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Performativity of social sciences as seen by an organization scholar

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ABSTRACT

Current discussion of performativity focuses mostly on economics, and has prevalently a critical tone. Yet performativity, as understood by philosophers representing the ordinary language perspective, is, and will continue to be, a stable ingredient of social life. Additionally, such social sciences as management and organization studies are supposed to be performative. This text takes up the issue of non-performance, and discusses felicity conditions for social sciences.

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1. An “ordinary language” perspective

I begin by specifying the way I understand the performativity concept, which I am using in my text. It relates to ideas of the “ordinary language” philosophers of the Oxford school, who criticized analytical philosophers for their hermetic language and their lack of attention to the meaning of words used in everyday conversations. Most relevant is the speech act theory, first presented by John Austin during his William James Lectures at Harvard University in 1955, and then published in 1962. He introduced the notion of “performative utterances” – that is, utterances in which what is being said equals what is done (“The meeting is closed”). As Austin put it, and many others repeated after him, human utterances can serve to say things, and they can serve to do things (Austin, 1962; Czarniawska-Joerges & Joerges, 1988; Silverman & Torode, 1980).

I am repeating these well-known things to differentiate the way I am using the notion of performativity from other ways it has been used. The first way is typical to management and organization studies, in which the term denotes capacity of assorted agents to perform, that is, to accomplish various tasks successfully, or even effectively (see e.g. March & Sutton, 1997; for a review of literature see; Corvellec, 1997). Agents can be human or non-human – like machines and organizations. Performativity means thus a high potential for performance, though in this form the noun is rarely used in management literature (but see Czarniawska, 2011).

As Fabian Muniesa (2014) pointed out, Lyotard (1979) tried to combine this meaning with the Austinian one. In my opinion, the speech act theory is both a narrowing and an extension of the management definition. A narrowing, because it concerns only one

type of performance: performance via utterances. An extension, because the belief that “words are not deeds” is still common (Czarniawska, 2013).

I also suspect that my understanding differs from that of Judith Butler's (1990) – suspect, because it can be simply a result of my insufficient understanding of English grammar. I perfectly understand, and agree with, the statement “gender is performed”; but I do not understand the statement “gender is performative”, unless it is the same as “gender is performable”. On the other hand, it could be, as Paul du Gay (2010) pointed out, that Butler's use is close to the Cambridge and not to the Oxford school of philosophy, and it reflects their differences in formulation of the speech act theory. I need also to add that “performativity” exceeds my English competence, although I understand that it is a perfectly usable word in French (Muniesa & Callon, 2009).

Another interesting but in this context less relevant use of the term “performativity” is the one that relates it to theatrical performances (see e.g. Pinch, 2010, who speaks of performing the economy, rather than of performativity of economics).

Finally, I want to distance myself from the usage of the term “performativity” that I encountered recently, and that seems to assume that all speech acts are performative. Indeed they are not: I can say any number of times to two people “I declare you husband and wife”, and they will not become married. I cannot even close a meeting by saying, “this meeting is closed”, if I do not have the mandate to close it. The “felicity conditions” are not fulfilled (MacKenzie, Muniesa, Siu, & Siu, 2007). In fact, this difference – between performative and non-performative social sciences – is the main focus of my essay.

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2. The performativity of economics?

Economic sociologists have recently developed the notion of performativity, applying it to the analysis of contemporary economic theory. It was Michel Callon who famously suggested, “economics, in the broad sense of the term, performs, shapes and formats the economy, rather than observing how it functions” (1998: 2). Many scholars of science and technology adopted this idea, and began writing about performativity, by which they meant that “theories and models bring about the very conditions that they attempt to explain” (MacKenzie, 2008, p. 25). Is it good or bad? The main proponents of the focus on performativity claim that it is neutral: “An emphasis on performativity does not imply an evaluation, positive or negative, of the ‘effects’ of the aspect of economics in question” (MacKenzie et al., 2007: 5).

This declaration shows that they keep the promises of symmetry made by science and technology studies, from which this use of performativity originated. Not everybody is prepared to follow it, however. Daniel Miller (2002: 218) accused Callon and his followers of defending “the economists’ model of a framed and abstracted market against empirical evidence that contemporary exchange rarely if ever works according to the laws of the market”. Mirowski and Nik-Khah (2007) refused to see the performativity of many an economic theory. Others see performativity interpretation as straightforwardly critical: as an accusation that, in pretending to describe the world, economists shape it according to their wishes and models (e.g. Christophers, 2012).

A devil’s advocate could suggest that usage of the performativity notion by economic sociologists is tinted with admiration, not to say envy. After all, sociology, in the times between Durkheim and Parsons, was strongly performative, was it not? In an interview, Callon said (in Barry and Slater, 2003: 301) “We recognize the right of the economists to contribute to performing markets, but at the same time we claim our own right to do the same but from a different perspective”.

I cannot speak for sociologists, but I can say that many of us, management and organization scholars, are in fact bemoaning our lack of performativity. Our texts do not “perform, shape or format management and organization”, although our very existence is grounded in the promise of such performativity. We “mirror” practices better than the economists claim to do, or at least we believe we do. Still, the economists shape what they purport to mirror, and we end up mirroring only – not because reality and its representation finally came to an ideal accord, but because practitioners choose other representations.

We are not alone – let me quote an example of another social science that is suffering from the same problem.

3. From mirroring to world-making

This is a title of an article by Kenneth Gergen (2015), the leading representative of what I called idealist social constructivism (Czarniawska, 2003) in social psychology. He claims that after the vitriolic “science wars”, social scientists more or less agreed on the two assumptions of what he calls reflective pragmatism: “Whatever exists makes no necessary requirements on representation”, and “What stands as objective truth can be established within a research tradition” (p. 289). Very well, says Gergen, but “What does the research ultimately contribute to the world more generally? (...) For whom are the outcomes useful, and in what way; who is benefitted, who may be harmed; and who is absent from the discussion?” (p. 290).

He then introduces the notion of future forming, that is, a time dimension, which I find helpful in discussions on performativity. After all, if the descriptions of past practices are correct, one could

claim that it is a case of perfect performativity. The issue concerns the future, however, as all performative utterances do. The meeting was not closed, and the couple not married, until so declared. The economists avoid attracting attention to timing by formulating their models in so-called gnomic present (McCloskey, 1985/1998), appropriate for stating truths that are independent of time. In other words, their utterances are performative, at least partly because they are formulated as constative.

Relying on Austin, Gergen points out the impossibility of establishing the exact difference between constative and performative utterances, just as it is impossible to draw the line between description and prescription in social psychology. He recalls his earlier notion of enlightenment effects, which he finds similar to Ian Hacking’s (2000) looping effects. Yet, he says, they both “failed to explore the productive possibilities” (p. 292). Using arguments similar to those of Callon and Latour (1981), Gergen noted that most research sustains “existing traditions of indexing the world along with the forms of life in which they are embedded” (p. 293).

How, then, to move from mirroring to making, or, to use another vocabulary, how to open black boxes in any situation short of a catastrophe? Gergen pointed out that the naturalist tradition imitated by social sciences assumed an endurance of the study objects (thus ostensive definitions), whereas, at present, the voices pointing out the conditions of flux, liquidity, and processuality are multiplying.¹ He then considered the potential of critical social science, and noted problems related to the self-referentiality of many critical works, their lack of alternative visions, and the authors’ tendency to use a hermetic vocabulary. It is better to put more faith into “the performative movement in social science” (Gergen & Gergen, 2012). This is a dramatist version of performativity, though: it consists of exploring various forms of writing, but also in extending social sciences to other forms of expression, like theater, film, photography, and music. He noticed, however, that “audiences are generally small – often restricted to academic gathering” (p. 299).

Yet there is a growing management consulting industry exploiting theater – and the audiences are not small (Zaemdar, 2013). Indeed, the positive examples that Gergen quoted are those favored by consultants: appreciative inquiry, open dialogue, public conversations projects. He observed their vicinity to the old tradition of action research. The main difference between the action research of the 1960s and the present one would be the redefinition of knowledge: from an individual possession to knowledge embedded in relations among people. This redefinition has consequences, not least for the understanding of research: it is, or should be, a collaborative endeavor.

Can theory be a product of a collaborative endeavor, however? Relational theory, propagated by Gergen, is suggested as an instance of such a possibility. On the other hand, the very examples of theories that changed the world, as quoted by Gergen, contradict this possibility: Marxism, perhaps the most successful social theory ever, was hardly a product of collaboration, especially not with workers.

Here is the concluding paragraph of Gergen’s text:

In conclusion, let me suggest that significance of the natural sciences in society was not derived from their claims to superiority in matters of truth,² but in their contribution to the affairs of everyday life. (...) We have perhaps naively believed that when our words are inscribed in the journals and books of the

¹ Somewhat unusually for an idealist constructivist, Gergen brings technology into the picture – not in its stabilizing, but in its de-stabilizing role.

² But see a recent complaint of Gerald F. Davis (2015) that truth was replaced by novelty in organization studies.

disciplines, that such inscriptions will be carried in the minds and hearts of the populace. It is the thrust of the present proposal to reverse the investment – to undertake research as a form of social action, with the words following after. (...) It is time for the social sciences to channel their substantial resources of intelligence and ingenuity into creating more viable forms of living together (2015: 307).

In the last sentence, Gergen practically repeated Latour's (2005: 256) appeal from *Reassembling the Social*. In a sense, both suggested the same solution: social scientists have to create "crowded agoras", wherein the important issues can be debated, rather than being calculated by the economists on their computers (Latour, 2013). Yes, but how attract the debaters to those – now empty – agoras? Gergen suggested action research; Latour suggested a new anthropology of the moderns. Will the economists be interested in discussing such matters? And why should they?

Although no new or dramatically different solutions may be within immediate reach, the studies of performativity of economics and non-performativity of social psychology offer enlightening insights into the situation of management and organization studies.

4. The fate of MOS (management and organization studies)

There are quite a few similarities and differences between the situation of MOS and that of economists (as portrayed by economic sociologists); and, on the other side, social psychologists (as portrayed by Gergen).

One crucial difference concerns the relationship with consultants. Whereas economists are themselves consultants to both politicians and to managers, and social psychologists and other action researchers collaborate with consultants, management and organization scholars are often in competition with consultants. Perhaps the money problem that was present at the outset of management consulting is to blame: instead of agreeing to share our findings with consultants (who could thereby popularize our theories), management and organization theoreticians wanted to be consultants themselves. Some succeeded, at the price of their scientific reputation; many failed, because they did not foresee the importance of Gergen's idea of performativity – of an easily understood language and the use of theatrical elements in presenting knowledge.

On the other hand, although great many economists are talented popular writers (see e.g. Davies, 2010), the performativity of economics can be located exactly in the technicality of their models and prescriptions: mathematics cannot be debated in the same way as a sociological report can. Thus management and organization scholars, many of them sociologists, actually reside in a no man's land: far from "ordinary language" and equally far from the enchanted language of numbers and equations.

Furthermore, as Gergen has observed, "conservative politicians often dismiss social science research altogether because of what they properly see as liberal bias." (p.303). This is correct; but equally correct is the observation that left-wing politicians favor those they perceive as being left-wing economists (there were, and still are, many of those). In the losing position stand those, who, like many management and organization scholars, espoused the idea of symmetry in research. Neither politicians nor managers (not to forget journalists) want symmetrical research findings: solutions must be right or wrong; actors must be heroes or villains.

What about the underdogs, then? Here is a story of action research, undertaken by a Swedish MOS researcher Peter Hägglund (2005). He applied three different analytical frameworks to a situation of a company in crisis that he studied. The first was a

structural approach, close to models used in business economics. The second was an interpretative approach, based in social constructivism, and close to the one suggested by Gergen. The third was the actor-network approach. Hägglund's conclusion was that the actor-network approach was the most beneficial: "an organizational actor who understands her organization from an actor-network theory perspective may feel less powerful, but this insight may enable her to exert more influence" (Hägglund, 2005: 267).

Note the conditional. The actual observations suggested that

... people who wish to exert power over organizations and people's working life tend to prefer the framework of organizational structure (...) Structural framework clearly establishes the organization as something that exists, and that has clear rules, boundaries, and rules of evaluation. (Hägglund, 2005: 265)

Hägglund compared structural theory to economic models, quoting MacKenzie. In contrast, "the interpretative inquiry reveals so many local perspectives that it becomes difficult to see how the whole could function" (p. 266). Because of that, it can be used to undermine top management plans. Structural theory "teaches how to reach for power"; interpretative inquiry teaches "how to resist it" (Hägglund, 2005). As for now, there are no signs that actor-network theory gains ground in managerial (or anti-managerial) practices.

Reflecting on Hägglund's conclusions, I was reminded of two experiences from my own career. There was a period when my teachings were truly popular with practitioners – in the 1970s in Poland, when I was telling my listeners about how organizations are managed in the USA. That was before I went to USA and discovered that they were more centrally steered than the Polish ones. In other words, I was telling them fairy tales, which helped – them and me – to deal with the oppressive reality. Later on, aided by the example of my Swedish colleagues, I have learned to study and depict organizational realities. Sometime after 1989, we went for a visit to a Polish university. When we presented our research, one young scholar (an economist) told me: "Madame professor (they still use a lot of titles in Poland), this is reality, not science!" Practitioners do know what their practice looks like: they want fairy tales, or visionary images, which will perform reality by their very existence, or at least will provide legitimacy to their own plans.

As to agora, Latour is wrong. It is not empty, it just moved – to the media – and recently social media joined in. The mainstream media invites voices of economists and political scientists. As to the debate itself, Hägglund's observation fits well: the mainstream media adopt the structuralist, the social media adopt the interpretative framework. The mainstream media teach how to reach for power, the social media how to resist it. There is little debate about management and organization issues; the room is filled with consultants and psychologists (not exactly of the relational kind). The felicity conditions in the present mediatic landscape are yet to be specified.

Mirowski and Nik-Khah may be on to something, if their insights are combined with Gergen's. Field studies, the kind we management and organization scholars do, show indeed that the economists' models do not work. But these models are seen as "future forming", or at least as "future framing". They are performative in the sense that the actions that are taken are consistent with them, that is, as if they were the correct descriptions of reality.

During the wave of enchantment with postmodernism, I told an economist colleague in an internal debate that modernist solutions do not work in spite of two hundred years of attempts to introduce them. He answered, calmly: "Clearly, another two hundred years are necessary". In two hundred years, there will be a perfect market

– or perhaps we will enter the agoras?

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