



Alternatively

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With their recent *The Dictionary of Alternatives*, Martin Parker, Valérie Fournier and Patrick Reedy (2007) attempt to show that “there are many alternatives to the way that many of us currently organize ourselves” (2007: ix). The dictionary, with entries such as ‘Atlantis’, ‘Robinson Crusoe’, ‘Ivan Illich’, and ‘Wikipedia’, seeks to remind us that there are many ways of organizing social life other than on the basis of and dictated by the kind of free market- or neoliberalism that reigns in large parts of the world. In other words, the dictionary attempts to delegitimize the notorious post-communist ‘There Is No Alternative’-logic of thinking,¹ nicely captured by Zygmunt Bauman:

‘our form of life’ has once and for all proved both its viability and its superiority over any other real or imaginable form, our mixture of individual freedom and consumer market has emerged as the necessary and sufficient, truly universal principle of social organization, there will be no more traumatic turns of history, indeed no history to speak of. For ‘our way of life’ the world has become a safe place. (...) From now on, there will be just more of the good things that are. (Bauman, 1991: 35)

Dismissed as obsolete and thus seemingly incommensurable with today’s prevailing or hegemonic ‘end of history logic’, alternatives nevertheless occupy a prominent place within it. As such, they have an appeal beyond the boundaries of critique or the position of marginality and their generation is not limited to only those who question or oppose neo-liberalism, contemporary capitalism or the status quo as such. For instance, by offering alternative paths to organizational success management gurus promise the kind of competitive edge that will bury the competition, usually keeping the belief in the superiority of the free market intact as well as keeping capitalism alive. As Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) show, these managerial innovative alternatives do change the form of contemporary capitalism (or at the very least the way capitalism is legitimized), perhaps more so than both defenders and opponents of TINA-thinking are willing to acknowledge.

We might also say that the production of alternatives lies at the heart of contemporary consumer capitalism. Only through the constant production of alternatives can capitalism realize the circulation of capital that is needed for its existence. The never-

1 The phrase ‘There Is No Alternative’ (also known as TINA) is usually attributed to Margaret Thatcher.

ending generation of alternatives is precisely that which drives the dynamic of the market. It is in this vein that propagators of free market economy establish the inferiority of what was long considered its main alternative, for example:

Shoppers in the former Soviet Union did not patronise retailers such as Moscow's GUM (State Department Store) because the 150 shops comprising Russia's largest department store offered the widest choices, highest quality and keenest prices. They did so because they had no alternative ... (Lewis and Bridger, 2000: 188)

Hence the logic behind the slogan 'There Is No Alternative' lies in the idea that the one feasible alternative left to us derives its supremacy over others precisely because of its superior capacity in generating alternatives *within its own system*. The viability of alternative social systems is, in other words, measured in terms of their capacity to create consumer choice. In this context the uneasy association of alterity with capitalism makes itself felt, namely because of the *conditions* under which its articulation and generation as such is presented: as a choice like so many others we make as consumers.

A certain caution towards an unwavering appreciation of the generation of alternatives is also well advised given the threat of commodification that permeates our (alternative) lives today. The business of alternatives seems to be very lucrative indeed, especially so in the culture and music industry where alternatives are anything but fixed. Their days are always numbered, and their alternative status, that is their status as an expression of our discontent with and disapproval of the status quo is ephemeral: alternative music, design, fashion, literature genres, political movements, philosophy, journals and magazines can easily be picked up by perceptive copywriters and brand managers, and drawn back into the circulation of consumer goods.

Academia should also be approached with a certain caution, for the practice of marginal writing, as discussed in the editorials of 7.2 and 7.4., at times coincides with the incessant search for alternatives. Writing from the margin can become a useful tool for the production of alternative research contributions, incarnated as 'the new' or 'the latest', qualifications so crucial, or so we have been taught, to constructing our academic careers. However, not only is the ephemeral alternative always on the verge of becoming the established, but given that mass academia always lurks behind the scenes, ready to get its hands on the brand-new alternative, alternative publications, as fuel for the academic publishing industry, also very easily turn into commodities.

In the social sciences we have already witnessed the growth and establishment of the enormous Foucault industry, and today figures such as Deleuze, Laclau and, recently Žižek are dangerously close to joining the rows of mass marketed and mass consumed alternative thinkers. The question is what this mass distribution and mass exploitation of for instance Žižek does to the alternative status of alternative organization studies. When do Žižek-references become mainstream and common sense in organization studies? When do they lose their alternative quality, and thus their critical edge: the potential for the break or difference they represent to actually make a difference. For, lest we forget, that is what is at stake here, not the pursuit of alternatives as an end in itself.

But now we have come full circle, and ended up where we started. While as a warning, the threat of commodification is real and as such should gear us up for action, in convincingly picturing it, we might end up feeling helpless and trapped instead. Consumer capitalism has become this terrifying machine in the face of which, as Frederic Jameson (2000: 192) points out about this kind of ‘winner loses’ predicament, “the impulses of revolt and social transformation are increasingly perceived as vain and trivial”, such that no one seriously considers alternatives to capitalism any longer. Thus, to make out commodification as this totalizing force is a process of abstraction that is not only politically paralyzing, but can even be construed as conformist, like any belief in ‘this is how things are’, like TINA.

One of the main tasks that critique has (to) set for itself is to counter political paralysis of any kind, construed by the right *and* left, by pointing at the false logic behind it, indeed, by means of the formulation and practice of alternative logics.

Before we discuss the contributions to this issue, which all deal with the problematic of alternatives in different ways, we will use this editorial to reflect briefly upon the concept of the alternative itself. We distinguish realistic alternatives from unrealistic alternatives.

Realistic Alternatives

In their most general sense, alternatives embody ‘that which is other’. They offer a way out of a present situation and open the door to and a way into another one, a promising as well as an alarming or unsettling thought. Insofar as we accept that the alternative is the outcome of a belief in that things can be otherwise, the shift of perspective – theoretical or ideological, if the distinction is meaningful at all – might be an important part of alteration (the act of producing alternatives). To see something alternatively entails seeing it from another or the other’s point of view.

The production of truth and common sense then becomes one of many attempts to pacify alternatives, to render them naïve, utopian or decoupled from reality (i.e. psychotic representations). Education, propaganda and news broadcasts (the distinctions are not always clear-cut here) are double-edged swords in this regard. These apparatuses, call them ideological if you like, have the potency to produce and distribute unquestionable Truths as well as questioning alternatives. Whether or not both of these potencies are realized is indeed open for discussion. In any event, the shift of perspective involved in the search for alternatives is more than anything else a certain break, a more or less stark one, with that which exists, with the truth that gives itself to us without questions asked.

One of the best-known versions of shifts of perspective is the *negation*. Arguably, negating the present, the current and common sense is the most violent (in the non-pejorative sense of the term) form of alternative. It entails the 180-degree-turn that enables the alternative to present itself in the sublation (the *Aufhebung*, the synthesis, the overcoming of contradiction). In the negation it becomes apparent that the alternative is within reach in the dialectically induced counter-position, which is also

the case for less violent alternatives. It is in this context of dialectical reversals that we can perhaps (still) appreciate Marx's comment when he wrote that

You can hardly say that I value the present time too highly; and yet if I nevertheless do not despair, it is only because of the desperate situation of this time, which fills me with hope. (Cited in Levin, 2004: 419)

Thus, as the negation the alternative is something more than just 'something other' or 'something different'. As the negation, the alternative needs to have something in common with that to which it claims to be an alternative: the problem to which it presents a solution. At the very least dialectical reversals need to share the language of the problem that is at stake. Thus placing the search for alternatives to free market liberalism in the context of the dialectic implies that free market liberalism is the wrong solution to the right problem, and other or better solutions can be generated from this tension.

Drawing on Deleuze (e.g. Deleuze, 1994) we might say that alternatives thus understood, as negation, resemble the actualized. They appear to be realizable precisely because they accept the problem or structure that underlies the actual state of affairs. Following this idea, we might question whether utopias are to be considered as alternatives exactly because of their utopian character: they are simply not realistic in terms of being within reach for any utopia is by definition and in its very structure the not-yet, and as such cannot testify to its realizability, except retrospectively. Nor are escapist or romantic fantasies easily understood as alternatives, not because they are not realizable but because they do not offer a different solution to an existing problem; they evade the problem itself, turning their backs on rather than facing it.

Given the status (quo) of the realized, that is, considering that the realized is never just that, and needs qualification for instance in terms of the limitations that constitute it and that bring it into relief as the realized, the question is whether alternatives should be assessed, appreciated and accepted (as realizable) on the basis of that which already exists. To do so is to engage and work within the limitations that constitute it, which places in question the kind of shift of perspective involved and the kind of change associated with their realization as *truly* different, giving us more of the same instead, if that is a concern at all. It is in this context, of rejecting working with(in) that which exists, that Žižek's otherwise unrealistic characterization of alternatives for an oppositional politics can be placed, namely for us to 'demand the impossible given that we are realistic' (*Soyons realistes, demandons l'impossible!*). This leads us to a second way of understanding an alternative. One that we think is more in line with *ephemera*.

Unrealistic Alternatives

So far we have stressed that the formulation of alternatives tends to be based upon the structure of the actualized, which is how alternatives appear as realistic. However, the formulation of an alternative might also obtain its realism from the very fact of being called 'an alternative'. In other words, the formulation of alternatives has a rhetorical

effect: if we present something as an alternative we suggest that it is realistic or realizable, which might or might not be the case.

It is in this sense that those who argue that the pursuit of alternatives equals the loss of a grip on reality, typically associated with the kind of youthful idealism that supposedly informs it (*'Looking for alternatives? Get real!' And: 'Grow up!'*), cannot simply be put into the category of the victims of the neoliberal logic of the end of history. They have a point: many of the alternatives that are brought forward *are* unrealistic.

Furthermore and rhetorically speaking, insofar as an alternative has to compel belief as an alternative so as to create an invitation to entertain the (im)possible that it represents vis-à-vis a public that needs convincing, alternatives have to seduce, not provoke, to use Baudrillard's distinction. An encounter with a provocation, "blackmail by identity" as Baudrillard refers to it (quoted in hooks 2000: 344), calls on you to shed any nuance in response as well, and stages your point of view as well-entrenched, which prevents you from opening up to the possible that alternatives embody. Seduction on the other hand, according to Baudrillard, allows "things to come into play and appear in secret, dual and ambiguous" (*ibid.*: 344) and creates a certain suspension of your point of view, the condition for alternatives to register and to be considered as such. To step into this space is to inhabit estrangement, to be unsettled, to leave behind dogma, ideology, the status quo and to embrace (unknown) otherness, the challenge alternatives pose.

Alternatives understood in this way do not function as different solutions but as different problems; not as alternative answers to the same questions but as alternative questions opening up for new answers. Whereas any alternative solution keeps the problem which it solves intact, an alternative problem breaks with and delegitimizes the existing solution. It divides, twists and thoroughly subverts established Truths as well as breaking the ground for new ways of thinking. As such, the moment of alteration transforms the horizon of the given by way of giving us new questions to ask. It is also in this sense that utopias and escape fantasies can be understood as alternatives insofar as they disrupt the existing problem. This is also what Parker, Fournier and Reedy point at when they approvingly cite Levitas (2004: 39, cited in Parker *et al.*, 2007: xi): "what is important about utopias is less what is imagined than the act of imagination itself, a process that disrupts the closure of the present".

And, what if, in the spirit of the revolutionary imagination we disrupt 'the closure of the present', not by imagining a different future, but by imagining a different past? Or rather, in terms of creating alternative problems, what if we imagine the past to be different, not as bygone, the longing for which can only be construed as sentimental, but as a lever for social change? As Crystal Bartolovich (2006) has suggested recently, drawing on Walter Benjamin, what if we imagine "revolution as radical nostalgia, the desire not for the 'lost' past as such, but for a world that might have been" and understand it as "a site of suppressed possibilities", that can be realized today for the future if we were to exercise our "weak messianic power" (Bartolovich, 2006: 65). It is also in this context, of redemption, that Zizek's most recent provocative, *or* seductive suggestion to reconsider, and 'defend', the 'lost causes', of for instance Stalin, Mao and Heidegger can possibly be placed.

To think of alternatives in this way offers a breath of fresh air that allows us to see things differently. They are not about different ways of organizing ourselves – they make us think and see organization in ways we had not before. Alternative problems create the conditions on the basis of which new forms can emerge without spelling out exactly what form the new could take. Of course, this is easier said than done: finding alternative problems is more arduous than finding alternative solutions to received problems. The problem provides the language needed for its solution, and solutions cannot transcend, at least not profoundly, the language of its problem. An alternative problem, on the other hand, is compelled to use another (indeed an alternative) language, perhaps even neologisms, in order to pose something hitherto unheard of.

Contributions to this issue

This issue of *ephemera* started off as an open issue, not as a thematic issue on alternatives. Still, we believe that each of the contributions deal with the problem of alternatives in their own way.

The issue opens with Adrian Mackenzie's article on productivity systems that are put forward in the self-improvement literature. He focuses especially upon David Allen's *Getting Things Done* (GTD), a book that proposes to break work *and* personal life – the distinction becomes trivial – down to a long list of projects which are further subdivided in 'next action'-lists. Mackenzie offers a critical, but also engaging reading of *Getting Things Done* and the large community of 'GTDers' it has given rise to. He argues that GTD offers an alternative way of dealing with uncertainty and change, one that attempts to come into grasps with the multiple. It also has its prize: thinking and the generation of ideas are in danger of being overshadowed the highly individualized production and execution of minute action-tasks.

In the second article of this issue, Simon Lilley addresses the problems that charity work encounters in times in which philanthropy is pressured to take the form of business. Through a case study of the charity organization 'Heritage' and a reading of Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*, Lilley explores how charity organizations deal with the complexity brought by a hybrid and ultimately incommensurable logic of philanthropy and business. In the end, business and commerce are not capable to provide an alternative form of organization to the practice of philanthropy as an end in itself.

The issue continues with a note written by Matteo Mandarini on the Italian political thinker Mario Tronti, in particular his text *Politica e destino*, which deals with the relation between politics and fate. This is a relation that goes to the heart of 'the alternative'. Or as Mandarini put is: "How does one flee fate and – at the same time – bring the kingdom of the world to collapse?".

Insofar as the proliferation of alternative organizational forms and the associated plurality of struggles is concerned, their presence testifies to a belief in the limitations of socialism, and by implication Marxism as the only alternative to bringing about (a certain kind of) social change. Jason Del Gandio's note discusses the emphasis on

alternatives from this point of view. In addition, Del Gandio engages with alternatives from a rhetorical point of view, and asks us to consider how alternatives can best be communicated so as to realize the potential for and promise of change they embody. His suggestions put in play our qualifications of the different rhetorical registers in which the language of alternatives can be pitched, for instance as (un)realistic, provocative or seductive.

Alex Callinicos' book *The Resources of Critique* is reviewed by Michael Rowlinson. In this book Callinicos offers a critical reading of grand intellectual figures, indeed alternative names in some camps of organization and management studies, such as Jürgen Habermas, Jacques Bidet, Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello, Pierre Bourdieu, Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, and Antonio Negri. In relation to Callinicos book, Rowlinson raises crucial questions concerning the alternative potency of critical management studies (CMS). Can CMS possibly provide a critical discourse within the walls of business schools? Can CMS remain political as it is being increasingly institutionalised as a research field and adopted in the curricula of business schools?

De Angelis' *The Beginning of History: Value Struggles and Global Capital* is reviewed by Peter Fleming. De Angelis suggests that the main concern for us today is not the end of history as delineated by Fukuyama, but rather the beginning of an alternative web of social exchange. The alternative way, the other way, is here conceptualised as *the outside*, already residing within the everyday struggles to go beyond the logic of market forces, and a paramount question, Fleming holds, becomes that of: "how is such an outside possible when the enemy is capable of such extraordinary feats of suppleness, when capital can even package and sell its own critique?". The boundaries between inside and outside, between *the way* and the alternative way, are anything but stable.

In his review of an edited volume that discusses the thought of Antonio Negri, Erik Empson engages, among other things, with the challenges in suggesting alternatives to received wisdom, as embedded in theory as well as practice, in this case Negri's dedicated attempt to renew the revolutionary spirit and imagination. He for one is appreciative and convinced of Negri's alternative oppositional politics and tries to convince us of their potential as well.

This issue concludes with a double review of the earlier mentioned *The Dictionary of Alternatives* (Parker *et al.*, 2007). The dictionary offers a rich list of alternatives to pursue, different paths to opt for in our search for the other and the better. The first review, written by Daniel King, focuses on the role that the book could play in the community of critical management-scholars. King sees the dictionary as both experimenting with what we have labelled 'realistic alternatives' and 'unrealistic alternatives'. The second review is written by Alan W. Moore and brings to the fore the utopian aspect of alternatives. The dictionary presents, writes Moore, "an inventory of the utopian abjects".

In Conclusion

Holding on to alternatives, i.e. always being on the look-out for the other, and by implication another, is rooted in hope and faith. When the hope for something else and better perishes, the alternative dies with it. Far from being (merely) the position of the assumed naïve and energetic teenager engaged in the adolescent's revolution and emancipation from the parent generation, the search and production of alternative questions and problems is the stance of the believer. However, belief is necessarily accompanied by doubt. Without doubt belief turns into conviction and blindness. Conversely, without belief doubts very easily develop into cynicism and dejection. The alternative thinker, writer, speaker and practitioner is one who is full of faith but far from faithful.

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