

# From Antagonists to Allies?

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# From antagonists to allies?

## Exploring the critical performativity of alternative organization

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*On a cold January night two fairly junior scholars are wandering the streets of Copenhagen. They are in high spirits, having just left the bar where they had a few drinks after a day of workshop discussions at the local Business School. Not entirely sure about the route back to their hotel but with a faint idea of direction, they are engrossed in a conversation and barely paying attention to their surroundings. Their topic is the possibility of research for 'real' progressive change. How can critically minded scholars have an impact on organization? They disagree on the finer points of the issue, but agree on the main task of critical scholarship: to address concerns and problems of people in organizations and inspire sustainable ecological, social and economic practices. The devil lies in the details, it seems. Is it possible to make managers aware of problematic organizational practices and change these practices simply by talking with them about their ways of managing? What, indeed, would the critical scholar have to say to managers? And if entering such conversations, would it not be all-too-easy to become corrupted by the existing logics of the organization? One of the hotel-bound scholars seems to be in doubt about all of this. On a fatalistic note (perhaps a consequence of a few beers circulating in the blood stream) he proffers that there may be no cure and*

*critical scholars fight a lost cause. Can we be critical and constructive? What are the options? The other academic is more hopeful and committed. Yes, there is a way forward; we just have to chip away and keep the ideas coming, especially with regards to alternative forms of organizing. Arguments fly back and forth, until a faint neon sign appears in the rainy, foggy night: one hotel has been reached, at least (and at last). It puts an abrupt but perhaps timely end to the conversation... yet the discussions continued with similar intensity and more voices during the next day back at the Business School and eventually informed the content of the papers in this special issue.*

All the contributions collected here share the same fundamental aspiration: to challenge mainstream organizing in and through empirical investigations of 'actually existing' alternatives and thus to conceptualize and develop critical performativity within and of (alternative) organization. The papers draw inspiration from questions such as: how do principles of alternative organizing play out in practice? How can we substantiate existing conceptions of alternative organizing? And how might practices of alternative organizing inform mainstream management and/or the critical study thereof? Accordingly, the ambition of the special issue is to showcase a collection of articles that put into question current organizational norms and push beyond established disciplinary boundaries whilst recognizing the potential limitations and possible dark sides of alternative organizations themselves.

To situate the papers, we will briefly recap the current status of the discussions on critical performativity and alternative organization, respectively, and point out their points of convergence. We end this introduction to the special issue with a walk-through of the papers collected here,

noting their various engagements with the question as to whether and how organizational scholarship may become performative while maintaining its critical edge through engagement with alternative forms of organizing.

### **The notion of performativity**

*How to Do Things with Words* (1975) is the title of a book based on a lecture series given by J.L. Austin in the 1950s in which he proposes a distinction between *constative* utterances, which describe a state of affairs and are true or false, and another class of utterances, which are not true or false and which actually perform the action to which they refer: *performative* utterances (Culler 2007). The latter do not simply report on reality but perform an institutionalized act that has consequences for actors' behaviour and sensemaking. For example, uttering the words: "you are fired" is a performative speech act. These words change individual behaviour and sensemaking with regards to employment. Importantly, however, performative utterances need to meet conditions of *felicity*, which means they should have institutional power to effect behaviour. If the speaker is not the employer of the recipient of the statement, it becomes inconsequential. Moreover, the intention of the speaker needs to be sincere, and the statement not meant to be a threat, a joke or in some other respect split the semantic message of the statement from its social function. If these conditions are met, the speech act is performative – it does what it says.

The discussion of performativity, then, brings to the fore the world-making dimension of language, as the title of Austin's seminal work makes clear. It relates to the general problem of acts that create something new, in the socio-economic, political as well as literary sphere, and as such it has inspired a broad array of research studies. However, interpretation and application of the concept of

performativity has differed among academics, who continue to debate such issues as whether constatives may also be performative, the exact character of felicity conditions, the interrelations of particular utterances and social norms as well as the potential impact of bodies and (other) materialities on the performativity of an utterance (Gond et al. 2016; MacKenzie, Muniesa and Siu 2007). These and similar issues have been particularly taxing for critical researchers who are concerned with the issue of whether and how scholarly critique can have practical impact.

### **Critical Management Studies and critical performativity**

Some of the early roots of organizational theory include an in-built critical perspective on the undesirable effects of the operation of large-scale organizations. This is, perhaps, best encapsulated in Weber's famous dictum that rationalization and efficiency will produce "specialists without spirit and sensualists without heart" [*"Fachmenschen ohne Geist, Genußmenschen ohne Herz"*] (Weber 1905, 109). However, as the field of Organization and Management Studies (OMS) developed, it became predominantly concerned with finding and advocating solutions for the most efficient and rational ways of organizing, without explicitly accounting for any negative collateral effects. Critical voices continued to simmer under the surface but were not really able to challenge the dominant functionalist and efficiency-oriented perspectives that marked the mainstream consensus of the newly minted field.

This changed in 1970s and 1980s, when a renewed interest in critical organizational scholarship emerged around the instalment of a series of conferences and the publication of a number of influential texts (e.g. Alvesson and Willmott 1992; Mumby and Putnam 1992; Willmott 1993). On that basis, various critical perspectives slowly took hold among a larger group of OMS scholars,

fuelling a desire to expose and change exploitative business practices, forms of inequality, systematic injustice and ecological irresponsibility. Gradually, this eclectic movement of critical scholars became established as Critical Management Studies (CMS) (Adler, Forbes and Willmott 2007; Alvesson, Bridgman and Willmott 2009).

The critical spirit of CMS is not only directed outwards at organizational practices, but also inwards at the field of OMS, generally speaking, and at the role of CMS within it. Thus, the origins, intentions, and authenticity as well as the branding and impact of CMS have been intensely debated issues (Butler and Spoelstra 2014; Hotho and Pollard 2007; Rowlinson and Hassard 2011). In an influential attempt to delimit the field of CMS, Fournier and Grey (2000) sparked one such heated debate among CMS scholars. In their paper they, *inter alia*, argue that CMS, in contrast to mainstream theory, should not accept the role and function of management as 'given', but rather focus on its deconstruction and, therefore, refuse to "contribute to the improvement of managerial effectiveness" (Fournier and Grey 2000, 17). Indeed, Lyotard (1984, 88) had already pointed explicitly to the link between performativity and "the new current sense of efficiency measured according to input/output ratio" typical of modern capitalism. CMS, Grey and Fournier conclude, should counter this 'sense of efficiency' and, hence, produce knowledge with a non- or even anti-performative intent.

Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman (2009), however, took issue with this edict and argue that, on the contrary, critical scholars should seek engagement with organizations and not shy away from producing performative knowledge, albeit a critical version of it. Coining the concept of 'critical performativity', they suggest that subversive interventions of critical researchers in organizations

carry transformative potentials. In fact, active engagement is a prerequisite of one of the central tenets of CMS, which is to promote tangible and progressive change. With their notion of critical performativity, Spicer et al. laid bare a deep-rooted anxiety. What is it that CMS should do? Is it critique or engaged practice? Or both combined? Should CMS be antagonistic or (cautiously) accommodating?

These fundamental questions have sparked a series of replies, with various evaluations as to whether and how criticality and performativity can be combined. At the level of empirical engagement, Wickert and Schaefer (2015) outline conditions and practices of an active dialogue with managers that may trigger awareness of adverse business practices and possibilities for (incremental) transformation. And at the level of theory, Hartmann (2015) suggests the idea of a 'subversive engagement' with the canon of established mainstream theory, which might enable critical researchers to detect transformative potential in established mainstream theory and/or to fertilize mainstream functionalist theory with alternative insights.

Less constructive readings of the empirical and theoretical potential of critical performativity also abound. Cabantous et al. (2016), for example, take issue with how the 'performativity' of 'critical performativity' is conceptualized, arguing that in the attempt to build a strong case for critical intervention, socio-material entanglements of performativity in relations of power have been neglected. Spoelstra and Svensson (2016) deride the willingness to not only critique, but also transform organizational and managerial norms and practices as 'the happy end of Critical Management Studies'. Bristow and Robinson (2018, 644) elaborate this point, raising the issue of 'unintended performativity' and suggesting that "even if all we ever do is disseminate ideas, these

ideas have an impact and a fate of their own in the hands of other people around us, often to the detriment rather than benefit of others.” Conversely, Fleming and Banerjee (2016) express their concern that the concept of critical performativity builds on an overly optimistic account of what language may do, suggesting that active engagement with managers will most likely lead to failed performativities; meaning, engagement is co-opted by management in the name of transformative change while active resistance is suppressed. At best, then, engagement leads to ‘decaf resistance’ (Contu 2008) with a semblance of performativity, but without the critical kick.

In sum, the vivid scholarly debate on critical performativity revolves around the seeming impasse of the critique-practice divide. It seeks answers to the question of “how substantial critique can be turned into transformative redefinitions of organizations?” (Alvesson and Ashcraft 2009, 65, see also Hotho and Pollard 2007). The tendency being for CMS to turn its critical gaze unto itself to suggest that this is an impossible task.

Thus, Tourish (2019) argues, is the very case of the failure of CMS to fulfil its promise of making a practical difference and challenging the reigning orthodoxy. CMS scholars tend to choose a comfortable distance from the realities they think need to be radically changed. “CMS”, Tourish (2019, 247) contends, “sometimes resembles a firefighter who spots an inferno but decides to write a report on it rather than help to extinguish the flames.” All too often, CMS focuses on its own internal discussions of the theoretical and practical potentials and limitations of seeking the ever-elusive integration of critique and practice. The critical performativity debate being a particularly pertinent case in ivory tower point.



Of course, such 'meta-performative' debates are not particular to CMS. As the literary theorist Culler (2007, 164) points out, "this is the basic problem of the performative – the question, yet to be resolved, of whether there can be a harmonious fusion of doing and saying or whether there is an ineluctable tension here." Thus, one may wonder: can there be a way forward that does not lead us back into the web of our own discussions? Here, further consideration of the decaf metaphor might point in new directions. 'Decaf' pretends to be coffee, but could never compete with a double espresso. Similarly, the metaphor suggests, 'decaf performativities' can only hope to offer watered down forms of critique. But the metaphor might be shifted to focus on substitutes to coffee that change the substance while preserving the effect. Just as we might get our caffeine kicks from alternative sources like green tea, guarana or yerba mate, maybe we could practice critical performativity in and through our engagement with alternatives to mainstream forms of organization and management?

### **Introducing alternative organization**

In a recent contribution to the debate, Parker and Parker (2017) advocate this solution. When one explores alternative organizations, they argue, the inhibiting dichotomy may be turned into a constructive duality as the critical scholar can make allies in the field. Exploring alternative forms of organization, then, could provide CMS with "...a resource that would allow for a more substantial challenge to the idea of business as usual" (Parker and Parker 2017, 19). Rather than engage with traditional organizations and risk being served (and/or serving) one's critique decaffeinated, critical scholars may turn to other empirical sites in which engagement will not hamper, but instead strengthen the potential of scholarship to promote progressive change.

But what might such alternative sites of engagement look like? What are the alternative modes of organization, which critical scholars might rely on as allies in a common quest for progressive social change? In answering these questions, we must begin by recognizing the basic relationality of the concept: 'alternative to what?' The alternative always stands in relation to a dominant order, against which it is defined (Cheney and Munshi 2017). At its most general level, we may identify this order as 'corporate capitalism' or 'mainstream business', with its production of economic, human and environmental disaster (Parker et al. 2014). However, any number of alternatives to this order are equally – or even more – undesirable than the current state of affairs (De Cock, Just and Husted 2019). And the question of 'alternative to what' must, therefore, immediately be accompanied with that of 'what alternative?' Turning to alternative organizations, then, require of critical scholars that they become unapologetically and productively normative; pointing not only at all the things that are wrong, but also at how they might be better. As Povinelli (2011, 189) puts it, "every critical social analysis must have a normative horizon against which progressive action can orient itself... To say, 'not this,' does not tell us 'what then?' or 'where then?'"

Turning to the task of defining alternative organizations in positive terms, Parker et al. (2014) establish three minimal qualifying criteria: autonomy, solidarity and responsibility. Alternative organizations, they contend, should support the well-being of individuals, collectives, and the planet in principle and practice. That is, alternative organizations should not only treat the three criteria as societal ends to be promoted, but must also incorporate them in their own modes of operation, as integral to the organization.

As Parker and Parker (2017) point out, this raises a further question of degree: 'how alternative?' Zanoni (2020) poses this question in terms of a 'post-' and 'anti-capitalist' project, arguing that while the point of alternative organization studies is, indeed, to study actually existing alternatives, we must be vigilant of capitalism's ability to compartmentalize and/or co-opt such alternatives, making them either ineffective or, indeed, placing them at the service of the capitalist project. Capitalism being the societal order that is able to assimilate and thrive on its own critiques (Chiapello, 2013), alternative organizations, in Zanoni's conceptualization, must be actively positioned outside and against it.

Against such advocacy of radical alternatives, Parker and Parker (2017) make the case for inclusivity. Hence, they illustrate their theoretical stance with an empirical study of a sustainable investments company that, clearly, is far from revolutionary yet, they argue, holds potential for changing the financial system from within. By engaging with such 'less than perfect' alternatives, organizational scholarship may become performative and remain critical in a dual sense: it can provide constructive criticism of mainstream corporate capitalism by offering viable alternatives, and it can push the boundaries of these alternatives, challenging the organizations with which they engage to become ever better.

While Zanoni suggests that alternatives must prefigure societal change by example, practicing the change they want to see in the world at the level of their own organization (see also Maeckelbergh 2011), Parker and Parker strike a more evolutionary chord. 'Change from within', they argue, can be incremental – at the organizational as well as the societal level. But can inclusivity go too far? As Bristow and Robinson (2018) warn, we should choose our allies carefully so as to avoid the unwitting

reproduction of existing power structures and elites. They suggest a marginalist perspective where “our natural allies should be those on the margins of every sphere, organization, location and walk of life” (Bristow and Robinson 2018, 644) and exhort us “to ensure that our configuration of allies remains dynamic and contingent to reflect the changing power relations and to resist the temptation to settle permanently into familiar networks, drifting together towards more comfortable positions” (645).

Another point to consider is whether all three dimensions of alternativity must be promoted equally. While all are necessary for the definition of an alternative organization, different strands of alternative organization scholarship have attended to them differently. Thus, autonomy is at the centre of studies that focus critical attention on the alienating effects of work under conditions of capitalism and suggest how alternative organizations might offer spaces for more meaningful expressions of individual identities in relation to the collective (Reedy, King and Coupland 2016; Husted 2018; Kociatkiewicz, Kostera and Parker 2020). The dimension of solidarity is often highlighted in studies that zoom in on the organizational form of alternatives; for example, cooperatives, collectives, communes as well as modes of commoning and other arrangements of ownership and/or participation that empower organizational members (Webb and Cheney 2014; Pitzer et al. 2014; Meyer and Hudon 2017; Pansera and Rizzi 2020). Similarly, studies that are concerned with the societal goals of economic justice and redistribution for equality also tend to foreground solidarity (Safri 2014; Daskalaki, Fotaki and Sotiropoulou 2018; Peredo and McLean 2019). Finally, the notion of responsibility clearly invokes the extant literature on corporate capitalism’s implication in the global climate crisis (for a recent overview, see Ergene, Banerjee and Hoffman 2020), meaning studies that focus on alternative organization for a livable future tend to

prioritize this dimension, placing (economic) solidarity and/or (human) autonomy in the service of (environmental) responsibility (Cato 2014; Elzenbaumer and Franz 2018; Korchagina 2018; Skoglund and Böhm 2019).

The richness and diversity of alternative organizations as an empirical field, raises hopes that critical scholars may find many allies with whom to join forces in the pursuit of progressive societal change. Furthermore, it indicates that focusing on alternatives may also provide opportunities for reconceptualizing organization as such. In exploring such opportunities, critical performativity may be a useful starting point, but it might also prove to be too general to adequately explain and promote the alternative one deals with. Thus, realizing the performative potential of (critical) engagement with alternative organizations might necessitate dialogue with other theories and concepts.

Such dialogue has, for example, been sought by Just, Muhr and Burø (2017) who offer Malabou's concept of plasticity as an inroad to studying the interrelations of performativity and affect in the alternative organizational setting of an NGO dedicated to promoting the recognition of minority ethnic LGBT+ folk. Parker and Parker (2017) also imply the usefulness of conceptual additions to the framework of critical performativity when introducing Mouffe's notion of 'agonism' as a means of highlighting the productivity of performative tensions. Underlying these two examples are broader concerns with the relationships between performativity and materiality and performativity and power, respectively.

The papers included in this special issue, all explore these and/or other aspects of how critical performativity and alternative organization may cross-fertilize each other, seeking critical vantage points for OMS outside of the usual empirical and theoretical haunts.

### **Introducing the contributions to the special issue**

Kavanagh address the theme of normativity head-on, suggesting we should bring normativity rather than performativity to the centre of our discussions. In so doing, he uses the analogy of the theatre critic who is expected to make normative statements on a particular production, explicating ‘the good, the bad and the ugly’. The alternative organization with which Kavanagh engages is the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), which runs on the work of volunteers and is very much organized along non-market ways (which can also bring its own problems). He explicitly applies the three principles of alternativity as outlined above – individual autonomy, collective solidarity, responsibility for the future – to the GAA and also finds an innovative way of staging the interaction between academics and practitioners, thus reflexively mapping and traversing what are often far too solid academic boundaries. In doing so, he introduces a delightful textual conceit (which we will not give away here), ending the article on an Irish insult directed at us academics: *Agus níl puinn eolais agaibh faoin iomáint!* Surely a first for this journal.

For Cinque and Nyberg, a theatre production takes very much centre stage, not just as a metaphor for the critic, but as the empirical setting of their analysis, as they explore the radical potential of the staging of a play by Pier Paolo Pasolini. Historically, the notion of performativity has been linked to the theatre through the work of Goffman and Bateson, who used the idea of the theatre to think about how social structures are embodied and negotiated and how social relations emerge in the

enactment of roles (Culler 2007). Conceptually Cinque and Nyberg build on the work of Arendt and Rancière in order to explore the political potential of theatre. Yet, what they find in practice points to the difficulties in developing radical alternatives to an established order. Whilst the actors involved expressed disappointment with the stasis of Italian culture in general, they also conveyed a sense of aversion towards the critical project to which they voluntarily and (initially) enthusiastically took part. The authors carefully unpack how the project ended up undermining its own radical potential and reinforcing the institutionalized practices of Italian theatre: “the actors showed little joy; rather, they showed tiredness, irritability and exhaustion, forgetting about their original purpose.” In a final twist, Cinque and Nyberg use their case as a mirror to deflect light on our own struggles in the CMS community, when trying to enact radical critical performativity.

Husted returns to the idea of normativity in his piece, focusing on the specific enactment of neo-normative control within a minor political party in rural England. His is a search for ‘allies’ that operate within the formal political system but nevertheless offer a local alternative to it. The party, Independents for Frome, has no official leadership nor rank-and-file and espouses an “ideology that emphasizes dialogue and participation as moral virtues *per se*.” In contrast to much of the literature on neo-normative control, Husted sees it as potentially liberating in this specific instance, whilst not over-romanticizing this particular collective. He points, for example, to the ever looming “tyranny of structurelessness” and highlights unresolved gender issues in the group. Yet, this is a case study that shows the potential of alternative parties as useful allies in effectuating social change.

Burø and Koefoed turn their attention to another rural scene; a village in Denmark, where they discover “an empirical phenomenon that forced us to think: the repeated enunciation of something

called 'spirit'," which seems to live through acts of what the authors term 'commoning'. They offer multiple and rich examples of what this means in and for the villagers, but one is worth singling out: egg-buying. This seemingly inconsequential practice, leads the authors to what Benjamin (2002, 461) called "the crystal of the total event", where they "find trust in the responsibility of the communal others as solidarity in action". Theirs is a study of community self-organizing without any visible core or leadership, yet containing regulatory principles that evoke curiosity, openness and tolerance, thus becoming a means to inspire further forms of alternative organizing.

In the final article, Christensen documents his engagement with Roskilde Festival, offering two different readings. Arguing that in order to discern and appreciate the alternative practices on offer, we have to replace what, with reference to Sedgwick, he calls *paranoid criticality* with a *reparative methodology*, Christensen shows how he, as an initially paranoid reader, became reparatively positioned and thus was able to generate a different kind of affective knowledge. He emphasizes that reparative readings are not superior, but simply "allow us to do new, different, alternative things to organization(s) through the knowledge we produce". And is this not precisely the point of critical performativity? Reparative readings replace a hermeneutics of suspicion with one of wonder, which "can be a cause of astonishment or admiration but also a feeling of doubt or uncertainty, meaning wonder should not be understood straightforwardly as a positive affect." Christensen carefully reflects on his own fieldwork experiences during which he became acutely aware how his initial critical stance turned out to be incapacitating. Through careful case vignettes he shows how he repurposed suspicion towards his own beliefs and convictions, choosing a much more open engagement with the Festival. As he concludes, "instead of doing fieldwork to uncover



what we find problematic, we may engage with organization(s) we find admirable and do things that we love”.

Indeed, if there is one thing that binds all five contributions to this special issue together, it is this sense of love and admiration (despite some ever present shadows) the authors have for their cases. What they offer is certainly not ‘decaf performativity’ but – to push the metaphor – rather a rich array of stimulating substances, which upon entering the bloodstream will quicken the pulse and provide a much-needed lift of the spirits, a sliver of hope with which to cut through these dark times.

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