



In these critical times: Of monstrosity, catastrophe, and the future of critique

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abstract

In this essay, we argue that the climate catastrophe is the Monstrous disruption that opens the instituted and textual reality to an outside—overflowing planetary boundaries—whilst de-centring human beings as the assumed masters of the universe. This contradictory relation—an external force other than humans, contingent on humans—constructs a situation ripe for nostalgic yearning for certainty and truth-tellers. Across the globe, this takes the form of the Sovereign, who domesticates climate change into a shared phantasm upholding human mastery and exceptionalism while denying others' agencies and experiences. The alternative, we suggest, is to stare into the abyss opened up by the climate catastrophe and support an affirmative critique of responsibility towards the other. This compliments the common negative form of critique in organization studies, but also suggests the end of the business school.

Somehow, in the midst of ruins, we must maintain enough curiosity to notice the strange and wonderful as well as the terrible and terrifying. (Tsing et al., 2017: M3)

Introduction

Screens and newspapers are filled with apocalyptic images from across the globe depicting the catastrophic impacts of climate change: from wildfires to

floods and cyclones. Even so, the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere steadily increases, with the planet on track to reach global warming of at least 3 degrees Celsius by the end of the century (United Nations Environment Programme, 2019)—a state incompatible with organized human civilization on most continents (New et al., 2011). The academic field of organization studies has recognized the severe implications of climate change (see e.g., special issues in *Organization*, Wright et al., 2013; and *Organization Studies*, Wittneben et al., 2012), and there is growing critique of how mainstream management and organization theory incorporate climate change into corporate wealth creation and economic growth (Ergene et al., 2021; Kalonaityte, 2018). The mainstream employment of existing and dominant organizational theories to translate climate change into palatable and calculable futures is also evident in business school teachings of climate change, emphasizing ‘sustainability’, ‘risk’ and ‘resilience’ (Allen et al., 2019; Wright and Nyberg, 2016). This position projects humans as rational and in control of their destiny, with western capitalist democracies assigning corporations and entrepreneurs the task of addressing climate change.

In line with critical organization studies literature, we argue that this assertion of control avoids the unsettling aspects of climate change that challenge the anthropocentrism within organizational and management scholarship as well as within business schools more broadly (Allen et al., 2019; Ergene et al., 2021). Within business schools, the dangers of climate change are converted into business risks and opportunities supporting the continuation of compound economic growth and the depletion of natural resources (Nyberg and Wright, 2022). Using the Derridian (1976, 1978) trope of the monster, we aim to contribute to critical debates on the domestication of climate change by showing how particular representations of climate change inform climate actions (Campbell et al., 2019; De Cock et al., 2021).

We argue that the climate catastrophe is the Monstrous (capital M) disruption that opens up the instituted reality to an outside—overflowing planetary boundaries—whilst de-centring human beings as the assumed masters of the universe. This contradictory relation—an external force other than humans, contingent on humans—constructs a situation ripe for

nostalgic yearning for certainty and truth-tellers. With this, we also contribute to recent discussions on the re-emergence of authoritarian populism (Robinson and Bristow, 2020) by suggesting that it signals the return of the Sovereign (Derrida, 2005). Populations are turning to, or hiding behind, a Sovereign defending the phallogocentric instituted reality against the monster. In doing this, the climate Monster is translated into a phantasm, a monster (lower case) in the form of an external enemy upholding the social reality of a common human world. The alternative, we suggest, is to stare into the abyss opened up by the climate catastrophe and support an affirmative critique of responsibility towards the other. This compliments the common negative critique in organization studies, but also suggests the end of the business school.

The essay is structured as follows. We first engage with Derrida's early writings to argue that climate change can be seen as the Monster, breaking the linguistic structure that centres human agency and challenging human exceptionalism. We then show how two common responses to climate change—apocalypse and adaptation—are domestications that uphold the current western idea of progress for a common humanity. Third, we engage with Derrida's later writings to warn against hard sovereign power as a stabilizing factor. Finally, in the discussion, we outline an alternative route—affirmative critique—of responsibility by embracing the other.

Derrida and the climate Monster

Our engagement with Jacques Derrida takes as its point of departure a conference in Baltimore on the 20th of October 1966, where Derrida delivered the paper 'Structure, sign and play in the discourse of the human sciences'. He suggested there that language had replaced humans, who had replaced God, as the foundation in the trajectory of western metaphysics. The world was no longer anthropocentric—it was linguistic—and 'in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse' (Derrida, 1978: 354). In the talk, Derrida argued that there is no simple origin, no source or kernel, from which one can trace the meaning of a word or discourse.

This linguistic emphasis is conveyed through his (in)famous claim that ‘there is nothing outside of the text’ (Derrida, 1976: 158; ‘il n’y a pas de hors-texte’) because reality is always-already ‘inscribed in a determined textual system’ (Derrida, 1976: 160). Whilst this was often interpreted to mean something like ‘everything outside the actual text or texts we are considering is irrelevant and doesn’t really exist’ (Culler, 2007: 102), Derrida arguably meant quite the opposite: there is only text because you cannot get out of the text. He fundamentally put into question the idea that there is a mental picture, ideal or signified, that gives meaning to language, structures it, which can be found outside the system of language. Experience is always mediated and ‘the original’ is produced as an effect of signs and continuously supplemented.

Rather than finding an origin or centre, of interest is the motion between the structure of representation and its impossibility. There is an internal contradiction in the homogeneity of language that makes change possible. The homogeneity of constructing the structure of representation is dependent on the ‘close and patient tracing of construction’ (Wolfreys, 2007: 18). The tracing, or perhaps colouring in, can end outside the dotted lines, that is, be otherwise. The play of the structure is therefore, so to speak, within its own movement. It is not imposed from an ‘outside’. Considering that the linguistic system has no origin or centre, there is an infinite play of difference, an excess, in that the trace can transcend any particular context. Moreover, and for the same reason, this infinite play also means that the system has a lack; it cannot be closed.

At the end of the Baltimore presentation, in our reading, Derrida (1978: 370) can be seen to suggest the incompatibility of these two interpretations: i) the excess or abundance outside the structure that provides endless possibilities of play, and ii) the gap or lack filled with insecurity and ‘nostalgia for origins’ or ‘reassuring foundation’ that leads to endless substitutions of a centre. The structure cannot be totalized because of either the empirical infinity for the limited subject or the absence continuously filled in the present. This ‘irreducible difference’ is the future arrival of the ‘monstrosity’ (Derrida, 1978: 370). Derrida (1978: 370) invokes the trope of the monster in suggesting the future arrival of ‘the formless, mute, infant

and terrifying form of monstrosity' that will overcome the two interpretations of language without structure or centre, that is, the difference between the social abundance informing linguistic developments and the lack of a centre (continuously supplemented).

We argue that the climate catastrophe can productively be seen as the Monstrous 'arrivant' addressing the irreducible difference. This is a future that 'breaks absolutely with the constituted normality and can only be proclaimed, presented, as a sort of monstrosity' (Derrida, 1976: 5). With regard to Derrida's first interpretation, the climate catastrophe is the abundance, the outside, which simultaneously confirms and de-centres humans. It is becoming glaringly obvious that there was never a human mastery of the world.

Following the second interpretation, climate change grounds human exceptionalism by its human origin. Climate change has been a politically polarizing issue, becoming the identity supplement par excellence, with the position on climate change grounding human experience through links to, for example, voting and consumption patterns (McCright and Dunlap, 2011). It is an exceptionalism that, at the same time, breaks with the modernist human progress, while denying the consequences of the dominant modernist project of freedom and prosperity through forms of capitalism. The agency of humans to completely alter the planet without collective willingness to take responsibility for the consequences can, potentially, lead to a longing for authoritarian agency; that is, for someone else to deal with the Monster (of their own creation).

This Monstrous 'arrivant' is unpredictable and presents in the 'form of an absolute danger' (Derrida, 1976: 5), with which current modernist concepts and constructions cannot deal. Similar to the dangers of climate change, Derrida (1984: 23) elaborated on the concept of 'disaster' in the context of nuclear catastrophe, claiming that it is 'fabulously textual', because until it happens, it can only be imagined, and once it happens, it marks the end of human civilization. Derrida's (1984: 23) 'fable' ('something one can only talk about') was located in the socio-political reality of the 1980s, with the forces of destruction stockpiled and capitalized. Since nuclear catastrophe could

only be talked about, it produced a construction of the then present reality: the time was marked as 'the nuclear age' (Derrida, 1984: 21). The nuclear age, similar to the present era of climate change, was constructed through 'fables about the future' (Toadvine, 2018: 52), which suspend the present.

Rather than a Monstrous arrival, we argue that this textual interpretation of nuclear catastrophe as the imagined end of civilization is a phantasm for western capitalist democracies. The phantasm is the construction of an illusion of a common end, and hence a common world—the familiar claim that 'we are in this together'. However, as Barad (2019) points out, nuclear catastrophes have already happened. Barad describes how the aftermath of sixty-seven US nuclear bomb 'tests' on the Marshall Islands between 1946 and 1958, with one bomb test 1000 times the size of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, was a catastrophe in the sense of an 'end'. The break produced by radioactive colonialism left two-kilometre-wide craters, and a radioactive fallout resulting in higher rates of cancer and Marshallese women giving birth to 'jellyfish' and 'grapes', as they themselves described it (Barad, 2019: 526-527). Thus, the nuclear catastrophe has happened, several times. It just did not enter the western psyche as a reality since the effects were suffered by the other.

The disasters already experienced by marginalized human and non-human populations arguably prick the inflated phantasm of a common looming catastrophe. This is a phantasm upheld and shared in the pretence and projection of a common world (Toadvine, 2018). However, what the Marshallese experience tellingly suggests is that there is no common world, no one reality. Even so, by endlessly rehearsing nuclear war (and its aftermath) in films and books, there is a domestication of 'an image of a postnuclear world that "stands in" for the actual failure of the imagination to be able to conceive of the end' (Masco, 2013: 273), and these articulations of the world, through contemplating its violent end, have colonized the present. Perhaps, the popularity of apocalyptic fiction and films suggests that people in the western world are even 'dreaming of it, desiring it' (Derrida, 1984: 23).

Does the same process of ‘domestication’ not apply to the climate catastrophe too? Have people in the western world become inured to disasters because they are already frequently played out on screens? This creates a form of implicatory denial (Norgaard, 2011), where people glued to televisions and the internet witness the extreme hurricanes, flooding and droughts displacing thousands of people, recognize climate change as the culprit for these extreme weather events, and yet feel comfortable that they will somehow be able to adapt to these consequences, and therefore can disregard them again as soon as the visual spectacle on the screen is over. The climate Monster is textually institutionalized as a monster—a phantasm supporting the existing world order. The climate catastrophe is a spectacle that exists elsewhere, and even with the increased frequency of its consequences, these are not integrated into modernist grids of intelligibility; there is a lack of proper concepts to think ‘the catastrophe’, as it lies across the abyss that separates the Anthropos from the other and challenges the anthropocentric exceptionalism in current ways of thinking and being.

The domestication of climate change

The trope of the monster assists in explaining domestications of the climate catastrophe, which use dominant discursive frames around adaptation and apocalypse. Following the initial literal denial of climate change (Oreskes and Conway, 2010) and the implicatory denial of its effects (Norgaard, 2011), the current dominant responses are domesticated by folding climate change into dominant social imaginaries (Wright et al., 2013). Despite the ongoing and increasing impacts in the form of extreme weather events, record-breaking temperatures, and sea-level rise (IPCC, 2018), the climate catastrophe is continuously pushed into a known future; essentially an extension of the present with added ‘visions of innovation, sustainability, resilience, and adaptation, those increasingly greenwashed, green-tainted words, retrofitted to neoliberal policies’ (Nixon, 2018: 12). This colonization of the future by the dominant economic system of corporate capitalism, promoted by business schools, clings on to human-centred conceptualizations and constructions of climate change.

The discussions around ‘adaptation’ are symptomatic of this. Rather than developing new conceptualizations that are commensurate to the present environmental violence, societies are readying themselves for what lies in the future. This focus on adaptation and resilience, prevalent in contemporary discourses around climate change, then becomes a justification for or defence of the current dominant economic system. It is clever technological adaptation that will ensure the continuation of what is seen as a linear progressive development of the world (De Cock et al., 2021). For example, in their study of local adaptation in a community vulnerable to climate impacts in Australia, Bowden et al. (2019) show how the local community resisted any attempts towards adaptation until after the events. Following fierce opposition towards implementing measures to protect houses in vulnerable areas from flooding, the local council settled for future ‘trigger points’, when they would implement flooding polices. Nothing is to be done until the flooding has already happened; until the future has arrived.

Alternatively, and simultaneously, there is an embrace of the doomsday scenarios of the climate apocalypse with warnings of impending disasters ‘repeated ad nauseam by many scientists, activists, business leaders, and politicians’ (Swyngedouw, 2013: 9). This is articulated as nature’s payback for how humans have treated the planet; an ‘apocalypse without the promise of redemption’ that threatens all of humanity (Swyngedouw, 2010: 218). This reaction is what Miéville (2018: n.p.) called the ‘sheer arrogance of despair, the aggrandisement of thinking that one lives in the Worst Times’. Yet, this apocalyptic future is a continuously shifting finitude, forever delayed to the ‘not yet’. The coming apocalypse is the external (or Nature) that centres humans by offering certainty of what will come. The surrender to the coming apocalypse negates the climate change catastrophe by providing ‘truth’, since there is no apocalypse without truth: ‘Apocalypse means Revelation, of Truth, Un-veiling’ (Derrida, 1984: 24).

Povinelli et al. eloquently summarized these two positions which both forego agency in *the present*:

Rather we hear the soothing sounds of apocalypse or adaptation. The apocalyptic allows us to remain with(in) the comforting lullaby of finitude—death, death, death, immediate and decisive! And adaptation allows us to believe that we can continue on without change or major discomfort. Neither is true. Both are false. But both have a power in late liberalism that cannot be ignored. (2014: n.p.)

Within the social sciences this domestication of the climate catastrophe can be witnessed in the adoption of the term ‘Anthropocene’, which contrasts the human actor to other biological, meteorological, and geological actors (Povinelli, 2016). The Anthropocene clearly centres humans (anthro) as the culprit for ‘climate change’, which is usually followed by a debate about when it started and/or which particular form of human organization is to blame (see e.g., Haraway, 2015; Malm, 2016; Moore, 2015; Yusoff, 2016). The Anthropocene, which centres humans, becomes an outside or boundary to engage in the form of climate justice (Schlosberg and Collins, 2014) or the end of capitalism (Klein, 2014). On the other side of the spectrum, the Anthropocene becomes a call for re-centring humans through human ingenuity and, in a linear fashion, supporting geo-engineering to construct the ‘good’ Anthropocene of ecomodernists (Ellis, 2011). The answer is to reconfigure the Earth so as to avoid reconfiguring the economy (Nyberg and Wright, 2022).

The notion of Anthropocene can furthermore be seen as a way to sustain a distinction between humans and the non-human world. A geological epoch—the Anthropocene—supplements the centre from within and in the present. The term has an assuring connotation, suggesting humans are in control and that ‘we’ share a common destiny. However, there is a lack of responsibility and agency requiring an ‘other’: something or someone to deal with the monster. The monster is needed to ground conflicting experiences and provide a shared singular ‘truth’. The political solution is then the return to comforting narratives and the someone/something that can provide a solid ground once again. Tokarczuk (2019: 3), in her recent Nobel lecture, despaired at our ‘frequent attempts to harness rusty, anachronistic narratives that cannot fit the future to imaginaries of the future, no doubt on the assumption that an old something is better than a new nothing, or trying in this way to deal with the limitations of our own

horizons'. And of course, the 'truth' and certainty these narratives provide tend to come with particular forms of power in their wake.

A dark turn: The rise of sovereign power

The rise of right-wing or authoritarian populist parties and leaders—read Bolsonaro, Duterte, Orbán, Trump as a start, but the list goes on—is often attributed to 'economic anxiety' (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). The assumption is that the failure of neoliberal globalization of free markets and trade created economic losers that are not benefitting from this trend or lost their comparative status, and that this economic disadvantage is translated into support of populist parties. However, this does not explain why more people appear to be turning to exclusionary (generally right-wing association with nationalism) rather than inclusionary (generally left-wing focus on equality and strengthening political participation) forms of populism. If populism's basic logic is the separation of society into two antagonistic groups—the 'the people' vs. 'the elite'—and claim to respect the popular sovereignty of the people (Mudde, 2004; Ostiguy et al., 2021), why are people supporting the destruction of the democratic horizontal axis in favour of a strong vertical axis to a leader?

We are not suggesting a causal relation between climate change and authoritarianism or right-wing populism, but rather that climate change feeds into the failure of the established system of representation to effectively incorporate economic and social dislocation (Panizza and Stavrakakis, 2021). Populist actors offer political solutions to the experienced failure of economic progress and articulated threats to reified binaries and borders. McCarthy sums up how authoritarian populists address these dislocations:

[They] assert "blood and soil" claims of indissoluble links between the nation and the biological and physical environment; deploy resurgent tropes of territorialized bodies politic, contagion, and disease; exploit national natural resources to buy political support and underwrite their political agenda; attack environmental protections and activists to give extractive capital free reign; eliminate or attack environmental data and science in a "posttruth"

era; and are especially dysfunctional political responses to the security threats, fears, and divisions associated with climate change. (2019: 302)

The return of the Sovereign—an authoritarian leader that embodies the sovereignty of the people—on most continents can then be seen as a consequence of the uncertainty and the anxiety of social dislocation that characterize current times. For Derrida, sovereignty is the power to decide exceptions by giving itself the right to decide what is normal and what is exceptional:

...sovereignty, like the exception, like the decision, makes the law in excepting itself from the law, by suspending the norm and the right that it imposes, by its own force, at the very moment that it marks that suspense in the act of positing law or right. The positing or establishing of law or right are exceptional and are in themselves neither legal nor properly juridical. (2011: 82)

The law is here caught in the paradox of ‘using violence to guard against violence’ (Lucy, 2014: 149). In this, sovereign power exempts itself from the law by making the Sovereign the lawful arbiter for both normality and exceptionality. This power refers back to the age of European kings, and is ‘defined by the spectacular, public performance of the right to kill, to subtract life, and, in moments of regal generosity, to let live...a regime of sovereign thumbs, up or down’ (Povinelli, 2016: 1).

Across different continents—e.g., Trump in North America, Orbán and Putin in Europe, Duterte in South East Asia, and Bolsonaro in South America—national governments are emphasizing the sovereignty of nation states against articulated forces of globalization and trans-nationalism. The reassertion of state sovereignty and aggressive nationalism has re-emerged, with the Sovereign establishing a certain reality based on anachronistic narratives. Former President Trump exemplified this by declaring climate change a hoax and then dismantling the Environmental Protection Agency’s policies on climate change (as well as other environmental protection policies). This exercise of sovereign power is particularly problematic for addressing the challenge of climate change, because of the Sovereign’s territorial and divisional politics. Strengthening national territorial securitization and increasing state competition hampers the possibility of

addressing the climate catastrophe in the present. Rather than states working together, the Sovereign is called upon, yet again, to protect national interests of competitiveness, jobs, and economic growth through aggressive foreign policy.

In response to challenges by environmentalism and climate protests, 21st century sovereign power situates responses to the climate catastrophe within a security context and, more specifically, environmental protesters within the spectre of terrorism. The real threat is then not ‘climate change’—which can be domesticated and brought within human control—but the greenies and vegan terrorists, who are blurring the distinctions and hierarchies between humans and animals, nature and culture. This has been clearly articulated by leaders in the fossil fuel nations of U.S., Australia, and Canada, for whom the problem is not the fossil fuel corporations, but the people engaging in protests and boycotts (Irwin et al., 2022).

Sovereign power is used to defend these distinctions and to reproduce a ‘natural’ order which upholds the rights of corporations to use animals and lands, and criminalizes the tactics of ecological activism (Povinelli, 2016). The Sovereign is called upon to defend human exceptionalism and to create a world of certainty through linguistic performances, where people can retreat into ‘the well-trodden, obvious and unoriginal center point of commonly shared opinions’ (Tokarczuk, 2019: 20). The end of the world that the Sovereign defends is then not the destruction experienced by the Marshallese, but rather the disintegration of ‘horizons of significance and possibility’ (Toadvine, 2018: 57).

For Boltanski (2011: 126), sovereign power justifies itself ‘by decreeing or conserving rules... whose observance enables the maintenance of order—that is to say, of reality such that it cannot be otherwise than it is’. Boltanski (2011: 125) calls this a model of ‘simple domination’, where domination is ultimately ensured through repression ‘obsessively orientated towards preserving a ready-made reality, which must be sheltered from disturbances that might be provoked by consideration of experiences in touch with the world’. With the ‘world’, Boltanski (2011:57) refers to the unabsorbed background or ‘everything that is the case’, which can be distinguished from

the linguistically instituted reality. These disturbances in the ever-changing world of living and non-living beings are made palpable by incorporating them into the constructed reality. It is not the world that matters here, only the maintenance of a carefully constructed social reality. Sovereign power confirms over and over again a certain truth *about* the world without concerning itself with what is actually happening *in* the world; or to paraphrase Tokarczuk (2019): it offers imaginaries of the future that cannot fit the catastrophic climate impacts that are already happening.

Sovereign power does not directly engage the world. Demands for climate action may be officially recognized, but they remain simply couched in declarations as a form of ceremony supporting a singular truth and reality. Not even declarations of a ‘climate emergency’ lead to any substantial efforts or changes to political priorities. The impetus is to keep the current social order by reinforcing the instituted reality; the socio-economic order must be upheld. With events and experiences following in the wake of climate change that increasingly challenge this constructed reality, a ‘strongman’ (yes, gendered) is required to keep this order in place. Even fascist temptations are no longer beyond the pale when there is a lack of solid ground or when facing demands to reaffirm human exceptionalism. The gap between truth claims and experiences of the world can be filled with the tyranny of certainty, the enforcing of a ‘natural’ order.

For the Sovereign, liberal notions of dialogue and careful argumentation are simply notions to be abused or set aside in the pursuit of a singular political aim. The Sovereign can, through linguistic performativity, create a certain reality by adhering to the playbook of former U.S. President George Bush’s strategist, Karl Rove: ‘We’re an empire now, and when we act we create our own reality’ (Rove quoted in Mankoff, 2017). However, there are limits to linguistic performances, with the climate catastrophe infringing on institutions engaged in domesticating it by aligning it with constructions of their ‘reality’. Gaps are opening up between how the world is instituted and how it is experienced, and it is here that the possibilities for a critique arise: staring into the abyss of climate catastrophe—facing the Monster.

Discussion: Towards affirmative critique

With sovereign power on the rise across the globe, as attempts are made to reassert western and modernist colonizing realities of human exceptionalism and control, it is perhaps more urgent than ever to develop alternatives to the dark turn to the Sovereign. In the face of the climate catastrophe, this dark turn is seductive. The climate Monster challenges the linguistically constructed and confirmed reality by i) de-centring humans with an abundance of extreme weather events and ii) denying human exceptionalism and ideas of progress. The phantasm of the textually institutionalized climate monster, on the other hand, feeds into a reassuring foundation of truth and a shared reality to defend. The Sovereign is voted in or 'accepted' to defend old divisions and hierarchies between humans as well as between humans and non-humans. The Sovereign provides origins, foundations, and certainty in nationalistic tales. However, the re-emergence of far-right populism and its success at the ballot box are potent reminders that hard sovereign power, and the fascist horrors that trailed in its wake in the 20th century, have at best been concealed for a number of decades. Such critical times demand pondering anew what critique can mean, what form it can and should take, and what it can still do when faced with the climate catastrophe.

In this section, we aim to outline the possibilities of critique without a common world or experience. Rather than critiquing the phantasm of the climate monster and the supporting narratives of adaptation and apocalypse, affirmative critique opens up the abyss of the end of the 'common' world as the horizon of significance and possibility. The destruction of a linguistically constructed reality upheld and stabilized by powerful institutions also, necessarily, destroys any notion of a common world. In declaring that 'There is no world, there are only islands', Derrida (2011: 9) cites the last line of a poem by Celan (2014): 'Die Welt ist fort, ich muss dich tragen' [The world is gone, I must carry you]. There is no ground or foundation for a common world.

This is not a nihilistic declaration, rather the opposite: the lack of a common world is exposed only through the abyss over which 'I must carry you...', but

also any other' (Derrida, 2005: 152-153). This is an affirmative responsibility, since, in recognizing that there is no common world, what I must do in carrying you '...is make it that there be precisely a world, just a world, if not a just world, or to do things as to make as if there were just a world, and to make the world come to the world' (Derrida, 2011: 268). This is a double affirmation of recognizing oneself as both dependent on and responsible for any Other. Affirmative critique is here about moving the discourse to include new connections and traces within the structure of representation, that is, to span the instituted reality by embracing the world.

Embracing the other

Affirmative critique is concerned with the conditions of formation and movement that allow the visibility and intelligibility of new social and physical arrangements. Critique then is no longer about an effort to take apart and demolish an existing structure in a sort of nay-saying—the climate catastrophe is already doing that demolishing—but rather it 'is the operation that seeks to understand how delimited conditions form the basis for the legitimate use of reason in order to determine what can be known, what must be done, and what may be hoped' (Butler, 2009: 787). One such threshold condition is the crumbling of the seemingly self-evident distinction between the human and non-human, and even life and non-life, under the challenge that the climate catastrophe poses in the nominated geological era of the Anthropocene. This is a post-anthropocentric position that recognizes and embraces the constant flux, enactments and diverse effects of other living and non-living beings.

From his early writings, Derrida (1978: 151-52) questions the separation between language and the world and sees the distinction of the inside from the outside as the 'originary violence' of metaphysics. The negation of a 'natural' division between language and the world problematizes anthropocentric binaries—subject/object, meaning/matter or human/non-human—and the presumption of Nature or matter as passive and controllable. This negation of the division between language and the world (or nature and culture) also challenges human exceptionalism. Kirby (2011: x) points this out in translating Derrida's 'no outside of text' to mean 'no

outside of Nature'. Thus, any divisions and categories are temporary constructs.

Such a position recognizes that the climate Monster makes it 'increasingly difficult to ignore the inconceivably vast forces emanating from the environment, forces entangled with human actions but scarcely subordinate to them' (Nixon, 2018: 12). It is this becoming-aware of the 'urgent proximity of nonhuman presences' (Ghosh, 2016: 5), of the 'overlaid arrangements of human and nonhuman living spaces' (Tsing et al., 2017: G1), that compels the rethinking of the instituted reality. Moving beyond the instituted field of vision in the form of endless capital accumulation requires new concepts to name the current threshold conditions and new narratives to incorporate social dislocation. Otherwise, the return to the Sovereign is likely to become the main option for contemporary deployments of power. It calls for new narratives and stories that help to understand conceptualizations of agency, time, and space that the climate Monster calls forth.

In challenging human exceptionalism, Povinelli (2016: 4, 179) coined the concepts 'geontology (Nonlife being)' and 'geontopower (the power of and over Nonlife beings)' to describe 'a set of discourse, affects, and tactics used in late liberalism to maintain or shape the coming relationship of the distinction between Life and Nonlife'. It is a distinction, she suggests, which is simultaneously unravelling and being reconsolidated. What interests Povinelli (2016: 9) is 'the slight hesitation, the pause, the intake of breath that now can interrupt an immediate assent' to these all-too-obvious distinctions between the human and nonhuman, life and non-life. Morton (2013: 7) has pointed to the need for developing a 'geophilosophy that doesn't simply think in terms of human events and human significance', and Grosz has used the notion of 'geopower as a way of characterizing the geological, inhuman and pre-individuated forces that subtend and provoke organic life' (Grosz et al., 2017: 134), thus destabilizing concepts of identity and agency.

These ideas and concepts point to the end of the human dream that reality is significant for humans alone, with affirmative critique including

‘innumerable relationships with nonhumans; the interrelationships among life forms and between life and non-life’ (Morton, 2013: 128), which can ‘stimulate new forms of noticing that may help provoke layered thinking about responsibility’ (Nixon, 2018: 16). It involves becoming aware of other temporal patterns that have been hitherto ignored because they never fitted the timeline of progress (Tsing, 2015), and for business schools it means taking responsibility for what is done to the planet.

The experiences of the others affected by climate change are generally excluded from business schools’ ‘Eurocentric’ imaginaries of aggressive return on investment. If there is no ‘common’ world, affirmative critique starts with questioning business schools’ dominant western and linear temporality (see e.g., Nyberg and Wright, 2022; Parker, 2018). There are physical markers or traces to follow in understanding what has been achieved in the name of ‘progress’ and legitimized and established as truths by business schools.

These traces can be followed both in understanding how these marks have silenced or excluded others, as well as to affirm suppressed agencies. For the former, there are traces of lobbying that shapes political decisions and represses alternatives, such as indigenous ways of knowing and being; mine sites haunted by disrupted waterways and endangered species; and plastic bags, carbon emissions, and all the unaccounted-for ‘waste’ and ‘externalities’ of the industrial era. These traces or materialities are political in that they have sedimented dominant relations and connections as ‘natural’ or ‘objective’ foundations. These traces provide contrasts to what they are not—exclusions of what could have been and what might be (see also Raffnsøe et al. in this issue).

For the latter, affirmative critique is then to confirm these ‘minor histories’ as alternatives or possibilities for new relations and connections (De Cock et al., 2021). Not by looking back, but, rather, by making a-new. This is an experimental and hopeful pedagogy in affirming responsibilities towards and demands from marginalized humans and more-than-humans. This is not about representing the world, but making the world present (Ingold, 2015). Affirmative critique engages alternative imaginaries to create

possibilities for making sense of the present, and, in the next section, we discuss this in relation to contemporary debates within organization studies.

Contributions and paths forward

Affirmative critique opens up the narrow discussions of critique in the burgeoning literature within organization studies on critical performativity (Cabantous et al., 2016; Just et al., 2021). The debate, so far, is generally about whether critical scholars should engage in reformative (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015) or radical (Fleming and Banerjee, 2016) critique. However, both modes of critique are relying on forms of human control to either reform the self-destructive aspects of capitalism (reformist critique) or expose the domination and destruction of corporate capitalism (radical critique) (Cinque and Nyberg, 2021). The concern with critical performativity, beyond the clear emphasis on human agency and reflection, is that by criticizing the binaries and instituted reality, there is a risk of reinforcing them as such. Barnwell (2017: 31), quoting Rita Felski, pointedly asks: ‘what virtue remains in unmasking when we know full well what lies beneath the mask?’

Affirmative critique, instead, supports the move within organization studies towards alternative organizations (Parker et al., 2014; Parker and Parker, 2017). This scholarship is based on affirming different and alternative organizations, with the (unrealized) potential to embrace a broader range of possibilities in re-configuring relations with living and non-living beings. With no ‘outside’ of the linguistic structure, this means breaking down existing linguistic structures and embracing the world with new conceptualizations and ways of seeing. Beyond alternative forms of organizations, it requires new types of humans with different understandings of themselves in relation to others. Traces of these subjectivities, which are changing the construction of humans, already exist within, for example, feminist science studies (Haraway, 2016), reconstructions from speculative fiction and oral histories (De Cock et al., 2021), and marginalized histories of indigenous peoples’ ‘reciprocal relationships with thousands of plants, animals and ecosystems’ (Whyte, 2017: 159). The point is not to genetically slice humans into a new category

(see e.g., the Crakers in Atwood, 2003) or romanticize aspects of the past; it is to change how humans understand themselves and their experiences in the world.

A recent example of this type of thinking by organization scholars is Gasparin et al.'s (2020) discussion of how humans may live in a radically transformed relationship to the world. By using parasitic logic, Gasparin et al. (2020) propose diverse and playful forms of reasoning to disrupt the dominant anthropocentric logic. The discussion of the parasitic human is then not about 'taking without giving' (Gasparin et al., 2020: 309); it is a discussion of a more complex and symbiotic or mutualistic relationship to the planet. Phallogocentrism is an obstacle for developing new alternatives and imaginaries to replace the dominant western idea of progress. As such, affirmative critique can be seen as scholarly resistance of the Anthropos—'as Man the Manager' (Wolfe, 2020: 135)—evident in business school teachings that reproduce human, male, and white exceptionalism.

The discussion of binaries and divisions also contributes to debates in organization studies on authoritarian or right-wing populism with anti-democratic or anti-pluralist agendas (De Cock et al., 2018). Recent waves of populism have generally been attributed to austerity and economic decline (Robinson and Bristow, 2020). However, an alternative analysis suggests that these movements are reactions to loosened borders (e.g., Brexit), binaries (e.g., the white majority of all different groups voting for Trump) and divisions (e.g., Global North and South). At the core of populist movements is the experienced challenge to the privileged part of these oppositions. While research has established that scepticism of climate science and lack of support for environmental actions are closely aligned with right-wing populism (Żuk and Szulecki, 2020), the dynamics between climate change and populism require further discussion (Lockwood, 2018). If climate scepticism is not primarily due to economic interests but is rather a reaction to a perceived threat to the social order, then wider dissemination of climate science may have the opposite effect: it strengthens the support for socially sedimented divisions.

In this essay, we have argued that the climate Monster challenges the instituted reality that is privileging certain people, groups, organizations, and nations. The climate Monster acts as a counterforce undermining this privileged position, which creates uncertainties as well as unrest. Rejecting climate science and action is then arguably about incorporating the social dislocation and strengthening the old divisions and hierarchies of Phallogocentrism. Within authoritarian populism the political solutions are then nationalistic agendas with stricter borders that keep others out, conservative agendas that equate equality with white and male oppression and appeals to sovereignty and a Sovereign. Thus, the turn to the Sovereign is about centralizing and elevating the linguistic structure ordering reality.

Finally, we contribute to recent discussions in organization studies that radically question the current anthropocentric position on climate change and provide alternative directions for organization scholars (Campbell et al., 2019; De Cock et al., 2021; Ergene et al., 2021). This literature has shown how the climate Monster has been domesticated by corporate capitalism to support the existing dominant social order in pursuing economic growth. What is generally seen as ‘inaction’ on climate change is, from this perspective, a flurry of ‘actions’ that internalize the climate impacts and supplement the lack of a structural centre with human agency. Ecological forces are translated into business opportunities and new technologies are employed to bolster human mastery. A phantasm of climate change is employed to sell the idea that ‘we are in it together’; a ‘we’ that promotes individual actions in addressing climate change.

Even the apocalyptic discussion of climate change feeds into this ‘we’ by portraying an ending in the form of a climax of human extinction. This is a privileged and paradoxical end that is both finite and possible to experience. Without these two assumptions, the ‘end’ loses its meaning and appeal. The discussion of a common end supports the phantasm and denies the experienced ends of the world for othered species, communities, and habitats. A new ‘regime of truth’ (Evans and Reid, 2014) or ‘imaginary’ (Levy and Spicer, 2013) for ‘us’ would then fulfil the same political function of privileging dominant categories in structuring reality and centring humans.

Affirmative critique demands creating new and responsible relations and processes that open this instituted reality to the world. Affirmative critique is built on embracing the world and making the world challenge instituted realities through the experiences and disturbances of living and non-living others. This is different from negation of the instituted reality in the form of unmasking the origin of domination or revealing the social order that produces false consciousness (Nyberg and De Cock, 2019). Since there is no common reality experienced as the world, negation of the instituted reality runs the risk of reinforcing the phantasm of shared humanity. Similarly, the common affirmative critique based on utopia becomes problematic, since the shared common future utopia is also a phantasm. The utopian nostalgia for a past that never was is the basis for most authoritarian populism currently reinforcing old hierarchies and divisions (Kojola, 2019). There are no possibilities for a 'happy ending', for a shared past or future, since there is no common ending.

Rather, affirmative critique is about rethinking the relations and connections that link singularities as well as those organizational forms that institutionalize communities. There is an ethical obligation towards others that is developed through recognizing that there is a shared mortality and vulnerability when facing the climate Monster. This is not an outside, threatening humans or individuals; it is the future to come that needs to be embraced by building new, more inclusive, structures of representation for co-habitation.

Concluding remarks

While Derrida never made much mention of the climate catastrophe, in his last seminar before his death in 2004 he returned to the originary metaphysical violence of nature/culture by questioning the stupidity of drawing a line between humans on one side and animals on the other, with the latter having 'no other supposed unity than a negative one, or one supposed to be negative: namely that of not being a human being' (Derrida, 2011: 8; see also Derrida, 2008). With this, Derrida questioned human exceptionalism that sets humans apart from any other aspect of the world; a

world that is occupied by Life and Nonlife. This logically would then also apply to different humans and provide the possibility of opening up the fault lines both between humans as well as between humans and the world, by questioning the stabilizing apparatuses that construct unity and uphold lines of distinction. This is what Boltanski (2011) refers to as the instituting practices of reality. There is thus no world (singular) to stand on; only a Monstrosity that demands the suspension of certainty.

Searching for solid ground in substituting the lack of certainty or structure is fraught with danger in the form of power claiming to uphold certainty or truth. Climate change framed as the outside is currently employed by Sovereigns to re-centre humans, enticing a nostalgic search for certainty and support of those who promise to provide human mastery over nature. This is a danger reproduced by business schools, founded on teaching the mastery over labour and nature. Business school teaching tends to deny the Monstrosity of the climate catastrophe, domesticating it through the deployment of corporate friendly terms such as sustainability, adaptation, transition, and resilience. Nyberg and Wright's (2022) recent review of climate change research within business schools shows that they are still adhering to their founding principles of professionalizing mastery over others (Life as well as Nonlife) in serving profit and, in doing so, they are ultimately denying the climate catastrophe. Any challenge to these truth claims is circumvented through the monoculture of publishing and being a useful idiot for big business (Fotaki and Prasad, 2015). As such, the business school is obviously ill-equipped to test knowledge claims that take into account the world when facing the Monstrosity that is the climate catastrophe.

Critique acknowledging the climate Monster is about opening the instituted reality to the world, that is, allowing for world variations, or play, and giving new meanings to a trace that decentres humans in representing and conceptualizing the world. Derrida already opened up this possibility in *Of Grammatology*:

The instituted trace cannot be thought without thinking the retention of difference within a structure of reference where difference appears *as such*

and thus permits a certain liberty of variations among the full terms. The absence of *another* here-and-now, of another transcendental present, of *another* origin of the world as such, presenting itself as irreducible absence within the presence of the trace... (Derrida, 1976: 46-47; emphasis in original).

Affirmative critique, we argue, is about making such absence present by challenging that which is seen as natural and present, and opening up a world (or worlds) of multiple agencies and experiences. Affirmation is then performative in making a-new or 'mattering-forth' (Povinelli et al., 2021) by bringing absences into presence/the present. These absences are haunting instituted practices (see also Raffnsøe et al. in this issue) as differences. These hauntings are evident in the 'ordinary' taken-for-granted suffering and incredible violence inhabiting categorizations of both humans and non-humans. The labour and energy to challenge existing hierarchies and affirm new voices and experiences are evident in recent protest movements such as BLM, #MeToo, and Fridays for Future. Of course, there are modes of policing, oppressing, and erasing these absences that challenge existing hierarchies. This is the promise of the Sovereign.

The double move of affirmation is then to first recognize the suffering and historical forms of violence enacted upon human and non-human others and, second, to embrace the forces of the world that are destabilizing existing hierarchies and decentering humans. The climate Monster assists in the first movement through its denial of a world that has been reduced to a singular reality of human production, distribution, and consumption, calling into question Eurocentrism (and Phallogocentrism). This, hopefully, will lead to the second movement of new relations and modes of critique that hold certainty in suspense and are open to non-human traces. This would be a form of critique that embraces the world by questioning the institutional forces of instituted realities. In facing the Monstrosity of the climate catastrophe, perhaps there is inspiration to be found in Paul Celan's (2014) poem *Faddensonnen* (Threadsunns), which ends with the line: 'There are still songs to sing beyond humankind'.

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