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Sliwa, Martyna; Spicer, Andre; Svensson, Peter

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Writing in the Margins is Being Elsewhere. Always.*

Martyna Sliwa, André Spicer and Peter Svensson

Marginality and Popularity

In the editorial for the *ephemera* issue 7(2) Spoelstra, O’Shea and Kaulingfreks (2007) reflect upon *ephemera*’s relation to the wider field of organization studies. Marginality is brought up as a main trademark of *ephemera*, in effect its core business. We would like to spend this editorial on following up on this theme. This is not only because marginality is a pertinent issue in need of further discussion. Which it is. It is also an attempt to use the editorial space as an arena for transparent dialogue between the members of the editorial collective of *ephemera*. For us, that is exactly what *ephemera* is or should be: an ongoing dialogue on organization (the original sub-title of the journal was *critical dialogues on organization*).

Let us take as our point of departure the very exit in Spoelstra, O’Shea and Kaulingfreks’ reflection in 7(2):

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? (p. 285)

This question raises some interesting and crucial issues regarding what it *means* to work, to write and think, in and from the margins. What kind of writing existence is the marginal one?

A mundane form of marginal writing is that taking place when we read and make use of the margins of the book or article page as a space for our reflections, associations, thought, critique and comments. Jotting down uncensored pieces from the flow of consciousness in the margins of a text is a very physical manifestation of writing marginally. From outside the centre of the page the reader/marginal writer can respond

* Peter Svensson would like to thank Matilda Arvidsson for her thoughts and inspiration during conversations on marginal writing in the fall of 2007 in Lund, Malmö and Copenhagen.

to and comment on the text. Marginal writing then becomes a way of discussing *with* – not *within* – the centre text.

If we expand this mundane form of marginal writing to a reflection on marginality as an academic position, marginal writing is a way, perhaps *the* way, of discussing and engaging in a dialogue with the field of organization studies without actually becoming a received part of it, without writing within it. The dialogue thus takes place in-between positions. Arguably, the marginal is the ultimate position to assume in a dialogue. You cannot go any further than to the marginal without exiting the discussion at hand. Beyond the margins looms a different discussion.

As also acknowledged by Spoelstra, O’Shea and Kaulingfreks in their 7(2) editorial a marginal position, intended or realized, renders problematic popularity and impact. What is the relation between marginal writing and the width of its distribution? Arguably, marginality cannot enter the state of popularity without facing the risk of self-destruction. The marginal writer can never be a part of the field if by ‘the field’ we refer to the corpus of ranked journals with established editorial boards and high impact factors. Spoelstra, O’Shea and Kaulingfreks (2007: 282) pose a question pointing to the very heart of writing, i.e. whether “we have lost the plot?” Perhaps the answer to this question is nothing but a roaring, indeed a marginal, *No!* Perhaps this is the plot. The marginal position resides in its unwillingness – maybe even inability – to gain popularity as defined through established rankings of journals. Hence, *ephemera* is not marginal within the field of organization studies; it is (or can be) marginal just because it is *not* within the field of organization studies.

Is this to say that the marginal can never be popular? That a prevalent presence on Google Scholar would be an indication of a loss of marginality?

Perhaps so. Perhaps even yes. However, this is not necessarily a result of some immanent logic in the relation between the centre and the marginal, but rather as a consequence of an academia governed by market logic. Being mainstream or marginal/alternative becomes in this world little more than a matter of being in or out of demand on the market of texts and ideas. A core competence of a researcher, so we are told in PhD-programmes, conferences and by well meaning senior colleagues, is that of being receptive to fads and gaps in research. Pragmatism and opportunism are brought to the fore as vital tools in the survival kit of research careers. The market logic of academia is as clear as it is destructive for marginal writing: If you want to become a researcher, come inside and join us – in here, not out there. The invitation to the community of successful researchers is an explicit call for being in demand.

However, being in demand involves a risk of ending up in the broad mainstream, as accepted, received, established, legitimate, predictable, applauded. Popularity can be quite a pleasant state of being, however one that compellingly pulls us into the centre court of mainstream discourse.

Is unpopularity necessarily a sad state of existence? Maybe this is exactly what marginality is all about: to be unpopular, out of demand, the one without a date on the

school prom, the one standing in the corner of the conference drinks reception, the only one never receiving any awards. Maybe the marginal is the habitat of the few.

Whereas the centre can be expanded infinitely (in an entirely homogeneous system, the centre fills up all space), the marginal is always situated in-between the centre and the rest of discourse (that which is constructed as another discussion). Consequently, the margin tends to be a narrow position and does not handle overpopulation very well. A crowded margin can be the genesis of a new centre.

Marginal Centres

What happens when the margin becomes crowded? When there are too many notes scribbled at the edge of the page; When there are too many people hanging around at the edge of the school disco, staring into their drinks; When being geeky becomes a piece of serious cultural capital? When the early hours are no longer the province of the lonely stroller; When the most deviant behaviours and styles become something which an accountant would declare themselves 'down with'; When it becomes acceptable for a twelve year old from a bourgeois family to wear a t-shirt declaring them to be a 'pimp', 'hustler', 'criminal', or 'dirty girl'? When business school professors get into psychoanalysis and masochism?

These situations may appear to be outlandish, but the marginal has become so central to many contemporary aspects of organizing. In their *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Boltanski and Chiapello point out that calls for creativity, flexibility, empowerment and fluidity which were once apparently marginal have become the very stuff of the new economy. They note that new wave managers (in France at least) have sought to "stress the continuities between the commitments of their youth and the activities they pursued in their firm" (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 97). These corporate margin dwellers have sought to do this through emphasising a new set of values which act as a gateway to success in the new capitalism. These are:

Autonomy, spontaneity, rhizomorphous capacity, multitasking (in contrast to narrow specialization of the old division of labour), conviviality, openness to others and novelty, availability, creativity, visionary intuition, sensitivity to differences, listening to lived experience and receptiveness to a whole range of experiences, being attracted to informality and the search for interpersonal contacts. (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 97)

According to Boltanski and Chiapello, the margin has become the centre. The concerns of post-structuralism and the fascinations of cultural studies have fuelled the slang of corporate hipsters. Indeed in this issue of *ephemera*, Colin Cremin points out that it has become a virtual right of passage for any aspirant investment banker to propel themselves into the margin through a 'gap year' experience. This is a time where middle class youth engage in purposefully deviant activity like taking drugs, hanging out with 'ethnic peoples' and becoming ecologically aware and perhaps helping street kids somewhere in an un-named Latin American megalopolis.

So where are margin dwellers left when their uncomfortably cool place gets filled? What is to be done? There are a number of solutions on offer. One would be a kind of

neo-conservatism that attempts to reassert the importance of the centre, and strictly police the margins. This typically involves a return to the good old bread and butter rules. This is what René ten Bos calls the ‘new severity’ – a desire to do away with the corporate hi-jinks and obsession with creativity and wackiness in favour of a rule bound world. It is a desire for systematic and contractual punishment in place of the anything-goes fun-fare of contemporary capitalism. This is the kind of solution which contemporary champions of the return to bureaucracy flirt with.

A second solution would be a search for a radical change which would seek to make explode any dividing line between marginal and central. This appears to be the hope of what Nancy Fraser (1997) once called ‘deconstructive socialists’ – this is the attempt to interrupt boundaries and systems of classification which render some marginal and some central. It is to not only celebrate characters that cross these margins, but to actually begin to seek to erase these differences, or at the very least to radically question them. This seemed to be the strategy of many during the last ten years who have celebrated the potential of ambiguity, hybridity, and border crossings. In recent years, this kind of approach has found its embodiment in not just armchair deconstructionists but also those of a more practical bent such as the Zapatistas. In this issue you will find Khasnabish celebrating the shape-shifting and margin-crossing nature of Subcomandante Marcos.

A third approach might be taking seriously the formation of marginal centres. These are gathering places at the edge of activity, a place where marginality can be supported, sustained, and maybe not made so marginal. It is a place for clustering, places where we might sustain ourselves at the edges. This would involve looking at the gatherings which can and indeed do happen when more people come and go from the edges. This might form a pattern like the ‘foam’ that Peter Sloterdijk talks of in his final volume of the *Sphären Werke* (2004). If we are serious about maintaining these marginal centres, then we need to begin to ask ourselves how it is possible to sustain them, sustain each other. And indeed what spirit is needed? Is it just one of the lonely wanderer looking for an edgy experience, looking to be the man in black, looking for the bliss of emancipation from social norms, looking for autonomy from oppressive systems? Or could we imagine these marginal spirits being sustained by another dream, maybe groups being washed up at the margins together and sustaining themselves in certain atmospheres.

Contributions to this Issue

In the first article of this issue, Alex Khasnabish discusses insurgent imagination as a way of articulating new forms of radical political actions and as a mode of engaging collectively in a hopeful creation of cultural and historical meaning. In this article, the impact of the Zapatista movement on the development of new insurgent imaginations amongst North American alter-globalization, anti-capitalist and social justice activists are explored. “To take social change projects seriously”, Khasnabish (this issue) argues, “we must also attend to this imaginative terrain and practice.”

In the next article, Colin Cremin offers a Žižek- and Lacan-informed reading of the phenomenon of the gap year. In the business and promotion of the gap year Cremin discerns a promise of a way out of the routinized everyday life and an entry into the *real* life, full of surprises and contingency. At the same time the gap year is constructed as a productive practice of self and career development where strengthened employability becomes a crucial selling proposition. As a promise of a safe escape from the routines of late-capitalism, the gap year is, Cremin suggests, an instance of the commodification of the contingent.

In his paper, René ten Bos engages with a new generation of management gurus. He points out that clown like calls for jocularity, fun and frivolity in the workplace have become increasingly passé. Instead, the management gurus call for a move back to the rule-book. This involves what ten Bos identifies as a kind of new corporate masochism – a desire to not just play by the rules but to be punished by them as well.

In the next paper, Christian Maravelias discusses the impact of the transformation from bureaucratic to post-bureaucratic principles of exercising power upon individuals' freedom at work. He argues that, rather than implicating an increase or decrease in individuals' freedom, this transformation results in a reconfiguration of its nature. Following his discussion, Maravelias warns that post-bureaucracy brings with itself the risk of "driving individuals into cynical and self-satisfied opportunism."

In her article, Prue Burns writes about Australian Generation X-ers. Deeply aware of the difficulties involved in speaking from the position of someone who belongs to a group which "simply do(es) not belong," Burns offers a personal, at times painful account of the cultural traits of her generation. In posing the question "So who are we?" Burns does not wish to provide a finite answer. Rather, her final words are words of inspiration and hope about who Australian Generation X-ers might become.

The Turbulence Collective has provided a brief note which reflects on the last year. For some it has been a year of triumphs, joy, love and pain. For them it has been a year when the alter-globalization movement has had to ask the question: "are we winning?" They invite the reader into a discussion of this and other pressing questions.

Bruno Latour's book *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-theory* is reviewed by Jeroen Veldman. The book is depicted as an introduction to ANT and as an argument for a wider understanding of 'the social' and 'agency', to wit, one that refrains from "the privileging of humans in the study of the social" (Veldman, this issue), and hence takes both human actors and non-human actors into account. Moreover, Latour advocates a research approach that takes seriously social life as it is played out in local and particular everyday situations.

Carl Cederström reviews Yannis Stavrakakis' book *The Lacanian Left: Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics*. He praises Stavrakakis for the insights he offers into the differences between Žižek's and Laclau's respective theories, and for his overall comparative analysis of the four thinkers termed by Stavrakakis 'the Lacanian Left': Žižek, Laclau, Castoriadis and Badiou. Whilst not uncritical of the text, Cederström recommends it to

the readers as, arguably, “the most important resource for anyone interested in exploring Lacan empirically.”

Finally, Campbell Jones provides some reflections on one of the massive, most long awaited, yet most challenging intellectual events of recent years – the publication of the first complete English translation of Jacques Lacan’s *Écrits*. In the context of the recent outbreak of Lacanianism in organization studies, the good Doctor offers a wise prescription: *Read*.

Exit/Entry

Let us exit this editorial and enter the 7.4-issue with one last question: Does the discussion in this editorial propose that being read and appreciated is a dangerous thing? Why should we publish if there is no single public? How do we write in foam?

The main thrust of the discussion is nothing more than a reflection on some of the tensions between writing from the margin of and writing within the field of organization studies. Applauds are seductive but potentially disarming. One mode of avoiding the gravity of mainstream, the exit from the margin, is to be in constant flux, to nurture a suspicious mind towards appreciation from the field, and to beware of broad agreement.

In that sense, the ephemeral aspirations of *ephemera*, “the celebration of the *ephemeral*, passing, transient, resistant to solidification, reification, massification” (Böhm, Jones and Land, 2001: 3) is intimately related to its ambition to operate from the margin(s) rather than from within the centre of the field of organization studies. Writing in the margins is being elsewhere. But is this desirable? Aren’t we here now? In this foam together? Maybe what we might hope for is a little stability; being able to touch, share words, and see each other for a few moments before the foam washes away and the world tears us apart again.

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the editors

Martyna Sliwa is a member of the editorial collective of *ephemera*.
E-mail: masliwa@essex.ac.uk

André Spicer is a member of the editorial collective of *ephemera*.
E-mail: andre.spicer@wbs.ac.uk

Peter Svensson is a member of the editorial collective of *ephemera*.
E-mail: peter.svensson@fek.lu.se