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Doing organizational ethnography: Movement, relations, agency

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Why do organizational ethnography?

Perhaps the most important reason for doing organizational ethnography is the simple one of giving corporate subjects the possibility of speaking. Agency is thus granted to the people who through their interwoven actions create the social patterns that we call organizations. This also implies that we do not see an organization as the result of some narratives that reside inside persons. Neither is an organization the result of some grand narratives that predestine their worlds from the outside. People create the social (Latour, 2005, p. 7) and they thus create organizations. They do this from the particular historical, cultural, political, geographical, material or natural circumstances that surround them or more precisely run through them. People are thrown into the world, which conditions what they can do, how they perceive themselves and so on. They are as such social beings, who cannot be understood independently of the particular time-spaces in which they have grown up and in which they live their lives.

People are the embodiment of these time-spaces, which are thus living, vibrant, dynamic and moving. It follows that these time-spaces are neither constant, nor do they provide any constant. The framework of forces that runs through these time-spaces always relies on what Deleuze (1992a, p. 161) calls lines of subjectification. In other words, the living dynamic social field of forces, which Foucault (1980, p. 196) calls a *dispositive*, and which is tactical in targeting the formation of particular subjects, always has to be made. The formation of the subject is neither given, nor determined. It is always only conditioned. It has to be made in order to be living and in order to be 'real'. Ethnography is thus a celebration of agency. It is true that it is through agency that the power relations that are embedded in organizations become real. But it is also through agency that power relations are renewed, bended, transformed, redirected and resisted. When we say that ethnography is a celebration of agency we acknowledge the possibility of multiple subject formations within the same social field. It is thus agency that grants dynamics to the social. Without agency - if we were in other words only discourse and we had no other choice than to enter into a given space of discourse - language would stiffen and die (Agamben, 1999, pp. 142-144).

Organizational discourse has always had its difficulties in coming to terms with agency. Sometimes it is almost as if organizational discourse would like to eliminate the agency, from which it in some sense gets its own agency. These suicidal tendencies have always been part of organizational discourse: from scientific management and its more contemporary great grandchildren like lean, total quality management, just-in-time production and business process engineering; to the bureaucracy and its contemporary great grand nephews and nieces like new public management and other governmentality regimes (e.g. Dean, 2008). The target of these dominant approaches to management has always been to eliminate agency in the form of reducing it to the technical rationality of these management technologies. In this sense organizational discourse has made the same mistake as almost all political sciences in presuming that people are all the same. But as noted by Arendt (1998, p. 8), plurality is the condition of human action in the sense that the only common characteristic of human action is that we are all different in the way that nobody is ever the same as anybody else, who have lived, lives of will live.

This is not meant as a critique of organizational discourse per se. It is only to say that an organizational discourse, which does not delve into how people actually live their lives within the technologized organizational spaces, would only produce monsters. As such we are critical of how organizational discourse has developed in recent decades. This development can be said to be monstrous. We don't think it is an overstatement to say that never has there been so many organizational technologies for controlling and guiding human action. Never has so many people been employed in the control manufacturing business of management. This business includes people actually employed as managers, as management developers or in management education (as we are ourselves). Perhaps we live in the age of *dispositive* understood as the age where more and more aspects of human life is being made subject of knowledge and control. As noted by Agamben (2009) our times have witnessed a veritable explosion in dispositives targeting the control of human life. Agamben is extremely critical about this development and call the men of our times the most docile and cowardly that have existed in human history (Agamben, 2009, p. 22).

Perhaps therefore we need ethnography more than ever to build up an alternative to this mass manufacturing of control technologies that we experience today. We do not need it in order to build better control technologies. In fact a main business of ethnography is critique and downright mocking of the control technologies imposed on people. Perhaps we only need it in order to confirm that there is life and meaning beyond the rationalities that we encounter every day in the business of organization and management. It is life despite of management; a confirmation that people can manage themselves. It is a way of going beyond the almost paranoiac sense of senselessness that we experience when navigating in the increasingly commercialized spaces of managerial and organizational research, where almost nothing seems to count beyond continuous rationalization and improvement of the instrument called organization. As management researchers we are increasingly subjected to an economic rationality, where we have to justify the economic value and benefit of our research for the university. In ethnography however, the principle is that people count in themselves in a sense that is beyond any need of justification. It is only through delving into the lives of people that we can learn something new about how organizations work and how corporate subjects position themselves within this political economy.

Therefore, organizational ethnography is also one of the weapons against control technologies. And one of its means is organizational storytelling in the version invented by Boje and followers (Boje, 1991, 2001, 2008). With this term we are interested in how people live their lives in response to a manifold of different forces. A story is a differential enactment of forces (e.g. Jørgensen & Thomassen, 2015, this issue). It is a way of capturing our living responsiveness to and our entanglement with many different forces - political, economic, social, cultural, geographic, material, natural etc. – from which people create their subjectivities in the moment of becoming. A story is plural, spontaneous and emergent (Jørgensen & Boje, 2010, p. 258). It demands by its very nature many different points of view (Tally, 2001, p. 14). It thus turns away from rational understandings of humans and organizations towards more complex views that question linear 'beginning-middle-end' ways of portraying personal or organizational experience and development that are dominant in organization discourse (Boje & Durant, 2006).

Our ethnographies take place in contemporary organizational forms, which in themselves are responses to dramatic changes and to ever increasing layers of complexity. The corporations and corporate subjects of today are implicated in complex and ever changing economic, material, social, political and cultural networks to a degree that is hitherto unknown. The world is increasingly fluent, changeable and characterized by constantly changing boundaries. As such organizations are not neat, bounded entities characterized by long stable periods that are only temporarily interrupted by change. Change is a permanent condition for organizations. The state of exception has increasingly become the rule and

organizations or corporations always have to reinvent themselves in order to constantly reinvent new products, new processes, and new business models in order to cope with ever changing globalized markets.

Corporate subjects face the same problems of always having to ‘reinvent’ themselves, to re-story and learn to cope with new challenges, new trends, new possibilities and new threats. Organizations can thus be seen as assemblages of dynamic engagements that are constantly re-negotiated and made, and which reverberate through and within corporate subjects and the networks of meaning of which these people are an integral part (Lewis, 2008). People and organizations are thus inevitably entangled in ways in which it becomes increasingly difficult to cut the boundaries between individuals and organizations. Organizations increasingly pervade the life space of people and a critical question is whether people are actually only ‘working’ in organizations or if they have to personalize them through their stories and actions.

As such, the 21st century organizational space is a complex space that mediate a manifold of forces from all around the world that become a resource for managing and taking action in regard to organizational matters, problems, relations, politics and judgments. It is also a space, which is increasingly globalized and dynamic. It is an assemblage of many different local, traditional, historical, but also highly innovative, scientific, disruptive and global forces. The question for the authors in this special issues is simply how do organizations and/or the subjects within them navigate in, or despite of, these developments. What characterizes organizational life in the 21st century, what new kinds of organizational forms emerge and how do people do these new organizational forms influence the configuration and understanding of who people are.

The collection in this special issue comprise ethnographies in organizations such as call centers (Frandsen, Pitts), social movements (Carty), universities (Bager; Valenzuela, Palacios & Cast), networks and regions (Jørgensen & Thomassen, Mendas) and even the relations between avatar selves in second life communities and everyday life (Przegalińska-Skierkowska). These are studies of life in organizations or organized life in communities, and how it affects these organizations and/or communities. This includes questions like how they change and re-story themselves and by what organizational means. How corporate subjects position themselves in organizations. How they cope with complex organizational challenges like new technologies, commercialization of education or the push towards sustainability. Or on the contrary how new technologies enable newer organizational forms and resistance to dominant and established narratives.

The special issue is divided in two. In this first issue we have a collection of articles, which deal with issues related to digitalized world of call centers, collaboration between business and university in regard to leadership education, the uprising of the indignados and Occupy Wall Street social movements and a conceptual preparation of an ethnography concerning the actualization of more sustainable energy supply chains in three municipalities in Denmark.

In the article *Portraits of Call Centre Employees: Understanding control and identity work*, Sanne Frandsen examines the life of employees in terms of how they respond to managements complementary use of technocratic forms of control and socio-ideological control to ensure efficiency and to produce an on-brand employee identity. It uses a portrait-based form of ethnography to illustrate both commonalities and differences in employees identity work and responses to managerial control. The stories from the call centre shows that cynical distancing - and subtle enactment of the service brand – grows out of simultaneous embracing of and distancing from the work role. The article thus discloses both the simultaneous enactment and resistance to managerial control devices at work in daily life in the call centre.

In the article, *The Indignados and Occupy Wall Street Social Movements: Global Opposition to the Neoliberalization of Society as Enabled by Digital Technology*, Victoria Carty explores two recent social movements: the Indignados uprisings that took place in Spain, Greece and Mexico, and the Occupy Wall Street protests that broke out across many parts of the United States. The article shows how these two social movements, which are treated as signs of global resistance to neoliberal policies and values, used the new digital media to enable counter-stories to dominant narratives. The point is that the new digital revolution has provided activists with new means for social movement activity and protest politics.

In the article, *Organizational ethnography: an interaction analysis of identity work through the study of other-orientation and storytelling practices in a leadership development forum*, Ann Starbæk Bager addresses the creation and meaning-making in relation to a leadership forum, which emerged as a collaboration between a university and leaders from the local organizational and community life. The article is an attempt to try to make sense of highly temporary organizational forms, which appear more and more often and have the character of network activities between organizations. The identity work in such temporary and fluid forms has been rarely studied. The article scrutinizes these local practices and provides insight into the lived lives of the participants in this temporary setting.

In the article, *Maps of organizational learning in regional development projects: Stories, objects and spaces*, Kenneth Mølbjerg Jørgensen and Anja Overgaard Thomassen develop a conceptual framework for doing an ethnography of three municipalities' work with integrating biogas into the energy supply chain. This will be an ethnography of interorganizational collaboration between a variety of different actors coming from different types of organizations. The authors propose mapping as a process of collecting and writing about lived stories as they emerge in different historical, geographical and material conditions. It is seen as a way of capturing a dynamic, changing and unfolding network of stories that are tied together but still disparate from another.

The second special issue will follow in November and will contain one more critical paper of call centers (Pitts), the problems concerning the formation of subjectivities of foreign students in an American University setting (Valenzuela, Palacios & Cast), the unfolding of life in the rural island regions of Croatia (Mendas), the construction of the Avatar Self and how it relates to everyday life (Przegalińska-Skierkowska) and a conceptual paper concerning dialogue (Henriksen), which is an important tool for doing organizational ethnography. A separate introduction to these articles will be written when these articles are being published.

We do not want to say anymore. Instead we want to give the word to the authors of the articles.

ENJOY!!!

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