Professor Bob’s Memory: An interview with Robert Cooper

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Introduction

As I sit down to write about my memories of meeting Professor Robert Cooper, I am immediately transported back to the excitement I felt when I opened my inbox and saw that he had responded to my email. It was May 7th, 2011 and I had sent him a message inquiring about a digital copy of his paper ‘Information, communication and organization: A post-structural revision’ (Cooper, 1987). At the time, I was pursuing a Master’s degree in Business (Organization Studies) at FGV-EAESP in São Paulo, Brazil.

I first discovered Cooper’s work when I started the program in February 2010. I was so impressed by his writings that I decided to write my dissertation on Cooper’s work, drawing parallels with the work of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. I remember struggling to access many of his pieces, and the decision to write that email to him directly was my last attempt to try to obtain a copy of that article. I didn’t expect to get a response, but I was thrilled when I received a very polite and prompt reply. Unfortunately, Professor Cooper did not have a copy of that particular piece, so I was unable to access it for my dissertation.

As the weeks went on and I delved deeper into my writing, I decided to take a bolder approach in order to address what I saw as gaps in my reading of Cooper’s work. Three months later, I sent him another email reminding him of our previous contact and asking if he would be willing to talk to me about his work. Once again, I received a prompt reply: ‘Thank you for your email.'
Yes, I would be happy to talk to you. When were you thinking of visiting England?

We exchanged emails where I asked him in which city he was living and when would be a good time for me to visit. When he told me he was in Liverpool, I replied that it sounded like a lovely place. He responded with a single exclamation mark: 'Yes, Liverpool is an interesting city!' Ten days later, on November 7th, I arrived in Liverpool. I met Professor Cooper on November 8th, promptly at 2pm, in front of the hotel where I was staying downtown. We had a short walk to a nearby cafe for our conversation. Robert (Bob), as he insisted I call him, talked to me for almost two hours with great kindness, patience, and intellectual generosity, answering all of my questions with ease. As I listen to that conversation now, 11 years later, I am deeply moved by how gently and skilfully he interacted with my foreignness, my youth, and my intellectual restlessness and anxieties.

After finishing our conversation and a couple of cups of coffee, I knew it was time for me to say goodbye to Robert. As we stood on a brick road bordering a large square in downtown Liverpool, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of finality, I knew that this would likely be our first and last meeting (as it in fact was). I was also washed with a sense of gratefulness for the kindness, patience, and intellectual generosity that Robert had shown me during our time together. As I watched him walk away slowly, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of appreciation for the brief but meaningful interaction we had shared.

The interview text was edited down and annotated by Martin Parker. Imagine a noisy Liverpool café as a background to a slow and thoughtful conversation. Most of the edits were bits of chat about the food and drink, or clarifications about forgotten texts, and the endnotes are intended to allow readers to follow up Robert Cooper’s work and the texts referenced if they would like to.

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1 Bob died in 2016.
The interview

Maria (M): So you were saying that you read the work of Deleuze?

Robert (R): Yes. Many years ago, but if you think of Simmel’s work, he was working in the German academic theatre from the 1880s to the beginning of the 20th century, and at that time the university system hadn’t become so specialized. In the 1920s and 30s, it began to institutionalize itself. So you got the emergence of specialized journals, psychology and sociology for example. But already in his time, people were criticizing him because he was so broad in his approach. People would say, ‘well is he a philosopher or a sociologist?’, and he would say ‘I’m both. Why can’t you be both?’ And this is what makes his work similar to French thinkers like Deleuze, which also makes his ideas very creative (Cooper, 2010). They probe into the background of ideas like organization and so on. He asks radical questions.

M: What do you mean by radical questions?

R: If you take as a simple example, what do we mean by ‘social interaction’? What do we mean by ‘interaction’? Well most people in empirical sociology would simply say that social interaction is the interaction between people. Simmel goes far beyond that. He asks questions which in a sense can only be approached and not be specifically answered. And it’s based upon a kind of thinking which recognizes the difference between what I sometimes call the implicit and the explicit. When you read an empirical sociology text, often it’s very direct, very definitive and rather simplified in its definition of its subject matter. Someone like Simmel would open it up. So social life for Simmel was never simple or explicit. If you take the notion of the individual for example, for Simmel the individual was never a separated bounded person because something came before that. This is why I’ll be writing this piece on the sociology of being, because before we are individuals, Brazilians, British or whatever, we are human beings, and that’s the big question.

M: Is it an ontological question?

R: Yes it is, that’s right.

M: That’s very interesting. Deleuze wrote a book on Bergson (Deleuze, 1991). He said in his readings of this author’s work that questions don’t exist. That only answers exist. When you make a question that is already an answer because you are bounding what you’re trying to grasp into a unit and it has a consistency inside it that makes it already an answer.

R: The word question presumably finds its basis in the word quest. So to quest something is to search for it, without necessarily finding an answer. And since very basic ontological questions can be approached from many points of view then the questions were only partial answers. This is very much like modern science because the development of modern science since the 1920s has actually raised more questions than answers. So called answers are getting ambiguous, as in quantum theory for example. It raises all sorts of issues and I think this is the kind of thinking that Georg Simmel recognized, everything was ambivalent and ambiguous and he had a famous phrase, ‘finite infinite ambiguity’. That was one of his big themes.³

M: It seems similar to a phrase that grasps the same thing, ‘meaningless infinity’ which you mention in an interview. Do you remember this interview?

R: I have forgotten it.

M: So here you describe ‘meaningless infinity’ (Cooper, 2003).⁴

R: Do I refer to Simmel? No.

M: You’re referring to Weber actually. Professor I have one …

R: Robert, Bob.

M: I’m still getting used to it. I have some specific questions about papers. I made long questions because I don’t expect you to remember what you wrote

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³ Though these are concepts that Simmel would use, I can’t find this phrase in his work. The reference is probably to Weber, as the conversation suggests.

in every paper. This one is about ‘The open field’ (Cooper, 1976).\(^5\) I really like that article because I thought that it has a poetic title.

R: Well I wouldn’t have got that published if I had not had a very strong relationship with the editor. I had a very strong connection with the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, which published that journal. It was a social psychology journal in those days. It’s a bit different now.

M: I think now it’s more for the business schools.

R: Yes, that’s right. It seems to have gone towards the commercial end of things. But in those days they were a bit more general. I wrote ‘The open field’ for myself, I didn’t write it for any particular journal, and after I wrote it I liked the spirit of it. I happened to be having a few pints of beer in London one day with the editor Michael Foster and we got talking about themes related to open field. I said to him, ‘I’ve got this paper but I don’t think any conventional academic journal would publish it’. He said ‘well let me see it’. Anyway, he liked it and as you say, they published it.

M: What moved you towards writing it for yourself? I mean what was your spirit?

R: Well one way of answering your question is to say that I’m a general thinker and this is why I like social theory. It gives you that freedom, that openness of the open field. It’s also general rather than specific. What I planned to do, perhaps not always successfully, is to try to bring out this contrast between the specific and the general, or the explicit and the implicit, and I think ‘The open field’ tries to do that. One way of answering your question is that this is a natural way for me to think. In this article I’ve recently been writing on Simmel and the sociology of being. Simmel, I think in his famous book, *The philosophy of money*, mentions physics in the 1890s, 1900s, and that was before Relativity Theory, before Quantum Theory and so on. But one of the points he makes is that modern physics talks not about specific structures, stable structures, stabilities, but continuous movement and the interpenetration of different ideas and so on. So what I’ve tried to do in this paper is to reactivate some of Simmel’s ideas connecting social theory with modern physics. There

was a professor of physics in the fifties and sixties, David Bohm. He’s one of these panoramic thinkers, thinks on a general scale, and he talks about relativity theory and more specifically about quantum theory. He uses the expression ‘the implicate order’ (Bohm, 1980) to suggest that here is always something behind the specifics of the explicit that we cannot understand and cannot grasp. We can have a vague idea of its existence but we cannot make it explicit. As soon as we do that, we lose its spirit, and this again, is part of that open field kind of thinking, everything must remain open and not specific. You can feel it, but you can’t get hold of it.

M: Deleuze, in his work with Guattari, developed the concept of rhizome as a critique of structure as a bounded specific bounded thing. I think he was trying to grasp that maybe as well. How you approach a problem in a rhizomatic way. It opens many ends and connects to many things at the same time.

R: And this is what David Bohm means by the implicate order. The implicate order and the rhizome are similar ideas. What’s interesting is that people from these different backgrounds, different academic approaches, are talking essentially about something deep down there, which cannot be approached, but they have a feeling that it’s there.

M: I have a specific question about another article, it’s called ‘Organization/disorganization’ (Cooper, 1986). I think it’s probably the most well-known of your articles in the studies of organization.

R: Where was that published?

M: It wasn’t published in an organization studies journal.

R: I don’t read the organization journals. I have some touch with people working in organization studies, but I don’t know what’s going on in the field.

M: I have this question to situate the article. This article starts off by exploring the concept of the system and boundaries, and you talk about the role of representation in process, and you seem to draw a critique of a conceptual system which diverts attention from the importance of the frame. The process of organization is including and excluding elements of the system. That is the process of creating representations, and you argue that by focusing on the frame or the role of the boundary of the system, you would be engaging in an active process of differentiation that ultimately makes up the system and the elements of social action that it would like to frame. So you shift the attention
of the system to the process of inclusion and exclusion that makes up this system.

R: Yes, that’s right. So this again, is one of the important themes of Georg Simmel’s thinking.

M: That was the influence you would say?

R: Not as a specific influence. All these things are mixed together now but this is the idea behind all these thinkers. The idea of the border of a boundary as a mixed up area is discussed by Simmel as a border region, and this is where the finite infinite ambiguity begins.

M: And in this article specifically, what you do basically is you draw two possible ways of approaching the system of the organization, the dominant mode that sees it as a unit, that makes sense by itself and has its own ‘is’, and an alternative conception that views structure differentially and brings in that undecidability you were talking about, that zone. But you argue that this mixed up zone can only be organized by a force that is external to it.

R: Yes. Have you read my piece that appeared three or four years ago in Organization Studies on ‘organs of process’ (Cooper, 2007)? That deals with these kind of issues.

M: The question that I have actually is that I see that this is a theme that is always present in your writings, but in this article in particular, you called this zone the ‘zero degree of organization’.

R: Yes. Well, that’s another idea, again from French thinkers.

M: Structuralist French thinkers.

R: Post-structuralist, that’s right.

M: And then this ‘zero degree of organization’ seems to be present in the other articles, named as the ‘placeless place’ or the ‘structural absence’, the ‘zero relatant’ state of nothingness.

R: Do I refer in this discussion to Hillis Miller’s work? He’s a professor of literature and again, one of these thinkers about the implicate order. You can see the connections between his fundamental way of thinking, and Simmel,
Deleuze and so on, but he doesn’t know Simmel’s work. But it’s the same kind thinking that comes out, from the heart, not necessarily from here.

M: So what I notice is that you do mention this zero degree of organization, but in the other articles you never touch that specific concept again. You always refer to this idea by other names.

R: Yes, that’s right. I mean Simmel talks about the zero degree idea, but never uses that term. He would talk about infinity or nothingness. But nothingness is another way of talking about the zero degree. So it doesn’t really matter what name you give it. There’s something implicit beyond, which we have to name. But we can never really understand. It’s inner spirit as it were.

M: Actually Deleuze, he uses the concept of zero degree to describe structuralism. He says that this structure necessarily has, in order for it to function, it necessarily has a blank space or a blank house like in a game. When you play a board game, in order for the pieces to move you have to have an empty place, an empty house. So he uses that metaphor and sees it as being a structuralist view. Would you consider it being a structuralist view of organization?

R: Well, I mean, in order to think about structures, you have to have non structures and they complement each other. You can’t think of the idea of a man, without thinking of the difference between a man and a woman. And this is where, if you like, where structured and non-structured come together, but structuralists place the emphasis more upon the individual terms, the explicit. It reminds me of the famous Beatles song, ‘Penny Lane’. It’s only five or six miles from where we are seated. You know the Beatles were a famous Liverpool group? They wrote one of their early songs on an area of Liverpool which they knew very well, and that was called Penny Lane. And the words of the song are very interesting. I think they’re mainly John Lennon’s because he was quite an intellectual. Most people will think of Penny Lane as a specific part of Liverpool on a map. John Lennon says no, ‘Penny Lane is in my ears and in my eyes’. So it’s part of an interaction.

It’s like what certain critical literary theories call constituted negativity. It’s what I am not, but when I am John Lennon, I become John Lennon and become a song writer and singer because I was brought up in Penny Lane. That

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6 Probably referring to the work of Wolfgang Iser.
constitutes me. Whereas before I was nothing. I was thrown into the world at birth and when I opened my eyes, I had no idea where the hell I was. Something vague was going on. That was the negativity. In a sense, I was nothing. But over a period of time I got to know parts of Liverpool. If I’m John Lennon, one of these was Penny Lane. Penny Lane constituted John Lennon. And it’s like all our experiences. You go to the university department, that constitutes you, constitutes your ways of thinking and so on. Unless you step back and ask these more radical questions, as you are doing.

M: That’s very interesting. I have another question about the article on relationality that you wrote in 2005 (Cooper, 2005). In this article you start by saying that institutional thinking frames the social and cultural world so as to make us think in terms of categories of things, that is bounded in separate structures. So we are brought up to think in terms of separate structures. And you observe in the article that even though categories and things may make it easier for us to grasp reality, they always hide reality as complexities. The relationships between things and between things as objects reflect not much themselves, but the flux and flow that make them up, the connections that make them up. So you make an important point that relationality implied that the movement of being or human agency is motivated by invisible and missing holes that lie in the heart of things. I think that’s the point of the song. So to relate would be to carry and be carried by this unidentifiable force that refuses to be caught up in a fixed form. You bring up the concept of latency, and you say that latent is the negative that makes possible the positive. The absence or the missing is immanent in presence and so on. I have a question about psychoanalysis. Do you think that you have been influenced by a conception of the unconscious and psychoanalysis?

R: Well, yes. The unconscious is part of the negativity and the conscious is that rational boundary kind of thinking we’ve been talking about. So yes, I’ve seen similarities between unconscious thinking and ideas like Simmel’s infinity and zero degree.

M: I have another question that relates to that. It’s about this sense of the negative, because I’m trying to dialogue with Deleuze’s work. Deleuze is very critical of anything that has to do with negativity. And in his writings, with Guattari, he develops a quite particular conception of desire. What was singular about it was the fact that contrary to its common notion that is present in psychoanalysis, they constructed a strictly affirmative conception of desire. So this meant that desire does not stand for a lack or a missing wholeness in human beings. Instead they argue that it functions like a
machine, like a factory, and it would be productive and sufficient in its own observance. When you bring up in your work this sense of negative and a missing wholeness, you’re talking about strictly productive things. You don’t seem to draw upon an idea of the negative?

R: It depends how you read this. Have you ‘flexibilized’ your thinking? If you open it up, as in the open field, we can see a connection for example between production and prediction. So what we produce in our factories, in our homes, and in our lives in general in society, is not just a series of functional objects, but things which we use to predict the nothingness of the future or to make that nothingness or vagueness into something which we can understand and control. So this is one way of understanding production. If we actually take the words themselves, production and prediction. They go back to Latin and early Greek, and we look at the definitions in the Greek lexicon of these words, pro and pre for example are related. Duction and diction is expressing something, stating something which has not been expressed before. So again, it’s this idea of the negative which is made positive. We can never have a positive without a negative.

M: I think that maybe it relates to this other question that I have. You do put some emphasis on this ‘negative’ background. So when I first read these references to the negative, I was on the verge of mistakenly assuming that it was maybe a dialectical view, oversimplifying it as an oppositional critique, because when you use the word positive and negative, it may lead to some misreadings. But for you this idea of the negative is not a positional critique?

R: No, this is where relationality comes in. The negative is an infinite source of possibilities. It’s what we do not know. That’s one way of approaching it. And in this sense it is the latent or latency. What we’re doing all the time when we produce things, when we talk about things, is that we relate the negative which is not expressible in a simple way. Perhaps the simplest example of that would be the idea of God. No one has actually seen God. There’s no positive forms of God but we produce and reproduce him all the time in a thousand different religions, so yes, we are relating the latent all the time, and religion is a good example of this.

M: I actually also have a question about the article that you wrote on autopoiesis as human production (Cooper, 2006). And you have a very interesting quote that I have got down here. You said that ‘Language is less a system for representing the world and for communicating our representations of it to each other and more a means of founding and finding ourselves among
the primal absence that divisions reveal as a constituting power of human being. We do not speak language; it is rather that language speaks us’ (ibid.: 65). Do you care to comment on this view of language?

R: Well I think I make the point in that article, or at least one of the articles that we’ve been talking about, perhaps the relationality one. I forget. Language is another way of saying linkage. It’s this linking with the non-specific in specific ways. When the child is born it comes into a world it has no knowledge of, and for years it’s operating in a kind of empirical mist. It’s surrounded by a confusion. So up until the age of seven or eight as psychologists and psychoanalysts tell us, the child doesn’t have a precise way of thinking. It doesn’t have what they call a gestalt way of thinking. It’s more like a scattered diffuse, post-structuralist way of thinking.

M: Children are post-structuralists.

R: Yes, that’s right, they are natural post-structuralists. And then when they approach maturity, beginning at the age of eight or nine, things become thing like, or more specific. For example, we talk about organizations, people think of businesses or government systems or whatever, but there’s another way of thinking about this, which is post-structuralist, and that’s more like the child before the age of eight. They see a confusion, but when the child is at that age, it can be very creative, it can see all sorts of important implications between different things and so on. And again, we come back to David Bohm’s implicate order, so there is a kind of a constituted being in early life, which is suppressed, but it’s always there. And you get this in for example poetry and you get it in Beatles songs. You get it in crosswords, cryptic crosswords especially, where there’s a kind of playfulness about it, and nothing specific and definite. When you get to the late teens, the world begins to change, it becomes mappable, but you confuse the map with the territory. The territory and the map are not the same.

M: It’s more like a fixed thing.

M: Yes. Thanks so much Professor Bob. I think that you have already answered this question with reference to the ‘Organs of process’ article where you make reference to the crossword that you were talking about. And also in an interview with ephemera you mention the crossword (Cooper, 2001).

R: Well the hidden messages there, the crossword is the crossings between words, not the words themselves, but the crossings between them, the
intervals or the interactions as Simmel would say. So that’s why I refer to the crossword.

M: That’s why you were trying to grasp these interactions?

R: We spoke briefly about Hillis Miller’s ideas, that kind of pre-empirical space. Now there’s a book a mathematician wrote about the history of zero called ‘The nothing that is’ (Kaplan, 2000). I suppose Simmel would call it playability, or another word for that is pliability, referring to a material that can be made into different forms by an artist or a sculptor. Or mutability, which refers to this capacity for raw material, raw ideas, infinity if you like, to be made over into different things. So the languages of the world are different ways of re-lating in my sense of this mute, quiet, covert, secret form, which we can never approach. Well, we can approach it, but we can’t identify it because it’s always escaping from us. But what we do in this playability or pliability is to recognize the mutability or the plasticity of the world’s reality. A number of people have talked about the idea that what the world offers us a kind of ‘plastic reality’ and another way of talking about plastic reality is mutability. It can be expressed in so many different forms. It’s mutable. And when you think of the English language, a hell of a lot of it comes from Greek and Latin. So we see that something which we, a thousand years ago we called Latin or Greek, now we can also call it English or Portuguese.

M: And they are still changing.

R: That’s right, absolutely, and I think this is part of the general way to understand what we mean by latency, nothingness and so on.

M: I think the crossword was a very interesting example because in order for you to make the crosswords, you need several black spaces. Otherwise you could not make the crossword, we cannot make these words relate to each other like that.

R: English and Portuguese in 2011 are if you like, similar approaches to the crossword. They take Latin, they take Greek and no doubt other languages, and mix them all together.

M: That is really interesting. I thought it was a brilliant example, the crossword. It’s really good. I have another specific question Bob. It’s actually about one of your last essays, the generalized social body (Cooper, 2010). I noticed, I don’t know if I’m correct, that there was this slight shift in the way
that you put things here, if we compare to the ‘Organization/disorganization’ approach. In the former article you situate the matter of the negative ground more in terms of language and information, and here in this later article you seem to be focusing more on technology and materials and the human body.

R: Well let me say that I did not submit that article to an organization journal.

M: They invited you?

R: A couple of years ago, Martin Parker, the editor of Organization, was talking to me over coffee about what I’ve been doing recently, and I mentioned a couple things and he said he’d like to see them. Anyway he came back after reading them and said he’d like to publish them. If I could include the word ‘organization’ occasionally! So, I said, ‘OK, I’ll do that’.

M: That’s funny.

R: But maybe that’s one reason why there’s a different shift.

M: In ‘Organization/Disorganization’, you talk more about boundary, that’s the role of boundary and in this article, you refer to distance instead of boundary. Is there any particular reason why you shift the attention from boundary to distance?

R: It is a very general way of rethinking boundaries. Something which is bounded, something seen as bounded, not necessarily is bounded, but seen as bounded, like the human body, but as quite a lot of people point out, there are different ways of understanding the relation between the human body and its environment. I mentioned John Lennon’s idea of Penny Lane. It’s not something outside me, but it’s inside me, in my eyes and in my heart and so on, so there’s an interaction between the two. Penny Lane doesn’t exist without me. I do not exist without Penny Lane. And so I’m not a bounded, stable kind of thing. There’s an interaction between the two, a mutuality that Georg Simmel would say, and I think the idea of distance tries to bring together this idea of a double, which can be seen as me and you, two separate things. But also can be seen as an interactive thing, which we constitute each other. In one paper which I did some years ago, in a sociology journal talking about Simmel’s work (Cooper, 2010). I mention a very important paper by Georg Simmel on Sociability where he talks about play, the idea of play or playability (Simmel and Hughes 1949). Now what was I going to share? I have forgotten.
M: What were we talking about? I forgot too.

R: Another way of talking about ...

M: ... distance.

R: Distance, yes, and inside and outside and so on. For Simmel, sociability means that this interaction is, in his example of conversation, that we are converses of each other. We do not only converse with each other, but a converse is another product, another social product. You are a converse of me and I’m a converse of you in this discussion. It’s the same way in all social relations. We are conversions of each other in what I sometimes call otherness. I am not myself, but always something other. In other words, I am a conversion or a converse.

M: That’s like Rimbaud’s formula? *Le moi est un autre?* I am another?

R: Yes, that’s right, absolutely.

M: But was it deliberate that you didn’t focus on language so much if you compare the two articles? In ‘Organization/disorganization’ you are talking about communication.

R: I think in the earlier part of the generalized social body, I implied this distinction between language and materiality, and I talk for example not directly, I don’t define it in an explicit way, but only in between the lines as it were. I imply that the body is a base that the words are part and parcel, rather like a crossword, of each other. So body, base and abode, which is an old fashioned English word for a home, a place where you live. The abode is also connected with the body, but it’s a base from which you start. And a base means something which is base, crude, which hasn’t been properly or specifically articulated. So it’s there in various terms, including the idea of latency. Latency in one simple way, like relating a story. I’m telling the story but what I’m trying to say is that there is something behind it, something which we can’t fully grasp, and that’s the latency of it. And the base is a kind of latent form. It can be made into this, that and so many different things, and this is what I mean by the social body, it’s forever changing.

M: Coming back to the topic of language, writers like Foucault and Deleuze who are often defined as being post-structuralist authors explicitly said that
they gave language a privileged place in their analysis of social reality. Would you say that you consider language as having a privileged place too in your analysis or not?

R: Yes, because that’s the way that we link with each other. Language is linkage. And again, it’s obviously connectable with the idea of relating something. I relate to you, and you relate to me, and what do we do? We relate expressing something latent, which is behind it all. We are not sure what the heck it is, but when we go to sleep at night, sometimes we have dreams or even nightmares. These are the latent things which we do not normally express in everyday conscious thinking. This is part of our unconscious if you like.

M: I have read articles commenting on your work that label it as being post-structuralist, do you consider it so, or you don’t like to have that kind of label?

R: Well, I don’t like simple terms like that. No, I don’t like categorical terms, but I can understand why people use these terms because this is a way of understanding why certain writers are different from other writers, mainly structuralists or post-structuralists. So it’s a convenient and readily understandable way of talking about us. I prefer to think that it’s both structure and unstructure which complement each other in the same way that we are conversions of each other. Men are men, sexually, physically, and so on, because they are not women and vice versa, and that’s how we know.

M: I know, at least in organization studies, that there is not a common agreement or general agreement concerning what is post-structuralism or how you define it, so how would you describe it? Is there a common concern amongst these authors?

R: They differ very much. Michel Foucault is regarded as one of the major post-structuralists, and yet he has to structure his writing about post-structuralism, and I think he recognizes that in his various comments. I suppose for simplicity sake, people still call him post-structuralist, even though it never is as simple as that. The post-structuralist is the converse of the structuralist as a man is the converse of a woman. I think I’ve actually written about this.

M: You do have an article but I couldn’t find it. Actually the first time that I wrote to you was to ask if you did have a hard copy of it. It’s called
‘Information, communication and organization: A post-structural revision’ (Cooper, 1987).

R: Oh, right, and where did that appear?

M: *The Journal of Mind and Behaviour*.

R: Oh, it’s an American Journal. There are quite a few articles which I’ve forgotten about, and this happens to be one of them.

M: It’s quite an old article, it’s dated 87.

R: Presumably that would be available on the internet?

M: No, it’s not. I couldn’t, actually there are several of your articles that I couldn’t get. Professor, I have a …

R: Robert.

M: Sorry I always forget.

R: Or Bob.

M: Bob. I have a quote here from Deleuze’s book, that you might be kind enough to comment on. It says this, ‘It is not difference that should be extended until it reaches contradiction, like Hegel thinks in his vow to embrace the negative. It is contradiction that should reveal the nature of its difference throughout the distance that corresponds to it. We do not identify contraries, we affirm all their distance, but as what relates one to another. Distance is in the measure of an arm, the affirmation of that which distances itself’ (Deleuze, 1993: 173). He’s basically talking about a criticism of what he thinks is Hegel’s understanding of the negative through his dialectics. And Deleuze says that a distance is what relates one thing to another, the affirmation of what distances itself. So it would not be contraries or negativities, but an affirmation of distance. I think that he’s very worried about terms like the negative and the positive so that he will not fall into what he thinks is a Hegelian view of the negative.

R: Yes, and Hegel’s view of the negative is negative?

M: Yes, dialectics.
R: I think I’ve come across that before. I think again, it’s this idea of flexibilizing our thinking. If you take this notion of a plastic reality, that everything is mixed together, unless we distinguish it. And let’s not forget that the word distance is also part of the word distinguish, something which is distinct. It all implies something which is indistinct or at a distance and we can’t see it. I think this is a little bit like the idea of counter change, counter form, a little bit like this idea of converse, which is a counter form. Man and woman are conversions of each other, if you like, but they are also counter forms or counter changes of each other, positive or negative are counter changes. And inside and outside. John Lennon sees inside and outside as being part of each other. They are codefinitive. You cannot have inside without an outside and likewise, no outside without an inside. So they constitute each other, and it’s in this sense that I understand what negativity is, that which it is not, but it can be opened up in so many different ways, interpreted in so many different ways. That’s one way of doing it but even when I say the word nothing, I’m suggesting that it is something. Negative is also something, something which is not, and I’m not sure what that means, but I can only understand it by comparing it with something or something positive, so the positive and the negative.

M: Something that is present?

R: Yes, even though we cannot see it, a bit like God, we could never see God or Jesus, even though we represent Jesus in formal paintings or whatever, but we can never represent God and we recognize that because he’s far beyond that. But somehow we have to translate him into something positive. He’s a distance, he’s at a distance and we have to make him present.

M: I also have another question related to Deleuze. He defines the role of philosophy in relation to art and science, and in one of his last works that he did together with Guattari, *What is philosophy?*, he says that the main difference between what he understands as philosophy and science is their relationship with chaos (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994). He defines chaos precisely as the emptiness that we have been talking about. On one hand he says that science renounces this emptiness in order to pin it or fix it, or to literalize it, because it’s quite dangerous to think in these terms. So when you pin it, you literalize the danger that surrounds this instance. For Deleuze, philosophy is a discipline which consists of creating concepts, but unlike science, these concepts have to embrace this chaos and keep it inside them,
but still giving it the consistency of the concept that is being used. So do you care to comment on this?

R: Well there are many different comments that one can make about that. If you look at David Bohm’s work it’s a bit like this notion of the concept. The concept is the capturing of knowledge. Cept, etymologically from the root kap, implies grasp or capture, and we capture the con, which is knowledge. Bohm’s analysis of modern science, especially quantum theory, exemplifies this capturing process. He says we do not study reality out there in the far distance, what we actually study is the methods we use to believe that we’re studying reality out there. So the various technologies and methodologies that the scientist uses, including the terminology of language, is really the basis of science, and that’s how we capture the con, through our methodologies and so on.

I think that can be applied also to philosophy. If that is the case, we can say that philosophy and science are very similar and that comes out in the ideas and scientific practicality that David Bohm talks about. It depends on your aspect, your tangent, another term which can be used, if you have different tangents on the complexity, the multi. This is another aspect of Bohm’s thinking which I think is multi-dimensional, similar to what Deleuze said before in that quote. If you look at it if you were a child, you would see it differently from a person of 60, or if you were an ordinary person rather than a specialized scientist. Different aspects or tangents of this multidimensional reality which can be expressed in so many different ways. Here we come back to the idea of latency. The latent is that which is infinite, and can be looked at from many directions.

M: This view that you are talking about, and the idea of latency, which is present in pretty much all of your articles and your interviews, is it compatible with field research? Was that at any time a concern for you? Because in organization studies, they’re very much worried about doing field research.

R: Oh, I see, empirical research. I have done that, and at one time many years ago, I was a bit of a socialist and I worked on the general area of industrial democracy on making the content of work more interesting and controllable for ordinary workers and factories and so on. I worked with the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, with Eric Trist and Fred Emery, an Australian social psychologist. But there was quite a strong movement at one time and I worked with some of these people and yes, I had to be concerned with practical things at the time. But I also did other theoretical stuff. I was
interested in the relation between theory and practice, the general and the specific, always have been, but at that time for political reasons, I emphasized the practical and the specific. So I wrote a number of papers on the social psychology of work\(^7\), but I always had this interest in general theory. So if I talk about work these days, it’s only at a distance in terms of social production. But over the past 25 years I’ve spent more time on the background theory and asking big questions about what the hell is it all about? What are we doing?

M: I have a question that is actually related to specific reading of your work. It was done by Hugh Willmott, and it was actually published as a chapter in a book that was edited by Robert Chia in those two volumes dedicated to your work (Willmott, 1998)\(^8\). Willmott wrote a chapter and he drew attention to his reservation that there is an a lack of explicit political engagement in your writings up until that time. And he argued that by focusing your analysis upon a particular way of thinking your writings would only engage intellectual curiosity instead of political action, or alternative ways of treating organizational issues. How do you perceive this critique?

R: I think I remember that when it came out. It’s a very limited view of what I’ve been talking about and obviously Hugh Willmott is a practical political engager, but he doesn’t know about the articles which I wrote about the democratization of work. But the other thing is that you can’t do everything. So if you’re doing theory connecting with philosophy, art, and so on, then I could come back and say well, one of the problems with Hugh Willmott’s writings is that he doesn’t engage with these bigger conceptual issues.

M: He doesn’t inspire intellectual curiosity.


R: That’s right, but you can’t do everything. The practical world is still implied in the so called general social theory, and this is my point which I mentioned a little while ago about the social body. It’s part of our body. And in this sense we are part of the theory if you like, as well as the practice.

M: It’s not separate?

R: Yes, that’s right, absolutely. But I thought at the time when that chapter appeared, that it was not a good way of interpreting my work.

M: I just have simple questions now, they’re more general too. One of them is that you are concerned with a variety of issues throughout your articles, would you say that there is a common ground amongst all of them?

R: Yes. There’s a common way of thinking about it and this brings us back to the crossings of the crossword. And to understand something depends what we mean by ‘understand’. We have to put it in quotation marks because we do not understand it fully, and as we kept on saying it before, we can approach it but not fully grasp it.

M: You said in your interview that when you are analysing something, the analysis requires the depth of that which is being analysed, like science does with plants or animals. You have to kill it to study it.

R: We live in a mysterious world because it is misty, and no matter what we say or think, it’s always inhabited by this kind of mistiness, and this again, is one of the aspects of David Bohm’s thinking about quantum theory. It recedes every time once you have answered one question, because it is infinite. It goes on forever asking more questions, so you’ve got one answer and then you’ve got a dozen more questions. This is the same with the social sciences, I think, but as soon as we use the term social science, we start thinking in institutional terms, there’s psychology, there’s sociology and there’s a language appropriate for each of these. But if you cross the wall, you see that is something which cannot be fully grasped and I think this is a kind of challenge that is interesting to follow through. People like Deleuze and Guattari are examples of people who question, and certainly Michel Foucault.

M: One general question too, what would you say were the main transformations in your thinking throughout the years, if there were any? Did it change?
R: Difficult to answer this one in specific terms. I think I’ve always, even as a youth, my late teens when I used to read Freud and always recognized that there is an unapproachable background – my unconscious or whatever – to everything. It’s present in everything that we say or do, and we see that more specifically in modern science, such as quantum theory, because as soon as you’ve answered the question, some other aspect comes up, and you are continually questing. I think I always had this kind of way of thinking. And this is why I started in social psychology academically and then of course you’re expected institutionally to write in social psychological terms, which I did a number of papers on. But I always had this desire to go beyond that and I think my development over the years until I’ve reached this grand old age of mine, is being more like exploring, putting my intellectual feelers out. I suppose this is one reason why I return to Simmel’s work because he does the same. What I recognize in my own interpretation of his work is that I bring out different aspects. A simple example would be when, in his analysis of a conversation, he doesn’t specifically bring out this idea of converse, but I have done that in several papers. So it’s putting a different interpretation on the complexity that Simmel recognizes in social life, bringing this aspect out and that aspect, rather than that one which is directly in front of us.

M: Are you familiar with actor-network theory?

R: To some extent, yes.

M: So it’s a methodology in a sort of way, a way to approach empirical work. John Law wrote quite a few things on it. Do you think that this sort of methodology, if I may call it that, embraces this kind of questing that you’re talking about?

R: I think it does to some extent, and John Law published a book two or three years ago.

M: I have read a book of his, it was called *Organizing modernity* (Law, 1994).

R: Yes, that’s right. Is that the one where he talks about mess and messiness?

M: Oh, no, that’s *After method* (Law, 2004).

R: That’s a more recent one I think, but he thinks differently than me. He’s a good guy is John. I connect with him. I wrote a paper with him quite a few
years ago, but it didn’t work out all that well (Cooper and Law, 1995). I wouldn’t do that ever again.

One of the things I’ve connected with actor-network theory in a way is the idea which various writers talk about, between the idea of parts and wholes. People have been talking about a very interesting book by Philip Fisher. I think the title of the book is *Making and effacing art* (Fisher, 1991). It’s an interesting development of the idea of parts versus wholes in modern art and people like Picasso and Jackson Pollock and so on. I saw connections with Philip Fisher’s approach and the work of an American woman, a literary thinker called Elaine Scarry. She’s written several books and one of them is a collection of papers she’s published over the years. The title of the book is *Resisting representation* (Scarry, 1994). It goes beyond the specific and the empirical. So when we represent things, she questions what lies behind it. And one of the terms she introduces is the term ‘participial’ acts, and this is again, about the idea of parts.

M: Has that to do with your concept of assemblage?

R: Yes. Without going into too much detail here, when I pick up a cup, I see that it has a handle, and the handle is an extension of my hand. The cup also has a lip, which is an extension of my lip. Now the cup is an object through its hands and its lips. It’s if you like my participial act, it represents the extension of the human body into the outside world and it reflects back to me, it tells me I have lips. It tells me I have a hand. And this is a very simplified way of defining or exemplifying the idea of the participial act. Everything is an act, even though we call it a thing. This is a kind of human extension, an act, and the same with words, when we represent the world, these are acts of representation. So it’s the act which connects with the actor network theory, I think, but in a probably more philosophical way than say Bruno Latour and John Law would do.

M: All right professor. I just wanted to thank you so much for your time. I cannot express how thankful I am.

R: That’s very kind. It’s great to come across someone so enthusiastic as you.

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9 Adjectives with -ed or -ing endings are termed ‘participial’, because they have the same endings as verbs, that is to say, participles that act as verbs. See Scarry, 1994: 49.
references


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