Landscapes of political action[*]

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Introduction

This issue offers a selection of contributions submitted to the *ephemera* open call for papers. The contributions address a variety of organizational issues and engage with diverse theoretical perspectives. However, despite their apparent differences, they all share a concern with the relationship between organization and politics and thus revolve around how processes of organizing intertwine with political issues like power, neoliberalism, gender and climate change. To provide a frame for this open issue, in this editorial we will revisit the question of how to theorize the relationships between organization and politics, approaching the matter by briefly discussing Arendt's threefold distinction between labour, work and action, as well as its relevance to organization studies. Following this discussion, we will reflect on how the artistic intervention *The Trainee* by Finnish artist Pilvi Takala evinces the intrinsic connection between politics and organization. We will then outline the contributions.

In her seminal work *The human condition*, Hannah Arendt introduces a tripartite distinction between labour, work and action, all of which are needed to achieve what she calls a 'vita activa'– that is, an active life that allows humans to flourish. Labour, Arendt explains, refers to 'the biological process of the human body' (1958: 7). For example, our existence depends on our harvesting, preparing and eating food. In contrast to the temporal nature of labour, work denotes the creation of 'an "artificial" world of things' (*ibid.*: 7), such as the production of durable objects, including tools, artworks and buildings. Distinct from both

labour and work, action refers to the existence of humans in plural – in other words, our political coexistence – or, as Arendt puts it, 'the political activity par excellence' (*ibid.*: 9). Action is thus the precondition of politics through which humans can make a new beginning, take the initiative to do the unexpected and reveal themselves to others. The unique feature of humans, Arendt contends, is their capacity to create the conditions for their own existence. Hence, humans are simultaneously influenced by and able to influence their natural and social surroundings. While labour and work can be performed without the presence of others, action is inherently social and therefore political.

The emergence of the modern age turned Arendt's concern to the 'instrumentalization of action' (*ibid.*: 230), whereby political action is reduced to a means-end relationship and therefore in her analysis assumes the features associated with work. Arendt represents this instrumentalization with the 'homo faber', a figure convinced that 'every issue can be solved and every human motivation reduced to the principle of utility' (*ibid.*: 305), maintaining that work has thus gradually replaced action as the highest order of the 'vita activa'. Paolo Virno takes Arendt's distinction between labour, work and action as a starting point, but argues that the conditions for political action have changed since the post-war period. He proposes that the advent of what he calls post-Fordist production has served to yet again reconfigure the relationship between work and action. What we once commonly recognized as politics may have been reduced to work, but new forms of work, he insists, will also reveal new forms of political action. Thus, Virno reverses Arendt's concern about the relationship between work and action, arguing that some of the work done in contemporary organizations has 'acquired the traditional features of political action' (2004: 51). In other words, he asserts that some forms of work performed today open up spaces for human interaction that may assume the character of politics. According to Virno, the current 'crisis of politics' is not that political action in our time has diminished, but rather that there is 'already too much politics in the world of wage labor' (*ibid.*: 51).

Taking both Arendt's concern about the absence of political action in the modern age and Virno's rereading of that concern as points of departure, we now return to the question of how to theorize the relationship between organization and politics today. We suggest that many of the activities undertaken in contemporary organizations come another step closer to constituting political action, insofar as they involve creating the social conditions of our lives. In fact, following this line of thinking, we can position organizing as a political activity, for humans configure social settings, arrange relations between people and govern society in ways that are always based on contingent choices that can in principle be altered. As such, organization always entails a political element. Taking such an element

seriously, Parker, Cheney, Fournier and Land claim that organization is fundamentally 'politics made durable' (2013: 39), yet they must grapple with the problem that such politics is rarely recognized. Instead, organizational configurations are legitimized as driven by necessity. In the words of Parker et al.:

> Our current versions of markets, management, hierarchy, leaders, employees, consumption and so on constitute a particular set of political assumptions. These aren't necessary and inevitable arrangements, dictated by the structure of our monkey genetics, or the calculus of the invisible hand of the market. Rather than seeing organizing as a technical matter, something to be left to experts with MBAs perhaps, we can understand it as a way of working through the complex ways of being human with other humans and hence a responsibility and possibility for all of us. (2013: 39)

When we start to see organizing as political, we also give ourselves the possibility of critically exploring the built-in conditioning of the (im)possible fields of action that follow from different forms and forces of organizing. This is precisely what *The Trainee*, an artistic intervention performed by Finnish artist Pilvi Takala beautifully set out to do.[1] We cannot do the artwork justice here, so we provide only this rough summary. The artist, introduced as the new trainee Johanna Takala, enters the marketing department at the Finnish headquarters of Deloitte. She comes to work every day for a month, with only very few people knowing the true nature of her presence. Quickly, the new trainee begins to act rather strangely. She seems to be doing virtually no work. She sits at her workstation in the open-plan office space, but her eyes do not gaze at the computer screen in front of her, and her hands are never busy typing or writing emails. Instead, she just sits there with her hands in her lap hour after hour. Her co-workers politely ask if she is waiting for someone or for something to happen, but she kindly replies that, no, she is just thinking. She goes to the tax department library for an entire day, but does nothing there. She spends another whole day riding up and down the elevator without a purpose or a destination (see the cover of this issue).

These actions, or rather the absence of them, slowly make the atmosphere around the trainee almost unbearably intense. Her co-workers find it increasingly problematic to be around her and struggle to find solutions or explain her behaviour. Some sincerely try to understand her bizarre work methods; others display a sort of bewildered amusement. Some simply cannot handle it and request that their superiors remove her from the office space. Emails and phone calls documenting her laziness are sent to top management, along with suggestions that she has mental problems and demands that someone

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[1] The intervention is documented in video here: pilvitakala.com/the-trainee/.

do something to resolve the issue. Gradually, the trainee's simple and silent presence becomes intolerable for the other employees.

Observed as a political action, this particular way of intervening in the neoliberal modus operandi of modern-day office spaces evokes a long tradition in performance art of making present in a particular context that which should not be there and thus exposing the rules put in place by certain political orders. In the performance *The Trainee*, the seemingly harmless yet inevitably subversive act of doing nothing in a busy office space strikes at the very core of how the job performance and self-performance imperatives at work today structure and permeate public spaces. Moreover, because the trainee's behaviour lacks a place in the order of things, she unmasks the political imperatives that structure and guide behaviour, roles, relations and self-performance in the office space. Ultimately, as all attempts to meaningfully capture and determine what she is up to fail (e.g., an explanation of mental illness), the heightening intensity cannot be alleviated.

The Trainee masterfully deploys this artistic strategy of politicizing a social space by putting something in it that the tacit rules in place cannot tolerate, thus forcing them to become visible. Perhaps even more powerful to watch, however, is the range of responses triggered by the trainee's presence. Throughout the video, the viewer is astonished time and again by the difficulty the other employees have relating to the presence of an unproductive colleague, and by the numerous tactics people invent to deal with the disturbing presence of an intolerable element. Some people react with laughter, others become aggressive, while still others demonstrate impressive creativity in the strategies they implement to avoid interacting with the trainee. Strange but effective choreographies of ignorance emerge. The video can be seen as a careful ethnographic study of how deeply invested most people are in upholding the status quo of social and political rules – a point, of course, made so eloquently by Goffman (1974). The employees in the Helsinki division of Deloitte, at least, are willing to come up with a wide array of interesting actions intended to prevent them from having to change how they make sense of appropriate behaviour, normality and rules in their organization. Notably, the act of being lazy and thus wasting the company's time and money is not necessarily what one finds so disturbing – every employee probably does that once in a while. Rather, the force of the intervention seems to stem from how shamelessly the trainee flaunts her unproductivity, for it potentially puts into question the way everyone else at the office performs according to corporate expectations.

Thus, *The Trainee* constitutes a form of political action working to transform an ordered social space into a political space. The political power of the intervention

lies in how it problematizes rules and routines, thereby opening up a space of contestation. It becomes painfully obvious how we, as employees, are invested in maintaining the status quo, and how the dynamics of certain practices enable us to avoid and ignore the political and potentially problematic nature of our daily work in organizations.

Contributions

Seeking to offer a range of explorations into new forms of political action, this issue of *ephemera* contains a selection of the contributions to our open call, including nine articles, one note and two book reviews.

In the article 'Towards an anarchist cybernetics: Stafford Beer, self-organization and radical social movements', Thomas Swan argues that anarchist theory and practice can be enriched by drawing on cybernetics, in particular the 'Viable System Model' developed by Stafford Beer. Despite the apparent discrepancy between the cybernetic emphasis on hierarchy and the anarchist rejection of domination and control, Swan argues that these two traditions are both concerned with the need for decentralized autonomy. The theoretical conflicts between cybernetics and anarchism arise, Swan maintains, because what he calls 'anatomical hierarchy' and 'functional hierarchy' fail to be distinguished. While anatomical hierarchy operates on the basis of distributing positions, functional hierarchy refers to the order in which decisions are made. In a functional hierarchy, Swan shows, every organizational member can take part in formulating strategies and making decisions. By rearticulating Beer's organizational model in the context of radical social movements, Swan concludes that such a model can provide a deeper understanding of the social dynamics at play in anarchism.

The social dynamics of political action is further explored in Alessandro Delfanti's and Johan Söderberg's article 'Repurposing the hacker: Three cycles of recuperation in the evolution of hacking and capitalism', which draws our attention to how political action, in this case hacking, can lose its transformational power when institutions and corporations adopt, adapt and repurpose its practices. Delfanti and Söderberg analyse the evolution of hacking through three interrelated cycles in which they claim this dynamic can be discerned. The first cycle focuses on how industry co-opts hacker technologies or innovations, such as hackathons. The second focuses on how corporate and military cultures and hacking, their counter-culture, are interdependent. The third and final cycle addresses how the critique of capitalism that gets incorporated in capitalism also legitimizes it. Although not intent on degrading

hacking and its potential for political action, the authors nonetheless claim that 'the hackability of organizational practices is a new feature of contemporary capitalism, and hackers are at one and the same time shaped by and contribute to shaping this larger whole' (56). The danger, the authors point out, is that hacking risks losing its subversive power if it only acts within the bounds of such capitalism.

In the next article Lawrence Corrigan and Albert Mills study the Occupy movement as it became manifested in Halifax, Canada, their aim being to provide a dramaturgical understanding of how societal actors produce meaning in the context of the territories they claim. As such, the authors explore political action in relationship to space, recognizing how space implies movement and displacement as well as how it intersects with the dramaturgical concepts of performing regions, performance/audience and stigma. Interested in 'cooperative occupation', they follow a series of events where war veterans' traditional claim to a space in which to commemorate and pay tribute to fallen soldiers competes with the putative home site of Occupy Nova Scotia. The article explores the liminal space that this particular clash produced between the Occupy movement itself and the factors of war and public administration that a desire to commemorate war brought to the space. The authors carefully map the tensions and difficult negotiations, but also the productive frictions between them, with the latter contributing to Occupy Nova Scotia's success in fostering public discussion about the right to the city and, ultimately, in changing the hegemonic narrative of the local political establishment.

In 'New media and the Egyptian revolution: The ironies of mediated communication, the fetishisation of information and the shrinking of political action', Liyan Gao takes a critical stance with regard to the proclaimed emancipatory and consciousness-raising role of new media. Gao claims that online engagement, such as sharing and liking practices, might mobilize political action, but does not in itself constitute political action. What is more, she argues, online engagement might even have the opposite effect of mobilizing action, as engaging in online activities to, say, share information might prompt us to feel that we are doing something important and thus that such activities can replace and displace political action. Using the Egyptian revolution to illustrate her point, Gao shows that while the Western media focused on the role of new media during the Arab Spring, the new initiatives that endured were based on the traditional organizing of people in public spaces rather than on online engagement.

In the article 'Decoding and recoding gender in academic capitalism', Soile Veijola and Eeva Jokinen take issue with the gender inequality that prevails in

contemporary academia, arguing that we are currently witnessing the emergence of 'coding capitalism', which builds on the premise that everything must be inscribed in a quantifiable language. Within this regime, women are expected to take care of the social aspects of academic work – what Veijola and Jokinen refer to as 'hostessing work' – while men are often expected to ignore such tasks. Nevertheless, this form of work predominantly carried out by female academics fails to be coded in the same manner as other more masculine endeavours are. Thus, practices like making coffee, organizing social and academic events or taking care of personal relations remain unacknowledged, as they are unrecognized by the established management tools, which value other forms of work more highly, such as getting published in highly ranked journals or attracting research funding. However, Veijlola and Jokinen argue that building communities is a quintessential support for creative academic work, and that 'universities cannot cope without care'.

Political action in the form of resistance in organizations comes under scrutiny in Erik Mygind du Plessis' article 'Serving coffee with Žižek: On decaf, half-caf and real resistance at Starbucks'. He bases his discussion on the Žižekian distinction between 'Real' and 'decaf' actions. In the case of resistance, 'Real resistance' would be revolutionary and change the social order of an organization, while 'decaf resistance' might give the individual a sense of relief but actually stabilizes power relations in the organization. Analysing an online forum where Starbucks baristas discuss their individual responses to the Starbucks code of conduct as well as customer behaviour, du Plessis demonstrates that this either-or distinction is problematic. He argues that since Real acts are per definition rare, almost all acts of resistance can be defined as decaf and thus amassed into one big category. However, acts of resistance are subtle and varied, and are generally neither harmless nor revolutionary, but in du Plessis' own expression, 'half-cafed'. The dichotomy of Real and decaf thus fails to take into account the myriad political actions that can exist in an organization at once.

In 'Managing International Development: (Re)Positioning Critiques', Fabian Frenzel, Peter Case, Mitchell Sedgwick and Arun Kumar take stock of the current state of critical work on international development. They argue that critical management studies should pay attention to the conditions for international development that have come in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, particularly a strong tendency to impose abstract, universal models that obscure the complex power relations that dominate international development. The authors call for critical scholars to respond to this trend by interrogating the influence of financialization on developing countries, the evaluation and measurement instruments employed in international

development and the prevalence of 'projects' as an organizational form. As the approach is critical, they call for scholars to expose the gap between real-world cases and the idealized management models that inform international development.

Antonios Broumas writes about rational choice and neoliberal theories of the intellectual commons, offering a careful, critical analysis of how rational choice and neoliberal theories conceptualize and understand the intellectual commons. Using his analysis, Broumas is able to show how both theories tend to reduce the potential of the intellectual commons in order to improve the dominant, capital-based mode of social reproduction. His contribution demonstrates how this tendency means that both theories strive to conceal their more radical potentialities towards commons-based societies. Arguing that a theory of the intellectual commons should not be confined to the status quo, but instead have solid, normative foundations, Broumas concludes that, in contrast to social democratic and critical theories, both rational choice and neoliberal accounts of the intellectual commons fail to conceive of them outside contemporary capitalism and, thus, to help commons-based societies to emerge.

Although, we often think of Big Tech companies like Google, Apple or Facebook as primarily data-based and thus immaterial, Mél Hogan focuses her article on how global Big Tech increasingly encroaches on ecosystems management to grow its own operations. By focusing on the material and environmental dimensions of Big Tech and drawing on such facts as data centres' being the largest and fastest growing consumers of electricity and water, Hogan traces how Big Tech is investing in, building or taking over crucial infrastructure like wastewater facilities or forests in several specific geographical locations. The contribution highlights the glaring paradox of Big Tech, which, although often represented as sustainable entrepreneurs, uses tremendous natural resources to develop the very technologies supposed to fight environmental degradation. Moreover, the article compellingly shows that however green data centres become, and however innovative renewable energy may be, a larger media ecosystem undergirds them – a world of limited natural resources. Hogan thus proposes the concept of 'Big Data Ecologies' to situate infrastructure at the centre of the discussion on how Big Tech companies drive neoliberal, global transformations with severe consequences for the environment. If not a form of political action in itself, the contribution provides fertile ground for political contestation regarding how Big Tech threatens the possibility of a sustainable future.

Ville Kivivirta, in his note 'The shock of the Anthropocene and a margin of hope: On possibilities for critical thinking in the Arctic context' connects two themes

explored in other contributions to this issue, namely political action in the context of climate change as well as within the university. Discussing Serres' concepts of the parasite and the cyborg, Kivivirta examines the potential role of critical scholarship in universities located in the Arctic region. Focusing on the regional conditions and possibilities for critical performativity, Kivivirta demonstrates the importance of seeking to understand how critical scholarship is lived, experienced and practised differently from within particular settings. As such, Kivivirta contributes to the more conceptual discussion of critique and critical performativity in organization studies.

We round off the issue with two book reviews. The first is by Sine Nørholm Just and the second is a collective review by Hugo Letiche, Geoff Lightfoot and Simon Lilley.

Sine Nørholm Just reviews Boldyrev's and Svetlova's edited book entitled *Enacting dismal science: New perspectives on the performativity of economics*. This book deals with the question of how performativity matters 'after-the-turn': in other words, once it has been established that economic theories *are*, indeed, performative, then what? Thus each chapter of the book presents a different view on the theoretical discussions and empirical developments that define the performativity of economics today. As the various chapters unfold, Sine Nørholm Just detects an undercurrent of dissatisfaction with the inability of critical accounts to influence economists. Thus, the book springs from an urge to engage with and discuss the fact that the performativity of studies of the performativity of economics has been greatly overlooked. What do we want critical accounts about the performativity of economic theory to do in the social and material world? Put differently, and in greater alignment with this issue's overall theme, what kind of critical or even political action can such accounts lead to?

Finally, Hugo Letiche, Geoff Lightfoot and Simon Lilley undertake an ambitious encounter with Graham Harman's recent work in no less than a triple book review of *Immaterialism: Objects and social theory*; *Dante's broken hammer: The ethics, aesthetics and metaphysics of love*; and *The rise of realism,* the latter having been co-authored with Manuel DeLanda. As a leading figure in what is known as speculative realism or object-oriented ontology, Harman has produced work that has proved influential in philosophy, art and architecture, but whose impact on organization studies has yet to be seen. Recognizing that leaving the safe confines of post-structuralism is no simple feat, Letiche, Lightfoot and Lilley convincingly argue that management and organization scholars should be interested in Harman's work because the empirical domains of these disciplines are contoured by and studded with a multitude of objects too often ignored, fetishized or black-boxed.

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