existence, it is real. If it lacks existence, it is then possible. In addition, whereas there is no doubt that existence or emergence always happens in a specific context in time and space, in the binary thinking of possible/real the real seems entirely abstracted from its context of emergence – as in the case of the emergence of creativity in the reviewed literature.

In virtual/actual duo, the virtual is real as much as the actual, that is, 'the virtual and the actual are two mutually exclusive, yet jointly sufficient, characterisations of the real' (Boundas, 2006: 5). And 'it is the reality of the virtual that produces existence in its specific context and space and time of emergence' (Grosz, 2000: 227). It is the virtual-past that produces the actual-present. The latter is already in the former. That is, the new, in some form, is already in the realm of virtual-past. This is the process Deleuze (1991, 2014) define through the concept of *differenciation*. Becoming-creative is inscribed in the process of the *differenciation* of virtual-past in something new within the realm of actual-present. While the reviewed literature conceptualises the creative process as the form of a realisation, namely the concretisation of a

possibility or a pre-existing plan, we understand it as a form of actualisation, that is 'the opening up of the virtual to what befalls it' (Grosz, 2000: 228).

How can we think of the character of virtual-past that actualises itself in the present? The virtual-past eludes linear causality in the sense of depending on a set of logical cause-and-effect connections or relations among elements. Neither does it involve identification or imitation or resemblance of something already existing or something possible, and as such, it can remain surprising because 'it is difference that characterises the virtual' (May, 2005: 53). And Deleuze argues that the virtual is that which differs with itself and that it 'is an internal multiplicity of succession, of fusion, of organisation, of heterogeneity, of qualitative discrimination, or of difference in kind; it is a…continuous multiplicity' (1991: 38). The past as being a virtual multiplicity of difference-in-kind actualises itself in a particular set of stable actualities of the present; however, it does not resemble nor gets depleted in what it actualises.

Emergence: Unsurprising surprise

Does creativity, as emerging from the *diffenciation* of the virtual, result in something new in the realm of actual, i.e., a purely surprising, an out-of-the-blue phenomenon? Our answer to this question is no. Creativity does not descend into the lives of humans or organisations as an external force from outside. It is an immanent event in that it unfolds from the virtual which is always already real and involves things that we have to presuppose for there to be anything actual (Williams, 2011). Yet the (re)iteration of the virtual-past is not completely unsurprising either. The actual-present, the sole dimension of reality which the body perceives in its practical life, does not only encompass, but it also composes and recomposes (through its interaction with the universe) yet-unperceived differences-in-kind that are embedded within and beyond those identities. The actual-present is imbued with the continually *differentiating* multiplicity of virtual differences that are going to *differenciate* themselves in the novel and unfamiliar ways in the future. As such, though creative processes yield surprises, they are not entirely new. The creative future when actualised in the present is also already in the past, i.e., at that point, this future has passed because it is now present. The

diffecentiation operates in a non-deterministic way, i.e., it, somewhat unsurprisingly, yields a surprising emergence.

In defining the character of future, Deleuze (1983) borrows the idea of the eternal return from Nietzsche (1954) and argues that what faces us in the future is not the return of fixed identities of the present but the return of virtual differences, differences-in-kind, that lie within and beyond those fixed identities. 'The future,' in other words, 'is virtual difference that has not yet actualised itself into a particular present' (May, 2005: 62). In terms of the creative process, new will return to organisations (*return*-in-the-future) in surprising ways. Consequently, as Holt and Hjorth put:

> We should distrust all claims to being, including the claims of fate itself...We are left with what is open. (2014: 212)

The future is open insofar as it can never be brought entirely into one's consciousness in the living present. The future is a hesitation; it is full of uncertainty and unpredictability. It is this insight that leads us to a fundamental reconceptualisation of the creative process.

In describing this process of becoming-creative, we believe that the various questions that we used to compare and contrast perspectives on the creative process no longer function in the way we schematised them before. In fact, if we were to add our conceptualisation of the creative process, it quickly becomes clear that the typical managerial questions of what, how, and why are co-implicated and not so easily distinguishable. In fact, in understanding the process of becoming-creative, we would have to shirk linearity altogether. When describing processes in colloquial terms, it was easier to delineate *why* we engage in it, and *what* we hope to accomplish, and *how* we go about it, precisely because we envisage a staged route from the problem to the solution. But within the process of becoming-creative, identifying these dimensions are disrupted as they tend to co-emerge. In fact, they may surprise us in terms of what we hoped to find and how it came about.

Discussion: Embracing creative surprise as a (un)surprising process

The managerial preoccupations of mainstream business literature have meant that much of what is written about creativity forecloses the surprises that emerge as it remains preoccupied with instrumental organising, often directed at external capitalist ends. In developing our critique of such approaches, we however inevitably face a paradoxical challenge: if not intended to improve managerial practice, why bother arguing for an alternative conception of creativity anyway? The paradox of having to justify one's critique from an instrumental perspective plagues much of critical management studies. It is especially perplexing since the notion of organisation in itself relies on particular instrumental conceptions – Deleuze suggests that organs exist to keep the organism alive, and as such organisations have some kind of purpose (Linstead and Thanem, 2007: 1486). We therefore fully accept that offering a temporal perspective to creative organising, i.e., working through what is continually becoming in and through creative processes, must in a sense also have its own rewards. But perhaps this kind of purpose has the potential to escape managerial straightjackets, precisely because it emerges as an internal good from within creative practices themselves (MacIntyre, 1981).

One such reward may be gleaned from the way in which a different orientation to time emerges. One might be more patient, more participative, and more tolerant of time-consuming surprise. Our analysis supports Deslandes' (2010) discussion of Mintzberg's critique of traditional time-management. Deslandes argues that Mintzberg's view of strategy echoes Bergson's conception of time as duration in its argument for an integrated, holistic view, rather than a fragmented view of time. In much of the theorising on the creative process, different components and phases are arranged in causal relationships without an acknowledgement of *differences-in-kind*, i.e., the endless heterogeneous multiplicities located in the realm of virtual. In the process, time-consuming surprise seems to be edited out, because they do not fit types, categories, or measurable outcomes. And in most cases, instrumentalised management is just too impatient to allow for too many other possibilities. But to understand and live the multiplicities, emergence in duration is required, as time and timing lies at the heart of how the past

registers itself in the new. In a very real sense, the kind of intuition that can appreciate qualitative multiplicities takes time, perhaps time that managers do not think they have. A Deleuzian account of creative-becomings challenges us to think differently about time and its relationship to the way creativity may function in organisations. Certain challenges facing the planet and humanity make new ways of living and organising urgent. Deleuze insists on thinking beyond the possibilities of capital, towards other ways of becoming. Instead of focusing on the business case for doing so, one may appeal to ecological and epistemological reasons for challenging existing paradigms (Ergene et al., 2021).

A second way in which both critique and the timeous working through of multiplicities seem worthwhile, is the relationship that it offers to an appreciation of precepts and affects beyond rational, cerebral grasps on reality. It is in this regard that a Deleuzian analysis contributes to the interest in intuition that has recently re-emerged in organisation studies. For example, Sadler-Smith's (2016) account extends the discussion of intuition beyond the typical references to Barnard's 'non-logical thinking' and Simon's 'bounded rationality'. By means of a phenomenological analysis that draws on linguistic 'de-nominalisation', Sadler-Smith (2016: 1077) reveals two aspects of intuitive affect, namely 'bodily awareness' (gut reactions/feelings) and 'cognitive awareness' (sense/mental images). We believe that our account of philosophical intuition deepens these insights by offering an account that takes time and timing seriously, both in how bodies are habituated over time, and how mental images are shaped over time. Mintzberg's conceptualisation of strategy that is more reliant on intuition than on the process of compiling systematic data highlights the implications this has for organising (Deslandes, 2010). From this perspective, strategists become 'intuitive continuationalists' (Deslandes, 2010: 13). Where Sadler-Smith's (2016) linguistic analysis reveals that the process of intuition is often described as being fast or automatic, our analysis would explain that the perceived speed of this process may mask the time involved in preparing this response. In a very real sense, allowing for intuition may indeed save time, because it can potentially distil extensive pasts into surprising moments. And then again, it may waste time in the most pleasurable way(s).

It is important to reiterate that from a Deleuzian perspective, Bergson's philosophical intuition does not refer to a sort of metaphysical contemplation. Instead, it is a rigorous process of attending to embodied cues, testing one's emerging insights regarding a situation, product, or opportunity through time. Bergson (1988) uses the example of a lump of sugar. When a lump of sugar is put into a glass of water, it dissolves in time and 'that shows how this sugar differs *in kind* not only from other things, but first and foremost from itself' (Deleuze, 1991: 32). This example enables us to recognise that a particular creativity antecedent is not merely different from other antecedents *in degree* (often measured quantitatively in a particular space and time), but it also becomes different from them and itself *in kind* when it interacts with other antecedents in a complex way and creates a multiplicity. In thinking through the invention of the electronic book, to revisit Amabile's Jacobson example, the idea of the book comes to differ also from itself. That is, it challenges us to experience the object called book in radically new ways, while at the same time engaging us in practices of reading that continues in and through these changes. Or to take another example, an antecedent like intrinsic motivation may differ in kind from other types of motivation, but also manifests differently over time. This requires researchers to avoid labelling it in a way that cannot accommodate its inherent multiplicity. Nor can it be nearly dichotomised from extrinsic motivation, which also differs from itself over time. It also makes it important to allow an understanding of antecedents to be understood over time and in time, rather than by means of snapshots of episodes, or of specific products or ideas. Differences in kind only become intelligible when we experience these multiplicities through embodied experimentation over time.

From a research perspective, our wager would be that it is best to avoid typical modes of measurement and units of assessment to products and results that may be ill-suited to studying the creative process as a temporal phenomenon. Valuing creativity in terms of its contribution to capital and capitalism's pursuit of the new, limits our ability to consider other forms of valuation, and new possibilities of becoming. Developing post-Covid ways of working and organising could benefit from the experiments that emerged as the virus forced us into new becomings. Some of this have yielded new insights and new ways of being. However, harvesting these learnings whilst acknowledging that

not all of this is necessary good, will be part of the process. This also means acknowledging the dark side of creativity, i.e., the ways in which capitalism capitalises on the decoding of traditional social codes and recoding it to enable new forms of commodification (Jeanes, 2006). The dark side of creativity is often only visible over time. Methodologically, this requires systematic work on exploring 'the relations and affects that have shaped creative production contemporaneously and historically, to make sense of the dynamics of production and the processes that shape creativity over time' (Fox, 2015: 533). To address the complexity of the creativity phenomenon, longitudinal qualitative research (e.g. Styhre and Sundgren, 2005) may be accompanied, for example, with mathematical modelling, logical compound synthesis and statistical analysis of large databases collected over time.

Our reading of temporal aspects of the process as becoming extends and deepens insights into the limitations that linear conceptions of time may have for understanding something like responsible innovation (Blok, 2019). Instead of looking backwards or forward in determining what responsible innovation may mean, an ethos of responsive innovation requires immersion and action and emergence in duration, which may yield a more meaningful understanding of sustainable innovation. Or as Painter-Morland (2012) argued in her Deleuzian reframing of responsibility, it is not so much being responsible *for* what occurred in the past or what may lie ahead, but an ongoing responsiveness *towards* others and the environment. This capacity to give a response, in time, towards particular others may entail stronger relational constraints by which new scientific discoveries can be guided (Pérezts et al., 2020).

In this way, the agency is reconfigured in and through time. We become, as agents, in and through our ongoing experimentations in responding, as a response to our relatedness at specific moments. In terms of addressing the challenges relating to the unit of explanation, causal relationships and the nature of causes, our emphasis on the temporal dimensions could potentially contribute to 'entrepreneurship as process' (McMullen and Dimov, 2013) by not simply looking forward, or backward (as is the case in strategy research) but by acknowledging each strategic conversation as the exploration of the past that is registering as new. In this way, management always reinvents

itself through its critical engagement with the past, and what it is always already becoming.

In fact, as Deleuze and Guattari (1999:19) explained in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*, the idea of 'deterritorialising', which can be described as decoding or dismantling of existing practices and patterns, is central to capitalism's growth, and as such part of managing organisations. The challenge, however, is how to maintain the always creative tension between capitalism tendency to reterritorialise the flow of energies into axioms (Parr, 2010b: 71), as such arresting and containing it, and the need to remain open to ongoing experimentation through ongoing differen*c*iation. From our perspective, it is perhaps precisely the role of critique to maintain this tension. Creative surprises open the possibility that what emerges is questioned, interrogated, evaluated, and as such requires that critique remains central to any form of management. Time, and timing, are key in this process.

Our analysis, therefore, offers insights in refining insights around organisational memory, potentially informing discussions around the interaction between 'procedural' and 'declarative' memory (Kyriakopoulos and de Ruyter, 2004). In terms of debates around whether the creative process is more individual or more collaborative (Elsbach and Flynn, 2013), we believe that our discussion may expose this framing as a false binary. From a temporal perspective, that which resides in the bodies of individuals is always already the result of past collaborations – specific to the individual but never capable of registering without some form of interaction with other bodies (human or non-human, material or immaterial).

Our account gestures beyond the preoccupation with talent management, which identifies creatives to employ as a resource. Firstly, we argue that human agents contribute but are not more central to the creative process than all the other co-contaminating factors. Yet, precisely because of the creative process relationship with distant pasts and futures it is somewhat unsurprisingly productive, and managers are themselves the embodied residues of these temporal dimensions. Instead of managing such processes, the manager may be managed by it. Embracing and exploring this in itself is creative in a way that may disrupt the somewhat unhelpful distinction

between the suits and the creatives that often persists in organisations. Our understanding of the process of becoming-creative, disrupts neat identifications and undermines the simplistic managerial orientation that informs it. The implication of our study is that while creativity is the emergence of something surprising, unexpected, and different, these experiences in fact always existed in the virtual realm, that is, the ontological past. The past is a crucial part of the emergence of any creative present, but perhaps not in the way that a managerial approach to creativity can appreciate. The reason may be that the ways in which componential theories (Amabile, 1988, 1996, 2013) conceptualise the units, stages, practices and the interactions between them, thoroughly disrupts the basic idea of the process ontology as embracing unpredictable flows of experience. The way in which the how, why, what, as well as the results of processes of becoming-creative are interwoven and co-emergent, is something that is very difficult to understand if one seeks to find generalisable managerial tools to make the creative process replicable.

The difficulty in understanding the limitations of managerialism may also relate to the fact that management scholars sometimes tend to rush to conclusions, i.e., they do not always take the time to look for blind spots in their ontological assumptions. The reason why the co-emergent process of becoming-creative has not been meaningfully conceptualised, is because the temporality of the creative process has not been studied thoroughly. The challenge of finding time to attend to time, however, remains a paradoxical problem faced by both theorists and practitioners alike, and presents multiple epistemological challenges as well. To address these, taking account of temporal dimensions could help one avoid the trap of binary logics, or as Fouweather and Bosma (2021) describe it, resist the power of OR in and through participation in the process, and most importantly, in speaking and acting differently.

Focusing on the temporal dimensions of the creative process helps us address the paradoxical challenge of managing to live with the timing(s) of multiple, unmanageable, temporal surprise(s). In terms of the broader literature on paradox, our account offers very specific illustrations of how paradoxes of organising, especially the tensions inherent in learning-organising, performing-organising, and even belonging-organising (Smith and Lewis,

2011), play out in the creative process. The paradox that we deal with, is the more nuanced interconnectedness between *what was* and organisational attachments to these pasts, and the embracement of *what is becoming* precisely because of the engagement with these pasts. Within the creative process, one has to deliver on existing expectations, i.e., continue to perform as a member of organisational structures while, at the same time, learn and critically question what one is part of (i.e., belonging while individualising).

Conclusion

Even though a central part of our analysis resists the simplistic instrumentalism at the heart of managerial discourses, we also do not believe that one can ever be completely rid of it. The (un)surprising process of creative emergence, what is experimentally and playfully discovered pulls its force as much from past successes as it does from failures. Pleasure and pain are the mixed results of what emerges, as is useful and useless novelty, helpful and harmful invention. Being mindfully part of the process of becoming may be the kind of strategy that could allow us to resist the power of 'OR', but only if one can make peace with what unfolds over time, and in time (Chia and Holt, 2009; Fouweather and Bosma, 2021). What is needed instead is an openness towards experimental playfulness, explored from who and what we are always already becoming.

The embracement of our material intuitions also means being much more comfortable in our skins, and an understanding of what this implies for any form of agency, whether that may be creative agency, strategic agency, or managerial agency. We argue, in other words, that creative surprise does not denote a kind of break with our embodied past, as a moment of an unbridled individual or a collective brilliance, or disruption. At the same time, however, the creative process indeed involves some unexpected, unprogrammable and unmanageable emergence. The challenge is to respond meaningfully to this paradox of continuity and change, which Hernes and Irgens (2013) so clearly described in terms of organisational life, but yet has to register in how we think about creative agency, but also about how we respond to the challenges of change and continuity in everyday (organisational) life. In a world radically transformed by the power of a virus, our philosophical analysis may yield

some insights regarding ways of living and working in times of unprecedented change.

And then, we do believe that being creative remains hard work. It is by no means about waiting for the new and useful to miraculously occur. Instead, it involves putting the body in play, applying the mind, i.e., the embodied mind, to identify those false problems that block the emergence of the new and useful, and experimenting with disabling and reassembling the forces, desires and capacities that pulse through the body as new combinations are explored. We therefore tentatively conclude with a paradoxical answer to the question: Is the creative process surprising and therefore unmanageable? Yes, it is the ultimate surprise inasmuch as it cannot be anticipated, directed, or managed in the strictest sense(s) of the word(s). But the answer is simultaneously no, inasmuch as creativity is the residue of all the multiplicities that already exist within the past, waiting to register themselves, (un)surprisingly, as something that our bodies already *knew*. And this is perhaps troubling, as much as it is reassuring…but only time will tell.

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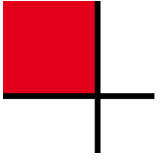
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Point of difference: The lost premise of creativity in 'creative work'

Alexia Cameron

abstract

Difference, divergence, feeling and less effortful thinking define creativity. Over the last 20-30 years we have witnessed accelerated growth and demand for creative products and labours producing experiences, atmospheres, and services, with increasing value placed on creative ideas, data, being moved or feeling, and 'being affected' in an attention economy. Creativity is often masqueraded as a core company ideal in the contemporary organisation, whilst its very premise is denied 'on the ground'. It is even openly accepted now that workers should bring with them some degree of emotional truth to contribute to innovation. Yet, management practices often remain pivoted around the pursuit of aligned workforces, organisational homogeneity, and deterministic recruitment processes for prospective candidates to fit into, all of which pose restrictions on the individualisms implicit in actually being creative and affective. Through the optics of affect, this note lays out the impossibility of creative work when those who are required to produce this creativity are not first free to themselves *be affected*.

Introduction: The emotional truth

To reveal the eco-system of feeling that produces the contemporary organisational paradox — where divergence and creativity are baked-into products while their premise often denied in organisational design — this note applies a Spinozian framework of affect. Here, affects are the, often unconscious, feelings that stick during encounters between bodies and other

bodies and objects, informing the direction one moves in thereafter, and in their broadest sense represent 'a sense of push in the world' (Thrift, 2004: 64; Spinoza, 1996). In what follows, the phenomenon of being affected is applied to organisations which vocally desire creativity and creative workers to reveal the incongruity: between what creativity means 'on the ground' and how it is pursued, or arrested, in dominant organisational discourse on aligned workforces.

This paradox in contemporary organisation, a need for creative workers and, yet negation of creativity's premise in difference and divergence, can be explored through the passage from being affected to becoming affective. Because divergent thinking, creativity, and innovation (qualities that are in demand and valuable) can be rendered and potentially optimised in the experience of being affected by range and difference (Spinoza, 1996). Through the worker's own susceptibility to feeling, and one's history of *different* ideas to draw from during any given affective encounter, lies an ecosystem of feeling very often denied in the pursuit of aligned (seemingly creative) workforces. As a way into the notoriously complex concept of affect, the note will refer to feelings that stick as a similar experience to that of affect and being affected, further explored in the following pages. A recent *Slack Technologies* (2019) report, titled 'State of work', is also used to illuminate this common organisational vernacular that both implicitly recognises the need for engaged, affected and creative workers, while, at the same time, promote the use of top-down management that contradicts what creativity means and looks like in practice. This report is not meant to be an isolated example as much as it represents and illuminates common mainstream management speak in contemporary times — and in younger companies, like in the tech sector, too.

Indeed, the argument that creativity is supressed in modern organisational design is not new. In their critique of the rationalist approach to management, Peters and Waterman (1982: 31) explore how rationality in management misses 'all of that messy human stuff' when it is oriented around the 'right' answer, more than the company's past experiences and learnt, incorporated values. Similarly, Hamel (2007) in his book, *The future of management*, illuminates the paradoxically slow paced recline of management innovation that's still 'stuck in a time warp' based on the sole pursuit of efficiency, in

light of such accelerated changes in societies and technologies over the last half century. Bell (1976) explains in *The cultural contradictions of capitalism* how cultural critique and culture, as a term, have grown into a game of 'in-and-out'; consumed and concerned with the notion of 'lifestyle', rather than a serious discussion of high art as it had been. More generally, 'society itself had lost its cultural moorings' over a gradual shift in mass society toward the paradigm of entertainment in an attention economy (Bell, 1976: 44).

But the subjective and fleeting qualities of affect, what I suggest throughout the note can be likened to the preconscious experience of feeling's that resonate with the individual, or stick, so to speak, within management and organisation is often cast aside as merely 'the province of the "art" factor in management' (Peters and Waterman, 1982: 31). Feeling and affect, moreover creativity, are seen as unquantifiable, hence unworthy of application and pursuit as a measure of reorganisation or design overhaul. As fleeting forces of encounter that shape the direction one moves in thereafter, informing their experiential archive and opening-up opportunities for divergence, affects illuminate the mechanics behind why this tension may not necessarily have a logical grounding for success in its objective. In the following sections, I intend to break-down the ecosystem of feeling that executes this organisational paradox: the vocal desire for creativity whilst denying its very premise. The logic behind creativity, defined here as non-effortful thinking, divergence and, following Spinoza (1996), seen as being dependent upon difference, feeling and a pluralised archive of experience, is both desired and denied in contemporary management and organisation. By breaking down and applying the ontology of affected labour, there is also room here, and in future work, to consider potential practical measures to account for the seminal place of feeling in being creative and producing affective, creative, immaterial products bound with feeling.

Affected creators

In many ways, the job of those who are doing creative work is to move, and be moved themselves, such that they authentically and meaningfully translate the ideological, atmospheric, and ephemeral qualities of the product and its use-value, or immaterial value: trust, optimism, humour, existential

questioning, ideology, seduction, impulse, escape, health etc. Being moved, or being affected, that is, the propensity to feel at work and to care, defines many creative labours, yet tends to be left out of more common metrics for measuring labour/performance and recruiting labourers. In developing Hardt and Negri's (2000: 293) useful conceptualisation of affective labour as 'labour in the bodily mode', the concept of *affected* labour helps to articulate the metric of care that precedes being affective; because being moved comes before moving others and helps inform the latter (at work) (Spinoza, 1996).

Affect, as a neighbourhood of social theory, can be traced through to two dominant strands: the post-structural approach taken up by figures such as Spinoza (2007), Freud (1997), Foucault (2003), Ahmed (2004), Massumi (2002), Deleuze and Guattari (2013), among many more. Spinoza's (1996) early work in particular had an impact in the forming post-structural affect theory. Spinoza explains affections as inseparable from the objects and sensations that trigger them — they are a collective faculty and embedded within natural and material environments. From a Spinozian and post-structural affect theory perspective, affect and emotion are theorised as separate concepts: affects are the feelings before emotions, and emotions are consciously applied to unconscious feelings. Where emotions become qualified states attached to feelings to give them meaning and order, affects are the forces and intensities embedded in the unconscious that spur senses and nostalgia long after they pass. Emotions consciously attribute meaning to the feelings (or affect) happening in the body during those fleeting passages of feeling, being moved, and being affected.

On the other hand, the neuroscientific perspective is notable in the work of Thrift (2004), Sedgwick (2003) and Tomkins (1962) (Clough, 2008; Stenner and Greco, 2008). The Neuroscientific theorisation of affect considers affect as synonymous with emotions, where the two concepts are often used without distinction. Here, affect is seen as existing separately from the world of objects, materiality's, cultures, and nostalgias that trigger them. Emotions and affects, seen as coming from the same logic and order, represent states that can be isolated and observed as automatic responses made by organisms that have evolved from their beginnings in the survival instinct (Leys, 2011). Whether viewed through the post-structural framework of affect as constant states of becoming, embedded in the interactional, material and natural world

and which are embodied, or through the neuroscientific lens that isolates affects (used interchangeably with emotions) from their environments, both perspectives consider affects as representative of 'a sense of push in the world' (Thrift, 2004: 64).

Being affected and becoming affective is a type of push, force of encounter and bodily response not unlike the notion of feeling, or being moved, which will liken affects to in this note as a potentially more accessible way-in to the concept and its application (Thrift, 2004). In Spinozian theory, previously mentioned as one of the earliest and most influential theories of affect, the journey from being affected to becoming affective opens new opportunities and possibilities in terms of how to move innovatively in the felt moment, and in what direction thereafter. Feeling, in this sense, is a potentially creative activity, because in the process of being moved (being affected), (potentially divergent) ideas, stick, are aroused and activated and stripped of their familiar normality if one is woke to the felt moment, happening within their body, as they transition between states. In being affected (being moved by feeling), the wider and more plural a person's experiential archive of ideas; the greater potential there is to form adequate ideas through exploring possibility and divergence. Because affects serve as reference points for past feelings to draw from in the moment, impacting the direction one moves down and the feelings engendered thereafter (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013; Spinoza, 1996). Past imprints of feeling become embedded in the individual and their archive of experience to draw from in subsequent encounters.

In Spinoza's (1996) book, *The ethics*, this mutual co-dependency between moving (affecting) and being moved (being affected) is explained: a person is empowered to move others, to act, having experienced positive feeling in the moment and ordered the ideas conjured in relation to the wide-ranging history of other ideas that make up their virtuous character. One may, for example, feel enchanted at a spectacular show, perhaps they are moved with tears or radical changes in physicality or perspective as they pass through the inexplicable/transcendent feeling (the affect) of the show and its sensory experience, such that they attribute an emotional state to the feeling/experience thereafter. That same person may leave the concert with a heightened capacity to act, empowered and transformed through the feeling-states to see a new perspective, a confidence, or form a thought about new

ideas, in what Spinoza (1996) describes as the conatus (one's desire to strive) being activated through the sensation of pleasurable affects. Everyone strives, but what we strive for is determined by the multitude of our own history of relations — a person's own experiential archive where the wider the breadth of material to draw from in digesting feeling in the moment, the more likely they are to pursue creative ideas and divergent thinking (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013; Massumi, 2015). In other words, the more plural experiences one carries, the more archival footage they accumulate to draw from in subsequent encounters, and the more options they can see in ordering the affects and using feeling as a vehicle for striving and, ultimately, creativity.

At work or elsewhere, one's openness to embrace divergence during the wide range of feelings encountered daily as the body collides with other bodies, ideas and objects, *is* a form of knowledge, based on how one recognises, orders and reasons with the affects thereafter (Spinoza, 1996). In being affected and forming adequate ideas, a diverse archive of experience is optimal, because past encounters with similar feelings become touchstones for potentially transcendent thinking and 'divergence from the flow' (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013: 473). Feelings are given meaning through their referentiality to other ideas that make up the person's 'epistemological fabric of ideas' (Deleuze, 1988: 74-75). Difference, rather than sameness, in one's felt experiences leads to a wider set of aggregates that one can reference against each other to form potentially adequate ideas and divergent or creative thinking. This multitude of past affects helps to inform the present moment and the sort of direction to move in the moment. To have a range of experiences to draw from, then, equips one with further tools to understand feeling and the sorts of emotions and behaviours conjured (Spinoza, 1996, 2007). Exposure to diverse ideas, in labours that produce affective products, builds this knowledge, creative capacity to move in different directions, and resilience. Moreover, divergence and less forced/effortful thinking characterise creativity and being affective (Madrid and Patterson, 2018).

Affected labour, then, refers to an individual (workers, consumers, employers, investors, owners, followers, passers-by, likers etc), themself being personally moved by the product, brand and atmosphere such that they authentically communicate the atmosphere, ethics, aesthetic, culture and/or lifestyle of the product. Affected labourers are part of the multitude of engaged players who

actively participate in sculpting the direction of the product. To do their job successfully, or simply get through it, such labourers are implicitly required to adequately order the affects that are embedded in the job (Cameron, 2018). Artists, for example, illuminate the idea that the product must move the maker, so as to move the audience. They productively utilise feeling in creating work that needs to be moving. Similarly, affected labour exists within an economy of desire hinged upon engaged, moved players. It follows that this (lucrative) affected commitment becomes the employee's positive emotional attachment to the organisation (Afroz, 2013). Creative workers need to be affected; moved by the culture and lifestyle of the product, invest in it, find meaning in it, and manage emotion in a way that fosters the feeling, mood and atmosphere of the product/service (Cameron, 2018).

Breaking down the ontology of affect through a Spinozian (1996) perspective and applying this logic to work that produces affective products by moved labourers, exposes the impossibility of fostering creative and innovative workers if they are treated as static, homogenous and something to be fit into where everyone aligns. Affected labour is a step beyond the idea of affective labour; emphasising that workers not only need to move others, but before and in order to do this effectively they, themselves, need to be moved. But is one really free to feel at work? The relationship between affecting and being affected reveals the value of feeling fleeting (potentially transformational) openings. Being awake and open to feeling, embodying a differentiated and vast experiential archive to draw from in welcoming and dealing with momentary feelings, and seeing the potential within affective encounters to diverge, optimises the creative opportunities of feeling, especially if seeking to create moving products. Yet, this affective ontology appears contradicted in contemporary organisational design (even if creativity and innovation are prioritised and marketed). Innovation and creativity within many organisations are often celebrated as a concept more than an organising principle. Are we really allowed to be affected?

The language of post-industrial work emphasises flexible specialisation, teamwork, creativity, agility, passion, participatory work, collaborative work, and decision-making practices, all of which problematise notions of normality and homogeneity because they require the coming together of differences. This is supported by the language of productive diversity (or the celebration

of difference) where alternative knowledges and skills are recognised as valuable resources for the productive workplace in competitive marketplaces. But, even with this discourse on the significance of creativity, particular sets of outdated norms continue to be upheld. Creative work is operationalised such that the notion of diversity, while central to discourse and branding often comes secondary to the heavy seduction of sameness and cult values. There remain underlying assumptions of sameness; such that those who are not the same and have different knowledge and skills are seen to be in deficit (Solomon, 1999). Affected labours are premised on the notion that in order to form adequate ideas and use feeling creatively and productively, a wider and more plural experiential archive of ideas will give scope to the present moment in negotiating with the feeling and moving in a new (potentially innovative) direction. Following Carnera (2012: 78), in order for adequate ideas to formulate, 'we need to experiment with our own experience'.

'Aligned workforces' (really?)

Paradoxically, in light of this blatant requirement of individual feeling, contemporary organisations and recruitment practices still often seek to create their own monoculture, or cult. Creativity becomes purely a concept, too often couched in the posture of a free and equal, diverse workplace with bean bags, karaoke night and free espresso. Game-like playful designs are often adapted in physical workplace environments, nodding to the inevitable emotional investment required of workers, and their needing to be deeply affected to account for the longer, more connected, collaborative, round the clock schedules and connectivity that are required in so many jobs today (Greg, 2011). In fact, in a recent report from Slack Technologies (2019: 35), it was openly expressed 'when people are allowed to bring their emotional truth to work, that is when innovation, creativity, engagement and culture thrive in the organisation'. This report is not applied here as a unique or particularly specific case, as much as it reflects a common vernacular among young contemporary businesses seeking to produce more relevant and contemporarily equivalent products.

When aligned workforces refer to 'teams [that] are moving in the same direction' (Slack Technologies, 2019: 35), the premise of feeling and divergent

thinking as key to creativity is negated – and whether one really can bring their emotional truth to work is rendered questionable (*ibid.*). Workplace culture becomes a regime of power for managing people in contemporary workplaces (Foucault, 1989; Solomon, 1999). Contemporary training practices have developed into generalisable competency scales:

> While previously workplace training programmes were determined by local decisions made in response to local needs, training today in OECD countries is most frequently constructed within a competency-based training framework. This framework has been developed through government, industry and education partnerships resulting in policies and industry competency standards that represent institutionally recognised and legitimate knowledge. (Solomon, 1999: 122)

The bureaucratisation of skill, recruitment, testing and training tends toward a generalisable framework that scales categories of skill and competence according to static and incentivised industry indicators. Recruitment processes tend to recognise prior learning and the candidates aligned experience with the organisation. Whereas recruitment has the potential for *figuring divergence positively*, human resource practices and procedures still assume very particular kinds of experiences and prioritise the candidate's ability to fit in to the existing norms. Job seekers are encouraged, if not forced, to morph and potentially conflate their experiences into accepted categories and normative discourse in order to fit in with the organisation and be rewarded according to their experience of sameness (Solomon, 1999).

Such a dulling process may also lead to what Peter and Hull (1969: 25) coined the peter principle — wherein, people 'rise to a level of incompetence' or fall up in the organisational hierarchy in the process of their dumbing down to fit in. Recruitment and training of affected labourers are opportunities to enact creativity and embrace difference, which many workplaces today claim to foster. They are vulnerable to becoming assimilatory tools for ensuring an aligned workforce, without considering the centrality of the concept of difference in the affected labourer's mastery of feeling so as to invoke feeling in others (Solomon, 1999). Because in the process of affecting and being affected, for a person to formulate adequate ideas having been affected, the body relies on its history of corporeal experiences that, if plural and felt,

potentially present a wider range of ways to move thereafter (Spinoza, 1996). This room for divergence enabled by being affected *is* a form of creativity.

For creativity and innovation to be applied in organisational culture and design, there needs to be room for people to truly feel, or be affected, and an allowance of divergence if one is to pursue creative work (as an affected worker.) Organisational culture can be static and prescribed, something to fit into, rather than as malleable, created and recreated, plural, fluid, diverse, and formed through grassroots practice more than top-down prescription. In management speak, the concept itself of management, while being alternatively termed to re-engineer the top-down connotations, is enacted through:

> Managers want[ing] a clone of themselves, people who do things just like them. They are doers, taking charge; 'taking care of people [is] secondary'. Cloning prevents diversity; it also prevents any focus on managing people as a legitimate purpose within the organization. (Oseen, 1997: 46)

These 'cloning' practices run counter to the actual reality of the organic nature of work in organisations, and creativity, as a mode of 'divergence from the flow' that is based on the individuals embrace of different feelings in forming adequate ideas and moving in new directions (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013: 473; Solomon, 1999). While masquerading diversity, contemporary organisations can be seen as (inadvertently) creating monocultures in the process of cloning (Oseen, 1997). The construction of sameness rejects the very embrace of feeling and difference that is (seemingly) relied upon in the affected labourers' mastery over the job — closing-off potential pathways for 'divergence from the flow', creativity, and doing and being at work differently (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013: 473).

In affecting and being affected, or moving and being moved, it is the *different* backgrounds, experiences and perspectives which enhance an individual's skill in conjuring adequate ideas, digesting feeling, and striving to act or be affective (Spinoza, 1996). Again, using the example of *Slack Technology*'s (2019: 34-35) recent report on 'The state of work', all but one of 'The engagement eight' start from the bottom-up — i.e. precisely where engagement begins at the individual felt level — and, yet, at the same time, they all require *both* divergence and affected labour in pursuing an (ironically)

'aligned workforce'. These include: 1.) Invest in alignment now. 2.) Lead with strategy and vision. 3.) Communicate your strategy monthly. 4.) Allow people to be more human at work. 5.) Empower all leaders to share the strategic vision, but start at the top. 6.) Opt for meetings and collaborative channels when sharing strategy. 7.) Aggregate tools and information. 8.) Distraction is not just a productivity killer.

Despite conditions of labour today being built around creative products, affected and affective labour, flexibility, temporality and fluidity, unpredictability, 24-hour connectivity, casualisation and workers and consumers alike being affected, organisations are largely 'relatively homogeneous, integrated and unicultural' (Jeffcutt, 1994: 243; Gregg, 2011). Organisational culture is considered a static predetermined brand used as an instrument for unifying the workplace; a technology for governing workers and representing the brand (Oseen, 1997). Surely, given affected labourers are operating in conditions that require them to think creatively, flexibly, actively, innovatively, resiliently and emotively, then a fixed monoculture and blanket approach to culture, or aligned workforce, would not account for, or foster, the expressions of creativity and points of difference that drive creative products. Oseen (1997), for example, recommends an enabling model of management, rather than a cloning one, that recognises people as being different in how they work, and how they work together.

There is acknowledgment of difference and diversity, but often mere verbiage in the form of masqueraded company ideals, more than lived organisational values, and where culture tends to be understood as a static idea that can simply be commanded from the top. Valuing creativity is divorced from its actual premise in difference, disconnected from the base characteristics of culture that are plurality and communities of practice. Culture becomes a governing tool or disciplinary regime — and a means through which to navigate the product and its competitive advantage (Angouri and Glynos, 2009; Foucault, 1989). Moreover, cultural difference is often seen in corporations as a potential issue, risk, or a problem to be fixed, in a simultaneous embrace and denial of creativity (difference) within labours that produce creativity. Following Collinson (1994), it is the mystery of the uncanny unconsciousness and moral chaos within the contemporary organisation: irony, paradox, ambiguities, inconsistency, referentiality, that

should be illuminated within such networks and structures through sensitive research. Angouri and Glynos (2009: 13) suggest thinking about culture 'as a floating signifier builds this nuance and sensitivity to context into the analytical framework itself'. Here, culture would become conceptually separated from overly categorical and essentialist notions, toward exploration of formations and tensions — emerging differences — a dynamic movement hinged upon individual input (Angouri and Glynos, 2009).

Like the fleeting and ephemeral quality of affects, by definition, meaning, identity and culture are un-fixed and fluid where 'differences are symbolically conditioned and thus culturally malleable', such that Angouri and Glynos (2009: 9) 'characterize "culture" as a *floating* signifier here because its meaning and significance emerges only in and through the process of articulation'. And, for Jeffcutt (1994: 244) culture is 'theorized as a creative expression of the inhabitants of a particular setting, a symbolizing process which is amorphous, transient and sensual, a communal possession, a meaning system through which disintegrative forces are mediated and negotiated order pursued'.

Practiced, fluid, enacted, culture is manifested through engaged players who move — and are moved (Angouri and Glynos, 2009). Whether the value of cultural difference is embraced as an ideology, seen as a static value presenting a challenge to be overcome, or applied as a lucrative source of exploitation, there is broad persuasion that even at the lightest end of the spectrum divergent workers and workplace cultures in organisations are seen as a 'potential problem' or challenge in the context of capital's historic attachment to 'the ideals of efficiency and competitive advantage' (Angouri and Glynos, 2009: 6). Recognising affected labour goes beneath the surface of promoting an equal workplace, culture, diversity and employee satisfaction to reveal the ontological premise of feeling and its intimate relationship with divergence and creativity. Like affecting is hinged upon *being* affected, sameness and difference, too, help constitute one another. Notions of sameness cement what is conceived of as different, so as to project values onto sameness that are entangled in practices of power (Foucault, 1989; Oseen, 1997).

Conclusion: Embracing divergence and feeling through a care metric

Employee autonomy and creativity is vulnerable to being mere surface level branding within organisational systems that survey employee suitability with measures and metrics, psychometric tests and HR strategies geared toward universal competency standards. Individualisms may be promoted at work, but, in effect, risk actually perpetuating the opposite by failing to acknowledge how being an affective worker *is actually being* an affected one. In affected labours, the greater breadth of different ideas and experiences one carries, the more archival footage they may accumulate to draw from in subsequent encounters. In this process of forming ideas, cultivating self and utilising feeling, new vectors are opened-up in terms of the possibility and potential to move — and what direction in thereafter. This is a form of creativity akin to divergence and non-effortful thinking. How could enforced, static emotion management of contemporary workforces cater to the emotionally charged products and audiences they create and leverage off — if one accepts that moving others depends on oneself being moved (Hochschild, 1983)? The expression of feeling from consumers and producers of creative products/services, the mood-swings of diverse audiences and their collective engagement, inform the overall value (Lazzarato, 2006).

Immaterial products are by nature an activity, or experience, without a fixed end point or materiality; they require affected, communicative and emotional activity in finding use-value. Moreover, the potential for creative expression and transcendence in such labours is heightened given the feeling and care involved in production — albeit generally invisible and unpaid labour. And, following Virno (2004: 56), '...exactly for this reason, it is above all within the culture industry that the structure of wage labor has overlapped with that of political action'.

By actually feeling work and being affected, opportunities for creativity, non-collaboration and resistance are opened and, ultimately, the exploration of creative thinking is enabled. There is transcendent value in feeling individually and pursuing divergent thought in order to be creative, affective, and innovative (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013). Deleuze, for example, pursues the non-dialectical politics of multiplicity, or the multitude, in advocating for

creative pluralism in organisation, grounded in the concept of becoming (Linstead and Thanem, 2007). It is worth considering: what if the potential of human creativity that is characterised by divergent and non-effortful thinking was truly embraced in a multitude workplace, and organised according to feeling through a metric of care, rather than a normalising metric of sameness?

By breaking-down the passage: from being affected (moved) to becoming affective (moving), this note reveals how labours that depend upon creative workers and creativity (defined by non-effortful thinking and divergence) are born out of feeling and one's forming of adequate ideas in the process of their being an affected labourer (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013). As exploitative, precarious, coercive, and exhaustingly demanding work and consumption can be, there *are* characteristics of the present labour landscape that signal potential for divergence and creativity — where affected labour holds emancipatory potential. An individual's degree of *care,* and their ability to move others through moving themself, would seem much more indicative of their propensity for successful affected labour, rather than measuring their ability to fit in.

A metric of care would see affected labourers in organisations as users and engaged players whose ability to express feeling helps to drive the overall product. In a metric of care, individual difference is considered the crucial motor of creative growth or, following Deleuze (1988) and Spinoza (1996), as the premise out of which adequate ideas and innovation develop. A metric of care for measuring and recruiting creative affected labourers (when producing moving products that seek to affect the consumer) would seem to be an interesting paradigm shift in organisational redesign; figuring difference *as* becoming common. A metric of care would value the ontological premise of affected labour as being built on the individual's breadth of different ideas that are activated in the felt moment, and needed in the force of their own creativity and affectivity thereafter. Labour recruitment processes and skill-matching metrics too often both desire innovation and creativity, while paralysing its actual ontological premise — as has been revealed in this piece. In the pursuit of 'aligned workforces', organisation that produces creative products may consider replacing such an emphasis on alignment with an emphasis on different degrees of care.

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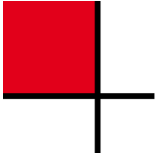Freud, S. (1997) *The interpretation of dreams*, trans. A.A. Brill. London: Penguin Group.

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A posthumanist approach to practice and knowledge

Laura Lucia Parolin

review of

Introduction

In an increasingly vibrant research landscape, where practice studies has become a well-established stream of research in management and organization (Nicolini, 2012; Nicolini and Monteiro, 2017), it is no surprise to see a second edition of this influential book. Considering the significance of Gherardi's contribution, I focus primarily on the similarities and differences between the first and second editions, showing how the latter offers a view of the state of the art of Practice Approach within the recent debate in social studies. This new edition, organized along the same lines as the original structure, focuses on the pillars of her practice-based approach, namely: situatedness, knowing in practice, embodied and aesthetic knowing, technological, normative, discursive and social infrastructures. In addition, however, it includes new insights that underscore the fine-grained nuances that coalesce under the umbrella of practice studies in management and

organization. More broadly, Gherardi distinguishes between humanistic approaches to practice that focus on humans, and their practices and posthumanist approaches that, instead, focus on the very process of connecting, in which all mobilized elements achieve agency through their connections. In my view, this is the main innovation of this second edition. Indeed, the text explicitly connects with the broader debate in the social sciences about the centrality of humans, taking sides with relational materialism (Law, 1994) and other posthumanist perspectives (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2019). I will now briefly outline the general structure and content of the book, before looking in greater detail at the significant new content.

Readers familiar with the first edition will remember a peculiarity of that volume was that it not only offered excerpts and extracts of research to introduce the practice-based approach but also showed how such approach enabled empirical analysis. Indeed, one of the main features of the first edition was to introduce the practice studies of working, learning and organizing, whilst at the same time arguing for their implication in undertaking empirical research. This remains central to a book whose title promises to explain how to practice empirical research using this approach. This should not be confused with offering a simple recipe that provides step by step instructions that anyone can easily follow. Rather, it offers a composite view of the practice(s) of research the approach enables. The book offers a sophisticated entry point to the entanglements that hold together theoretical reflections about practices and the multiplicity of ways of doing empirical research on work practices. In the introduction, Gherardi stresses how the act of embracing a practice-based approach means to dispense with questions of ontology (what practice is) in favour of questions about performativity (what practice does), suggesting that reflections on how we do empirical research is an epistemological process about how 'things' are made to matter, and how epistemological relations make 'things' acquire a situated position.

In the opening chapter, Gherardi immediately directs the reader to the core of her concept, showing how practice can be investigated as the spatial-temporal accomplishment with specific tools, discourses, technologies and rules. It emerges with a definition of practices as modes of action and knowledge that characterize a new strand of social studies on working and organizing called

'practice-based studies' or 'studies of knowing in practice'. The use of both labels is not casual. *Contra* other practice scholars, Gherardi's conceptualization of practice is based on the consideration of knowing as a situated activity (Gherardi, 2000). This conceptualization is the root of what has been defined as a practice-view on organizational knowing and learning (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015), and grounds her view in a critique of the rationality of social action. According to Gherardi, practising is 'knowing how' and knowing 'what next' to contribute to ongoing situated working practice. Thus, even when performed by a single social actor, practice is always something more than activities or courses of action as a practice is socially sustained by a normative base (ethical, affective and aesthetic) and continually reproduced and/or contested within the community, which sustains it.

Chapter two extends this interpretation of practice as collectively knowledgeable doing. Mobilizing examples mostly from ethnomethodological studies of coordination centres, the chapter shows how coordination is obtained through different kinds of participation and common orientation. In so doing, Gherardi shows how activities that deploy the collective knowledgeable accomplishment of a practice can be accounted for. The examples, taken together with reference to Hutching's work, and an example of teleconsultation, illustrate the concept of the workspace as relationally enacted and introduce the notion that practising is a performance in an equipped environment (see also Chapter four). These strands of research contribute to the project of overcoming the 'classical' concept of 'task' (individual task) that is argued to be inappropriate in describing how people work in complex and irregular processes. From this vantage point, the conception of work as a competent performance, which mobilizes relevant resources from the social and physical environment, is developed. Thus, practising should be read as the ongoing accomplishment achieved through collective knowledgeable doing.

To better explain the need to study work practices empirically, Chapter three is focused on studying knowledge as a practical phenomenon. Gherardi argues that practice studies collaborate in an alternative way of conceptualizing knowledge that differs from common ways of reading it as mental and cognitive phenomena. This view allows for the consideration of knowledge

that is not only embedded in the practise of a practice but also one that is embodied in knowledgeable bodies that participate in it. It is here that Gherardi discloses her contiguity with both aesthetic approaches to organization – based on phenomenological grounds – as well as organizational symbolism. This is not by chance, as they are among the most relevant *loci* where the critique of the rationalist paradigm within organization studies has emerged. Gherardi mobilizes these approaches to address how bodies and senses are used in work practices, highlighting how practices cannot be meaningfully reduced to their activities. Indeed, practices are also composed by pathos, involvement, passion and meaning of doing in relation to the world. Here Gherardi is also opening further considerations of how practice theory connects with affect theory (Massumi, 1995) and its uses in recent management and organization literature (Gherardi, 2017). The examples of research illustrated in this chapter show how professional competence emerges from educating senses to develop a shared aesthetic judgement within a particular practice. Abilities, then, commonly attributed to talent (and thus considered innate), are instead conceptualized as the effect of social practices, on the one hand, and a collective process of learning and knowing-in-practice, on the other.

The relational epistemology of Gherardi's approach is even more evident when she maintains that practices must be conceptualized as sociomaterial phenomena. The fourth chapter underlines how all practices are necessarily sociomaterial because the social world and materiality are strictly relationally entangled. In recognizing that her epistemology 'does not distinguish between the production of knowledge and construction of the object of knowledge' (82), she positions her approach within agential realism (Barad, 2007). Agential realism is ontologically opposed to considering the material and the social as separate issues, as Scott and Orlikowski (2013) put it, 'agential realism is a break with the dichotomy established by naïve realism and social constructivism, both of which retain commitments to separatism and representationalism' (Scott and Orlikowski, 2013: 78). In so doing, Gherardi explicitly collocates her proposal as part of a broader conversation – within posthumanism and relational materialism – that suggests the displacement of the human subject as the central seat of agency, and the recognition of the social as material, and the material as social. Indeed, for

Gherardi, the epistemology of practice is essentially a posthumanist project that decentralizes the human actor and reconfigures the concept of agency within sociomaterial practices. I would argue that this elucidation is the main innovation in this edition. Moreover, Gherardi clarifies how practice conceptualized as epistemology differs from other practice theories that consider practice itself as the object of inquiry.

In the following two chapters, Gherardi takes up some key themes of practice-based studies covered in the first edition. Chapter five is dedicated to discussing the relationship between practices and the normative infrastructure. In this regard, the focus is primarily on how practitioners convert norms into a resource for action. This approach highlights how rules (and protocols) acquire meaning through the shared experience of the practitioners, and they often require additional 'invisible work' to become practically usable. Next is a focus on discursive practices and language as mediator. In this sense, practicing is also conceived as 'doing' and 'knowing how to do', with words, and so concomitantly it should be analyzed as a 'discursive practice' that is normatively sustained by a community and learned and performed as part of practitioners' competence. This practice approach allows for the exploration of expertise and professional competence as it is deployed in discursive practices, showing both the knowledge embedded in meaningful interactions and the relevance of such expertise for the nexus of practices (Parolin, 2020).

Chapter seven constitutes a second important novelty in this edition: a focus on the socially sustained and contested aspect of practices. By maintaining that one way of practising is sustained and contested by the practitioners through discussion over aesthetic, ethical and affective judgments, Gherardi proposes original ways to account for these discussions. Looking at practices as matters of concern and matters of care (Mol et al., 2015), as opposed to matters of fact, she highlights the collective attachment of practitioners to the object of practice and shows the plurality and situatedness of judgements on what constitutes a good practice. In her proposal, attachment is expressed and sustained by four sources: situated aesthetic judgment in the form of taste-making (Hennion, 2007); ethics as practice; ordinary affect; and formativeness. Here Gherardi tries to connect the traditions of aesthetics to organization and management studies (Cook and Yanow, 1993; Martin, 2002;

Strati, 1998, 2000) with relational approaches like Hennion's (1997), Mol's (2008) and Massumi's (1995).

The innovations in this second edition continue through the next chapter, which focuses on practices' interdependencies as the texture of practices, explicitly framing the epistemology of practice as a posthuman project showing how practices are connected with, and anchored to, other practices. The introduction of the concept of *agencements*, intended as 'being in connection with' by Deleuze and Guattari, arguably overcomes the creaking structure/agency dichotomy by directing attention to the process of linking heterogeneous elements in 'an open-ended process' (182). Similar to DeLanda (2016), Gherardi suggests avoiding a focus on the final status of the sociomaterial assemblage, stressing instead the pertinence of the process of emergence. In this respect, Gherardi draws the readers' attention to a consideration of becoming, reminding us that organizational phenomena do not have to be considered entities, but rather unfolding processes. In doing so, she is contributing to the line of enquiry that regards organization less as a noun and more as a verb (Law, 1994).

If the previous edition was focused on establishing a coherent framework of practice-based studies and illustrating how to use it in empirical research, then this edition has an even more ambitious goal. It aims to clarify the location of this (particular) practice approach within recent debates in social and organization studies. In this new edition, the concept of 'texture of practices' is, thus, enriched by the two concepts of *agencements* and becoming considered as part of the same vocabulary 'that with slightly different nuances refers to territorialization, temporality and processes of achieving agency' (184). Gherardi explains her methodological suggestion to follow the practices as a movement up and down on the axis that connects the institutional order to the individual-in-situation. In this section, she also introduces her spiral case study design as a research method for mapping a texture of practices.

In Chapter nine, titled 'Tricks of the Trade', Gherardi furnishes the reader with an overview of the different methods used in practice-based research. Significantly, she highlights the performativity of the researcher's practices, suggesting how (and how not) to practise practice theory, which helps to produce the realities that it describes. It follows then, that her suggestion is

to strive for a 'more-than-representational' language that, 'is a search for the expression of the elusive knowledge embedded and embodied in practising, their enactments and affectivity, instead of just their representation as "true phenomena"' (224).

Gherardi articulates some crucial claims to conclude the book. Unambiguous, she explicitly declares that she is theorizing a posthuman practice approach, and it is this that constitutes the core and innovative character of the second edition of the book. In this respect, she is not simply explaining 'how to conduct a practice study', but explicitly setting out what the ontological consequences of adopting this approach are, and how the approach itself relates to recent debates in organization and social science. To frame practice-based studies in the conversation around posthumanism means to rethink the subject/object divide, and consequently, the paradigms that have nurtured them. Indeed, while these approaches focus on the human subject and human agency in the world, a posthumanist approach to practice focuses on the *relations* from which the subject/object emerges. Here, Gherardi distinguishes her approach from practice approaches that focus on human actions (i.e. *a la* Bourdieu).

At the core of Gherardi's posthuman theoretical framework on practice are three conceptual pillars: *agencements;* formativeness; and affect. As noted above, the concept of *agencements* connects Gherardi's proposal to Deleuzian and Guattarian philosophy, describing practice as a 'heuristic move that de-territorializes and re-territorializes the unfolding flow of practising'. In her proposal, practising is conceptualized as a rhizomatic movement that, through *agencements,* creates and dissolves connections without any pre-defined order. This sense of movement also characterizes the concept of formativeness. Drawing on Pareyson's philosophy (Pareyson, 1954), formativeness is a concept that connects practice with creativity and learning, and 'denotes "a doing" such that while it does, it invents the way of doing' (241). The knowing process becomes a material and formative process that progresses toward a final result based on attempting, correcting and re-doing. With this concept, Gherardi promises to grasp the co-penetration between production and invention while focusing on relationships where the subject/object emerges. Beyond Gherardi's specific concept (formativeness) to

promote it,[1] I genuinely believe this to be a promising line of inquiry, one that could contribute to a renewed centrality of learning and knowing in organizational and management studies – a concept of learning and knowing that exclusively focuses neither on intentional learning, nor on human actors.

Finally, Gherardi underlines the importance of the concept of affect from Massumi's (1995) conceptualization, as the ability to affect and be affected. Suggesting a dialogue between turn to practice and turn to affect (Gherardi, 2017), she proposes to consider the body of the researcher as the material presence of a knowing subject in the encounters with other knowledgeable beings within the epistemic process.

As it should be clear, this second edition is less a restatement and more of a new challenge to organizational scholars in several ways. Methodological and theoretical challenges arise from the conceptualization of organizational phenomena as unfolding processes, whose characteristics are described throughout the chapters. Other challenges derive from being able to follow, as well as to participate and narrate, the relationality that constitutes the epistemic practice of conducting a posthuman practice study. In every sense, this book provides an occasion to seriously consider relational epistemology in organizational research.

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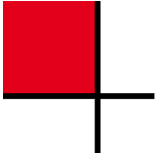
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From biased robots to race as technology

Inga Luchs

review

Benjamin, R. (2019) *Race after technology: Abolitionist tools for the New Jim Code*. Cambridge, UK/Medford, MA: Polity Press.

Ranking search results, filtering spam e-mails, recommending movies and books, evaluating credit card fraud, diagnosing malignant cells in cancer research, selecting job applicants – more and more tasks are being carried out by new media technologies such as machine learning algorithms. Their logic does not only simplify our daily approach to large masses of information but also applies at a higher level in the observation and regulation of population flows. They are for instance employed for policing purposes (e.g., in predictive policing), or in the economic sector, where they gain significant attention in the realm of data mining and big data analytics. With *Race after technology: Abolitionist tools for the New Jim Code,* Associate Professor of African American Studies, Ruha Benjamin, issues a critique of this contemporary situation by demonstrating how particularly new technologies reproduce and increase social inequalities under the guise of apparent objectivity and efficiency [5f.]. Benjamin centralizes her research around what she identifies as the 'New Jim Code', comprising 'a range of discriminatory designs – some that explicitly work to amplify hierarchies,

many that ignore and thus replicate social divisions, and a number that aim to fix racial bias but end up doing the opposite' [8].

With her research, Benjamin follows a long line of US-American publications in the last decade that point out patterns of discrimination caused by specific advances in technology. In *Algorithms of oppression* (2018), Safiya Noble, for instance, illustrates how Google's search engine shows biases against Women of Color and other marginalized groups (2018: 6, 15). With her book, *Automating inequality* (2017), Virginia Eubanks traces algorithmic decision-making systems and their social consequences, for instance in the management of homelessness in Los Angeles or the detection of child abuse and neglect in Pennsylvania. Cathy O'Neil provides a more in-depth technical analysis in her book, *Weapons of math destruction* (2016). With years of work experience as a data scientist in financial markets and big data analytics, she focuses on the statistical models which are part of the machine learning technologies that form the basis for automated decisions. O'Neil conceives these models as particularly troubling, given that they are 'opaque, unquestioned, and unaccountable, and…operate at a scale to sort, target, or "optimize" millions of people' (O'Neil, 2016: 12).

Ruha Benjamin adds to this previous research by combining the analysis of technologies from a Science and Technology Studies (STS) perspective with a thorough examination of its interconnection with critical race studies. For her newly devised field of research, she coins the term 'race critical code studies' [44]. Building on previous work by Safiya Noble (2018) and Simone Browne (2015), Benjamin centers this research around the historical connections between the logic of racism and technologies. Here, she follows a chronological line, referring with her notion of the 'New Jim Code' to *The New Jim Crow* (2012), a book by Michelle Alexander on the US carceral system. Alexander shows how the conditions of the contemporary US carceral system can be traced back to the 'Jim Crow era', which mandated racial segregation and manifested white supremacy from the 1870s to the 1960s (Alexander, 2012: 91). Similarly, Benjamin shows how algorithmic discrimination neither results from technologies that are inherently racist, nor from programmers who deliberately program racist algorithms [52f.]. Instead, as she points out, structural racism conditions contemporary technological classification systems, perpetuating already separated and

stratified societies along racialized lines [36]. In this vein, race has become 'one of our most powerful tools – developed over hundreds of years, varying across time and place, codified in law and refined through custom, and, tragically, still considered by many people to reflect immutable differences between groups' [36]. With this theoretical framework, Benjamin builds upon previous work by media researcher Wendy Chun (2009), considering race as a kind of technology: '[This] is an invitation to consider racism in relation to other forms of domination as not just an ideology or history, but as a set of technologies that generate patterns of social relations, and these become Black-boxed as natural, inevitable, *automatic*' [44-45].

In her 2009 introduction to the special issue 'Race and/as technology' of *Camera obscura*, Chun further identifies, how regarding race as technology helps a move from the ontological question of *race* – which remains important nonetheless – to the question of its function, 'regardless of its alleged essence' (Chun, 2009: 9). Through her argument, Chun exposes how race 'functions as the "as", how it facilitates comparisons between entities classed as similar or dissimilar' (*ibid.*: 8). Here, Chun refers to Michael Omi and Howard Winant's argument of race as 'a fundamental organizing principle of social relationships' (Omi and Winant, 1986: 61-62, cited after Chun, 2009: 14). Chun clarifies how race has historically been 'a tool of subjugation', in the way that 'supposedly objective scientific categorizations of race have been employed to establish hierarchical differences between people, rendering some mere objects to be exploited, enslaved, measured, demeaned, and sometimes destroyed' (Chun, 2009: 10).

While Benjamin offers a compelling illustrative account, dense with examples of contemporary technologies and their intersection with race, a more substantial historical classification and theoretical examination unfortunately often disappears behind footnotes. Yet, her specific approach reads as a conscious choice: with her method of 'thin description', she explicitly opposes the 'New Jim Code', which 'seeks to penetrate all areas of life', favoring instead 'a much needed discretion, pushing back against the all-knowing, extractive, monopolizing practices of coded inequity' [46]. Understanding race as technology helps Benjamin open the discussion of racial discrimination at all technological levels, from naming as technology to concrete algorithmic systems. By choosing this mode of analysis,

however, Benjamin's book appears to remain on the surface of things, not clarifying whether she is only illustrating existing theoretical work or developing her own contribution to the existing literature. This raises the question of whether a deeper engagement with the theoretical concepts addressed, as well as the realities of the various technologies, would be more productive. This will become particularly clear in the following discussion of the chapters.

Everyday apps and complex algorithms: [1] The importance of technical specificities

In Chapter 1, *Engineered inequity*, Benjamin starts with the example of Beauty AI, which was an Australian-Chinese application, where contestants worldwide could take part in a beauty contest by uploading pictures of themselves. What was peculiar about the project was that the winners were not chosen by a human judge but a supervised machine learning algorithm. The 'robot jury' of Beauty AI processed the uploaded images according to certain criteria such as 'wrinkles, face symmetry, skin color, gender, age group, ethnicity and "many more parameters"' [50] and compared them to an already existing, human-classified database. Not surprisingly, the algorithm ultimately turned out to be discriminatory, predominantly declaring white women winners of the contest and thus reflecting societal biases (*ibid*.). In Chapter 2, *Default discrimination*, Benjamin draws on the, by now, well-known example of the recidivism algorithm, COMPAS, implemented in several US states to predict the probability of criminals committing future crimes. The program developed by the for-profit company, Northpointe, assigned scores to individuals who committed a felony. This so-called 'risk assessment' was then used to estimate a person's potential recidivism, influencing his or her time of release ([81]; Angwin et al., 2016). In the first two chapters, Benjamin aptly illustrates what race as technology looks like in relation to contemporary algorithmic systems – showing that it is not malfunctioning technologies or biased programmers

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[1] 'From everyday apps to complex algorithms, *Race after technology* aims to cut through industry hype to offer a field guide into the world of biased bots, altruistic algorithms, and their many coded cousins' [7].

that lead to discriminatory systems, but a structural form of racial discrimination which runs consistently through the technologies.

In Chapter 3, *Coded exposure*, Benjamin traces the duality of creating (in)visibility through technologies and the consequences of inclusion and exposure for racialized groups. Here, she investigates the implications of technologies that are 'presenting partial and distorted visions as neutral and universal' [100]. With Kodak's so-called 'Shirly Card', the image of a white woman that was used from the 1950s to the 1990s for the standardization of light exposure in photography, Benjamin exemplifies how whiteness was set as default. Consequently, dark-skinned people were regularly underexposed [103f.]. Yet, also contemporary technologies, applied in algorithmic decision-making – such as in the granting of credit loans or in the automatic pre-selection of applicants for a job – are often advertised as neutral, even though they, too, evidently '...reproduce long-standing forms of structural inequality and colorblind racism' [64]. As Benjamin further elaborates: '[These] default settings, once fashioned, take on a life of their own, projecting an allure of objectivity that makes it difficult to hold anyone accountable' [64]. On the other side, Benjamin shows how efforts at inclusion and increased visibility of Black people within technologies should be met with caution, as 'we do not all experience the dangers of exposure in equal measure' [111]. Particularly when it comes to surveillance measures and the application of face recognition, Black people are frequently overly patrolled and discriminated against, as examples of predictive policing show [112]. Consequently, Black people stand under enhanced scrutiny but are at the same time also more often falsely accused, which can lead to life-impacting, even deadly results. As Benjamin states, '[who] is seen and under what terms holds a mirror onto more far-reaching forms of power and inequality' [99].

Likewise, attempts for more diverse datasets might equally lead to troubling effects. In Chapter 4, *Technological benevolence*, Benjamin challenges technological products that aim for more diversity, but which merely offer temporary fixes, sometimes even deepening the issue. In this chapter, Benjamin turns her attention to the company, *Diversity Inc.,* which supports companies in their targeted advertising through 'ethnic targeting'. As the companies themselves are legally not allowed to collect data on race and

ethnicity, *Diversity Inc.* offers them to predict these based on the names of individuals. However, since names are not sufficient for an accurate prediction, as *Diversity Inc.* states, they also use attributes such as socioeconomic status, location, or gender. Thus, similar to the example of the recidivism algorithm, the diverse attributes function as proxies for the ethnicity of the companies' customers [144ff.]. In this way, historic forms of redlining that were used to separate neighborhoods by race 'are now a source of profit for those who want to gear their products and services to different racial-ethnic groups' [147].

Throughout her book, Benjamin draws upon various examples that cut across different technological levels. Next to these mentioned here, which primarily rely on machine learning algorithms, Benjamin also includes other cases such as autocorrection in text editors or the idea of a social credit system in an episode of the TV show, Black Mirror. While Benjamin summarizes the core arguments around the debate of algorithmic discrimination, they tend to get lost in a stream of illustrative examples, resulting in an associative analysis. This also weakens her argumentative structure throughout the chapters, making it hard to understand her principal argument and how each chapter relates.

Furthermore, the differentiation of technologies in their technical characteristics lacks precision. Particularly Benjamin's decision to frame her research objects – 'from everyday apps to complex algorithms' [7] – under the loaded term of the 'robot' as 'any machine that can perform a task, simple or complex, directed by humans or programmed to operate automatically' [54-55] hinders a deeper understanding of the technologies and their underlying logics. Likewise, the notion of the 'robot' further reinforces the image of technologies as automatic and independent agents, which contradicts her explicit stance against technological determinism: 'We observe not only that any given social order is impacted by technological development, as determinists would argue, but that social norms, ideologies, and practices are a constitutive part of technical design' [41]. Despite this human impact in their design, however, technologies themselves should also be taken seriously in their ability to create meaning and thus bring political relevance (Rieder, 2020: 53ff.). Only this perspective enables us to shift our attention to the inner logic of these systems in their

design and understand, why it is precisely these social effects that they bring about, and which Benjamin aptly highlights. This outlook is vital when it comes to the formulation of alternatives.

So, what now? A call for action

With her book, Benjamin offers an impressive account of a range of discriminatory technological designs and their entanglement with structural racism inherent in society. She insightfully brings together these technological systems and their social effects with her wealth of knowledge in the field of critical race studies. The question that remains is what we can do to address these problematics. Or, in the words of the author: 'What does an emancipatory approach to tech entail?' [173].

In Chapter 5, *Retooling solidarity, reimagining justice*, Benjamin illustrates with the cases of the apps, *Appolition* and *Promise,* to what end a technological system is developed and how values and interests inscribed in that goal inevitably affect society. Both applications address the problem of 'pretrial detention, which impacts disproportionately Black and Latinx people who cannot afford bail' [164]. *Appolition* works by converting its users' daily change into bail money and is founded in an abolitionist belief [162]. *Promise*, on the other hand, costs $17 a day, and it functions by 'tracking individuals via the app and GPS monitoring' [164], thus making pretrial detention obsolete. This application receives large capital payments from investors. According to Benjamin, *Appolition* is a 'technology with an emancipatory ethos, a tool of solidarity that directs resources to getting people literally free' [163]. On the other hand, *Promise* further manifests the prison industrial complex by providing new forms of digital imprisonment [164].

With this comparison, Benjamin underlines the need for different values than economic interests, demanding 'a socially conscious approach to tech development that would require prioritizing equity over efficiency, social good over market imperatives' [183]. She further points out the need for new narratives and demands surrounding technology that work towards overcoming structural oppression and racism [197]. The reshaping of the

narratives that accompany technologies goes hand in hand with the call for their active re-design. The book thus functions as a 'field guide' [36], or 'conceptual toolkit' [41], supporting the fight for 'justice-oriented design practices' [48].[2] Here, she states that '[efforts] to combat coded inequity cannot be limited to industry, nonprofit, and government actors, but must include community-based organizations that offer a vital set of counternarratives about the social and political dimensions of the New Jim Code' [188].[3]

While this stance is significant, it does not clarify what the redesign of technologies should look like in concrete terms, aside from community involvement. Instead, the technological system of the 'robot' remains the unattainable other. Benjamin for instance describes, how 'the way robots can be racist often remains a mystery' [53] and that 'there is an enormous mystique around computer codes, which hides the human biases involved in technical design' [78]. Further, when Benjamin draws on the example of *Appolition* as a positive example for her demand of 'abolitionist tool-making', she falls back on a view of technologies as tools for a specific purpose. However, in order to gain a deeper understanding of its societal impact, as I want to argue, it is necessary to not only think from the outside of the technological artifact in terms of its effects, but rather to gain a deeper understanding of it by looking inside the supposed 'black box'. In fact, recent research shows evidence that the technical principles behind algorithmic systems are actually accessible (e.g. Bechmann and Bowker,

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[2] Benjamin grounds her call for 'design justice' on work done by researcher Sasha Costanza-Chock (2018) and a network of designers, software developers, activists and researchers that aim to think 'more about the *process* and power dynamics of design across multiple axes of oppression' [175]. Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein, authors of the book *Data feminism*, similarly demand to 'understand and design systems that address the source of the bias: structural oppression' (D'Ignazio and Klein, 2020: 63). Hence, they state that '[s]tarting from the assumption that oppression is the problem, not bias, leads to fundamentally different decisions about what to work on, who to work with, and when to stand up and say that a problem cannot and should not be solved by data and technology' (*ibid.*).

[3] Throughout her book and in the appendix, Benjamin assembles a variety of US-based tech and social justice institutes as points for further research [235].

2019; Mackenzie, 2017; Rieder, 2020), thus offering precisely the analytical depth necessary for redesigning technologies.

At this point, concepts such as representation, classification and discrimination are not only captivating in their cultural significance regarding knowledge production and the filtering of information, but they are also specific technological operations that require investigation. What, for instance, does it mean for the design of alternative technologies, when a significant and inevitable part of their operations is discrimination (Apprich et al., 2019)? Or, on a more specific level, what happens exactly when a machine learning algorithm performs a classification? What assumptions are leading the process and how are certain entities represented through specific categories and labels? How are processes of inclusion and exclusion taking place in detail, and who is taking these decisions? In this line of thought, Wendy Chun (2021) shows how, fundamentally, machine learning algorithms operate based on the homophily principle, which means that algorithms discriminate data by referring to notions of similarity. Consequently, segregation emerges in online networks, resulting in the creation of echo chambers and discriminatory effects. Precisely at this point, one could start and ask, with regard to concrete technological structures, how algorithmic systems could look that take heterophily or diversity as their starting point. Then, of course, as Safiya Noble writes, 'an app will not save us' (Noble, 2018: 165, cited after Benjamin, 2019: 179). However, this does not mean that we should not engage with the intricate details of the technological systems that we are facing today. A comprehensive understanding of their inner workings might lead us to a better understanding of how they function and what assumptions they rely on. Starting from there, we can think of how we might redesign technologies, integrating the values that Benjamin, and the data justice projects she refers to, so compellingly demand.

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