Queering Robert Cooper: Gender, a kitsch and anthropomorphic organization*

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abstract

This article applies the concepts of anthropomorphism and kitsch developed by Robert Cooper (1986/2023a) to queering the ontology of organization. Cooper suggests a non-essentialist ontology of organization that allows us to think ‘organization’ beyond a concrete economic entity and to expand the field of Organization Studies beyond studies of organizations. I use Cooper's concepts to demonstrate that gender norms are anthropomorphic and kitsch forms of organization themselves. Cooper’s work is not about gender, but for Cooper organizations operate to produce not only goods but also signs and symbols that organize society, including gender. He argues that ‘organization’ is not an entity but a constant process of micro-ordering our lives and world-making. In this sense, identities are forms of organizing, disrupting the essentialist and realist assumptions that organizations are entities and hence redefining the limits and objects of analysis of Organization Studies.

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Introduction

Generally, organizations are seen to mean companies, public sector and third sector entities that produce goods and services to be consumed by people or used by other organizations. Following this view organizational researchers would have as their object of analysis the generation of these goods and services like the costs of healthcare industries (Balu et al., 2021), leadership in manufacturing industries (Chan et al., 2019), and the competitiveness of the gas industry (Soltani et al., 2021), for example. Despite their different subjects of analysis, these studies have in common two things: (1) organizations are conceptualized as entities that produce goods or services to be consumed, and (2) the field of Organization Studies concentrates on studying these sorts of organizations.

In contrast, in the article ‘Notes on organisational kitsch’ Robert Cooper (1986/2023a), highlights that the main commodity of the organization is the production of systems of information and theoretical knowledge. For Cooper, organizations produce not only material goods, but also signs and symbols about the social world that produces us as subjects, forging the human being. In other words, Cooper states that the main goal of organizations is to construct the human being as a subject. Considering that organizations operate to produce signs and symbols that organize society, Cooper declares that organization does not mean an entity but a constant process of organizing our lives and that the greatest task for organizational researchers is to understand how the subject is constructed in these processes. Organization is a verb, not a noun.

For Cooper (1986/2023a), the ontology of organization is not a solid, static, and fixed entity, but a never-ending process of forging and shaping the real (Chia, 2003), developing a non-essentialist concept of organization. Cooper is queering the meaning of organization, problematizing organization’s ontology, and at the same time offering a new meaning of organization that expands the field of Organization Studies by queering its ontology. The word queering was forged by queer theory to problematize gender and sexuality. De Lauretis (1991) was the first author to publish an academic article using the term queer theory. Halperin (2003: 340) affirms that what de Lauretis wanted with this expression is ‘to open a wider space within it [academic knowledge
about gender and sexuality] for reflections of a theoretical order, to introduce a problematic of multiple differences into what had tended to be a monolithic, homogenizing discourse’. Queering means an action that problematizes and deconstructs what is seen as natural, normal, established, and hegemonic (Sullivan, 2003), including academic knowledge. In this sense, queering is employed in this article as meaning the reflexive action to problematize what is considered socially, culturally, natural, universal, essential, reified, solid, stable, and unproblematic about the meaning and knowledge of organization.

There is a tradition in organization studies of questioning the ontological status of organization and management (Boal et al., 2003; Chia, 1998a, 1998b, 2003; Czarniawska, 2003; Parker, 2001, 2002; Silverman, 1970; Weick, 1985; Westwood and Clegg, 2003). Cooper (1986/2023a) is one pioneer in this task, specifically when seeking to understand organization within a poststructuralist approach. This article aims to analyze the influence of Cooper’s (1986/2023a) work on the ontology of organization and the limits of Organization Studies in queering the organization. As we will see, Cooper (ibid.) has a non-essentialist meaning of organization that allows us to think of organization beyond a concrete economic entity and to expand the field of Organization Studies beyond the studies developed in companies and other workplaces, demonstrating that gender norms are a form of organization in itself.

Therefore, this article aims to question what an organization is, highlighting a non-essentialist meaning of organization and the importance of the social and discursive in this construction. Its main contribution is to explore how Cooper’s (1986/2023a) work travels to and in gender studies as understood by queer theory, helping shed light on contemporary Organization Studies in two ways: (1) expanding the understanding of the ontology of organization to gender norms and (2) revealing that gender norms are a kitsch and anthropomorphic organization. Cooper’s (1986/2023a) article is not a text about gender and queer theory, but I think that the concepts developed by him could be applied to gender. My main assumption that the non-essentialist organization ontology developed by Cooper enables us to understand gender norms themselves as a sort of organization, acting as a constant process of organizing our lives in society, producing signs and symbols that construct us as gendered subjects.
Cooper’s concepts of kitsch and anthropomorphism

Cooper (1986/2023a) (re)interprets the concept of the organization, queering the ontology of organization, questions its ontological status partly by affirming that societies are experiencing a new stage in the social-economic process and the main commodity is systems of information and theoretical knowledge. In this context, organizations are seen as providers of information and knowledge for all of society, producing goods, signs, and signals within society and at the same time acting as a nodal point between the production and consumption of signs and signals. It is through this organizational production and consumption of signs and symbols that people are also produced in a constant process of repetition operated by language.

Cooper (1986/2023a) reveals the importance of discourse not only in the construction of the world and organizations but also in our construction as subjects. His concerns are in tune with the poststructuralist tradition present in Foucault (1970) and later in queer theory by highlighting discourse as a formative of the world’s materiality and not just a mere representation of it. This connects discourse with power when seeking to comprehend how a specific version of reality appears for us as truth at the same time that other possibilities are excluded (Khan and MacEachen, 2021); evidencing how the individual is constructed as a subject in this discursive process of inclusion and exclusion (Diaz-Bone et al., 2008); and highlighting the power relations present in this construction. Discourse is a process of social world (re)definition that works as a strategy by which specific discourses acquire hegemony over others (Power, 2007).

For Cooper discourse is the primary means to analyze dynamic, complex, illusive features of organizational phenomena and organizing itself. Thus, discourses are practices relating to the process of organizing and the construction of subjects (Oswick et al., 2000). Seeking to understand this complex, dynamic, intersectional, and concomitantly discursive construction of organizations and subjects, Cooper (1986/2023a) develops two concepts: anthropomorphism and kitsch. I will explain these concepts below.

Based on Lacan, Cooper (1986/2023a) declares that repetition is fundamental to the discursive production-consumption process. The very need for
repetition of signals and signs reveals that there is a lack and incompleteness in human formation, it ‘reveals an essential gap or “nothingness” in the human experience’ (ibid.: 56). But it also affirms that an account of an origin needs to be constructed by a discursive repetition, because there is nothing original in our lived experience. Cooper calls this process of origin construction by repetition ‘anthropomorphism’.

The repetition of language is essential to the anthropomorphic process to construct the fiction that we have a pre-given and a-historical origin. This constant discursive repetition constitutes the materiality of the world and hides differences and history. However, the necessity and importance of repetition in this world construction process itself shows that origin, truth, or essence in human experience does not exist, showing that there is, in Cooper’s words, a ‘gap’ or ‘nothingness’ in the subject experience. There is no original, essential, or pre-given human being, instead the human being’s origin is a social construction (Cooper, 1986/2023a). Repetition has the main objective to make up that we are natural, covering the historicity and power relations that act in the construction of what we are as human beings.

Cooper affirms that anthropomorphism is a meta-fiction that secures the subject as a pre-given fact. Anthropomorphism establishes the origin and unity of the subject as something a-historical and natural, disguising and covering that subjects are socially constructed and imposed. For Cooper ‘there is no substantive origin at the beginning of our history [...] – this origin has to be constructed to look as if it were the authoritative fountain-head’ (1986/2023a: 56). Anthropomorphism is a process in which humans comprehend the world as being for them, positioning them in the center of the world and assuming that this is something natural and timeless, despite it not being. As such the conception of Humanity is a ‘meta-fiction whose function is to comfort, reassure and make the world safe for man [sic]’ (ibid.: 56) that seeks to construct the unity of the human being, establishing the idea that the human is the center of their own origin, as something pre-given, denying difference, division, and history.

The main goal of anthropomorphism is to establish and naturalize the notion that the subject is pre-given and the owner of his/her/hir origin. The subject is conceived as the center and builder of his/her/hir own history. Beyond that,
it denies the existence of gaps and differences between human beings. Anthropomorphism appears and operates where there is distance and separation to establish the notion that the subject is homogeneous and complete. Therefore, ‘man hides from himself the fact that he has no known and certain origin, that he is a “fiction” which is continually constructing itself’ (Cooper, 1986a: 57). For Cooper the anthropomorphic notion of the subject is kitsch.

Kitsch is a German word to describe this anthropomorphic process of denying everything that is unacceptable in our human experience, seeking to transform what is uncomfortable and disturbing into something pleasant and nice, making the disagreeable agreeable through a constant process of repetition. Kitsch highlights the unacceptable and disturbing lacunas produced by the process of repetition. Kitsch is a defense against the troublesome, the different, and the unusual that emerges in the processes of repetition, refusing any kind of critical thought in its goal to produce truth, unity, simplicity, homogeneity, and certainty (Cooper, 1986/2023a). Kitsch is a process that rejects and transforms what is unacceptable by naturalizing it. Kitsch denies ‘what is unacceptable in human experience. Kitsch is that which turns the disturbing into something that is pleasing and pacifying’ (ibid.: 57) through a constant process of discursive repetition. Cooper extensively quotes the novelist Milan Kundera (1984) to exemplify what kitsch means:

When I say ‘totalitarian’, what I mean is that everything that infringes on kitsch must be banished for life: every display of individualism (because a deviation from the collective is a spit in the eye of the smiling brotherhood); every doubt (because anyone who starts doubting details will end up by doubting life itself); all irony (because in the realm of kitsch, everything must be taken quite seriously); and the other who abandons her family or the man who prefers men to women. (Kundera, 1984: 132, in Cooper 1986/2023a: 59)

For Cooper (1986/2023a) kitsch has as its main characteristic the human-centredness and the defense against difference, unusual and troublesome, denying any critical thought and seeking to produce certainties and truths. Cooper (1986/2023a: 56), like Kundera, wishes to question kitsch and its ‘unilateral seal between human meaning and the word by denying its assumed predestined ‘naturalness’. For him, the human ‘meaning and unity is
constructed and imposed on that which is without intrinsic meaning and unity’ (ibid: 56).

The problematization of what organization and organization theory means is questioned in many of Cooper’s articles (Cooper, 1986/2023a, 1986b, 1987, 1988, Burrell and Parker 2016, and the unpublished work now published in this special issue of *ephemera*), evidencing the importance of this theme in his work. Anthropomorphism and kitsch are helpful concepts to comprehend what an organization is and how it is constructed for Cooper. The next section presents how these two concepts help to clarify and problematize a ‘realist’ view of the organization and offer a different understanding of organizing beyond the economic and the institutional, thereby queering organization.

**Queering organization**

Cooper proposes a new intelligibility about organizations by stating that ‘Organizations produce signs and symbols rather than [only] commodities [...]’ (Cooper, 1986/2023a: 62), and that consumption in our society is the consumption of signs and symbols. This intelligibility does not only just mean that signs and symbols are the main products of an organization, but it also queers the meaning of organization itself. For Gurrieri and Cherrier (2013: 277) queering means ‘a mode of critical engagement to examine and challenge established ideas’. Queering emphasizes the necessity of denaturalizing what is taken for granted about organization and at the same time highlights the extension of Organization Studies to other fields which occupy a marginalized or interdisciplinary position, such as studies of the human subject and identity construction. As Parker (2001, 2002) has asserted, it is the meaning of the term manager and the management disciplines that need to be queered.

It is noteworthy that this same process of production and consumption of signs and symbols occurs also constructs the organization itself, creating an intelligible organization. In other words, in this same process of production of signs and symbols organizations constitute themselves as organizations. Therefore, for Cooper organizations themselves are a discursive production, and the knowledge of the organization and the organization of knowledge are implicated and intertwined with each other (Chia, 1998a). Cooper (2016) adds
that knowledge (discourse) about organizations is organized according to normalized criteria regulated by discursive norms that produce signs and symbols. Therefore, the discourses (knowledge) that circulate about organizations are also constitutive of the organizations themselves (Rhodes, 2001).

Discourse cannot be interpreted as meaning only language, speech, or written text, and must include in its definition the architecture of a building or the structure of time in a day. Discourse constructs the materiality of the world, our reality, and our understanding of this reality, forging reality and not merely representing it. Every discourse is simultaneously language and social practice (Fairclough, 1995) that become real concepts, objects, and subjects (Oswick et al., 2000). Organizations are discursive constructions and as stated by Foucault (1969) every discourse is a practice that shapes and forms the objects to which it speaks and of which it speaks. Discourse is a practice because it establishes, constitutes, and limits the intelligibility of what an organization is and can be by submitting the organization to its norms, not making reference to any ordering practice outside the discursive system (Veiga-Neto, 2003; Lasta and Hillesheim, 2014). Therefore, the ‘organization of the discourse constitutes organizational reality [...]’ (Clegg et al., 2005: 155). Organizations are an outcome of the discursive practices that organize the world. Organization is a product of this discursive organizing process that produces signs and symbols (Cooper, 1986/2023a) which Foucault (1970) calls the order of the discourse. In this sense, organizations are a ‘reality-constituting and reality-maintaining activity’ (Chia, 1998b: 366).

As a discursive practice, organization is a production-consumption process naturalized by repetition. In this process of repetition of symbols and signs the organization also constitutes itself. For organization to seem something natural, stable, monolithic, and unproblematic it is necessary to build its origin. The repetition of discourse is the anthropomorphic process which constructs the notion that organization has a pre-given and a-historical origin, constituting its materiality as something natural and unproblematic in the world and covering its historicity and power relations. For example, it is through discourse that the workers and managers in an organization create an intelligible and coherent social reality in their minds about the
organization, shaping who these subjects are, and creating and perpetuating the structures of the organization (Mumby and Clair, 1997).

It is this anthropomorphic meta-fiction that secures the organization as a pre-given fact, establishing its origin and unity as something a-historical and unified, disguising its social discursive construction, and imposing it as something natural. The very idea of an organization is an anthropomorphic construction, constructing the organization as its own origin and something pre-given and denying any difference, antagonism, and historicity in its ontology (Cooper, 1986/2023a). In addition to hiding its contingency, anthropomorphism also constitutes the organization as a form of human being. In this anthropomorphic process, the organization is established as a person who has ‘their’ own desires and intentions. The organization is equated with a human being who thinks, analyzes, and acts. Anthropomorphism is a process in which humans comprehend the world as being for them and about them, and the construction of the organization as a human being is part of this tendency to put the human in the center of the world.

If we take a generally realist perspective, organizations and the world exist independently of the discourse and how they are perceived by human beings. In this approach, reality is objective, representing some sort of unique truth about the world, and it exists independently of power and discourse (Boal et al., 2003). For realism, organizations are entities, and organizational researchers produce ‘theories that seek to explain and predict’ these entities called organizations (ibid.: 87), taking them for granted. Despite recognizing their complexity, organizations are understood as solid, permanent, homogeneous, static, rational, a-historic, and orderly entities (Sims et al., 2009) and not social discursive constructions. Realism suggests that organizations are ordering and rational structures that control the uncertain and chaotic world, bringing harmony, unity, predictability, and security to the chaos.

This understanding of organization removes everything that is considered unpredictable, irrational, and emotional and considers these characteristics a threat to the organization’s existence (Clegg et al., 2005). This simplification of organization is a kitsch process that intends to refuse and eliminate
everything that is unacceptable to the realist approach, producing an essential, homogeneous, and unified truth about what an organization is. It is a kitsch defense against the troublesome, the different, and the unusual that emerges in the processes of repetition (Cooper, 1986/2023a). Such ‘realism’ despite its attempt to detach itself from a constructionist view of the world, trying to cover up the processual, conflicted, heterogeneous, and dynamic activities of the organization (Sims et al., 2009), is also a discourse that circulates in the truth games which seek to establish the truth of what an organization is, of what society is (Foucault, 1969).

Cooper is opposed to this realist view of the organization. He highlights that organization is a constant fight between order and disorder seeking to bring order to disorder (Cooper, 2016). Organization is an ‘artificial stabilizing of this incessant and relentless change’ (Chia and King, 1998: 466), characterizing the concept of organization as a space between order and chaos (Clegg et al., 2005). Organization can exist ‘only on the basis of impermanence where ordering constantly moves between becoming and being’ (ibid.: 150). The organization only exists and acquires materiality in the space between order/disorder, organization/disorganization (Cooper, 2016). Therefore, organization can exist only in this existential gap (Burrell and Cooper, 1988; Clegg et al., 2005).

Organization is an attempt to organize disorder and chaos. To accomplish this task, it engages in an ongoing kitsch process of organizing which operates by ordering and reducing the complexity of the organization, seeking to order the chaos and disorder to reduce its own irreducible complexity, to produce the idea that the organization is a stable and solid entity (Law, 1994). But this kitsch process is not deterministic and as Clegg et al. (2005: 153) explain an organization ‘is not just managing uncertainty, it does not just suppress and repress. Rather, it is a process of increasing complexity and reducing it: ordering and dis-ordering are interdependent’. Equally ‘Chaos, disorder and noise are not in opposition to organization but are its very precondition’ (ibid.: 154). In other words, ‘what we think of as an organization is the momentary apprehension of an ongoing process of organizing that never results in an actual entity [...] always becoming between order and disorder’ (ibid.: 158). As such, organization is a constructed abstraction and not a natural entity.
Understanding that organization is an unstable gap between order and disorder, Cooper (1986/2023a, 1986b) does not seek to create an essentialist and taken-for-granted conception of organization. He affirms that organization is at the same time the producer and the outcome of signs and symbols. Thus, ‘Organization is more a tedious and interminable process of factioning out the real than a solid, static thing’ (Chia, 2003: 98). Organization is not a concrete entity, but it is the ‘quintessential technology for real-izing the real for making what appears initially irrelevant and unconnected part of a universal order that gives sense and consequence to our everyday action and experience’ *(ibid.*: 99). Organization must be understood as a world-making, including itself in this world-making process. Instead of being a stable, monolithic, rational, objective, solid, and unified entity, organization is a ‘constant [and unpredictable] state of becoming’ (Clegg et al., 2005: 158).

Understanding organizations as not being entities broadens their meaning and they become ‘micro-ordering processes [which] collectively serve to shape our identities and aspirations and to orient us towards ourselves and our environment’ (Chia, 2003: 98). Then, Organization Studies is a ‘sustained analysis of the generic organizational impulses shaping contemporary modes of analysis, codes of behavior, social mannerisms, dress, gestures, postures, the rules of law, disciplines of knowledge, and so on’ *(ibid.*: 98). This takes us far beyond the traditional view of organizations as entities like banks, shops, schools, hospitals, factories and governments. Accordingly, the concept of organization needs to be opened so as not to conceal and overcode its possible and potential meanings (Clegg et al., 2005). Cooper’s anti-essentialism is to think of organization as a nodal point around which a hegemonic conception of the organization is articulated but considering that such a conception brings with itself antagonisms about what an organization is, allowing multiple and varied meanings (Laclau, 2005; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). A non-essentialist conception of organization is an alternative form of conceptualizing the organization and organization studies, making the social and the material central to thought (Chia, 2003).

A non-essentialist conception of organization suggests that there are many fluid and different forms of organizations and that organization is a world-making process. This makes it possible to understand our social codes and norms related to gender as a form of organization. As Chia (2003) suggests,
codes of behavior, dress, gestures, and postures that shape our contemporary world must be analyzed as organizations. Gender norms are a discursive construction that produces signs and symbols addressed to dress, codes of behavior, gestures, and body, so the next section applies Cooper’s concepts to gender norms to understand gender as an organization. Cooper might have largely assumed gender in his studies (see, for example, his interview with Cavalcanti in this issue) but his work encourages me to want to queer organization by using Cooper.

**Gender norms: A world-making organization**

Organization is a permanent process of shaping the real, a world-making process. The social order real-izes the real and gives us the sense and consequences of our everyday actions and experience as an organization. Gender as a key element of the social order gives us the intelligibility of our everyday practices yet it appears to many people as something less important and irrelevant because, in an anthropomorphic process (Cooper, 1986/2023a), it is made to be natural and inevitable – it is taken for granted. And yet gender is a quintessential technology for real-izing the real, a world-making process that produces the intelligibility, sense, and consequences of our actions, ordering the social, despite not being a concrete entity. Gender is an ongoing and unpredictable form of organization.

Just as for Cooper (1986/2023a) organization does not mean an entity, if we apply his ideas to gender we can say that gender is a constant process of micro-ordering our lives and world-making, constructing us as human beings. Understanding organization as a non-essentialist concept that produces signs and symbols (Cooper, 1986/2023a), instead of being a concrete entity, expands the meaning of organization beyond a structuralist and essentialist view, and also makes it possible to understand gender as an organization, because gender is a world-making power apparatus. The many fluid and different forms of organization which are not represented in an essentialist and realist view of organization, including gender, are concealed by the conceptualization of organization as being an entity. This disregards the social apparatuses that order our lives in society and produce us as subjects.
The heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990) creates signals and symbols to order the social world. It follows that organizations are not only economic enterprises, but also the ways in which we organize our human experiences in the world as gender norms. Organization is not a concrete entity but a world-making process that orders and constructs our world and gender is a powerful organizing technology that creates and circulates signs and symbols (discourses) that rule and make the world. Judith Butler (2004: 42), for example, asserts that gender ‘is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized’. Like Chia (1998b) asserts, to talk about organization is to talk about world-making and gender is a multiple, heterogenous, and complex world-making technology.

Therefore, gender is the power apparatus by which the sense of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized (Butler, 2004), but it cannot be reduced to an original version of masculine and feminine. Gender is a micro-ordering process that orients us toward ourselves, shaping our identity, dress, gestures, and postures (Chia, 2003). The process of organizing produces signs and symbols about the social world that produce us as subjects, constructing us as human beings (Cooper, 1986/2023a). Similar to Cooper’s concerns, queer theory is also preoccupied with how the human being is constructed as a subject, problematizing how gender norms construct normal and abnormal subjects in distinct hierarchies. Gender is an organizing that organizes our lives, establishing discursive norms through the heterosexual matrix that constitutes us as hierarchically ranked subjects (Butler, 2004). Such a ‘construction of identities, their simple location, and their causal attribution [...] are precisely modern strategies of organization: central features of our modern will-to-order’ (Chia, 2003: 99).

For Cooper (1986/2023a) the main goal of an organization is to construct the human being as a subject and gender is a form of organization that produces discursive norms (signs and symbols) that forge us as gendered subjects and organize society. We only become subjects with liveable lives if we submit to gender norms, and only as subjects can we occupy a discursive position in the order of discourse that allows us to live our lives and have a voice in society (Moulin de Souza and Parker, 2022). Not following gender norms makes
people unintelligible in society, excluding them from the privileged spaces, making their lives precarious, since they are not considered subjects. The organization of gender produces not only material objects (our body, for example) but also signs and symbols about the social world that produces us as subjects (clothes, for example).

Gender is therefore an organizing that circulates discourses, signs and symbols, that construct what we are as human beings in the social world. It is a reality-constituting and a reality-maintaining activity, a constructive process of world-making, a non-essentialist organization that produces signs and symbols (discourses) to order our lived experience via intelligibility and identities. It acts in all social spaces, organizing our lived experience in labor, religion, education, and sports, among other social spaces, that cannot be separated from its historical, cultural, and political intersections ‘in which it is invariably produced and maintained’ (Butler, 1990: 5). As we will see next, Cooper’s concepts of anthropomorphism and kitsch allow us to understand gender as an anthropomorphic kitsch organization of repetition.

**Gender norms as kitsch and anthropomorphic organization**

There is a connection between Cooper’s ideas about organization and gender studies. Cooper (1986/2023a) states that the repetition of signs and signals is vital for the organizational discursive production-consumption process. Relatedly, Butler (1993a) alerts us that the subject is not free and outside of norms but is produced through the constant repetition of these norms: she calls this repetition of norms ‘performativity’. Butler (1993b) declares that performativity needs to be thought of as the process that regulates the repetition of norms. This repetition is not performed by a subject; on the contrary, it is what allows, enables, and produces the subject. Performativity is not a singular act performed by a subject, but the historical condition of the subject. Then, similarly to what Cooper (1986/2023a) declares about organization, repetition is also crucial for gender for Butler. Repetition is fundamental for every form of organization, including gender norms.

Considering that organization has as its main goal the production of subjects (Cooper, 1986/2023a) and that the subject emerges in a world that has
cultural, historical, and social norms that circulate via discourses, the repetition of these discourses circulate the gender intelligibility produced by the heterosexual matrix, and they act as a background that constructs the subject through social practices which are constantly repeated. Gender norms work through and are operated by the heterosexual matrix, soliciting in us the embodiment of idealized characteristics of femininity and masculinity. The repetition of gender norms produces someone as a viable subject according to the heterosexual matrix which is performative of a specific set of practices. Discourse ‘has a history that not only precedes but conditions its contemporary usages, and [...] this history effectively decenters the presentist view of the subject as the exclusive origin or owner of what is said’ (Butler, 1993a: 19).

Cooper (1986/2023a) suggests that repetition is fundamental to the discursive production-consumption process because it establishes a sense that there is an origin, calling this process of origin creation by repetition anthropomorphism. He declares that despite our origin needing to be artificially constructed by a discursive repetition, there is nothing original or an origin in our lived experience – including gender – as Butler (ibid.) affirms about gender performativity. The need for repetition of signals and signs reveals that there is a lack and incompleteness in human formation, it reveals, as quoted earlier, ‘an essential gap or “nothingness” in the human experience’ (Cooper, 1986/2023a: 56). Butler (1993a) adds that nobody is entirely constituted by, or obedient to, the performativity required by gender norms and there is always an impossibility for someone to recognize herself/himself/hirself completely in the intelligibility of the heterosexual matrix, demonstrating the instability and incompleteness of subject-formation.

The repetition of gender norms is a strategy to create the sense that gender is something natural that has an origin in certain bodies and subjects, demonstrating that the intelligibility of gender forged by the heterosexual matrix is anthropomorphic. Anthropomorphism is a process in which human beings comprehend the world as being for them, positioning them in the center of the world and (by extension) assuming that gender is something natural and biological, a monolithic and stable organization, circulating a discourse which insists that the individual is or has a gender. This conception
of gender is a meta-fiction created to reassure us and make the world safe for humankind, seeking to construct unitary and foundational genders. It affirms the sense that the human is the center of their own origin, conceiving gender as something pre-given, denying any difference, historicity, and multiplicity in gender identities. It obscures the lack of any known and certain origin of gender, concealing that it is a fiction that continually constructs itself through performativity to appear as something natural through the repetition of norms. If we follow these heterosexual norms we are seen and considered as legible, normal, even ethical, people who obey natural forces.

According to Jagose (1996), gender and sexuality are performative not because they are something that the subject deliberately and playfully assumes, but because through reiteration they consolidate the subject. In this respect, performativity is the precondition of the subject. Therefore, performativity cannot be understood as a voluntarist or a presentist action of the subject; it is the precondition that constitutes and produces the subject’s actions. Performativity implies that gender is not something that someone has or is because its origin is not in the subject and there are no original genders. It demonstrates that gender origin, as an organization, needs to be artificially constructed by a discursive repetition, declaring that there is nothing original or an origin in our gendered lived experience, because agency does ‘not have an abstract or pre-social status, but … [is] always negotiated within a matrix of power’ (Butler, 1993a: 22). Therefore, performativity is not a singular and deliberate act: it is power relations that operate through discourse. It is not an intentional and conscious act of a person and it does not have its foundations in ‘someone’. On the contrary, its foundations are in binding power related to discourse. Then, it ‘is no “one” who takes on a gender norm. On the contrary, this citation of the gender norm is necessary in order to qualify as a “one”, to become viable as a “one”’ (ibid.: 23).

The incompleteness and instability of human formation highlights that the norms of gender are unstable forms of organizing. The heterosexual matrix attempts to organize, order and reduce gender complexity, seeking to order the chaos and disorder, to produce the idea that gender is a stable and solid dualism by reducing its own complexity. However, this kitsch process of ordering and reducing gender complexity is not deterministic and other forms of gender emerge outside the intelligibility of the heterosexual matrix. Order
and disorder are the preconditions of gender norms. Gender norms are in a constant fight between order and disorder seeking to bring order to disorder. Therefore, gender is a stabilizing of this permanent fight between order and disorder, and gender only exists and acquires intelligibility in the gap between order and disorder. This kitsch process of order and disorder related to gender can be exemplified by the concepts of parody and the abject.

The compulsory practices that occur in gendering kitsch processes are regulated by norms, but we cannot conceive of these norms as deterministic. Based on this, Sullivan (2003) suggests it is impossible that the repetition of an action will occur in exactly the same ways as before. Therefore, gender is a fantasy of a fantasy, a parody (Butler, 1990). The idea of gender parody does not assume that there is an original of gender that parodic identities imitate. Parody declares that gender identity is a fantasy of a fantasy and ‘reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin’ (Butler, 1990: 175). Behaviors seem to be real, normal, and natural because the subject is performatively induced to do performances according to gendered norms and social conventions (Lovaas and Jenkins, 2007). However, the constant repetition of gender norms demonstrates exactly their inefficacy. Performativity does not produce identical subjects, because each ‘of us performs our gender and sexual identities but not in exactly the same ways others do’ (ibid.: 8). Beyond that, if we do not follow heterosexual norms we are seen as a person who fails because of nonconformity with reproductive lifestyles and capitalist practices and we become what Butler (1993b) called abject.

The production of abjection is a kitsch process of denying in our human experience every gender and sexuality that falls outside the heterosexual matrix. The heterosexual matrix norms are binary, cisnormative, and heteronormative. Every expression of gender and sexual identities that does not follow these norms is rendered abject, evidencing the unacceptable and disturbing lacunas produced by the process of repetition (Cooper, 1986/2023a). Abjection is a defense against the troublesome and different gender and sexual identities that emerge in the process of repetition but do not follow the performativity required by the matrix. The matrix seeks to produce the sense of originality, truth, unity, simplicity, homogeneity, and certainty related to gender, to transform what is uncomfortable and
disturbing into something pleasant and unremarkable, making the disagreeable agreeable through a constant process of repetition to reject and transform what is unacceptable. It is a social ordering, a world-making or organizing that puts together the dispersed, multiple, and antagonistic into a simple and coherent explanation that rules our lives (Chia, 2003: 112) and through which the identity of the individual is constructed in the very act of organizing. This kitsch process goals to create a dualist version of gender reality as truth at the same time that other gender possibilities are excluded.

Repeating Cooper’s (1986/2023a: 59) definition of kitsch, citing Kundera (1984), he affirms that ‘everything that infringes on kitsch must be banished for life: […] the mother who abandons her family or the man who prefers men to women’. As a set of regulatory practices, the heterosexual matrix through which gender and sexual identities become intelligible affirms that some identities cannot exist, mainly identities that break with and do not follow the deterministic relation between sex-gender-sexuality (Butler, 1990). Nevertheless, many sorts of identities fail to follow those norms of intelligibility, and ‘appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain’ (Butler, 1990: 24). This kitsch process of production of simple, unified, homogenous, and true signs and symbols is a process to construct gendered and sexualized human subjects; making a person appear in his/her/hir degree of ‘adjustment’ to discursive norms ‘good’ or not. O’Shea (2018, 2020) demonstrates this in hir autoethnography about being a non-binary person in a heteronormative, binary, and cisnormative society who tries to adjust hir life according to these norms. Living in cisnormative and heterosexual hegemonic gender norms O’Shea livability is foreclosed through regulatory binary practices that act trying to produce coherent identities and truths about gender (Moulin de Souza and Parker, 2022).

**Conclusion**

The ontology of organization has an immediate application to the object and field of Organization Studies. In this sense, the realist definition of organization as an entity restricts the scope of Organization Studies to the analysis of entities, as well as to the work that occurs within and between
these entities. However, Cooper (1986/2023a) queers this ontology by developing a non-essentialist ontology of organization to understand and conceptualize organizing, highlighting its connection with the construction of human beings. Cooper problematizes the meaning of organization, offering other ways to understand what it means to organize and be organized, queering its ontology.

Consequently, there is a complex connection between the knowledge (discourse) produced about organization and organizing (Clegg et al., 2005). Organization Studies is itself a form of organizing, and one that often does not interrogate its own suppositions. Cluley and Parker (2023) do something like this when analyzing the Frankfurt School to understand how our thinking is organized, clarifying that the production of critical ideas or texts is an outcome of organizing practices. A non-essentialist concept of Organization Studies can also be seen, for example, in the works of Vachhani and Pullen (2019) analyzing new forms of feminist organizing developed for social movements; Parker (2017) studying cranes to comprehend the organization and its multiplicities and relations; and Kerr et al. (2022) conducting a comparative analysis of the political organizing of populism.

Beyond that, considering that for Cooper (1986/2023a) the greatest task for organizational researchers is to understand how human beings are constructed as subjects, then these power apparatuses should be the main goal of organizational analysis. Identities are world-making and one of the fundamental power apparatuses that produce what we are as subjects, working as a social marker that organizes our human experience (Brown, 2019; Collinson, 2003). In this sense, not only is gender identity an organization, but so are other sorts of identities too. Social class, sex, race, religion, and age are identities that should be comprehended as organizations, among others. Identities establish and produce what we are as human beings in the world through the repetition of norms that circulate within a discourse. Organizations are not just entities, but social power apparatuses that operate as world-making technologies in constructing what we are. It is not necessary to develop a study about identities in workplaces for the research to belong to the field of Organization Studies. Any study related to identities is a study about organization because social identities are organizations themselves, disrupting the taken-for-granted essentialist view.
that organizations are things that produce material goods and services and that Organization Studies is restricted to studying these entities.

This establishes the construction of the social world as the main object of analysis of Organization Studies, queering its limits. In this sense, the study of indigenous (Carpenter and McMurchy-Pilkington, 2008; Love, 2019), political (Huddy, 2001; Kerr et al., 2022; Laclau, 1994), and gender (Ke, 2021; Varshney, 2022; Whitfield et al., 2021) identities belong to the field of Organization Studies too. What characterizes identities as a field of Organization Studies is not the place where they are studied, but the signs and symbols that they produce in their discursive micro-ordering process that shapes our identities, orienting us towards ourselves, and forging us as subjects (Chia, 2003). Identities, as Cooper might say, are an anthropomorphic kitsch process of reality construction.

references


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