Introduction to the special issue
The evolving debate about critical performativity

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The notion of "performativity" (and the idea of the "performative") has recently gained traction in the organizational studies field (Cabantous & Gond, 2011; Callon, 2007; Huault & Rainelli, 2009). Some authors have even talked about a "performative turn" (Muniesa, 2014, 2017). Broadly speaking, the notion of performativity points to the idea that discourses (e.g. speech acts, theories) are not merely describing reality but contribute to enact the reality they describe. It is indeed used by scholars from different research traditions, ranging from Actor-Network theory (Callon, 2007), critical management studies (Spicer, Alvesson, & Kärreman, 2009) and gender studies (Butler, 1997).

An emerging strand of organization theory has sought to bring the ideas of "critics" and "performativity" together, around the concept of *critical performativity*. Spicer et al. (2009), originally coined the concept of critical performativity against the backdrop of a generalized form of critique of Critical Management Studies. They argue that the explicit non-performativity of CMS makes it impotent to promote social change. Instead, CMS satisfy itself with asking questions about the 'ends' of any social formation at a safe distance. This might stand in stark opposition to attempts to face the practical demands of facilitating emancipatory social change. As a consequence, CMS tends to have an excessively narrow conception of emerging social problems it can deal with. It often focuses on strictly organizational issues and seldom explores broader societal issues. For instance, CMS has had little to say about the animal rights, militarization and war, (neo)colonialism, anti-globalization movements, the financial crisis, global warming, the rise of the populist alt-right and so on.

In this way, CMS can be seen as parasitical to management. It is dependent on the very thing it critiques to provide them with an identity. The result is that the position from which they operate is always already given and pre-defined by the object of critique. Consider what would happen to critical management studies if management disappeared? CMS may also promote a cynical distance to the understanding of organizations because of its character as a largely intellectualist enterprise. It promotes the enlightening of organizations by shedding the light of reason onto previously shadowy worlds of power relations. While this progressive process of enlightening certainly has an emancipatory potential, it often progresses through the activity of the mind rather than socially visible action. The result may be a cynical world where we can see all too well the various relations of domination, but we continue to be embroiled in them nonetheless, rather than being prompted to act. This gives rise to a cynical consciousness whereby we intellectually engage with a particular phenomenon, but we remained practically trapped and almost dependent on this phenomenon.

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Spicer et al. (2009) makes the argument that CMS needs to find a way to promote activism and advocates the idea of critical performativity: that CMS in the future needs to find a way to embrace performativity in socially responsible and progressive ways. They suggest critical performativity involves "active and subversive interventions into management discourse and practice" (Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman, 2009: 538). They propose some tactics through which this might be achieved such as affirmation, care, pragmatism, engagement with potentialities, and a normative orientation. For them, critical performativity offers a way of critically working with discourses of management towards progressive social change. Doing this, they claim, offers a way out of the pervasive cynicism and studied impracticality, which characterises so much of critical thought. It also offers a way of yoking the booming research agenda around performativity to a more critical and political agenda.

The notion of critical performativity has captured the imagination of scholars in the critical management studies community and has led to a growing debate and an expansion of testing the feasibility of the concept. One avenue of expansion has been the application of the concept of critical performativity to a range of sub-topics in the study of management and organisation. These include leadership (Crevani, Lindgren & Packendorff, 2010; Tourish, 2011; Alvesson & Spicer, 2012), diversity (Zanoni, Janssens, Benschop & Nkomo, 2010), human resource management (Jannsens & Steyaert, 2009; Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010), business ethics (Prasad & Mills, 2010), organizational change (Morgan & Spicer, 2009), projects (Daniel, Dainty & Brookes, 2013), financial theories (Marti & Scherer, 2015), management education (Huault & Perret, 2011) and academic conferences (Bell & King, 2010). Each of these papers opens up valuable ground by exploring how the concept of critical performativity might be used to make sense of existing organisational phenomena.

A second way the debate about critical performativity has advanced is through the empirical explorations of largely theoretical claims in this field. Often this has involved exploring alternative forms of organising. For instance, Paranque and Willmott (2014) looked at how the John Lewis partnership can be seen as a case of critical performativity which is based around the reformulation of governance structures which give employees more voice. Similarly, Neil Sutherland and colleagues (2014) examined how critical performativity plays out through anti-leadership discourse in autonomous social movements. In a study of the Brazilian co-operative movement, Leca, Gond & Barin-Cruz (2014) looked at how academics in Brazil's ideas had been put into practice through the development of co-operative organisations. Finally, Daniel King and Mark Learmonth (2015) follow the struggles involved in trying to maintain a critical sensibility while being an engaged manager. Each of these papers extends the debate about critical performativity by providing empirical substance.

A third way in which the debate about critical performativity has advanced is through the attempt to connect critical performativity with other theoretical trajectories. For instance, Alcadipani and Hassard (2010) consider how the conceptual vocabulary from actor network theory could be connected with the idea of critical performativity to provide a more durable and developed idea of performativity. Another elaboration can be found in the work of Cabantous and colleagues (2016) who have (re) connected debates about critical performativity with Judith Butler's evolving

ideas around the same concept. Each of these elaborations has provided a richer theoretical pallet for discussing issues around critical performativity. A third elaboration can be found in Spicer and colleagues (2016) extension of their idea which connects the concept of critical performativity with ideas from social movement theory to describe in more detail how ideas can be made performative. A final elaboration can be found in a recent paper by Paul Edwards (2017) who introduces concepts from industrial relations and critical realism to explore how concepts might become performative and influential or otherwise.

A fourth way in which the notion of critical performativity has been developed is through the development of supplementary concepts. Three ideas are particularly notable here. The first is 'subversive functionalism' (Hartmann, 2014) which points to the role functionalist ideas can potentially have in developing rather radical changes in organisation. The second is 'progressive performativity' (Wickert & Schaefer, 2015) which describes strategies which involved the stimulation of incremental rather than radical social change. The final supplementary concept of note is 'failed performativities' (Fleming & Banerjee, 2016) which describes attempts to make subversive interventions which end up having little or no real impact – or in some cases even backfiring.

A final way the debate about critical performativity has evolved is through criticism. In recent years, there have been vociferate interchanges between proponents of views around critical performativity (see Human Relations, 2016). One major issue to come out of this debate is how attempts to be performative may end up blunting the critical or radical intentions which the field of critical management studies is supposed to be built up (Butler, Delaney & Spoelstra, 2016). A second concern is that the concept of critical performativity is in some way exclusionary, favouring certain world views and theoretical conceptions over others (Cabantous, et al., 2016). The final question is whether ideas about critical performativity are political naïve and miss the difficulties involved in fundamentally changing capitalist enterprises (Banerjee & Fleming, 2016). Each of these criticisms helps to sharpen up and identify the limitations associated with debates about critical performativity.

LOOKING AHEAD

While the debate associated with critical performativity is rapidly evolving, there remains a number of vital important questions which need to be further explored. Perhaps the most pressing is with regards to the tactics associated with critical performativity, their effectiveness and empirical validity. Much of the debate around critical performativity has been theoretical and conceptual in scope. The articles in this body of work have suggested a range of tactical interventions and while there have been individual case studies of some attempts by individuals to undertake performative projects, there has been nothing in the way of systematically tracking the relatively effectiveness (or otherwise) of specific tactics of engagement in empirical contexts. By doing this, it might be possible to begin to sort out when critical performativity becomes failed performativity, when various degrees of radicalism or progressivism are most important, and key contextual cues for application of the tactics.

The second major open question is how attempts to make critical conceptions performative can be organised and scaled up. This involves shifting attention away from questions about how to engage the view of managers and others towards considering the organisational infrastructures which is actually needed for critical concepts to have some degree of political impact. To answer these questions, it is important to begin to learn from how other theories (which may not be particularly subversive) have been able to develop organisational infrastructure around them which has allowed them to be developed and propagated.

A third interesting future question to explore is the role which education might play in critical performativity. In particular, there is a question whether business schools should seek to educate their students in the ethos and tactics associated with critical performativity. If this is indeed appropriate, there is a larger question of how this might be possible, which pedagogical techniques might be useful and in what kind of settings. Underlying this is the deeper question of *how* critical theory (and not just critical theory) might be taught and developed in business schools.

A fourth issue is that role of alternative concepts such as counter performativity. This is the idea that concepts often can have a backfire effect – insofar as discussing and propagating ideas can easily make reality move away from what is described by a model. There is a fascinating question here about whether actively documenting these backfire effects is a central role of the critical theorists might play in documenting, or perhaps even helping to facilitate these 'counter performative' effects. In some ways, critical performativity acknowledges counter-performativity simply by acknowledging dialectics as a key dynamic. However, very little has been done to work out what this means conceptually and empirically, which again can be traced to the lack of empirical studies of critical performativity.

A final issue is the question about how critical theorists relate to emerging challenge to experts (Nichols, 2017). One of the fundamental strands in critical management studies has been a challenge to technocratic expertise. However, this very challenge seems to be at the center of the ideological position of the emerging 'alt right'. This has created a wider wave of 'anti-expertise' in political discourse. There is a deeper question here about what role critical theory might play here – whether it is to offer alternatives to this 'reactionary performativity' and continue to challenge technocratic expertise, but do it from a different – more progressive - direction. A second approach is to defend the role of expertise and evidence in the fact of increase public assaults. This would put critical management studies in a rather strange position of being defenders of forms of managerial expertise. Regardless, this issue put critical theory on notice on how to relate to the legacy of enlightenment and modernity. While CMS has a track record of being comfortable in engaging with postmodern critique, it is unlikely to be able to move past modernism while keeping its commitment to truth, critique and social progress.

PAPERS IN THIS VOLUME

The papers in this issue all engage in various degrees with the questions posed above. For example, Knudsen (this issue) critiques the intellectualist argument that science in itself is performative and argues that practice, not science, decides the performativity of science. Combining Niklas Luhmann's theory of a functionally differentiated – or polycontextural – society, and a critique of Marxism's failure to integrate theory and practice, the paper suggests that functional differentiation and polycontexturality mean that systems are inherently incapable to 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 suggests four guidelines or moves for critical research strategy under polycontextural conditions: from assumptions of tensions to assumptions of blindness, from normative simplifications to critique of simplifications, from critique to self-critique, and from interventions to perturbations.

Aggeri (this issue) argues that performativity does not consist in describing a reality considered to be already present. Rather, it is about understanding how reality is produced by deliberate interventions. As a consequence, the pragmatic conditions that allow performation processes to be constructed are key for understanding performativity. The paper situates the performation process in relation to older traditions of research on the instrumentation of management on the one hand, and the Foucauldian concepts of *dispositif* and governmentality on the other. Drawing on a longitudinal case of a car project, the paper analyzes the disalignments between management *dispositifs* – including managers' acts of language – and the operatives' elementary acts of language, as well as the negative effects of the former on the latter.

Reinhold (this issue) extends critical performativity by engaging with literature on organizational aesthetics. Drawing on an empirical analysis incidents were artists engage in a high pressure organizational setting, she shows how aesthetic intervention can be counter-performative: slowness, hesitation and confusion is introduced to a context of closure, pressure and discipline. Reinhold's perspective asks us to take an interest in what happens at the margins of the social fabric of organizations where organizational life meets other aspects of society. In this sense, art performances at organizational gatherings may have their awkward moments, but they also put poignant questions about the extraordinary qualities of ordinary organizational realities.

Finally, Küpers (this issue) demonstrates the usefulness of a phenomenological and relational approach for interpreting the interconnected processes of performance. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty perspective, the paper examines the constitutive roles of situated embodiment and inter-relational connections for performances. By considering the incorporated and inscribed modes of bodily and embodied experiences and expressive dimensions of performances, organisations are viewed as staged life-worlds for performances that are events embedded in pre-forming contexts.

CONCLUSION

This special issue offers a deepening and broadening of the debate around critical performativity. It asks questions about counter-performativity, the unfolding qualities of performation, the boundaries set on the performativity of science by practice, and the embodied phenomenology of performance, among other things. Arguably, critical performativity can be put to productive work to better understand the social world and how to engage with it in progressive ways. It certainly is a concept that tickles critical scholar's imagination. Having said that, there is a real need for more, deeper and broader empirical studies of critical performativity: of the effectiveness of tactics, of relevant heterotopias, of the potentials and limits of interventions and the development of a rich repertoire of contextualized best practices and key learnings. For further ideas on how to proceed in this direction, we point to Spicer et al. (2016) who provides guidelines and ideas in this matter, that yet have to be extensively tried and tested.

As a final world, we like to touch on a key difference between the interest in performativity in a general sense and critical performativity. While we find the interest in performativity more generally worthwhile, useful and relevant, there are key differences between critical performativity and performativity in general. As a consequence, we don't think that performativity in a general sense can substitute for or replace critical performativity. The main reason is because 'critical' is related to a particular stance toward society. At heart, critical performativity assumes that we are not stuck with the social world at hand. In contrast, performativity in a general sense has a more positive bent, in aiming to explain why practices, devices and interactions has certain performative effects. From critical performativity point of view, the social world as we know it is understood as a constructed through social processes and thus could have developed differently, and 'critical' in this context means to problematize the current state of affairs in society at large and in relation to particular cases, e.g. inequality, freedom and opportunity. Here, a critical understanding is understood as a reflection upon established ideas, ideologies and institutions, in order to encourage liberation or at least reduce repression.

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