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## Marginal Competencies

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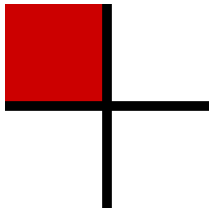
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## Marginal Competencies

Sverre Spoelstra, Tony O'Shea and Ruud Kaulingfreks

In the first editorial of this journal, the founding editors expressed their hope that *ephemera* would not be concerned with what it can do *for* or *with* organization studies, but what it can do *to* organization studies (Böhm, Jones and Land, 2001: 10). Seven years down the road, it is perhaps apposite to pause a moment and ask how to understand *ephemera*'s relation to organization studies today; perhaps with some risk of reflecting our life away.<sup>1</sup>

Some evidence suggests that *ephemera* hasn't changed the face of organization studies. For example, with currently 9 citations on Google Scholar, Gibson Burrell's '*ephemera*: Critical Dialogues on Organization' (the first article of the first issue) appears to be the most successful *ephemera* article so far – not quite in the same league as Levitt's 'Marketing Myopia' (1960) or Prahalad and Hamel's 'The Core Competence of the Corporation' (1990) who respectively score 569 and 4832 citations. Different kinds of dynamics are at work behind this kind of statistics, but few would doubt that impact upon the field of organization studies is amongst them.

Sceptics and sympathizers alike might question the idea of *ephemera* as an organization studies journal in the first place. After all, in a number of our issues (e.g. 4(3) on the multitude, 5(3) on social forums and 7(1) on immaterial and affective labour) the reader will have a hard time finding any reference that is widely accepted to be 'part of the field', e.g. articles published in *Organization*, *Organization Studies*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, etc. What is more, many classic organization studies articles – including the ones by Levitt, and Prahalad and Hamel mentioned earlier – have so far never been referred to in *ephemera*. If *ephemera* has the ambition to do something to organization studies, as the founding editors hoped, have we lost the plot? Indeed, how could we possibly maintain to be a defining factor in organization studies at all?

One step back: 'To define' simultaneously means to determine (from the Latin *definire*) and to draw boundaries (*finis* = boundary). We have never attempted to determine organization studies. As the name suggests, *ephemera* is rather interested in the undetermined and the undeterminable. To a certain extent it tries to mirror this

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1 These reflections are not meant to represent the editorial collective as a whole.

indeterminacy by not being bound to a fixed set of themes, established formats and traditional styles. *Ephemera* has, however, been very much concerned with drawing boundaries, or to be more precise, experimenting with, and sometimes transgressing, boundaries. Such experimentations are necessarily contested and are unlikely to be embraced by the majority of scholars – certainly not immediately and, in most cases, never.<sup>2</sup> While we are not against Levittian success, it is perhaps here that we can find one of the reasons for the lack of Google Scholar-impact.

It is profoundly disquieting that an academic field that promotes itself as multi-disciplinary, liberal and inclusive and that seeks to understand the marginal in organizations as a key theme puts at risk those whose work is viewed within the field as marginal. Anecdotally a representative of the Academy of Management once thanked a colleague for his continued research that took important risks at the very margins of the field. As he responded, those risks resulted in his remaining unpublished in the Academy of Management journals.

Here's the hypothesis that we will not test: *ephemera* is marginal in the field of organization studies because it is a marginal journal. Contrary to negative connotations of 'marginal' (often associated with low quality), operating in the margin has the huge advantage of loosening and experimenting with boundaries. After all, the centre is as far away from boundaries as one can get, despite the fact that the centre, by its very nature, attempts to keep them as close as possible. (Organizations defined by core competencies have relatively fixed borders close to their centre, which is another way of saying that core competencies determine.) Our marginalia include: the aforementioned themed issues on organizational matters outside the current definition of organization studies, media such as sound files, videos, and pictures, experimental forms of writing, and unfashionable treatments of familiar topics. The core business of *ephemera* is its very marginality.

Academia has an important and pivotal role to play in society as it may both develop and instil practice and knowledge in subjects and sanctifies what is known and knowable. At such a juncture there is massive scope for academics to commit symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1990) by, for instance, a delimitation of normative behaviour. Thus management scholars are made complicit with, for instance, the establishment of 'best practice' within organizational fields. A practice that all too often is more strictly concerned with the imposition of normative behaviour acceptable and established through, but not necessarily followed by, an elite (O'Shea, 2000). For us modernity needs a counter-logic that "enables the tactical redeployment of the marginal against the normalizing practices of a disciplinary society as well as otherwise (in)corrigible academic disciplines" (Pease, 1995: vii, in Champagne, 1995).

It is our belief, and here again we concur with Champagne (1995), that our strategic value lies in our ability to question and oppose the homogeneity that we find rife in organization studies. A homogeneity that we feel results in an inability to question and to think in its desire to achieve conformity. Against the organizational studies norm, and

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2 At least one of us has been told that his work lies too far beyond the place and so has no place in organization studies.

in so doing we of course help determine the norm, there is a need to look elsewhere towards other ideas, concepts, theories, disciplines. Thus to us there is as much 'value', probably more, in an original paper that discusses Sloterdijk in organization studies as in the 9765<sup>th</sup> that again demonstrates the ubiquity of benchmarking. The former helps define and develop the field through its marginality; the latter repeats the norm. Sadly, and as the statistics show (see above), the very nature of marginality often means that few attend to it.

Put in simple words then *ephemera* is marginal because it raises issues not spoken about in academia or the field of organization studies. It seeks to raise its own voice and not to repeat what's fashionable in the field. It expands the boundaries by forgetting about the centre and searching for what has been neglected or looked over. It questions the boundaries of the field by searching for that what we consider relevant.

This issue of *ephemera* is an open issue – by its very nature not a consistent whole. Yet the contributions that you are about to read have one thing in common: they all address marginal themes in organization studies. They are all about themes that are somehow related to organization studies but in experimental ways or about themes that arguably deserve more attention in organization studies. In short: this issue of *ephemera* clearly demonstrates our preoccupation with the margins of organization studies.

The first article of this issue, by Jussi Parikka, deals with virus and contagion in production. It is an article in which one doesn't find references to organization studies 'proper'. Parikka engages with amongst others Deleuze and Hardt and Negri and in the latter case puts forwards what we might consider as a more positive reading of viral life than appears in *Empire*.

In their article, Martyna Sliwa and George Cairns, propose both a greater role for novels in organization studies and advocate 'lay reading' as a means of praxis and interpretation that attempts to avoid the asymmetric power relationship of student-teacher in academia.

Niels Thyge Thygesen and Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen discuss New Public Management and systems theory. Whilst systems theory may be party to a wider audience in organization studies, it is this paper's focus on the works of Niklas Luhmann that arguably invests it with a marginality for a 'mainstream' organization studies audience. Their work interestingly questions the orthodoxy in management and organization studies concerning the "very assumption of unity" (Thygesen and Andersen, this issue) behind 'Management By Objectives' (MBO).

Pat Kane in conversation with Steve Linstead and Rob McMurray discuss amongst other things playfulness and the ethics of play in our dystopian world. A world where we are told that those of us privileged to live in the so called 1<sup>st</sup> world have increasing amounts of leisure time and capital with which to exploit it; a world however where those not as fortunate face a different reality. Kane's concern with an ethics of play critically considers our subjectivity in a subjectivising post-Fordist world and how play may avoid its totalising attempts.

Bruno Latour, interviewed by Tomas Sánchez-Criado, explains his search for a *Ding* (or thing) politics as was expressed in the exhibition 'Making things Public' in Karlsruhe in 2005. Things being originally 'assemblies' or 'cases' call for a political awareness of gathering between humans and nonhumans.

Is Stephen Dunne's review essay of Corporate Social Responsibility the exception of our editorial logic here? Without doubt, CSR has been a popular theme in virtually all journals of our field (and not often discussed in *ephemera*). Even if this is the case, however, rarely do we (here: critical scholars of organization) take the trouble of reading the likes of Kotler, as Dunne points out in his review. We couldn't agree more: Not just Sloterdijk deserves marginal readings, so do Kotler, Covey and Levitt.

The last contribution to this issue of *ephemera*, a review essay of Daniel Gross' *A Secret History of Emotion* written by Nader N. Chokr, deals with an emergent theme in organization studies: emotion. Rather than trying to understand emotions in a biological or psycho-biological significance, or in relation to cognition, the author looks at them from a rhetoric point of view, or how emotions are constructed in different times in history or for different cultural groups.

To end we might wish to voice a note of caution and issue some challenges. *Ephemera* somewhat provocatively lies on the margin of organization studies. Arguably such a position is always in danger as the boundary ebbs and flows in relation to the centre and as the centre attempts to territorialize all within its scope. Does one become absorbed, or do you attempt to live on a constantly changing terrain or indeed go beyond the margin to live in uncharted territory outside organizational studies? None of these are easy choices and none are necessarily right. What may work for some might prove to be anathema to others. It seems to us though that for the journal to remain liminal requires that our roles and positions within it must periodically, if not continually, be reviewed. The *ephemera* editorial collective must reflect the changing and diverging nature of the boundary and organizational studies fraternity. So after 7 years only one of the original editors remains 'in post'. Recently we have welcomed new friends and colleagues to the collective and now some of the 'old' collective will assume affiliated roles. We hope that the journal will continue to be marginal but to do so ultimately requires both it and us to change.

Some challenges then – what can you do to sustain us at the margins? Not simply to affirm but to question, subvert, challenge and transgress the field. What can you do, as marginal, to oppose your own subjection by our academic field and contest the legitimacy of the centre that forecloses and totalises? Let us not just theorise on organization but address the politics of our field to organize us as docile, marginalised subjects.

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