Bob Cooper, Hermes and the cult of information?

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abstract

This paper takes its departure from Cooper’s paper ‘The culture of information’, written in 2006 but first published in this issue of ephemera. This is an exemplary text that calls out to current organization studies with passion and urgency, in part because it has no obvious evidence of commercial journal publishers over-zealous editorial or reviewer lobotomising. In this paper, we follow in unadulterated form a writing that invites its readers to experience what Cooper calls unformation which he shows shadows and subverts our attempts to order the world with information. We carefully trace the textual work of Cooper’s paper and discover the work of a contemporary Hermes, a trickster who deploys secret meanings and erratic signs that demand something close to an apprenticeship in what we call here the cult of information. Via an ‘ontological turn’ he borrows from contemporary anthropology, we show how Cooper takes us to the brink of what is possible to think or say in organization studies, a point where originary thinking might begin again and in ways vital and responsive to the precarity of our existential condition in the epoch of the Anthropocene.

Introduction

Organization studies has much to say about culture and about information, but it has never fully grasped what Bob Cooper in this essay calls the ‘culture of information’. Whilst the study of organizational culture has spawned a huge research community following the publication of a series of popular
management practitioner texts in the 1980s (i.e. Peters and Waterman, 1982; Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Schein, 1985), there has been little grasp of this in terms of a ‘culture of information’. Cooper uses the phrase to open the analytical frame of organization studies beyond the boundaries of formal organization (Du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2016). Within these boundaries management and other occupations might be immersed in an organizational culture and engaged in the use of information technologies, but a culture of information invites organization studies to consider a more encompassing historical condition where a particular organizational ontology has taken hold of our thinking and being.

Cooper takes us into this realm by way of a remarkable ‘adventure in ideas’. This stands in stark contrast to most work on culture in organization studies which is not driven by ideas but duty-bound to provide a service to the business school and its clients. Working within these conditions, organization studies finds only a limited space for studying culture, which it routinely does through the application of classroom taught mass-production methodologies and derivative or abstracted theoretical constructs taken from the social sciences. In these ways culture becomes a phenomenon that can be defined and studied in narrow terms to fit within the boundaries of formal organization. This gives rise to a ‘normal science’ (Kuhn, 1962) that produces ever-proliferating and finer and finer grained distinctions and typologies of organizational culture linked causally to management practice, who correctly trained can help engineer culture for efficiency and optimisation of resources.

This paper tries to untangle the specifics of this argument as it is developed in Cooper’s 2006 paper on ‘The culture of information’, first published in this issue of ephemera. Cooper explores what he calls ‘generic being’ which he contrasts with that more impoverished being who becomes preoccupied with more mundane and day-to-day specifics. For Cooper we seek more and more information specification, but this only serves to expand what we don’t know, lost in a frenetic search for definition, closure, and meaning. In these ways the everyday busy-ness of thinking and research demanded by the business school is cramped by narrow utilitarianism. Cooper helps return academic thought to a more originary source – an ‘open field’ as he called it in his seminal Human Relations paper – a space where we escape the customary
boundaries of thought in organization and admit the more existential concerns of generic being (Cooper, 1976).

In this paper we show how Cooper draws upon work in contemporary anthropology to help unsettle the distinction between culture and nature, or disorder and order, opening up a condition of being that allows us to sense something that is neither nature nor culture but prior to their separation. Despite our best efforts to order and control our world with a ‘culture of information’ (of which business and management are derivatives), we are always on the cusp of events that overwhelm and disorder, returning us to this primordial condition. The anxiety this primordial existentialism can stimulate helps motivate a desire to flee a fear of disorder through the restless work of culture and cultivation. Academic research and writing is part of this ceaseless activity and cultivation of form, but with the growing awareness of its ontological hold there is possible hope that we can become more skilled at creating inroads into a space that permits and renews heightened sensitivity to those forces of organization that elude most organization studies. In these ways Cooper has become an essential citation for those variously working on what is called ‘process’ in contemporary organization studies (Hernes, 2014; Langley and Tsoukas, 2016; Holt and Johnsen, 2019), but his thinking and the idiosyncratic practice of his writing cannot be so neatly confined into the programmatic ambitions of these kind of scholarly sub-disciplines. In this sense, there is an anarchism to Cooper as his writing carefully undoes the normalising disciplines that have informed and made possible most of what passes for an ‘academic’ way of being in the world.

We will follow Cooper here then as he solicits an experience of undoing and what in this essay he calls latency and unformation. Many will interpret this experience as one that profoundly disables our customary preoccupation with productivity and output (research paper ‘pipelines’ as they called today in the modern university). By contrast Cooper asks one to think of matters beyond the instrumental ‘specifics’ and ‘particulars’ of a respectable academic career (to use the terms mobilised in ‘The culture of information’ essay). This raises difficult reflexive questions both about the status of Cooper’s writing, and the status of this apparent meta-commentary on his work. How are we to look after ourselves as we escape the confines of ‘paramount’ or ‘mundane’ reality during which we might experience a profound disturbance to our sense of
being-in-the-world (Laing, 1960). In this respect there is perhaps a cult-like status to Cooper, reflecting a shared cultivation of joy that invariably also passes by way of frustration (Cooper was a delightfully cussed and lugubrious character (see Burrell and Parker, 2016)). The paper works towards an understanding of how Cooper helps revitalise our sense of existential possibility in a cult(ure) of information and from where we might find the resources that can respond to current anxieties about the probable end of human life in the era we now know as ‘The Anthropocene’.

Orientation

In contrast to most papers in management and organization studies, ‘The culture of information’ does not begin with a painstaking citational journey of 100 or so specialist papers in organization studies that have been written on ‘culture’ and ‘information’ from which the author riddles out one fine gossamer like thread of hypothesis (or gap) to test conceptually or empirically. It begins in media res, written in a style that many will find challenging. The reader will experience twists and turns that seem to digress and drift with no clear signposting or structuring of direction as we have come to expect from the form of the academic journal article. However, sticking with this drift one can slowly begin to acquire a sense of the rhythm necessary to achieve the ambitions that Cooper sets for his reader. Key words slowly begin to emerge from the narrative and begin to echo and chime in the texture of his writing as concepts emerge almost organically out of the exposition of thought. They are not culled from an authoritative text, defined and then put to work for the purposes of adding a footnote to a specialist conversation or genre of organization studies. However, in Cooper’s style of reading and writing just as soon as a possible refrain becomes evident that ties all the elements together and in which the reader begins to find their feet and form an understanding – something else is brought in to intrude into this movement of thought.

Consider the first couple of sentences with which this essay begins:

Culture is the collective act of human cultivation. Culture cultivates a world of humanized forms out of the nonhuman wilderness of nature. (Cooper, 2006/2023a: 119)
Cultivation is one of the key terms or motifs upon which the essay returns, but each time it returns, it returns with new depth and nuance, whilst at the same time helping to orientate and position the reader with a sense of knowing what the essay is about, of keeping one grounded or in traction. In its first encounter, one is immediately struck by the declarative confidence of: ‘Culture is the act of human cultivation’. Many will respond with surprise. Is it, we might ask? On the one hand such declarations cause one to pause, on the other to race forward to see whether more meaning, exactitude or sense can be made by taking on board the second sentence, maybe to read towards the end of the paragraph where we might achieve a state of being informed (in-form-ed), with precision and definition.

There is a sweep and grandiosity in this opening pronouncement, but it resists immediate comprehension by virtue of its abstract quality, one that appears to speak of all times and places, and thereby drawing out and demanding an expansion of thought not normally cultivated in the reading or writing of academic journal articles, especially in business and management studies. Much of what causes us to slow down and stop also rests on the work being done by the word ‘act’. Notice its temporal ambiguity. Act is both verb and noun. Here we can begin to see the way the writing performs (or per-forms as Cooper might have written it) this ambiguity – and performs it with a varying degree of self-consciousness about the reflexive qualities of this writing act(ion). To seek to know is itself part of a collective act of human cultivation, and Cooper’s essay is reflexively engaged in this collective act of seeking to know – which is the culture of information in Cooper’s terms.

In pausing on this enigma, we are granted occasion to think: culture is then not an outcome of human cultivation. It is an ‘act’, and one being performed here in Cooper’s essay, and by extension in what I am writing here. As an act, it is in process, ongoing, in media res, unfinished. Culture is ‘being’ acted, and that ‘being’ that is doing the acting is partly the human agent, but it is also ‘human cultivation’ – which is a collective action, in part outside the control and comprehension of any one individual actor. And it is this which in one sense is culture for Cooper. However, if we allow our thoughts to extend at this point, we are led to realise that culture must be something only barely an ‘is’, even when conceived as a temporally, emergent phenomenon. Not a thing to be known or measured then, but something in which we are immersed and
entangled, and from which there is no outside upon which we might take its measure and pronounce: there! There lies culture. You see it?

The managerialisation of writing

One is not asked to deal with this enigmatic reflexivity and processuality when one reads a regular article in an Academy of Management journal which dominates the academic field of organization studies. However, the culture of information does shed some light on the state of ‘information’ available in this specialist world of management and organization studies. If we compare the form of Cooper’s essay to that of a journal article, for example, we quickly realise how the journal article proceeds in a very routinised and mechanistic way as it seeks to inform its readers. Papers begin by identifying an underlying problematic in the field by way of a statement outlining a research ‘gap’ that becomes ever more specialist and narrow as the field expands (Sandberg and Alvesson, 2011). A theoretical section usually follows the outline of the problem which helps establish and locate the problematic, sometimes testing theory or sifting and combining elements from different theory or bridging different theoretical fields in ways that have not been bridged before. Methodology is also required if the paper is reporting empirical findings and yet these methodology sections have become so formulaic that they are little more than window dressing made by a cut and paste from some reference template (Butler and Spoelstra, 2023). Following this a section reports and summarises the findings – and these might be empirical and/or conceptual. After this, papers then proceed to discuss these findings in terms of their implications for theory (and practice) – or their implication for broader assumptions and understandings that define a field of enquiry. A conclusion summarises and draws out future openings for other researchers offering additional qualification and caveat to the main narrative thread. Everything returns home, theory is reasserted, sometimes with nuance or extension, and normal science prevails.

Papers have become so formulaic in part because formula facilitates mass production, not only for authors seeking career advance, but also in order to easily and rapidly train the next generation of academics and reviewers of papers. What is being played out here in management schools is an
application of the principles of scientific management, this time employed to help organize and manage research (see Marcuse, 1964). Form has come to dominate over substance, reified in such a way that authors now routinely talk about having ‘done’ their theory section or finished their literature review, whilst demanding that colleagues ‘show me the data’. Reading, and many will suspect the actual writing of these papers has become so dull and predictable that there is little to no information about organization in them at all, or that any organization they do betray is an unacknowledged reflexive and ironic one, a manifestation and reproduction of formal organization as scientific management and bureaucracy, an iron cage where it might truly be said we are in a world ‘Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved’ (Weber, 1904/1992: 182).

Despite the appearance of rigour and rigidity, this remains of course a very fragile form of organization. Any deep dive into one of these papers betrays an overwhelming sense of ‘impression management’, or the performativity of science and scholarship. They will soon be written by AI. One illustration of this is the way authors present themselves as so self-conscious in knowing precisely what the significance of their work is and what it adds, to whom and with what consequences. They appear to know all of this ahead of how the paper might be read, received or understood by future generations of scholars. Inevitably some readers will respond to the shrill tone of these claims with a suspicion that the assertiveness and performance of confidence is over-defensive or compensation performed in equal measure to a sense of insecurity about the value or contribution of the work, a sneaking suspicion perhaps of the meaninglessness and emptiness of so much work in management and management studies (Alvesson, 2014).

Cooper’s information and the latency of organization

Cooper could not be published in these journals. There is no information in his papers that would be recognised and his writings barely in-form a reader at all. Cooper’s papers are more likely to be experienced as de-forming. The basic premise of this 2006 paper is that to think organization we must think culture beyond and in much more sophisticated ways than has become the
norm in contemporary organization studies. Picking up from a close reading of Raymond Williams (Williams, 1958, 1981), Cooper explores the ways in which culture in its most fundamental sense can be seen as a response to – or emergence from – a primordial existential chaos where ‘the human’ has not yet found itself as a being separate from its milieu and where it is not yet capable of seeing a world ‘out there’ beyond the apparent skin-lined boundaries of the human body. However, as we shall see, culture can never be fully or finally distilled out from this primordiality and remains haunted by the periodic return of chaos and disorder.

Understood as part of the culture of information Cooper helps us identify how our intellectual pursuit for knowing and knowing with ever greater precision (labelling, categorising, naming etc. with ever greater nuance) is entangled with an inevitable ‘latency’. The struggle for information, to be in-formed is a struggle that generates equal amounts of unformation as in-formation. ‘Latency is what is always extra to human requirements’ Cooper writes here, ‘always in excess of meaning and the limits of understanding, always lateral to the objectives and objectifications of human thinking, always out of sight and therefore out of (conscious) mind’ (Cooper, 2006/2023a: 135). In our efforts to know, language – for example – must necessarily play or trip across an extended ‘ecology’ of associative terms as it seeks relation to that for which is stands as a sign, an understanding first pioneered in Saussure’s (1916) Course in general linguistics. To deploy the English word tree, for example, can be understood as an attempt to share or enrol others into a labelling of the world where trees are important and relevant to our existence. In so doing we also seek to affirm shared meaning, which is achieved if we can distinguish a tree from a plant or a shrub and thereby conjure a distinctive image of ‘tree’ in the mind. In a Cooperian register we understand this deployment of language-naming as a quest or a re-request, indeed a request for participation in the world familiar to us, which of course might always be refused by virtue of the inherent ‘latency’ of information. We might use this word tree, but by sending it out into the world the word inevitably flees across multiple metaphoric and metonymic registers. A ‘tree’, for example, might conjure a variety of wild or cultivated trees; it might recall the trunk, with or without branches and leaves; it might also evoke a diagram, and it might be heard as a transitive or a verb as in ‘to tree’ a wild animal. However, without the
‘absence’ or absent-presence of this slippage (and negations) across language, meaning cannot be reaffirmed, just as black has no meaning or presence without its opposite, white.

Cooper tells us that the culture of information in which we participate brings about a series of extended or exteriorised forms (language, books, houses, libraries, schools, curriculums, museums, supermarkets etc.) that seeks to make the human body and mind more enduring and to permit an escape from the insecurity or non-sense of primitive being where the humus of our being reminds us of our fragility and evanescence. This also encompasses technology through which the body is made durable, to coin a phrase with which Cooper was familiar (see Latour, 1990). Hence, as he writes here, ‘Culture in this sense is a form of ventriloquism by which we project our mental and bodily needs and desires onto mute nature and thus make it speak back to us on our terms’ (Cooper, 2006/2023a: 119). We find position and orientation in the world by virtue of our brick-built homes, a street location, a national identity, language and schooling. They all endure and precede and exceed our limited temporal occupation and passage through them. Hunger is translated into predictable supplies of food that are pressed into tins and rows of the supermarket, whilst thinking is translated into the specifics of language and school curricula which shape and inform, just as academic journals systematise the generic intellect into specific questions, theories and methods, etc.

From this Cooper is able to conceive how technologies like the modern ‘computer re-presents the human central nervous system in order for human being to extend and expand the space and time of its existence and the latent possibilities that computer technology reveals to it’ (ibid.: 133). However, this ongoing quest for order is ceaseless because the ‘threat of breakdown and disappearance of cultural forms is ever present’ (ibid.: 122). Forms of ordering must be repeated, re-tried, re-asserted, and tested again to remind or recall the human into good form. Each production or re-iteration of sign and symbol is a repetition and re-production that opens up a gap (in time) into which drift, confusion or misunderstanding of meaning might be produced and against which we must renew our battle to reassert the order that is meant. At the same time that the body and its organs achieve coordination – of its otherwise boundaryless and wayward parts (physiologically, locomotive, thinking etc.)
it opens up new extensions and gaps that invite and risk new interferences and confusions. Both in space, and time.

In developing these arguments, one is struck immediately in reading the paper how wide Cooper ranges in his thought and referencing. It might even be accused of ill-discipline, but as he often notes in the studies he makes of other writers and those he finds most helpful, people like Jacques Derrida (Cooper, 1989), Gregory Bateson (Cooper, 1976), or Niklas Luhmann (Cooper, 2006/2023a), original thinkers do not sit comfortably within a disciplinary iron-cage but instead make new connections and intersections of thought possible. Only in this way can the confinement of disciplinary norms be tested and essayed giving chance to a freedom of thought that can observe no bounds, at least if it is to aspire or realise itself without the customary frustrations and inhibitions we find just below the surface of the most popular forms of organization (bureaucratised and Taylorised, for example). In this respect, a useful study could be made of the citational and referencing practice employed by Cooper. Observing the principle that a reader does not need to be reminded exhaustively of each and every journal article that unfolds, extends or explicates a simple idea in a sub-field of a sub-field – the theoretical and literature review sections of 'human capital resources emergence theory' (Ray et al., 2023) is a useful read in this respect – Cooper tends only to cite those sources that the reader may not have been expected to have read.

A list of such wonderful obscurities for scholars trained in organization theory can be found amongst these citations. One finds reference to Andre Breton’s 1935 untranslated Positions politique du surrealisme, for example, Shackle’s 1969 Decision, order and time in human affairs, Francisco Varela’s (1979) Principles of biological autonomy, Rudolf Otto’s (1926) The idea of the holy and a recent discovery and a current personal favourite, a reference to the Italian historian Diego Mormorio’s (1991) Tazio Secchiaroli: Greatest of the paparazzi. Who else can have found their way to a study of Tazio Secchiaroli in organization studies? Who has even heard of him? One can wager this book has never been referenced in any management or organization studies journal, ever. In this vein Cooper begins to cite and draw upon the contemporary anthropological work of Marilyn Strathern and Roy Wagner in essay. We might say he introduces students of organization studies to their
work and finds in their writings ways of helping him think what he calls here the ‘relational’ properties of the human being.

**Beyond culture**

Cooper finds the work of Strathern and Wagner attractive because it provides him with one way of thinking outside the terms of ‘the individual’ or ‘society’ and in particular the binary posing of two contained oppositions. Instead of a dualism, there is a recursive and ‘fractal’ relation between these two terms, a self-replicating entanglement that does not separate out into the static categories ‘individual’ and ‘society’. And yet it will be noted he still persists with the concepts culture and nature and the primordial existential struggle of order (culture) against disorder (nature), in this essay at least.

Cooper has been occasionally criticised for assuming that disorder is primordial (Willmott, 1997), disorder from which ‘the human’ is dispatched as a being described as of nature, but not one that exists simply in nature. On occasions in this essay Cooper gives the impression that he sees disorder as primary, primitive, or more originary, but a closer and perhaps more generous reading will show that Cooper was more than aware of this. However, confined to the grammar of western language and its reduction of communication to a tool of representational functionality, he struggles to be consistent. On the one hand disorder is clearly understood to be the product of order, a necessary shadow out of which and into which order always emerges and dissolves (see Plotnikof, Vásquez, Kuhn and Mumby, 2022). In other places he vacillates and implies that disorder has a more derivative status. In other words something neither order nor disorder, nor thinkable in its terms, comes prior to the co-emergence. Cooper’s thinking remains (productively) ambiguous on this point. There are passages that speak of a ‘nonhuman wilderness of nature’, for example, and of ‘nature’s seeming muteness’ – from which the human seeks escape. But these descriptions are also after-the-fact human constructions, to wit, Cooper’s naming and description that he deploys in this particular instantiation of his thinking.

A closer, more sympathetic, reading shows that Cooper is struggling to grasp something like a non-human force so that he can accommodate and work with
the deeper insight that what we call the human (culture) is co-emergent with the separation of order/disorder, which itself is an abstraction from what we customarily call, and what Cooper at times refers to here as, ‘nature’. Nature is itself the product of a naming act, a term that others have traced back to political struggles in the 17th century and the settlement of a division between the space reserved for a science and a space created for politics (Latour, 1993). In effect, Cooper is grappling with this inheritance of ‘nature’ within the remains of an ontological metanarrative. On the one hand he writes that ‘The “natural” has to be articulated or made to speak in human terms’ (Cooper, 2006/2023: 120) which despite the various textual emphasises does not deploy scare quotes around the word ‘The’. Nature is monolithic in this rendering – part of the restless and ceaseless unformation against which culture is composed to inform and stabilise. Elsewhere, however, Cooper invites us to see ‘the human’ as an expression and mediator of these more general lively processes of information and communication, and not the author: ‘we are the vehicles of transmission’ he writes ‘just as much as we think we transmit our messages through our technologies of communication’ (2006/2023: 131, emphasis in original). Implied here is the possibility that if we can allow for different types of ‘human’ then there might also be multiple natures. Life as a vehicle and expression of communication constructs and relates human and nature in multiple ways raising the possibility that raw or ‘wild nature’ is nothing but a historically and culturally relative rendering. Moreover, with nothing to ground or adjudicate competing realities we must admit the co-existence of irreconcilable differences. For example, subject to one set of relational connections a human is made to see and make ‘a forest’ a stock of resources; subject to another the same space presents a sacred sign system with its own (obscure) needs and agencies to which the human must tend (see Kohn, 2013).

There is nothing to ground or definitively judge which ontological condition should prevail, nothing that can explain the other as a translation or version of the other (see also de la Cadena, 2015). Here, Cooper’s meta-narrative begins to break a little as we explore the process of unformation to which he refers and allow it to work on his own expositional efforts. Copper has not named or conceptualised this reflexive and tautological possibility – but that which he is talking about is also at work in his own thinking and composition.
With his references to Wagner and Strathern he is however reaching out for connection with his own acts of ‘informational transmission’ and questioning in order ‘to keep anticipation alive’ (ibid.: 124). In doing so, however, he provokes the return of possible surprise and confusion immanent to that ‘latency’ which in his own terms shadows the relational. Information, he writes, ‘is never finished but is always supplemented by its latent field of unformation’ (ibid.: 126).

Like Cooper one might also send out a missive or sign to seek ‘connection’ by recalling the copious references to and expositions of Deleuze in Cooper’s writings, and to the promised but never completed or shared essay on Deleuze that would have formed a supplementary part five to the four part series he composed on postmodern thinkers in organization with Gibson Burrell (Burrell and Cooper, 1988; Burrell, 1988, 1994; Cooper, 1989). With Deleuze Cooper will have encountered a radical reading of Leibniz in which what Leibniz called the incompossible are made possible in the absence of a unifying God (Deleuze, 1992). Here, we admit a more restless and kaleidoscopic or fractal-like movement of elements forming and deforming in ways that make multiple but incompatible ontologies co-exist and juxtaposed in the same time. This is close to what Annemarie Mol (2002) achieved in her detailed empirical study of two ‘modes of ordering’ arteriosclerosis in a Dutch hospital in which two very different human bodies inhabit what is ostensibly the same patient. In this conception of ontology objects in the world of the human body oscillate between two states (of definition, knowing, intervention and treatment) much like those pictorial elements in the old woman/young lady portrait beloved in undergraduate psychology textbooks.

Reaching out to the anthropology of Strathern and Wagner, Cooper finds ways of escaping what might otherwise be an ontological metanarrative restricted to the static dualism of modern western thought in which a culture of information is identified by using the category of culture in distinction to and against the category ‘nature’. The ‘ontological turn’ to which Strathern and Wagner have been enrolled in contemporary anthropology (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017) first reverses our habitual assumption that cultures are plural but nature single, and then deconstructs the familiarity of the opposition by resisting incorporating this claim into modern anthropological theory and thereby forcing thought into a disciplinary exile where it enters regions of
equivocation and unknowing. The cosmology of the Amazonian people known as the Araweté, for example (De Casto, 1988), assume that there are many (what we call) natures, but only one (what we call) culture. The famous example Viveiros de Castro (ibid.) uses to illustrate this idea tells how what the Araweté understand to be human blood, the jaguar – who share their community – see as ‘manioc beer’. Blood-beer is not the equivalent of culturally relative representations of something more real or primordial. Instead, the separations reflect a single ‘culture’ shared by human, animal, and spirit – all of whom share a trans-corporeal reality within a cosmology that ascribes the human a more modest position than it is used to in western cosmology (see also Descola, 2013). However, before congratulating ourselves on a mystery solved by way of a translation into modern thinking and its categories of understanding, we are enjoined to dwell in its otherness and to think of how this otherness illuminates the limitations of our own ontology and how by way of this illumination signs become visible that suggest routes through which there is a becoming-other of the human in our own worlds.

To seize the gap that opens up during this transgression demands a capacity for conceptual creativity that in their coining raises the question of ontology and makes the boundaries of our modern academic disciplines quake. This is close to the way Foucault (1977) understands the concept of transgression, another transdisciplinary scholar who works across history and philosophy, contained by neither but extending both into a shared intellectual space that has no academic home or title. Similarly, the extent to which Holbraad and Pedersen (2017) in their outline of this ontological turn are doing modern anthropology is questionable, and of course this is mirrored in Cooper who, during most of his career, refused the label ‘organizational theorist’.

Other thinking: Towards ex-istence

Following up the references in a Cooper essay such as we see here with Strathern and Wagner helps make better sense of what is truly other and original in his thinking for organization studies. Following these lines of thinking into writers associated with the ontological turn in anthropology invite us to think of a more contingent and multi-polar ontology that cannot be subsumed under the relational dynamics of dualistic theory. In
organization studies Cooper served as a translator, occupying or testing disciplinary boundaries whilst bringing thinking from other areas of the university into conversation with experts in organization studies. Cooper thinks in many ways, and we are beginning to see here how his papers say many things at once depending on the preoccupations and reading one brings to it as a reader – something his pedagogy encouraged. For early career researchers in organization studies his footnotes are an important supplementary resource, for example, that makes it possible to recreate an outline sketch of a line of thought that marks out the sinuous shape of a path into and out of an intellectual labyrinth. Reconstructing this background by reading the source material, most of which would be new with each paper published, we can follow the currents of formation with which Cooper summons in his contributions to organization studies.

We thereby enter worlds perhaps equally as labyrinthine and fantastic as the specialist world of organizational and management theory, but with a big difference. In contrast to the stultifying aspiration for and expression of precision and control in management and organization, with Cooper our imaginations are kindled and impassioned. There is a surging quality in them that allows the reader to share movement towards the transcendental (Linstead, 2018). This exhilarating quality is achieved in part by the lack of control one experiences in following the process of his thinking out loud, but also by the referential excess of his citations. The references and the woven textual qualities of his writing combine to produce a subtle yielding and invitation to non-form or the unform in organization. The form with which he writes also stimulates the reader to experience wonder, especially when grappling with a puzzle left unresolved.

Whilst his essays move forwards in a conventional approach, building and elaborating a basic idea posited at the start, one can also detect a counter-movement, one that leads the reader back to the beginning. On returning to the words in the opening sentences however, they are made to reappear in a subtly shifted nuance of understanding where they strike one as more puzzling, deeper, or more worthy of thought. In the ‘Culture of information’ Cooper’s thought moves forwards to elaborate the opening statement that ‘culture is the collective act of human cultivation’, but as the paper progresses we become increasingly aware of how problematic all these terms are, more
complex and intriguing than we had assumed when starting to read the paper. The boundaries of ‘culture’ and its definition, for example, becomes increasingly difficult to retain as the term ‘nature’ is developed problematising the neat opposition culture/nature. Equally, ‘the human’ becomes deconstructed and pluralised, emptied of substantive content as the paper develops.

Citing Wagner (1991), Cooper begins to sketch how this figure we know as the human, for example, might be better understood as a ‘fractal person’, by which he means something like a partially bounded node in a network, a phenomenon that is part of a distributed set of supplementary resources (materials, technologies, institutions) that forms a recursive, self-replicating set of forces. Here, there is no stable part or whole, but rather – and to the extent that we have to use these terms – a mutual implication and inseparability that exists at infinite scales of abstraction: society is no longer to be conceived as a container, bigger and abstracted from individuals, who no longer appear bounded or contained at a more micro-scale; equally, it becomes possible to see the vast and incomprehensible universe as nothing but an extension of the human mind (that sees, knows and names that which we call ‘the universe’), and the human mind nothing but an extension of the matter of universe, ‘a form of reflective intelligence which, perhaps strangely, enables the earth to see and reflect itself’ (Cooper, 2006/2023: 125).

Without stable points of oppositional dualism, as in the conventional model in the social sciences – where there is a macro realm ‘containing’ a micro level, which acts and feedbacks with some relative autonomy on the macro – with Cooper we approach a much more complicated and precarious sense of ordering. With this rendering that which might appear as the sign of a mere minor disturbance, at a very small scale, must also simultaneously be manifest and active at what we typically think of as more macro scales. Without the separation of macro and micro, we retrieve a much more dynamic and volatile set of forces which retain the potential for profound systemic-disturbance and change. In this post-dual ontology, sometimes associated with what is called today in some circles a ‘flat ontology’ (following De Landa, or Schatzki, sometimes Latour and ANT) we find alliance with certain strands of chaos theory (Gleick, 1987), which is occasionally cited by Cooper (i.e. Cooper, 1998: 152). The recursive fractal patterns of the ‘Mandelbrot set’ that have no inside
or outside are particularly stimulating in this regard. Translated into sociological terms, we obtain a vision of ourselves teetering on the edge of immanent system collapse which will happen suddenly, from a minor disturbance, and with very little warning or knowing – and certainly not knowable or sense-able within the conventional industrialisation of disciplinary research. The discovery of ‘tipping points’ and ‘tipping elements’ in recent climate science (Lenton et al., 2008; Lenton, 2013) speaks to this vision of precarity and remind us that despite our best efforts to know and order the world and indeed by virtue of being enrolled into its ‘culture of information’ we must also live with a sense of impending disaster.

In this network ‘the human’ appears as one historical mode of discursive and disciplinary power that tries to contain and aggregate forces over which it has little comprehension or control. Returning to the opening sentence in Cooper’s essay we can perhaps now identify its expression as an effort of those forces to mediate or tame itself in a production of the culture of information for which the presumed autonomous agency of human authorship is a bit part player. Might these opening statements read more like petitions to or of the universe, in which Cooper sends out a missive to see what will come back and thereby to solicit that latency which subtends all efforts to know with the specificities and particulars available from language? Consider again his opening remarks: ‘The purpose of culture is to translate nature’s seeming muteness into meaningful signs and symbols in order to mirror and therefore visibly reflect the forms of human existence’ (Cooper, 2006/2023a: 119). Etymology is helpful here as it slows our reading and reminds us of a more expansive sense of ‘existence’ than we are customarily able to recall, especially when reading journal articles for information in management or organization studies. Existence originated as a compound word formed out of the Latin ‘ex’ which means ‘from’ or ‘out of’, which can also mean ex as in former, as in, for example, an ex-footballer. It can also be used to imply ‘upwards’, ‘completely’, to ‘deprive of’, or to be ‘without’ (OED). When we recall that ‘sistere’ was the Latin word meaning ‘cause to stand’ (something which allows us to stand, to stand upright for example) with root meanings ‘to be for, to make, or to stand’, we recover a very interesting and dynamic meaning of existence that has been lost and dimmed down by familiarity and over-use.
Existence then, is to be outside of any grounding, deprived of solid foundations, without a cause, or something upon which we stand – as in ‘I stand for this’, or ‘I stand for that’. To achieve this ‘out of’ and to be with existence is to summon forces that transport us outside ourselves, and this requires periodic acts of novelty or creation in order to elude or escape that form of organization which allows us to take a stand on the basis of the ‘forms’ and information provided by theory, models, and discursive repertoire that appears to let us know and control that ‘muteness’ of nature. To visibly reflect the forms of human existence is not to reflect existence and yet as becomes clear as we make our way through Cooper’s essay, the human is also not a fixed form, but retains forces that compel it to quest, to become, to test and exceed its boundaries. As he shows, the human is coterminal with the separation of culture and nature (thought ‘primordially’, or historically – as in Foucault (1970)). In other words, the human is co-created alongside culture and nature. The human with its culture does not stand outside something called nature, as some subject to an object that can be known. It is part of that which it is seeking to understand and its quest to know is akin to the proverbial dog chasing its own tail, a phrase to which Cooper has also had recourse (Cooper, 2005: 1705).

To escape a reductive tautology of this eternal return entails participation in this ex- of existence. This demands an existentially more transgressive practice, in the realm perhaps of a ‘more-than-human’ existence. This is an ex-istence which is not nature, or culture, or any other expression and frame within which the human finds support and definition. Though Cooper mobilises these terms he is subtly finding a way out of them and around them, unlike the work of technical abstraction and concept refinement we find in conventional academic study and journal article production where the prosecution of the paper involves a move towards additive knowledge that promises and appeals to the need for greater mastery and control. As we transgress the boundaries of our all-too-human thinking, as Nietzsche would call it, we teeter on the brink or void of not-knowing and not-being, which brings with it a loss of control. In a circular movement of thought, Cooper invites us to follow him into a domain where our conventional language and our capacity for thinking does not (yet) exist and therefore where language and concepts must be invented in a constant process of earthly or
cosmopolitical (Stengers, 2005) inter-mediation only to be discarded when it produces an illusion of too much knowing and security. To (pre)serve this renewal we must participate in this creativity and find access again to his ‘open field’ (Cooper, 1976). Existence in this sense demands the dissolution of boundaries and the loss of control, as a necessary element of creativity and invention. This is what ex-istence demands of us. Where most academics are after a journal publication, Cooper is after existence and its renewal – and in our age of the Anthropocene that speaks of imminent and catastrophic climate system change and adjustment, we must think: which of these strategies is of greater service to organization? And: what kinds of organization does these respective practices bring about?

**Conclusion**

Cooper ultimately speaks from and to a different world of management and organization, but one that is, ironically, more robust in its organization, in part because the thinking and writing is supported by a systematically developed, ontological ‘vision’ (Cooper, 2005). ‘The culture of information’ essay realises this vision through the exposition and practice of a more circular reasoning that stands in marked contrast with the linear thinking of most management and most managerial papers. With Cooper, organization is achieved by a kind of intellectual ‘weaving’. This weaving produces a more complex ‘form’ of organization that admits the inevitable entanglement of form with the formless or ‘unformation’ of organization – as Cooper calls it here.

Rather than ignoring the disordering that comes from this unformation, Cooper seeks them out and conjures them into his writing. In this way his writing constructs a more sensitive, flexible and capacious ‘form’ of organizing experienced by the reader of his papers. Whilst his approach to organization talks about disordering, he also performs a disordering through the highly crafted form and style of his writing. To ignore disorder and/or summarily dismiss these elements produces a very fragile or brittle form of organization that is easily overwhelmed by forces it finds difficult to admit or grapple with. This is where Cooper finds some conversation with the work of Karl Weick and in particular the thinking that informs some of Weick’s highly
original studies of disasters (Weick, 1990; 1993; 2010). Hence, we must embrace disorder by way of a counter-intuitive move that demands we think against ourselves. In these ways Cooper imagines a much more complex form of organization that places us precariously in a ‘culture of information’.

In this paper I hope to have shown that unformation and latency are both objects of conceptual weaving in Cooper and also things that are reflexively performed in the writing. In these ways the paper produces a suspended or even elevated state of being, one that shimmers or oscillates on the pivot of order/disorder. This is a strange space and time neither in nor of organization, but one that is immersed in the ‘latency’ of organization that is ostensibly being explored here. This (de)positioning and (de)positional work of the paper serves to derail the reader – both novice and more seasoned specialists – but with this disordering we are stimulated to enter a form of thinking outside the dualistic terms with which Cooper gets his essay going. With the ontological turn there are ‘many natures’ and many ‘cultures’ separating and dividing out from more primordial struggles with being in the world. In reading Cooper we are enjoined to participate in this existential ‘worlding’ (Heidegger, 1978) but we soon realise this demands a preparedness for exile and loss which entails a ground-clearing of our most basic ontological commitments. These commitments are made aware to us only at the moment of a transgression which we are beginning to see developed in recent writings associated with the ontological turn in anthropology which helps mark out or (de)limit the imperial presumptions of modern western knowledges.

In these ways Cooper is after the possibility of a transformation in organization. Here we understand Cooper as translator, cipher, mediator, or scryer of vast incomprehensible forces, forces that infinitely expand and elude our grasp by introducing additional latency in proportion to each effort to label or connect with it. To tarry with these forces requires a capacity for improvisation and spontaneous creation, to seize the appearance of the uncontainable which momentarily flashes as both promise and terrifying prospect of rejuvenation and hitherto unimaginable ways of being in the world. Working in this space Cooper introduces a complex and inter-related set of concepts that might appear to conjure worlds no more or less fantastical than those created in mainstream management or organization journals. There is however a profound difference in this fantastic. Conventional theory
in management and organization studies proliferates with ever more inventive particularities and specificities in a quest to represent an apriori reality for the purposes of control. Cooper unsettles this assumption and operates with concepts that lean into disorder to interrupt our habitual way of making sense. Concepts like ‘earth’, ‘generic being’, ‘events’, and mirror as we read them ‘The culture of information’ are ‘contaminated by secret meanings and erratic signs’ (Cooper, 2006/2023a: 130) in the same way Cooper accuses the ancient Greek God Hermes of doing in his communication strategies. A contemporary Hermes, we can follow Cooper’s secret meanings and erratic signs in the culture of information and thereby make our way outside their taken-for-granted hold on our thinking and imaginations.

‘The culture of information’ provides one apprenticeship for the student of organization in working through a series of concepts that move from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from form to inform, and then infirm to uniform and deform. We move from production to prediction and reproduction, from presence to ‘pre’-sense, that relates relationality to latency. Cooper weaves together this series of terms with a strict and rigorous methodology that recreates a pulse and rhythm that we do not ordinarily hear in organization but in the Age of the Anthropocene this ‘song of the earth’ sounds out to future generations of scholars preoccupied with the fate of the planet and its varied forms of life, ourselves included.

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