A Performative Reading of *The Work of Communication*.

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The Work of Communication. Relational Perspectives on Working and Organizing in Contemporary Capitalism by Tim Kuhn, Karen Ashcraft, François Cooren, is a welcomed comprehensive and rigorous attempt at theorizing how communication 'works' in contemporary capitalism. In this essay, we review what we see as the contributions of this book – as organization scholars interested in performativity – and address the following question: *What does this book perform?*

Resituating communication in contemporary capitalism. Kuhn et al.' (2017) book first originality comes from its inscription within the analysis of the changing nature of work and the transformations of capitalism over the last century. Chapter 1 retraces the progressive weaving of 'working' and 'organizing', and synthesises how competing and complementary narratives about transformations of capitalist economies set a stage within which communicative dynamics and their analysis as relational and sociomaterial become relevant, and in need for further theorization. The authors explain how the very notion of working is nowadays radically challenged and transformed by interconnected trends, often captured through narratives about 'digitalization', 'financialization', 'dematerialization', 'increased inequalities', 'branding' or the 'blurring roles of stakeholders'.

The strength of this Chapter, beyond offering an up-to-date and engaging introduction to any course dedicated to the analysis of organizations or work history, lies in its clarification of the many underlying connections between trends usually discussed in different disciplines (sociology, communication studies) or sub-disciplines (marketing, management) yet rarely 'put together'. The authors carefully weave and evaluate critically these multiple narratives, drawing progressively a picture of the overall web of socio-material communications that forms the texture of working and organizing experiences. This new state of affair calls for the

development of an apparatus that can account for the 'relationality' inherent to our current performative and communicative form of capitalism.

Accounting for performativity scholarship. The second Chapter of the book is a most useful read for anyone who wants to understand what 'thinking relationally' means, and a comprehensive overview of various forms of performativity theorizing. The presentation of relationality is enlightening; the choice to focus on five premises, which are associated to various research traditions (e.g., relational sociology, actor-network theory, agential realism), enables the authors to outline the distinct features of relational ontologies in an accessible and relatively unified way that makes it accessible to most readers.

The overview of the four versions of performativity – that are presented as four approaches to relationality – is distinctive and adds value in several ways. Moving away from a chronological presentation, this section presents various versions of performativity that span across the social sciences (e.g., Butler, Callon, Barad), and at the same time, succeeds in establishing some overlooked or under-appreciated connections between them. The authors offer a quick yet convincing presentation of the debate, between Callon and Butler, over performativity 'misfire' and 'politics'. The way they explain Karen Barad's approach is limpid and will help organization scholars grasp the complexity of Barad's ideas as well as their potential for moving organizational scholarship forward. When reviewing organizational scholarship inspired by Barad, Kuhn et al. (2017) give prominence to the work of Orlikowski, but also refer to Nyberg's (2009) early study of call centres or Hultin and Mahring's (2017) recent contribution to sensemaking. Recent studies by Harding and colleagues (Harding et al., 2017; Ford et al., 2017), which provides a refreshing Baradian take on leadership and resistance, can be added to this list.

Last but not least, Kuhn et al.'s presentation nicely extends existing overviews of performativity theorizing (e.g., Gond et al., 2016; Loxley, 2007) by covering other

performative/relational research traditions, such as Actor-Network Theory. Most interestingly, they also bring into the picture a new recruit, Affect Theory, which considers the socio-materiality of emotions through the consideration of their role in meaning-making (sens-*ibility*) and bodily sensations (sens-*ability*) involved in all forms of communication. Overall, this Chapter will likely inspire organization scholars and give them the desire to mobilize relational thinking and performativity to investigate organizational phenomena.

Conforming, extending, and challenging performativity scholarship by theorizing relational communication. The rest of the book is dedicated to three versions of communicative relationality that the authors offer as a way to "transcend traditional conceptions of meaning and communication" (p. 67), and renew our "modes of (re)thinking and (re)making the world of working and organizing" (p. 29). Each version is outlined in Chapter 3 and then illustrated in a separate chapter.

The *first version* of communicative relationality, called "*Communication as relating/linking/connecting*", attempts at overcoming the traditional opposition between the transmission and interpretivist views on communication by insisting on the materiality of communication and retaining the notion that communication is a matter of co-construction. From this perspective, communication is a relational practice: communication between two entities (e.g., human beings) always involves a third material entity (such as a contract, a post-it, etc.), which makes a difference in the way the communication unfolds. These ideas are illustrated in Chapter 4, in which the authors follow the "becoming of an idea" and show "how its materialization is collaboratively negotiated and established" (p. 95). The repeated use of multiple terms to refer to the same idea (e.g., there is absolutely nothing to sustain/support/withstand its existence", p. 131) makes the text convoluted at times. Once this difficulty is overcome, the Chapter becomes a source of inspiration for performativity scholars, and especially for those eager to shed a refreshing light on the processes by which

theories from management, marketing, or strategy actualize in organizational practices and make a difference.

Three insights emerge from this version of communicative relationality. First, once translated to the context of theory performativity (e.g., replace "idea" by "theory" or "formula" in the Chapter), the vocabulary developed (e.g., concretization, solidification, completion) can enable performativity scholars to be truly *processual* in their study of theory performativity. Such a processual understanding can help avoid the pitfall of a ballistic view, where theory performativity is understood as the linear, almost causal, influence of a theory on a set of practices; it re-directs attention to the process by which an idea (or theory, or formula) passes from one form of materialization to another. A second insight relates to the notion of *test of solidity* and the idea of resistance to objections and obstacles. This idea has the potential to inform the debate over performativity misfire and politics. Finally, the Museomix story provides a vivid illustration of Barad's notion of agential cuts as it shows how cuts enable "certain configuration of beings" (p. 101) to happen. It also nicely illustrates how matter and meanings are inseparable, and how the accumulation of matters, or the solidification of something from a relatively abstract mode of existence (an idea, a formula) to a more concrete mode of existence (a device, a tool), is what allows the idea (formula, theory) to express itself and matter.

"*Communication as Writing the Trajectory of Practice*" – the second version of communicative relationality – aims at expanding Callon's analysis of the performativity of economics by taking into account Butler's (2010) critique according to which "the site of the political, and of the possibility of change, must be located inside the performative act itself." (Kuhn et al., 2017, p. 78). To do so, the authors build on Enersto Laclau's articulation theory, and specifically his concept of "nodal point", which allows them to better account for the constitution of relations that form sociomaterial "*agencements*" within which conflicts and

contradictions are inscribed. Such agencements are defined here after Callon "as both verb and noun simultaneously" and as "the site from and through which conjunctions of agencies become configured into (what is characterised as) an agent" (p. 78).

A fine-grained ethnographic analysis of an 'accelerator' of digital start-up, AmpVille based in Boulder, Colorado (Chapter 5) illustrates this 2nd version of communicative relationality, by bringing us at the core of the value-creation engine of contemporary capitalism; at the nexus of most of the trends described in Chapter 1. The Chapter documents how cohorts of entrepreneurs, together with their team's skills, visual representations of their business models and technological innovation, indeed operate as agencements that struggle to materialize in their daily practice and in the eyes of prospect investors the (intangible and prospect) value of the product (to be) developed by their start-up. Tracking empirically the contradictions and tensions underlying the constant configuring and reconfiguring of multiple activities by entrepreneurial teams, the authors show how such agencements, through a process of "individualization of possession", ultimately (re)produce "the entrepreneur as a cultural hero and overwhelmingly positive socioeconomic force fosters a conception that the individual is, and should be in charge" (p. 155). Importantly, the AmpVille case also highlights how precarious and hybrid is the elusive "product" of the start-up that involves not only discursive activities but also the constant organizing of multiple forms of materializations to substantiate and make tangible claims to current and future value. Although one can regret that the Chapter does not tease out and analyse all the deeply political implications of the fascinating tensions it highlights between multiple modes of valuations—paradoxically, entrepreneurs' desire for wealth is at odd with the industrial and projective worlds that shape most of the accelerator's activities—it provides to date the one of the most convincing empirical demonstrations that value is constituted through the ongoing accomplishment of sociomaterial practice.

The third version of communicative relationality is labelled "*Communication as Constitutive Transmission.*" Reinterpreting communication through an affect theory lens, the authors push the boundaries of current understandings of communication by deepening the analysis of emotions and the socio-materiality of language, reminding us that "meaning moves among us *materially*, for instance, through physical sense and objects", (p. 89), and that it is through such an "[*affectively*] charged transmission that meaning comes to *matter*" (p. 90). Accordingly, communication is constitutive because it is "*transmissive*", i.e., it is involved in a *trans*personal model of communication, which acknowledges that signs, symbols and meanings are *first and foremost felt*, as they sociomaterially pass from bodies to bodies. Chapter 6 illustrates these ideas through an analysis of "branding work" as part of the constitution of occupational identities. Here, the symbolic, material and affective dimensions of brands are given full consideration, through a definition of *branding* as "the activity of cultivating and harnessing affective relations of identity in order to yield desired harvests" (p. 160). Expanding on Ashcraft's (2013) breakthrough approach to occupational identity through the metaphor of the "glass slipper" (according to which occupations derive their identity from their associations with certain people rather than the other way round), affect theory is put to work to develop an ambitious and general theory of occupations as constituted through the affective socio-material dynamics of communication. The cases of airline pilots and academic writing are productively used as contexts to develop these insights, and to show how socio-materiality and affect theory can help overcome some limitations of the prior "glass slipper" metaphoric model of occupational identity (e.g., *separation* of human and material dimensions; prominent role granted to *discursive* struggles). The analysis, refocused on how affects constitute the work-body relation, redefines occupational identities as "affective economies" – association between entities resulting from affects – that generate economic value and are constantly transformed through

the branding work by which (specific types of) work become coherently branded. This Chapter thus offers a refreshing take on the socio-material transformation of occupational identity by focusing scholars' attention on the branding work by which some organizational occupations are constituted as relatively economically profitable and/or become segregated. This ambitious theory of the production of occupations could be interest to consumer consumption theory and organizational behavior scholars, and could advance analyses of sense-making and strategy.

Performing an organizational theory of capitalism as communicative and relational? *So, what does the book perform as whole, hence?* Certainly, it delivers an up-to-date theoretical account of working and organizing in contemporary capitalism grounded in a solid conceptual apparatus and three original versions of communicative relationality that are fully-fledged and well-illustrated across the book. The authors offer an alternative conceptual toolbox and insights to develop new studies of how communication is involved in the organization of consumption, production and transformation of contemporary capitalism. The book also delivers on its goal to transcend discursive-material dualisms, while reminding us of the methodological challenges inherent to such a mode of theorization. As a whole the sharp analyses provided here can advance and stimulate many of the co-occurring research agendas about performativity in organization theory (Gond et al., 2016), strategy (Cabantous, Gond, & Wright, 2018) or marketing (Cochoy, Trompette, & Araujo, 2016).

On can regret, however, that the three versions of communicative relationality are not more closely knighted together and connected to the issue of value production in order to fully theorize a 'performative and communicative analysis of contemporary capitalism' which so much needed according to the front Chapters. In addition, even though the front Chapters do a great job at pedagogically exposing the assumptions of the performativity program, non-initiated readers may struggle to grasp some developments of the later empirical Chapters

without any prior knowledge of practice theory, valuation studies, or occupational identity.

This precious book nevertheless, has three immense merits: it demonstrates the richness of

relational communication, it abounds with original conceptual and empirical insights that

could be developed in future studies, and, more importantly it provides the felicity conditions

and several key ingredients much needed to perform further a consolidated and extensive

alternative communicative-performative theory of capitalist functioning.

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