Conditions for Critical Performativity in a Polycontextural Society

Knudsen, Morten

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Morten Knudsen

Abstract. This paper argues that practice, not science, decides the performativity of science. The argument is inspired by Austin's question of what it is that gives language its performative force. What are the conditions which connect sentences to certain effects? Advancing this question from the level of sentences to a societal level, and taking inspiration from the failure of Marxist notions of the relation between theory and practice, the paper suggests thinking critical performativity under the conditions of differentiation. This idea is qualified by means of Niklas Luhmann and his theory of a functionally differentiated – or polycontextural - society. Functional differentiation and polycontexturality mean that systems cannot communicate with each other; there is no real transfer of scientific knowledge into practice. Unhappy performativity is the rule. Based on this insight the paper discusses elements of a critical research strategy – under polycontextural conditions - and four guidelines for a critical science are suggested.

Keywords: critical management studies, critical performativity, critical theory, theory and practice, Luhmann, systems theory, functional, polycontexturality, polycontextural society, science.

Morten Knudsen
Copenhagen Business School
mk.ioa@cbs.dk

INTRODUCTION

The notion of critical performativity is a new take on a classical issue within critical theory, namely the relation between theory and practice. Critical theory (including critical management studies (CMS)) and related social scientific traditions with a critical self-description have a dual desire in that they want to encompass science (theory) and more than science (practice). Following the ethos of Marx' XI Thesis on Feuerbach, such traditions aim to interpret the world AND change it. That CMS has problems bridging theory and practice is regularly acknowledged, both by proponents and critics (Adler et al., 2006; Alvesson et al., 2009; Clegg, Courpasson & Philips, 2006; King, 2015; Voronov, 2008). The notion of critical performativity is a novel attempt to bridge the split between theory and practice.

Here, I wish to develop the notion of critical performativity further by focusing on what Austin called the *conditions* for happy performativity. With inspiration from classical Marxist studies I will put forward the suggestion to relate the discussion of the conditions for performativity to a theory of society. Dominating theories of society are today theories of differentiation. Therefore, my questions revolve around the conditions for critical performativity in a differentiated society – what can critical performativity be under these conditions? Drawing on Niklas Luhmann's theory of society, I

argue that practice determines how it observes theoretical observations of practice. This has a series of consequences. Firstly, it makes it clear that self-descriptions like 'critical' and 'radical' are only loosely coupled to the practical effects of theory. Secondly, the focus is displaced from science to practice when it comes to critique. This means that we should not only focus on the characteristics of critical theory, but also on the criticability of the social systems we criticize. What becomes crucial is the ability of the systems criticized to observe and react on the critique.

By thus offering a redescription of the relation between theory and practice the aim of the paper is to open up new questions which may help in guiding a critical research programme which takes into account the current relationship between theory and practice.

The paper is structured as follows: Firstly I suggest advancing the discussions of critical performativity by supplementing the literature on critical performativity with a discussion of the conditions for critical performativity which focuses on scientific communication (instead of on researchers) and which seeks its inspiration in theories of society, instead of in cases. Secondly, I take up Austin's question of what it is that gives language its performative force. What are the conditions connecting sentences with certain effects? Advancing this question from the level of sentences to a societal level I suggest to think performativity under the conditions of differentiation. Thirdly, I qualify this idea by means of Niklas Luhmann's theory of a functionally differentiated – or polycontextural - society. Based on this insight the paper discusses elements of a critical research strategy – under polycontextural conditions - and four guidelines for a critical science are suggested.

PERSPECTIVES ON CRITICAL PERFORMATIVITY

Various scholars within the social sciences, ranging from the disciplines of gender studies (Butler, 1990) and economic sociology (Callon, 1998, 2007, 2010; MacKenzie & Millo, 2003; Mackenzie, Muniesa & Siu 2007) to strategy (Guérard et al., 2013) and organization and management theory (Gond et al., 2015), have picked up Austin's concept of performativity. Performativity has become a way to think about effects without thinking along the lines of classic causality (Butler, 2010: 147). Inspired by, but also departing from, this analytical use of the performativity-term Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman transform the concept into a programmatic concept (Alvesson & Spicer 2012; Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman, 2009). They do not want to *study* performativity; they want their own studies to *be* performative. A logical consequence of the turn toward performativity is to conclude that CMS can also have performative effects on what it describes.

The argument is that CMS should seek to become *more* performative: "For us, critical performativity involves active and subversive intervention into managerial discourses and practices" (Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman, 2009: 538). The intervention can – it is assumed – be aided by a more affirmative and pragmatic approach to management practices and discourses. Researchers should both come to meet the managers, their discourses and challenges, as well as question widely accepted assumptions, and aim to minimise domination (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012: 376). The initial formulations focus on tactics (affirmation, care, pragmatism, engagement with potentialities and a normative orientation) through which the subversive interventions can be achieved.

Since Alvesson, Spicer and Kärreman launched the idea of critical performativity (CP) it has been related to empirical studies (King, 2015; Leca et.al. 2014; Roscoe & Chillas 2014) as well as to suggestions for further development (Wickert & Schaefer, 2015). In Cabantous et. al (2016) and Fleming and Subhabrata (2016) we find the most comprehensive critique of CP. Cabantous et al. argue that subjects, including managers, are constituted through discourse (209): 'performativity is about the constitution of subjects and not only about what is discursively performed by specific subjects'(2016: 209). Instead of the more close encounters with managers and their practices as suggested by Spicer et al., Cabantous et al. claim that it is an imperative to insert critical discourses into the general ways of thinking about organizations in the wider culture (210).

Fleming and Subhabrata (2016) are also sceptical towards the suggested focus on managers. They claim that Spicer et al. are too optimistic in their idea of the power of language when it comes to attaining emancipatory organizational change (2016: 257). Fleming and Subhabrata 'feel there is a degree of misplaced optimism in the recommendations, especially concerning discursive speech acts.'(268). Referring to the strategies proposed by Spicer et al. they state that: "..we are concerned that the conceptualizations of performativity proposed lack a realistic appreciation of the accumulated social forces guiding organizational behavior in these institutionalized contexts, including the profit motive, shareholder value, cost externalization, means-ends efficiency and so forth. (…). It is these conditions, we argue that need to be taken into consideration when assessing the impact of CMS scholarship.'(263). Their basic argument is, thus, that an 'utterance can only be performative on the basis of a broader institutional setting(…)'(264). Today, the 'broader institutional setting' does not make the acceptance of critical ideas likely – according to Fleming and Subhabrata.

While Fleming and Subhabrata understand the lack of conditions for critical performativity as given fact, Cabantous et al. and Spicer et al. share – beneath the polemical debate – the idea that the political/critical task is to *create* the conditions for performativity. Spicer et al. express it the following way: "In sum, critical ideas don't become performative on their own. They require a felicitous context. Often this needs to be constructed through a significant amount of mobilization work. This involves engaging disgruntled elites, bringing together slack resources, creating forums for micro-mobilization and framing ideas in a way that resonates with a broader public."(Spicer et al. 2016: 240). Cabantous et al. may recommend different tactics (focusing on discourses instead of actors), but the basic idea that we should change the 'contexts' or conditions for performativity can be understood as parallel, as they claim that we should make "fissures in the discourses and norms that govern the constitution of organizations and organizational practices, thus changing the conditions of possibility for being and becoming organizational subjects."(2016: 210).

Both Cabantous et al. and Spicer et al. seem to think that the conditions of possibility, which make performatives work, can be constructed by an intentional scientific (Cabantous et al.) and social movement (Spicer et al.). This can, of course, be attempted. But it should be noticed that such an attempt cannot be instigated from some position outside society. Instead, the scientific attempt to be political, to constitute new narratives, or to create movements for change, is always already embedded in society – that is, in pre-existing contexts or discourses. The

notion of the voluntarily created discourse/felicitous context should, I think, be supplemented with a more sociologically informed analysis of the pre-existing conditions for performativity. To understand the conditions for performativity (including the attempts to create contexts for performativity), we need a theory of society – including a theory of how science is also part of society.

'Critical performativity' is in my view a title of a research programme with political ambitions. Until now the papers discussing such a research programme have mainly sought inspiration in performativity theory (with Austin, Butler and Callon as central figures), case studies (Cabantous et al., 2015; Leca et al., 2014; King, 2015; Roscoe & Chillas, 2014; Alvesson & Spicer, 2012), and social movement theory (Spicer et al. 2016). Inspired by classical Marxist studies I suggest supplementing these sources of inspiration with theories of society. While acknowledging that we can learn much regarding the interplay between science and practice from case studies I also think that we need a theory of society in order to understand what Austin called 'conditions for happy performatives'.

King and Learmonth investigate how critical scholars can practice what they teach (2015). Similar Grima (2011) Wickert and Schaefer (2015) and King (2015) tend to focus on the practice of the researchers. My suggestion is to supplement this approach by replacing the distinction between researcher and practitioner by the distinction between scientific communication (or theory in the broad sense) and practice. We are researchers because we take part in scientific communication (as we produce analyses, papers, knowledge, theory) and organizational practitioners (including managers) are practitioners because they take part in organizational communication. I therefore suggest focusing on the communication rather than the persons to which the communication can be ascribed. The question is therefore how (critical) scientific communication may impact non-scientific communication. Instead of asking how researchers can intervene in management practice the question becomes how scientific communication may impact organizational communication.

The ambition of this paper thus is to reflect on the societal conditions for critical performativity. As the question of conditions of performativity has largely been left out of the debates about critical performativity I shall by way of introduction clarify the problem to be dealt with by a brief reference to Austin and Lukács. Austin helps us understand the basic problem regarding the '*conditions* of performativity'. Lukács is a good illustration of how the basic problem has been reflected in Marxist discussions of the relation between theory and practice. After this development of the problem which I think is in need of clarification I present Niklas Luhmann's theory of a functionally differentiated society as one possible frame for reflecting the context for critical performativity.

THE SOURCE OF THE FORCE (OF LANGUAGE)

The notion of critical performativity involves intention, decisions and ambitions concerning certain effects. Spicer et al. write, for instance, "Performativity is not bad in itself. The problem is to carefully decide what kind of performativity we want" (2009: 554). In 2012, Alvesson and Spicer state that, "The concept of critical performativity therefore aims to combine intellectual stimulation through radical questioning with an ambition to use

discourse in such a way that has an impact, both in terms of emancipatory effect and practical organizational work" (2012: 376).

These ideas of 'ambitions', 'intentions', 'aims' and 'decisions of wanted performativity' raises the question what constitutes the performative force of language (Austin, 1976: 148ff; Culler, 1997: 104). The basic question is why certain utterances have certain effects. Intentions cannot (alone) explain why certain statements have certain effects. The uttering of the words is not the only thing necessary for an act to have been performed (Austin, 1976: 8). Austin therefore investigates the 'conditions for happy performatives'. Conditions for happy performatives are ones that must be satisfied if the utterance is not to be unhappy and the act a failure. Austin outlines six rules that must be met for a smooth or happy functioning of a performative. The first rule is:

> (A.1) There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances… (B. 1) The procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and (B.2) completely (Austin, 1976: 14 f.).

According to Austin the effect of an utterance thus depends on the existence of accepted conventional procedures. Compared with Austin's initial analysis of performativity we can see, that we must supplement Spicer et al.'s emphasis on tactics with an analysis of the conditions determining the fate of the utterances of the critical researchers, an analysis of the relation between research and practice. Also a softer concept of performativity looking for less concrete and specific effects of scientific discourse will need an understanding of the conditions which connect scientific and non-scientific communication.

Austin developed his concept of performativity in relation to statements in specific situations. Discussing the relationship between theory and practice in more general terms presupposes that we re-think these 'conventional procedures'. This raises the question of how we, at societal and organizational levels (and not at the level of singular utterances), conceptualize the conditions that provide the performative force of language. Is there, at a societal level, something equivalent to Austin's idea of conventions which give the language its performative force?

It is worthwhile to go back in the history of ideas to get a better understanding of the problem. The discussion of the relation between theory and practice is, of course, not a new discussion in relation to critical theory. Especially in Marxist traditions is has been intensely debated. I shall briefly describe Lukács' idea of 'the practical essence of theory' as he states the problem in a clear way – and fails in a way from which we can learn today.

THE PRACTICAL ESSENCE OF THEORY

In 1919 the Hungarian man of letters, Marxist and revolutionary Georg Lukács discussed 'the practical essence of theory', that is those features of theory which convert it into a 'vehicle of revolution'. The basic characteristic of Marxist theory is, according to Lukács, that it is a revolutionary theory – that is a theory which becomes united with practice. Lukács' claims a) that theory and practice are separate but have the potentiality to become one and b) that the role of theory in relationship to practice is to come up with the true self-description of the proletariat, who, by means of this description, will revolutionize history. Theory becomes united with practice when it lives up to its function as "self-knowledge of reality" (Lukács, 1988: 81).

The notion of 'the practical essence of theory' can be paralleled to Austin's notion of 'conditions of happy performativity' as it points at the conditions which connect utterance and effect or theory and practice. Austin talks about conventional procedures while Lukács talks about 'those features and definitions both of the theory and the ways of gripping the masses which convert the theory, the dialectical method, into a vehicle of revolution'. They are both aware that connectivity (between utterance and effect or between theory and practice) presupposes certain conditions. The condition of possibility for the unity of theory and practice is that class-consciousness and future communism are already latently present in the given capitalistic society. Or as Marx put it in his younger years, the critique believes that "*die Welt längst den Traum von einer Sache besitzt, von der sie nur das Bewusstsein besitzen muss, um sie wirklich zu besitzen*" (1976: 346)[1].

What we can take from Lukács is the idea that the critical aspect of theory lies in its practical effects, in its performativity. We can furthermore learn that we must have a theory of society in order to understand the relation between theory and practice. Lukács saw capitalism and its class structure as the condition which gives the theory its performative force as it makes a unity of theory and practice possible. His theory of society was based on an assumption of the proletariat developing one common consciousness – being the self-knowledge of reality. This assumption is no longer convincing. We have, as Adorno stated, the proletariat as an economic category, but not as the subject with the historical mission to become a new self-aware humanity (Adorno, 1979). In this sense we can learn from Lukács' failure not to think the relation between theory and practice as a potential unity. Habermas' theory of the public sphere and communicative rationality is the latest serious attempt to formulate a theory of society as a potentially self-conscious unity (1976, 1988 and 1989: 415ff.). Today the dominating theories of society are not theories of unity but theories of differentiation – different discursive formations (Foucault, 2013), different kinds of fields (Bourdieu, 1998), different orders of worth (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) or different social systems (Luhmann, 2012/13).

If we have societal differentiation as starting point it has consequences for how we can conceive of conditions of performativity. We should avoid figures which (often implicitly) draw on ideas of unity of theory and practice. When Cabantous et al. (2015) for instance claim that 'A major

1. "It will then become evident that the world has long dreamed of possessing something of which it has only to be conscious in order to possess it in reality."(http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_09.htm, retrieved 30 September 2015).

task of a political organizational theory of performativity is therefore the development of a new way of speaking about organizations that can circulate throughout culture…"(2016: 207). I cannot avoid hearing this as a reminiscence of the dream of a unity of theory and practice. With societal differentiation as a point of departure we have, instead, to think of critical performativity in ways which do not implicitly presuppose an idea of unity between theory and practice. I shall unfold that by means of Luhmann's theory of differentiation.

With systems theory as its basis, the next section will ask the question: what are the conditions for performativity in a differentiated society?

THEORY/PRACTICE UNDER POLYCONTEXTURAL CONDITIONS

Analysing the relation between theory and practice in the framework of a theory of society leaves it open which theory to choose. In this paper I have chosen to use Luhmann. While Luhmann – following his dispute with Habermas in 1971 (Habermas & Luhmann, 1990) – by many critical theoreticians was regarded as a conservative thinker there has, as demonstrated by the recent publication of two anthologies, in Germany been an increasing awareness that Luhmann's theory contains valuable resources for critical analysis (Amstutz & Fischer-Lescano, 2013; Scherr, 2015). For an early reading of Luhmann as a critical theoretician see also (Breuer 1987).

Luhmann's (2012/13) theory of differentiation represents one of his major sociological contributions and is at the centre of his theory of society. In this framework, functional differentiation means that society is differentiated in operationally closed, autonomous communicative systems. The most prominent function systems are law, politics, economy, education, science, art, religion, love, medicine and the mass media. Functional differentiation should not be understood as a division of labour in the Durkheim sense, i.e. as unities specialised in specific tasks in the frames of a societal unit and with common benefits as a result (Borch, 2011: 89). Instead, Luhmann's analyses of function systems are closer to Foucault's (1973) analysis of the medical gaze. Function systems are specific perspectives on the world, specific observations and various constructions of reality.

Luhmann captures the epistemological dimension of societal differentiation in the term polycontexturality. 'Polycontexturality' stems from the philosopher Gothard Günther and his attempt to develop a polyvalent logic (Günther 1962, 1979, 1991). 'Contexture' should not be confused with context, but denotes a bivalently structured area (something is either true or false, for instance). In Luhmann's sociological interpretation of Günthers concept polycontexturality means 'that society develops numerous binary codes and programmes which depend on these' (Luhmann, 1998: 666, own translation). Polycontexturality in the systems theoretical interpretation is not merely a set of epistemological assumptions according to which formally equal possibilities of different observations exist (Krause 1996, p. 143), but claims that society itself has become polycontextural with the emergence of functional differentiation. A polycontextural society is a society that observes itself and its environment in different ways based on different binary codes. Polycontexturality implies the simultaneous

existence of different communicative codes, which in turn have different evaluative principles and different value systems. Polycontexturality is radical perspectivism in which the perspectives observe each other and relate to each other but also distance themselves to each other (Knudsen & Vogd, 2015b). The different codes observe and depend on each other but without a common denominator on whose basis they can be compared – there are no hierarchical relations between the different observations. The arrangements of the observations are heter¬archical. This does not mean, however, that they are equal in the sense of equal importance or influence, but differences in degrees of domination need explanation, since they do not simply exist as a natural condition.

This description of society has consequences for how the relationship between theory and practice, science and other systems can be understood. Functional differentiation and polycontexturality mean that systems cannot communicate with each other; there is no real translation of meaning or transfer of scientific knowledge into practice. Austin investigated the conditions that must be fulfilled for an utterance to have the effect intended. In the framework of systems theory, the point would be that different social systems have different conditions of acceptability. If it is generally the rule that the conventions in relation to scientific communication are not the same as the conventions for other social systems then unhappy performativity is also generally the rule. We generally have unhappy utterances, performative failures or what Teubner calls "productive misunderstandings" (2000: 408ff) between the different systems. With no hierarchical relation between the different observations, critique loses its authority but not its relevance. There are no common structures which give scientific utterances (theories) a force when it comes to other function systems.

The presence of what Austin calls conditions for happy performatives is restricted to the inside of a system – and even here, communication is seldom of such a tightly coupled nature. Contingency is the rule.

We can clarify the points made above by zooming in on the systems theoretical concept of communication. The systems theoretical concept of communication is constructed in a way which does not essentialize communicative elements and meaning. A communicative element acquires its meaning in a network of recursively connected communicative elements. It does not have an essential meaning. The difference that a communication makes for ensuing communications is not determined by the focal communication itself but by the other communications (Seidl, 2009: 136). Thus, the same meaning cannot be transported from one context to the other, from one system to the other. We have what is called operational closure: One system cannot operate, that is, communicate, within another system's boundaries. What is, for instance, the meaning of the utterance: 'I do (sc. take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife' (Austin, 1976: 5)? A systems theoretical interpretation of Austin's example would say that it depends on the observer and thus that the performativity also depends on the observer. For the legal system it has one meaning, for the religious system another, and for the tax authorities a third meaning.

If the meaning of the statements depends on the context (and the context is boundless, as stated by Culler (2007: 128) in his reading of Derrida's reading of Austin), then it is impossible to control the effects of

signification or the force of discourse (2007: 128). Luhmann's anti-essential concept of meaning puts distinctions like critical/apologetic, critical/instrumental, normative/descriptive into question. We can state that one can *talk* about critical performativity and intervention, but one cannot *decide* to be critical and performative, to intervene or not to intervene. Self-descriptions such as 'critical' or 'radical' have limited consequences in themselves. The critics may observe their critical studies as radical and rebellious, while others may observe them as an inspiration for business.

SCIENCE AND ITS PERFORMANCE

We can have a closer look at the relationship between science and its environment based on the theoretical premises presented above. The disintegration and recombination done by science is specialised in the production of new scientific knowledge (Luhmann, 1995). Only seldom is this of interest in societal situations. The problem of societal relevance is thus not only restricted to critical theories (Van de Ven, 2007). Further we cannot understand the spread of scientific knowledge in extra-scientific contexts as a logically secured knowledge transfer. Only in science itself might scientific logic be binding. "Practice" (understood as systems outside science) can pick and choose useful elements, but does not have to buy the whole description. Knowledge is not spread or translated because it is logically necessary or true. The scientific system closes around the function to produce new types of knowledge and cannot control which kind of performance the fulfilment of its function may be to other systems. The more the development of scientific knowledge depends on internal scientific interdependencies the more improbable it is that the scientific communication is temporally correlated with processes in its environment (Luhmann 2009: 378). The function system closes around itself. 'Critical performativity' and related discussions about 'rigour and relevance'or 'engaged scholarship'can be seen as a reaction against this.

Luhmann suggests calling the quality that knowledge gets when it is observed by another system "performance". Thus, science has more than just one kind of performance (Luhmann, 1998: 636 ff). A political system observes knowledge as potential arguments in political struggles; an educational system observes it as something that improves one's chances of life (Luhmann, 2002: 98), economic systems observe knowledge as potential product elements, while an organizational system is oriented towards decisions and thus observes knowledge as possible premises for decision making (Luhmann, 2000a). In other words, different systems observe knowledge differently. Knowledge should not be essentialized.

Kieser and Leiner (2009) have systematically gathered experiences in relation to action research and 'mode 2' research when it comes to combining theory and practice. On the basis of an empirical study of collaborative research projects, they conclude that "We do not know of any publications that contain jointly produced *research* output describing *research results* rather than processes and difficulties of collaboration" (Kieser and Leiner 2009: 527). The communication tends to tip to one side, which means collaborative *research* between researchers and practitioners have not been documented – according to Kieser and Leiner. Even if scientists and practitioners cooperate, they construct problems, data and solutions in different ways according to their different self-referential systems.

Based on the systems theoretical concept of communication and the characterisation of modern society as polycontextual, we can state that performativity understood as predictable and controllable relations between scientific utterances and effects outside science is improbable. The importance of the observer when it comes to the meaning of the (critical) analyses makes it fundamentally uncontrollable how intended critical analyses are perceived and used. The observers decide the critique, not the critics.

What we have looks like a paradox. Under polycontextual conditions, the practical essence of theory is not decided by theory itself but by practice. If we, as suggested by Lukács, see the critical aspect of critical theory in its practical effects and if this effect is decided by practice, then we cannot with certainty distinguish between critical and uncritical performativity. The lack of predictability and certainty should not, however, make us abstain from having a critical ambition. The fact that there are no clear, conventional procedures connecting utterance and effect in the relationship between science and practice does not mean that science cannot be performative. The question is what a critical research strategy can look like under polycontextual conditions. We need strategies exactly because we do not know the destiny of our research. The strategies aiming at performativity should take it seriously that scientific communication and 'practice' is differentiated and that the observer's use decides how scientific communication is perceived.
The next section is a reflection on some of the elements of a critical research strategy.

CRITICAL RESEARCH STRATEGIES UNDER POLYCONTEXTURAL CONDITIONS

The use of the knowledge produced by critical scientists is contingent and uncertain. This means that there are no fixed recipes, and we cannot pinpoint *the* best way to enhance the influence of critical analyses. There is no logical position from which we can decide whether one research program will have a 'stronger' or 'better' effect than another program. What we can do is to experiment with different research strategies and to discuss, compare, and learn from our experiences. The ideas and strategies related to 'critical performativity' must be evaluated by their effects, both in terms of practical changes and in terms of the production of interesting knowledge. When Fleming and Subhabrata claim that Spicer et al. are too optimistic, when it comes to the emancipatory power of language, then this critique is most forcefully disproved by acting the strategy and afterwards reporting on the experiences. Likewise when it comes to the suggestions made by Fleming and Subhabrata themselves: act it out and let us hear about the experiences.

In a polycontextural society, science cannot decide how it is observed by others. What scientists can do, however, is to let their own practice be informed by a description of how it may be observed in practice. It can develop its notion of critical performativity in close dialogue with its own analyses of the present. It can make its strategies a little less arbitrary by relating them to a theory of its object. It can also reflect on the question whom we want our knowledge to be a performance for. That is: who do we see as the potential subject for practical action?

WHO IS THE SUBJECT?

If practice decides the practical essence of theory then the practice-side, that is, the addressee for the critique, should be taken into consideration when reflecting on the research strategy. The question regarding the recipient or the subject of the critique is also at the core of Fleming's and Subhabrata's critique of the notion of critical performativity. They question the privileging, by Spicer et al. (2009), of managers as agents of change (Fleming and Subhabrata 2016: 270). Instead they point to wider public forums, like social and environmental activists, the unemployed workforce, and union officials, as alternative audiences.

If we generalize the discussion about the subject, we can distinguish between a critique which identifies the subject and the object of the critique (which we might call the therapeutic-political strategy) – and a critique that criticizes something in order to produce knowledge for someone else (which we can call the supportive-political strategy). Let me outline the two possible directions for a critical strategy.

Fleming and Subhabrata support the supportive-political strategy as they understand knowledge as something that can be used in political struggles. The performance of the supportive-political strategy would be knowledge that can be used in political struggles. In this political position, we also find post-Marxist traditions (for instance Laclau and Mouffe 2001) attempting to make the governed intellectually independent of the governors (cf. Gramsci's prison book no. 10, Gramsci 2011). Traditional left wing subjects who can be supported are social movements, unions, and left wing parties. In a CMS context, students, (including MBA, MPA and similar students), could also be seen as potential political actors. We need to ask what it would mean for the scientific system, if it wanted to be observed as a performance for political actors. The notion of the parasite may be helpful in developing a picture of this position. The challenge would be to become a good host for the subjects, which can be seen as parasites. To be a good host means to stay different from, but relevant to, the parasites. If scientific communication is too political in itself, it may become less relevant for political actors. Its ability to be a relevant host, i.e., a supplier of knowledge for political actors, also depends on it being recognisable and accepted as scientific knowledge.

Spicer et al. (2009) and Alvesson and Spicer (2012) seem to be close to the first position (the therapeutic-political strategy) as they have management as their envisioned audience for their critique of management. Management can be criticized in order to make it aware how its present behavior is contingent and produces non-intended side effects. Knowledge is here produced in order to make someone change themselves. The advantage of the therapy model is that it makes it clear that knowledge is not distributed like a thing or a package. The concept of therapy points to the context of knowledge. What is understood in the therapy model is always understood based on already existing structures. This also means that the client, or observer, represents the limit of the knowledge. If the client does not perceive a problem, then the therapist has to start somewhere else. Every observation, description and intervention depends on the observers – the client and the therapist.

In the therapy model, we can distinguish between different performances. The creation of *contingency* is one kind of performance. Genealogies, discourse analyses, and similar types of studies can demonstrate that what is taken for granted, necessary and natural is contingent. This might make the system able to transgress itself and its own habits. Therapy offers structures other than the ones that have been used so far. Another performance is to help the system *observe new and old problem/solution* relations. Basic structures are not challenged, but smarter solutions to well-known problems are made visible in the therapy. A third therapeutic performance relates to *unforeseen side effects*. Scientific observation can observe something besides the client-system itself – and, based on that, ask the question: Is this really what you want to achieve or to make happen? Science of course can also direct this question at itself in a self-therapeutic process.

The choice of intended subject for a 'critical performativity' research strategy is a contingent choice – and it is not necessarily a choice with real effects. Maybe the supportive-political knowledge intended for the unions are used by the managers in a therapeutic way in order to clarify and strengthen their own strategy. Maybe the therapeutic-political strategy involuntarily supports the management-side in a political struggle. The different strategies also have different costs. The therapeutic-political strategy for instance limits the potential critique to the perspectives of the criticized. The critique may be narrowed down in order to get a hearing.

Whether one works with the supportive-political strategy or the therapeutic-political strategy will depend on the situation. Below, I have chosen to unfold some aspects of the therapeutic-political strategy. A therapeutic relation is intricate, as it involves the question of how knowledge can be opened to critique and someone be made to revise his or her knowledge against his/her self-perception (Wesche, 2013: 204). I shall reflect on this problem by means of the term 'criticability'.

CRITICABILITY

If the effect of theory, outside scientific communication, is decided by practice and not by the intentions of the theoreticians – then the observations of, and reactions to, critique come into focus. Fuchs' (2013) focus on social systems 'criticability' ('Kritikabilität' in the German original) is consistent with this idea, that is, that their ability to be disturbed by critique is crucial. From this perspective, we should not ask what the conditions of possibility of critique are, but what are the conditions of criticability of social systems.

Fuchs argues that function systems like economy and politics are outside the reach of critical communication. Society and its function systems are 'uncriticable', not because the modern capitalistic economy is perfect and without problems, but because it does not have a structure which makes it able to perceive and react to critique. Function systems like economy and politics are communicatively unreachable as they do not have an address; they are un-adressable (Kette &Tacke 2015: 249). Furthermore, they are not hierarchically ordered and do not have binding goals or similar ideas of a unity which could define what they ought to be, but are not yet (Fuchs 2013: 106). Contrary to function systems, Fuchs suggests that organizations can be disturbed by means of critique. They are not indifferent to information, they can, also legally, be held

accountable for their actions; they have self-descriptions according to which the actions of the systems can be measured. Organizations can be ascribed communication both as authors and addressees. They have members who can speak on behalf of the organization (the managers), and the members are, via their membership roles, expected to act in accordance with the system. Siemens had to explain the use of dangerous materials in the windmill production, VW had to excuse for cheating with the emission tests. But no one has ever heard the economic system apologize for increasing global inequalities.

If we follow Fuchs in his argument that organizations should be granted a central position in a critical project, then we should have a closer look at the relationship between organizations and polycontexturality. While Luhmann himself tempted to link different organizations to specific function systems (schools to the pedagogical function systems, churches to the religious system, parties to the political system, universities to the scientific system etc (Luhmann 2000a, 200b: 228, 2000c: 226), more recent approaches claim that the relationship between organizations and function systems has become increasingly indeterminate and contingent. The widespread talk in public organizations about the 'core task' can be seen as a symptom of the loss of such a core task given by a simple organizational belonging to a function system. Different headlines for this diagnosis have been suggested: polyphonic organizations (Andersen 2003), heterophonic organizations (Andersen and Born 2007; Andersen and Thygesen 2007), multifunctional organizations (Roth 2014), the multimedial organization (Roth et al. 2010). Polyphony refers to the phenomenon that organisational systems may be linked to several function systems at once, which each have different types of communication. Polyphony can be seen as a special case of a polycontextural arrangement, namely as a situation where the distinction in which an organizational decision is to be framed is undetermined: is it a medical decision, a financial decision, a legal decision or a political one? The diagnosis of polyphony has recent years inspired (but also been developed in) different empirical studies (for examples: Knudsen, 2015; Knudsen and Vogd 2015a; Roth et al. 2010).

The implications of the diagnosis of 'polyphonic organizations', when it comes to a critical research strategy are not yet clear. Polyphonic organizations are not committed to one (function-specific) code, they can observe in the frames of several distinctions. *On the one hand*, this means that they can have a broader span of resonance, they can be receptive to different kinds of communication, including scientific communication. The focus on evidence and evidence-based practice (medicine, politics, management, policing etc) can be seen as instrumental attempts to connect organizational decisions to scientific communication in order to improve efficiency. But as organizations thus make themselves open to perturbations from scientific communication – they may experience difficulties in distinguishing between purely instrumental and more critical communication.

On the other hand, polyphony also means that organizations are less bound to the norms of specific function systems. Therefore, they may tend to develop a more instrumental rationality in the sense of Horkheimer and Adorno (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002). For instance ideals of 'Bildung' and knowledge as a value in itself seem currently to be rather unimportant in the self-description of the universities. Instead, the universities focus on

external funding, rankings, and students. This instrumentalization is not a natural law, though. Roth has launched the idea of reprogramming organizations, following the idea that there are no natural or given hierarchy between the codes structuring the communication. This also means that the economical code does not have to be the dominating code (Roth 2014, 2016). This idea opens a line of interesting questions regarding the codes, their mutual relation, how communication shifts from one code to another etc. We also need to ask which force might realize such changes. I shall not pursue that further here. Instead, I return to the question of a critical research strategy and discuss what it might look like – taking into consideration that 'under polycontextural conditions the practical essence of theory is not decided by theory but by practice'.

By way of a conclusion, I shall suggest four displacements which can inform the discussions of a critical therapeutic-political research strategy aiming at polyphonic organizations. The suggestions should not be confused with a comprehensive research program, but may be seen as guidelines which may increase the likeliness that critical research can have perturbative effects also outside science. Of course the guidelines can be supplemented – not least based on empirical experience.

FROM TENSIONS TO BLINDNESS

Since Marx, critical theory has placed tensions and contradictions in a central position. This immanent or dialectical critique searches for contradictions (tensions, inconsistencies) as the contradictions are seen as the condition of possibility of change. Marx' basic theory of crisis is a theory of contradictions and inconsistencies, which have the potential to develop into something new. The tensions can, for instance, be between actions and norms (the ideology) of a group. But what we know today is that the world does not have to add up in order to work. Today, it seems that the change-potentiality of tensions has been overrated. Contradictions and loose couplings can be found in all organizations (Meyer and Rowan 1977, Kieserling 2015). The complexity of social systems means that they cannot normally be organized in a non-conflictual way. Sometimes the tensions are a way for the organization to work – as has been convincingly described by Brunsson's concept of 'organized hypocrisy' (Brunsson 2002). This problematizes the search for tensions as a critical change-oriented research-strategy. In a systems theoretical tradition an alternative to tensions could be blindness. What a critical research programme can aim for is to release observational possibilities, which are not limited by the perspectives of the organizations (Luhmann 1994). Instead of connecting the potential for change to tensions, the potential can be connected to the enlightenment of blind spots. The critical guideline could be: Do not tell them where it does not add up, but tell them what they cannot see.

FROM NORMATIVE SIMPLIFICATIONS TO CRITIQUE OF SIMPLIFICATIONS

Critical theory can operate with an immanent critique (as mentioned above), but it can also operate with a critique based on norms – with emancipation as a central norm (Huault et al. 2012). Kieserling claims that such normative perspectives have a tendency to be abstract as they disregard other important interests (2015: 147). From norms follow no precise guidelines regarding how to organize complex, polyphonic social relationships. This also means that a normatively justified critique runs a

risk of being turned down as it is perceived as unrealistic or irrelevant. An alternative to a more simplified normative critique is a critique of simplifications. It seems that polyphonic organizations tend to be inferior to their own complexity as when they describe themselves as goal-driven, rational and hierarchical organizations with a core task. Simplifications can make actions possible but they can also lead to the exclusion of perspectives, considerations, dynamics, and groups, which are important for different reasons. The critical guideline could be: Do not tell them what they ought to do, tell them what they are doing but do not know they are doing.

FROM CRITIQUE TO SELF-CRITIQUE

In terms of performance, a critical science programme can ask how it can facilitate the *self-critique* going on already in the systems. Polycontexturality does not imply that critique is not possible. On the contrary, there is a large amount of critique going on in the many different social systems. As French pragmatic sociology (or the sociology of critique) argues, critique is already going on out there (Boltanski, 2011; Boltanski & Honneth, 2013; Boltanski & Thevenot, 1999, 2006; Celikates, 2009; Jagd, 2011; see also Messner, Clegg & Kornberger, 2008). How can we increase the capacity for self-intervention by offering alternative self-descriptions? The critical motto guideline could be: Do not criticize them - facilitate their self-critique.

FROM INTERVENTIONS TO PERTURBATIONS

The talk of 'active and subversive intervention' (Spicer et al. 2009: 538) underestimates the fact that the observer's use decides how scientific communication is perceived. The 'intervention' is decided not by the intervenor but by the intervened. Instead of fantasies of powerful interventions, we might be better off describing our own critical activities as irritations or perturbations. What we can aim for is not interventions, but perturbations. Knowledge is, as mentioned above, observed as a performance by non-scientific systems. But knowledge may also have the character of irritation or perturbation to non-scientific systems. Perturbation is the quality that knowledge may have for social systems, when it does not support the internal operations of a system (as performance does), but none the less makes a difference to the system. Perturbation is something from the environment that disturbs the system and may make it act. Perturbation is always also self-perturbation (the body, for instance, creates itchiness as its way of reacting to a mosquito bite). The reaction is decided by the system not determined by the perturbation. An oil company may find Greenpeace irritating, but Greenpeace cannot determine how the company reacts to its campaigns. For a critical research programme, the question is how to perturb in a way which does not just affirm and innovate the logics of practice. How can we pose impractical and yet perturbing questions to practice? The critical guideline could be: do not think you can intervene – but hope you can irritate.

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Morten Knudsen is an Associate Professor at Department of Organization, Copenhagen Business School. His research interests focus on public sector reforms, politics of (dis)connectivity, social production of ignorance, the relations between management education and organizational practice, limits of steering and methodological issues in organization and management research. His work has been published in Soziale Systeme, Organization Studies, and Management Learning among others. Together with Werner Vogd he has recently published the edited volume *Systems Theory and the Sociology of Health and Illness : Observing Healthcare*, Routledge 2015.