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The Developments in Ethnographic Studies of Organizing: Towards Objects of Ignorance  
and Objects of Concern

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Ethnography is enjoying much attention in management and organization studies today. The proliferation of specialist conferences and standing working groups at management and organization symposia – including EGOS and the Academy of Management – and the publication of significant new research monographs and edited collections are certainly more than suggestive of a burgeoning trend in organizational ethnography (see e.g. Kostera, 2007; Neyland, 2007; Ybema et al., 2009; Czarniawska, 2012; Garsten & Nyqvist, 2013 and O’Doherty, 2017). At its best it provides the basis for paradigmatic innovation in academic research communities, questions and unsettles taken-for-granted assumptions shared across paradigms, and pushes back against the secrets and lies in which modern corporations are so often mired.

For these and many other reasons, researchers are increasingly turning to ethnography in management and organization studies. It helps enrich and complexify our understanding of how struggles around power and inequality form group and sub-groups who continually pull and push at the boundaries and operations of formal organization. In one important review, ethnography offers a way into an inter- and cross-disciplinarity which remains an essential pre-requisite to the mapping of contemporary systems of globalizing power and inequality (Westbrook, 2009) – and one to which management and organization studies must surely want to contribute. If the social sciences are wedded to the building up of modern nation states (Bauman, 1987; Foucault, 2003), ethnography offers the possibility of developing new understandings about emerging post-national patterns of international order and disorder in which ‘the west’ appears to be in the process of being slowly dissolved and transformed (often in violent and horrific ways) through its confrontations with the global south and the east.

Whilst these ambitions remain some way off being fulfilled in studies of organization the emergence of new journals dedicated to ethnography in business and management studies is some indication of an increasing recognition of ethnography's capacity to open up new routes out of the old. From vast geo-political realignments in the global balance of power, to post-growth or de-growth economics and the challenge of ecological sustainability, the sense that things cannot go on as before is strong. Management and organization remain central to these broader social and political challenges and ethnography provides one important method for integrating and combining things which are typically understood to lie within local or mid-range domains at the meso level with things normally cast into the broader and more encompassing 'macro' realm. Where the proper domain of sociology is traditionally considered 'the social' (Bauman, 1987; Giddens, 1986), management and organization studies are normally considered subordinate to this broad canvas, but one where a derivative or applied sociology might be usefully employed. As we shall see management and organization studied ethnographically can help circumvent this initial separation (or dualism) that divides that deemed local from that considered 'global'.

Exploring the possibility of overcoming such analytical divisions remain central to the ambitions sought for this special issue. To do so we draw together some of the most innovative contemporary ethnographies in management and organization studies that treat a range of new trans-national objects, materials, and technologies. Algorithms, digital money, blood ontologies, data infrastructures, information coordination centres, collateral debt obligation contracts, and price display boards are far from being typical in management and organization studies but provide the focus for the papers published here and which mark out a terrain we call 'objects of concern' and objects of ignorance. Traditionally associated with culture or people – the soft or subjective side of another typical dualism – ethnography is now being developed to study things previously left to science, engineering or technology studies. There is culture or rather cultures in a test-tube as much as there is a 'culture' created by laboratory scientists working with test-tubes. Similarly, nature is not the other of culture, but is itself a cultural phenomenon, just as culture can be thought of as natural. Dividing the world of objects and materials that can be known best by science (nature), whilst reserving for arts, humanities and the

social sciences that which remains subjective (culture) is deeply debilitating for our research (Latour, 2005) and fails to deal adequately with a world of organization in which its objects and other phenomena increasingly escape such categorical confinement.

For some time now the discipline of organization studies has been confined by a syllabus and an agenda largely set by the perceived needs of business and management as they are constituted and represented from within a business school. If the client for sociology was society defined as a public good whose custodian was the state, then for those disciplines in a business school looking for distinction vis-à-vis existing departments of social science, it is the private sector, corporate firm and its executives and managers who acts as the client. This can lead to an extremely narrow and impoverished set of objects and practices deemed of relevance to the client: practical accounting and finance, the principles of marketing, best-practice human resource management, and optimised logistics and supply chain configuration. It is a world of organizational charts, box diagrams, neat lines of cause and effect and human decision makers sitting atop a pyramid of converging reporting lines. By contrast the papers we publish in this special issue all point to the need for a significant extension of the content and syllabus created for organization studies in a business school. The decision-makers are not always humans and nor can we assume the human and its groups monopolise the capacity for agency in organization. Where we still labour in organization theory with dualisms such as structure or agency, or subject and object, these papers trace objects and their relations which point to new forms of non-human coordination and agency. Humans and their society (the separation, and the positioning of one in the other) are contingent organizational outcomes rather than apriori and sovereign cause or condition for the emergence of these new objects. In this way the papers in this special issue push at the limits of current paradigms in management and organization studies.

In the rest of this introductory essay we extend and elaborate why one should or would undertake ethnographic research in a business school and consider what it can give access to and the questions it can answer and for which other methods struggle. We trace some of the historical conditions out of which ethnography emerged creating a variety of distinctive descriptive practices and styles. This is important in order to be

able to discriminate and see what is novel about the ethnographic practices developed by our contributors here. We also trace some of the complexities and paradoxes associated with the method of ethnography before drawing out some of the shared features of those ethnographies capable of studying forms of organization emerging around non-human actors where the relations and forces to which they give rise escape the categorical divides and modes of orientation given by subject/object, structure/agent, and global/local. Drawing on recent experiments in a genre we call 'post-reflexive' ethnography, which includes the work of people like Marilyn Strathern (1988, 1991, 1999), Bill Maurer (2005), and Annelise Riles (2001; 2006), we show that the objects of concern to which we turn in this special issue demand careful navigation of the organizational realities which these objects help emphasise. To what extent can contemporary organization analysis and organization theory recognise and acknowledge the work of these objects when they resist the representational conventions reproduced by most contemporary ethnography in management and organization studies. Finally, we wonder if some of this ethnographic work developed here might sketch out the lineaments of a post-paradigm organization studies, long called for (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Pym, 1990; Hardy & Clegg, 1997), but rarely practiced (cf. Hassard & Cox, 2013; O'Doherty and de Cock, 2017).

### **Organizational Ethnography in the Business School**

Despite flourishing in management and organization studies, ethnography is rarely studied systematically in schools of business and management. Where ethnography is claimed as a method it is normally justified on very superficial and pragmatic grounds – it allows research to get close to the action in organizations, for example, or it provides a method to study forms of social interaction that would elude more formal and structured quantitative or qualitative methodologies (Gill and Johnson, 2010). As a result the writing of ethnography is often produced in a very unselfconscious way, and in the main the writing of it in management and organization studies inadvertently tends to naïve realist or naturalistic descriptions<sup>1</sup> - and this despite the popular if ritualistic citation of Van Maanen's (1988) classic *Tales of the Field*.

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<sup>1</sup> There is also the attendant risk that ethnography will be seen as casual, personal and impressionistic and potentially dismissed on claims that it remains unreliable (Labadt, 2017), which is unfortunate because there is nothing so difficult as careful description of phenomena that avoids cliché.

Doctoral students are rarely offered courses in which they get the chance to carefully study ethnographic texts in order to work out the various different styles of writing and the rationale for cultivating style in one form rather than another. The descriptive practice of Geertz (1973) and the style of his texts as realized in his classic 'Cock fight' paper are very different to those of Evans Pritchard (1940) in *The Nuer*, or the style of the more contemporary Michel Taussig, for whom we might take a fairly recent paper on blue jeans as a typical example (Taussig, 2008). This means that ethnography is unfortunately under-developed as a method in schools of business and management and its most celebrated exponents (including Tony Watson or Gideon Kunda) tend to be either ex-sociologists or escapees from anthropology (see Rosen, 2000) who are typically autodidacts or self-taught writing outside the collective regulation maintained by disciplinary experts.

Historical reviews of the development of ethnography offer complex and checkered narratives that position ethnography in a number of different ways, many of which would not speak to the rather grandiose ambitions and emancipatory hopes with which we opened this introduction (Stocking, 1993). Rooted in early twentieth century anthropology and sociology, ethnography is often associated either with a western colonial project that studies far-flung island tribes for the purposes of empire and control, or marginal and exotic communities indigenous to the burgeoning modern western metropolis – working class trades and occupations, racial segregation, gangs, drugs and inner-city violence – wherever social order was perceived to be threatened from within (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007; Smith, 2017). This remains a somewhat jaundiced caricature of ethnographic history of course, and more nuance and care is required to develop an adequate genealogy.

Ethnography has always been practiced in a number of radically different ways and from a variety of political commitments, serving different ends and from often-incommensurable positions on underlying assumptions about ontology and epistemology. The methods and practices of Malinowski (1922) in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, which for many is the founding text of modern ethnography (Kuper, 1973), is so vastly different from those of his contemporaries that there is often little

agreed upon models and procedures as to how or what one is doing when doing ethnography. Indeed, it is often hard to grasp what it is that holds practitioners of ethnography together in ways that would offer the possibility of mutual acknowledgement or collective self-recognition. However, it is perhaps what appears to be this openness and freedom that is so attractive to those new to the rigour and demands of academic research, which can be misleading because it risks losing the discipline and specificity of ethnography as a method or what can be better argued to be a 'way of seeing' (Wolcott, 1999), an 'attunement' or existential commitment, even 'a way of life' (Rose, 1989).

Those adopting and adapting ethnographic research methods in management and organization studies usually justify their choice on the rationale that ethnography offers ways of 'getting close to the action'. Spending extended periods of time conducting fieldwork the ethnographer builds trust with indigenous members of the community or organization(s) under study and acquires privileged insider knowledge. In this model the intrepid ethnographer sets off to confront a bewildering and confusing organizational community to return some time later with the data that will eventually order and explain what was initially so disorienting (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). The much debated and ethically controversial study of various gay and ostensibly public sexual practices conceived and contracted through 'cottaging' or the 'tearoom trade' community (Humphreys, 1970) offers one example of this approach Casting light on a lifestyle and community of which mainstream society would have little or no awareness of its existence, Humphreys carefully teases out and elucidates the complexities and subtleties involved in organizing a semi-clandestine sub-culture. Similarly, in management and organization studies, ethnographic studies have helped understand the complex role of organizational sub-cultures (Turner, 1971), and the ubiquity of theft and stealing in work organizations - or what might be called 'stealing' by non-indigenous members of the community (Mars, 1982).

That one should seek to embark upon ethnography from within a business school is however one of the more intriguing challenges we need to address because there are very specific conditions of possibility that must be carefully navigated for those wishing to practice ethnography outside of its traditional homes in sociology and anthropology.

The customary norm that ethnography requires one-year full time fieldwork, for example, is doubtless one of the biggest obstacles for those wishing to conduct ethnographic research, and prima facie would seem to restrict its possibility to doctoral students. This reluctance might be explained by unique pressures to publish in the business school in which publication can be easily secured by the recycling of ‘gap-spotting’ (Sandberg and Alvesson, 2011, 2013) and formulaic papers that conform to the commercially driven agendas of private publishers (Harvie et al., 2012). Commentators from both within and outside the business school persistently rail against the quality and scholarly integrity of its research, and periodically this gets aired as anxiety about the rigour/relevance dilemma (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Mintzberg, 2004; Bennis & O’Toole, 2005; Starkey and Tiratsoo, 2007; Knights, 2008). Some have even called for the closure of business schools, in part because of the lack of independent scholarship and the damage to the economy and society promoted by a narrow and technocratic research and teaching syllabus (Parker, 2018). Indeed, widespread cynicism and accusations of moral and ethical failure in the business school has attracted insider ethnographers (Anteby, 2013) who against considerable internal collegial opprobrium and resistance have teased out the subtle processes through which the business school reproduces oppressive and conservative cultures that mitigate against serious scholarship.

### **The Promise of Ethnography: Complexity, Ah-ha moments, Story Telling**

Ethnography is uniquely placed to provide insights into complexity, paradox and ambiguity in organization which often poses problems to those seeking quick and pragmatic diagnosis and solutions to managerial problems accustomed to box diagram mappings, simple cause-effect relations and linear processes (O’Doherty, 2017). Notwithstanding the creative and performative feats and unintended consequences of these standard management 101 techniques, whose ubiquity can be traced to the influence of an engineering discourse and a broadly positivist conception in the practice and study of management science (Shenhav, 1999; Alvesson and Willmott, 2012), ethnography also shows how multiple realities can co-exist in organization such that management can synthesise or maintain worlds that are simultaneously predictable and ordered *and* overwhelmed by chaos and uncertainty (Watson, 1994; Knox et al., 2015). The two, order and disorder can become indistinguishable in ways that recall the visual flicker caused by the widely known young girl-old woman illusion, but this is a finding that goes



back to one of the first ethnographies of management (Dalton, 1959). To see not only the old woman or young girl, but both together simultaneously is a huge challenge, and still poses difficulties for management sense-making (Weick, 1995) who pressed for time and results tend to want to see things in more basic black and white terms. How these ambiguities and paradoxes are created by indigenous members of organizations and how they are lived with is only limited by the particular conditions and circumstances to which ethnography can delve and the study of work organization provides infinite variation on this theme.

In Willis and Trondman's (2000) 'manifesto for ethnography' they talk about ethnography's capacity to generate what they call an 'Ah-ha!' moment, in which our very basic sense of the world gets overturned or refreshed in which we see things again, as if for the first time. There is a moment of clarity and understanding that can vary in existential depth and profundity, but which remains fundamentally evanescent as the ethnographic method leads us to extend further into another round of relations that develop our research question taking us further away from that which is obvious towards uncharted territories, even questions not asked before. At the same time, this onwards and upwards drive confronts its own methodological paradox, namely that typically ethnography simultaneously leads us back to that which is so obvious that we have forgotten in a version of that well known Heideggerian puzzle worked out in *Being and Time* in which we learn of that which is *ontically* the closest is *ontologically* the farthest away (Heidegger, 1962).

It is perhaps little wonder that the practitioner of ethnography invariably experiences a sense of going around in circles (but each time perhaps deepening the lines drawn in the sand), or of experiences more disconcerting than this, more akin perhaps to an aimless wandering. Indeed, this is yet another trope in ethnographic method. 'Getting lost' (Solnit, 2006) or how to get lost is becoming more widely recognised as an important strategy in ethnographic research, the paradox being that it is only when you are lost that you have any sense of knowing what it means to be 'here' – which is a version of the 'fish in water' sales pitch sold to organizations by ethnographers seeking access, namely that the ethnographer can help tease out features of organization (the water) that cannot be seen or sensed by indigenous members (ask the fish how the water is today,

they are likely to respond ‘what water?’).

This brings us to another paradox of method and finding that ethnography can offer, namely what is added by ethnography to the stories that are told by members of organization about the way their organization works or doesn't work and how one manages in it. The ability to tell these stories requires the ethnographer to get as close as possible to becoming an indigenous or skilled, competent member of the organization they are trying to study. What is sought is, in part, insider's knowledge, but they are also trying to tell a story that members of the organization cannot tell themselves, they are in other words seeking to add to the stories currently known and told about the organization. To do this the ethnographer must navigate their role as both insider and outsider, but they can never lose that tension of being insider/outsider. The quality of the tale told of organization depends on coming as close as possible to becoming an insider (and there is a genre of field stories of ethnographers who ‘go native’ and never return (Rosen, 2000)), without losing awareness that one is and must remain an outsider to be able to produce an ethnographic account. There is a point reached at a paroxysmal point of tension in this relationship in which the ethnographer almost loses that tension in an infinitely minute moment of vacillation or transgression where the ethnographer forgets they occupy the role of ethnographer.

The complexities and paradoxes of method in ethnography, only some of which we have detailed here are perhaps the prerequisite or mirror image of the kind of insights into organization available to the ethnographer, a world of subtlety, paradox, counter-intuition, surprise and paradox. The time it takes to navigate and access these dimensions of organization does perhaps militate against the feasibility of such research in time pressed, results-orientated business schools, but at the same time such openings as it does provide into organization cannot be adequately contained and explained within hidebound academic disciplines. In this sense the business school provides an extraordinary confluence of modern disciplinary subjects, everything from evolutionary psychology and the pursuit of Popperian ideals in laboratory science to anarcho-syndicalists steeped in Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Mikhail Bakunin to an avant-garde of so-called ‘accelerationists’ and object oriented ontologists, the modern business school is certainly lively and heterogeneous (Parker, 2018). Given this, one might argue

that the business school is the site of a major transformation and even 'de-territorialisation' of the modern social sciences. What are the possible new objects and subject positions being created out of this confluence and possible de-territorialisation of the modern social science? How might we best study them?

### **Unsettling Subject-Object Divisions**

This special issue on ethnography in management and organization studies was commissioned to explore the possibility that new forms of practice were emerging around new objects of concern specific and unique to students of organization studies located in schools of business and departments of management. With this end in mind we will be exploring a range of phenomenon in the papers that follow, most of which will be surprising or even shocking to students of organization in business schools and indeed perhaps to ethnography: 'blood ontologies' (Wittock, Michiel, De Krom, Hustinx), price display boards (Cochoy, Hagberg and Kjellberg), bitcoin (Kavanagh, Miscioni, Ennis), data infrastructures (Ratner and Gad), collateral debt obligation contracts (Tischer, Maurer, Leaver), transport coordination centres (Heath and Luff), algorithms and high frequency trading (Lange, Lenglet, Seyfert). None of these immediately strike one as obvious candidates for ethnographic enquiry – and indeed in some of the papers there is a pushing against the boundaries of what might qualify as ethnography and the concomitant search for an alternative descriptor (i.e. praxiography).

At the same time, none of the papers fit within traditional social or applied social science disciplines and methodologies, both in terms of their object and allied subject position required for their research. There will be much to gain for those who do define themselves as sociologists, anthropologists, or philosophers, but there will also be a certain frustration or perhaps excitement and intrigue. Whilst medical sociology might be interested in the social life of blood, for example, even its social construction, the fact that there is a business of blood or blood economies, is one that would only pique the interest of someone thinking from within a business school. Moreover, when blood is discovered to be neither a concept (a social construction), or a reality independent of its knowers, we can learn much from what Wittock and colleagues describe as the multiple ways in which blood is *enacted* (see also Mol, 2002; Law, 2002). The making of business out of blood remains a potentially vast *social* experiment and demands an

entrepreneurial preparedness to sacrifice any belief in a constraining social context held together by prevailing customs and norms. Business makes a difference, and therefore we should expect that it requires unique methods of enquiry but which has not yet attracted much in the way of debate.

What social science could cope with such a mixed up (bloody?) ontology-epistemology, and moreover something which cannot be explained by a sociology or an anthropology? With its commitment to access-all-areas (see O'Doherty, 2017), the openness of ethnography would seem a valuable first step into studying this phenomenon, but then how precisely does one ethnographically study blood? Can it be asked questions? Is it possible to interview blood? If it is possible for some ethnographers to 'interview a plant' (see Hartigan, 2017), it may indeed be possible; but on a more prosaic level if organization is making business in ways that multiply the becoming of blood then business is complicit with ongoing *ontological* deconstruction that plays havoc with traditional categories of subject-object or structure and agent. With its traditions of 'becoming the phenomena', ethnography is well placed to cope with this derailment of subject-object or the dilemma faced when one expects the world to conform to either representation or reality.

### **The Development of Ethnography in Organization Studies**

We are beginning here to draw out some of the peculiar properties of organization to which this special issue sought to draw attention and to invite specialists in organization studies to consider and develop through their ethnographic research. This invitation was stimulated by the sense that ethnography was theoretically and practically under-developed in management and organization studies, or rather had stalled around the literary turn developed by Geertz (1973), whose 'thick description' is popularly cited as justification for doing ethnography by colleagues. One gets the impression that students attracted to ethnography are those who are intimidated by the apparently more formal rigour of quantitative methodologies or the (quasi) science of positivist hypothesis testing and data collection. Ethnography might seem a rather 'soft' option which encourages the development of researcher creativity and interpretation such that anyone might feel they are capable of producing 'thick description'. By far the most popular reason given for why ethnography is 'chosen' is that it allows the researcher to

'get close' to the action. Developing trust with informants it is claimed that ethnography can generate insight into the intimate feelings, thoughts and actions of managers or the authentic voices of the often-overlooked shopfloor worker (Nichols and Beynon, 1977) who might not confess what it is they do or think through the impersonal techniques of attitude surveys or formal interviews. This formed an important element in ethnographies conducted to test and develop labour process theory in the 1980s and 1990s. Collinson's (1992) ethnographic study of *Slavs* was particularly significant helping to show the contradictions and paradoxes under which modern industry labours whilst advancing insight into counter-intuitive puzzles such questions as 'why do workers work so hard', or 'how do certain forms of resistance enhance managerial authority and worker insecurity'? Important insights into the specific conditions of organization that pertain to women at work was also improved by ethnographies that brought to life gendered aspects of experience on the shopfloor and in trade union struggle (e.g. Pollert, 1981; Cavendish, 1982; Westwood, 1984; Cockburn, 1991).

These studies helped show how ethnography could study management and workers in action so as to reveal things not considered important by indigenous members of organization. This very 'taken-for-grantedness' might also give important insights into specific properties of organization, how it works or is made to work and its overt and sometimes latent or implicit discontents. To learn the difference between a 'nod and a wink' in social interaction is widely considered to be the high watermark of ethnographic ambition and insight, a subtlety whose organizational properties cannot be made evident through any other research method<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, often accused of being rich in local description but light on generalizable lessons or theoretical development, the lessons of ethnography are seen by some to be decorative, merely adding local colour to that which lies underneath or behind the scenes, on a more structural level accessed by a more powerful set of universal theoretical explanations for organization.

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<sup>2</sup> Consider the organizational work done by the supervisory indulgence or encouragement of 'the tap' as a means to reach output and efficiency requirements in the manufacture of airplane wings (Bensman & Gerver, 1963). Negotiations over start and finish times and observance of health and safety rules in the achievement of working order involve incredible complexities of discretion, compromise, push and pull, and testing and interpretation, that only ethnography has any chance of uncovering.

On the other hand, when an important contemporary ethnographer of management and organization like Steve Linstead is puzzled by his experiences as an apprentice in a cake factory, during which he was regularly submerged head first in a vat of coagulating cake mixture to remove small crystals blocking the outlet pipe (Linstead, 1996), one enters a world of ritual and humiliation of which the sanitized textbooks and teaching of business and management overlooks, denies its significance, or remains ignorant. Work in this vein (see also Rosen, 2000) began to appear through the support of the burgeoning international Standing Conference on Organizational Symbolism network (SCOS) that introduced neglected and often marginalized figures such as Barry Turner (1971) and Van Geenep (1909) to the understanding of management and organization.

The boon to ethnography generated by the 'cultural turn' in business and management studies in the 1980s (Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Peters and Waterman, 1982, etc.) helped show that organization is held together through paradox and ambiguity, transgression and liminality and often through arcane and intricate subterranean ways, which also reveal dimensions of organization through which power and inequality is pursued and sustained (Kunda, 1992; Collinson, 1992; Watson, 1994; Casey, 1995). The chutzpah of what Steven Dunn (1990:19-20) called 'prairie philosophising' and the 'smell of woodsmoke' that enveloped the genre of predominantly North American writing on organizational culture as a viable approach to restoring the fortunes of western economies confronted with Japanese and (at the time) the newly industrialising economies of the far-east, was systematically dismantled and the complexities and contradictions of culture in organization restored by these ethnographies.

In recent years ethnographic approaches in the wider academy have undergone significant transformation that take them far beyond the traditional anthropological approaches made popular by such authors as Kunda (1992) or Rosen (2000). Whilst Rosen is more experimental in his ethnographic craft (see Rosen and Mullen, 1996), he shares with Kunda and others in management and organization studies a largely 'realist' or in some cases a 'critical realist' commitment to ontology and epistemology (see also Watson, 1994; Casey, 1995). The 'late life of a cocaine dealer' (Rosen and Mullen, 1996) might abound in literary beatnik jazz and free association that conjures an intense and

paranoid experience for the reader, but this style seeks an integration of form with subject-matter that aspires to a greater representational veracity than could otherwise be achieved. There is an authorial or subjective will-to-power in relating compelling 'tales from the field' that leaves much to admire in these studies, but the reflexive and artefactual status of the writing is rarely explored in ways that would muddy the telling of a good story. A good story are still defined as those that conform to the Aristotelian principles of beginning, middles and ends and which reproduce the conventions of character, plot and narrative that characterize the modern bourgeois novel. The stories are essentially preoccupied with human experiences, and this is a feature shared by some of more recent developments including the visual-turn in ethnography preoccupied with access to more emotional, affective and aesthetic qualities of organization (Hassard et al., 2018; Wood, 2018).

Whilst Linstead (2018) sees this visual turn and ethnographic film-making for management and organization studies as a practice with 'performative' qualities - i.e. the ethnographic practice and final product circulates within and thereby helps constitute or *real-ize* those realities and practices that are the ostensible object of study – his films are still about human (collective and individual) experience and particularly about the possibilities for 'aesthetic moments' that elevate experience into a rarefied almost transcendent realm of poetic vision and insight. Whilst often moving in ways that extend our understanding of life as tragedy or Vanity Fair, it is still a comforting or placatory project: art as therapeutic 'pharmacology' (Derrida, 1982).

### **New Objects of Concern: Towards the Post-Reflexive**

In our call to attend to new objects of concern we wanted to know if it was possible to make an organizational ethnography of objects or things, even things as apparently mundane and inert as a t-shirt! Such flippancy might serve to provoke or mystify but there was a serious intent. We wondered to what extent human experience was being eclipsed by a new set of emerging objects we tentatively identified as global financial trading algorithms, 'big data', new symbiotic human-machine intelligences, affects, drones, bio-engineering, or other virtual and augmented realities. How do we study these things? Moreover, where do they take place? Where is their organization? 'Multi-

sited' ethnography (Marcus, 1995)<sup>3</sup> has been long been considered a methodological requirement in the study of contemporary anthropology, whereas a ritual Christmas party would appear to take place in simple place and time (Rosen, 1988). Similarly a cock-fight might suggest itself as a part or a microcosm of wider society as society works itself out through staged dramas that are nested into wider context in a circulating or dialectical functionality (Geertz, 1973). However, if objects are neither simple social constructions under the control and experiential grasp of their human inventors, nor existing in an autonomous realm of technical essence (Heidegger, 1976), where do they reside and what significance should we grant to their organizational capacities? What happens, moreover, to our understanding of organization if we abandon the presumption of society, and the assumption that society is a kind of bigger whole or a container in which humans reside (see Strathern, 1988, 1991)?

By following a t-shirt instead of say its human wearers or its workers, could we trace networks, relations and effects that might force us to re-configure our understanding of organization (including the time and place of organization) and in ways that displaced or alienated our human sensibilities beyond the comforts of traditional existential dread<sup>4</sup>? Students of science and technology studies, socio-materiality, and actor-network theory amongst others, have all in various ways abandoned the dualism of subject and object, and the assumption that the concepts of 'the social' and 'the technical' exist as delimited and differentiable domains to which explanation for organization can be sought. With their use we are searching for a phantom empirics. Instead we need concepts that work with their mutual and inextricable entanglement and in which neither has explanatory priority for the other.

In making these analytical moves we are encouraged to re-centre and privilege a range of contemporary objects that might be identified because of their incorporation into organization. Organization looks a lot different when we privileged a humble t-shirt or follow something like 'hair' (O'Doherty, 2017: 185-213). Such objects cut across

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<sup>3</sup> But often mistakenly cited for saying something betrayed by the apparent simplicity of its title.

<sup>4</sup> As members of late twentieth century communities we have a plenitude of intellectual and aesthetic resource by which to name and make sense of this existential dread, from the laughter of Kafka to the scream of Munch.



established divisions and as the network opens up around these objects we begin to find room for the possibility of agency and experiences that exist beyond the human-actor. Can an object have agency? Advancing these thoughts we might ask whether an object world of internet mediated algorithms and artificial intelligence is beginning to realise a cybernetic intelligence that begins not only to second-guess what we presume is left of human thinking but is perhaps re-programming our cognitive faculties and in ways that give rise to a collective-hybrid agency with powerful organizational potential? Legal status has been granted to such apparently fantastic creatures as 'ambient intelligence' (Hildebrandt, 2008), for example, which extends our understanding of criminality and criminal liability into realms previously consigned to science fiction. Do we now need to extend this dictum to consider the possibility that some of these objects might themselves be ethnographic researchers come to study us in order to feed data back to a new empire conspired by alien intelligence with the prospect of a coming war of the worlds?

If the human and its capacity for collective agency is no longer in control, or at the centre of these organizational worlds, to where or to whom should we send our ethnographers? Such speculations are perhaps at the very edge of what might be considered 'reasonable', but we find excuse for some of this by inviting readers to consider what might happen on the 'rim of reason' (Munro, 1998) when our current epistemologies and ontologies provide little purchase on recent events and objects in contemporary organization. Baudrillard's (1990) delirium might have been one symptom of this exhaustion of modern reason, but can we begin to develop strategies from within organization analysis based on the kind of careful descriptive practice associated with the traditions of ethnography? John Law (1994) once sagely commented that the ethnographer is 'never where the action is', by which he meant that an appreciation of the extended relations through which organization is achieved means that there is no simple time or place in which organization happens. It is widely known that apparent decision points at so-called crucial meetings to which the ethnographer might have access have been prepared for months and years in advance, but has this problem got worse with the consolidation of new tele-technology medias and the proliferation of non-human actors and 'hybrid' actors (see Latour, 1993) for which we have few conceptual hand-holds? Consider Amazon's Alexa. Is 'it' (she/he?) a personal

assistant that will help make our lives easier – a mere tool through which the human extends its control, or does Alexa give rise to new human-non-human relations for which our agency becomes orchestrated in ways that make it somewhat capricious and its longer term consequences unpredictable? Consider also climate. Is climate a human or natural force? Without clean separations or distribution of agency and causality, to where should we want to focus our efforts to modify or change causal forces? Following the work of Lovelock (1979) many are turning to ‘Gaia’ to explain the strange nature of these emerging agential qualities (see Latour, 2017) which might raise the possibility that these emerging hybrid assemblages of human and non-human even have something akin to what we call a consciousness.

Organizations are certainly aware that we are looking at them as ethnographers, an organizational self-awareness which has been widely accepted theoretically through the popular ‘reflexive modernization’ theses developed in tandem by Anthony Giddens, Scott Lash, John Urry and Ulrich Beck (Beck et al. 1994), and others that point to things like real-time information monitoring and information systems<sup>5</sup>. Whilst theoretically known amongst many in organization theory it has not led to much in the way of practical and methodological innovation to try and circumvent some of the possible tautological problems associated with studying something that changes in relation to the knowledge seeker. Clifford and Marcus (1996) are dutifully cited amongst scholars of ethnography in organization studies, but the implications that follow when we read of an anthropologist who is referred to a copy of his supervisors book by a tribal chief when asked about the symbolic and ritual qualities of headwear has not been worked through carefully in terms of ethnographic practice.

There is also the assumption that the ethnographer is an expert who will explain to indigenous members their community and this remains the dominant mode of ethnographic practice in organization studies. In Nader’s (1972) terms we are still in management and organization studies ‘studying down’ - those with less formal education, less expertise and less status perhaps. Most ethnography in management and

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<sup>5</sup> See Parikka (2010, 2015) for more a more contemporary thesis of media ecologies and its knowledge implications. Kittler (2006) is also essential for those seeking to understand the epistemological and ontological implications of digital information media and tele-technologies.

organization studies is also *theoretically* driven as researchers seek to collect interesting stories and evidence to fill out theoretical schemas and commitments. Whether this is Foucault's theory of subjugation combined with broad Marxist political economy (Collinson, 1992; Casey, 1995), practice theory, socio-materiality, or actor-network theory (Bruni, 2005; Alcadipani and Hassard, 2010), ethnography is made subordinate and in-service to academic theory (see Røyrvik, 2011).

Whether we can or should seek to abandon apriori theoretical knowledge and concepts has been debated amongst ethnographers in organization studies notably in a point-counterpoint debate in 1993 in which Van Maanen favours quite a naturalistic and descriptive response to the problem whilst Deetz and Mumby argue for allegiance to theoretical guidance that will allow ethnography to uncover the unofficial and marginalized narratives of organization life otherwise denied or repressed by those in power<sup>6</sup> (see Putnam et al. 1993). When reflexivity is acknowledged it tends to be reserved for that of the ethnographer and certainly there is little attempt to tackle the possibility that our theories (and ethnographies) are already circulating in a knowledge economy (Thrift, 1999) of which managers and members of organization remain readers and 'users' of that theory. One of us recalls an ethnographic moment when an interlocutor replied 'Ah, well this is Erich Fromm, territory, right? Are people still reading Fromm at university?'. Immediately this posed some real problems. For Fromm was to be used to help explain what was going on. How could we use Fromm as an explanation when indigenous members were using the same ideas as a resource to make sense of organization? The anxiety of tautology and infinite regress is never far from these concerns. More than this we are perhaps more insightful as ethnographers if we can acknowledge that managers and other members of organizations are themselves practical theorists, developing explanations of the world in which organization operates in which the explanation is also engaged in enacting a particular form of world-making. There is no divide between theory and practice, or representation and reality, which remain the dominant tropes for ethnographers keen to find a method that permits latitude for their own interpretative efforts and reflexivity.

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<sup>6</sup> Which also assumes an apriori moral critique, which might be better suspended in order to allow research to attend to experience in a less prejudicial way, to learn about one's moral position for example, to test, or allow it to change (O'Doherty, 2017).

## Ethnographic Developments in Recent Anthropology

Strathern (1991) has been at the forefront of anthropological theory and practice in developing forms of ethnography that attend to these dilemmas in knowledge and the work of Maurer (2005) with his proposal to advance 'lateral reason' and Annelise Riles development of (2001) 'inside out' ethnographic practice have done much to extend Strathern (see allied projects of Rabinow, 2007; Holmes and Marcus, 2006; Marcus, 2013). Sometimes called 'post-reflexive' ethnography, Maurer and Riles produce an ethnographic practice that acknowledges the world-making complicities of ethnographer knowledge seekers. In Riles' study of networks and non-governmental organizations as they operate in and around the institutions of the UN she realizes that the knowledge practices - reading, writing papers, analyzing and debating evidence - mirror in form and content precisely those practices in which she is placed as an academic. Often the very same theory, academic theories of globalization, for example, are being used by members of these organizations to construct and shape policy and practice, which makes more complex the status of these theories as disinterested explanatory resources for academics. Riles seeks ways of surfacing the un-seen and mundane that is shared by both the putative object of analysis and the subject doing the analysis. In this way she turns 'network' from a descriptive or conceptual register into a resource that helps enact what it is talking about. This is a turning 'inside-out' of network in an effort to ethnographically map this elusive realm of practices and relations that are responsible for enacting organization but which normally remain obscured sometimes by virtue of their apparent superficiality, their marginality or triviality<sup>7</sup>.

In his research Maurer in a similar manner to Riles wants to acknowledge the intellectual and theoretical reflexivity of that (humans and non-human actors) which he studies to seek ways of side-stepping (the 'lateral' of lateral reason) the problem of

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<sup>7</sup> Riles' work shares affinities with a broad range of emerging practices in the social sciences that Nigel Thrift (2007) has sought to collect under the title 'non-representation theory'. The work on performativity in recent social studies of finance is also similar in approach and intent (see Callon, 1998, 2010; Mackenzie, 2008; Muniesa, 2014).

tautology that strikes when knowledge seeks to know knowledge practices which are formally very similar. To acknowledge one's implication is a first move and during his research Maurer will become a skilled practitioner or expert on Islamic finance or bitcoin for example, a keynote speaker at insider industry conferences or events, and someone to whom other practitioners might seek advice, which implicates Maurer in the facilitation and extension of networks of influence through which the world of bitcoin mutates. Is Maurer the subject or object of research, the actor or the observer? These questions help open a complex and shadowy world, highly sensitive and uncertain, and in the case of new technologies and realities emerging around things like bitcoin, unpredictable and febrile, one of entanglements and mutations in which things like causation and effect enroll and implicate the ethnographer (see the mysterious K.D., 2015). In reading Maurer or Miles, or the 'para-ethnographies' of Marcus and Holmes, one gets the sense of dispersed and complex agencies where subject and object or structure and agency no longer hold. Our customary intellectual resources for explaining *where* the action is, or *what* is agency are misleading and of little explanatory purchase in these worlds shaped by quasi-subject/objects (in Serres' (1992)), or actants in Latour's (1996) terms.

Finally, the work of Strathern, Maurer and Riles has been seminal for the development of new forms and styles of ethnographic description more adequate to the dilemmas and paradoxes opened up in post-reflexive studies. Instead of abandoning the challenge of 'description' they push against the application of existing repertoires or templates of classificatory and descriptive organization that will reproduce cliché and a sense of having always-already anticipated what it is we might find out empirically by virtue of powerful academic theories. In a sense they are seeking 'weak' explanation by not offering the reassuring tropes that are popular in academic work where we might find bitcoin being described or explained as 'capitalist' or a social construction, or the work of 'neo-liberalism', the economy, 'culture', the contradictions of capital, or actor-networks. As Latour (2005) counsels, we need to avoid ready-made concepts and explanations which act to short-cut explanation. Instead of seeking these short-cuts we should follow relations and practices all the way and not presume a backstop or context to which we can appeal for explanation. Description necessarily becomes more detailed and more exhaustive once we abandon the use of ready-mades and other theoretical or

conceptual black-boxes.

### **Objects of Ignorance and Objects of Concern**

In this special issue, we were keen to attract academics in management and organization studies who were grappling with similar issues in their ethnographic practices. We wanted to try and focus our efforts by selecting a range of possible objects of concern for contemporary research in management and organization. We asked scholars to consider a range of new trans-national objects, materials, and technologies including new forms of agency and non-human actors that also push at the limits of our current paradigms in management and organization studies, whether in the form of global financial trading algorithms, 'big data', new symbiotic human-machine intelligences, affects, drones, bio-engineering, or other virtual and augmented realities. How are we to study these things ethnographically, we asked? Can one make an algorithm, for example, the subject of ethnography?

Here of course we press against the *graphie* (writing, signs, communication) which is that of the *ethnos* (people, community), and to invite interest in forms of 'Writing organization' (i.e. code, software, algorithms) that are neither human or non-human, but assemblages that mutually re-define what is human and non-human. We have variously spoken of 'symmetrical ethnology' (Czarniawska, 2017), or 'gaiagraphy' (O'Doherty, 2018) to reflect our methodological efforts to permit equal status to human and non-human actors and which stakes out a similar realm of organization captured by people like Eduardo Kohn (2013) in his efforts to work out 'how forests think', Marisol de la Cadena's ethnography of 'earth beings', or Hannah Knox's (forthcoming) study of organizations and practices that bring about something akin to a 'thinking like a climate'<sup>8</sup>. A strong relation to this work is obvious in the works of Annemarie Mol (2002) and John Law (2004), who are both widely read by management and organization scholars. Indeed, "praxiography", a neologism coined by Mol, describes very well what most of us are trying to write.

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<sup>8</sup> Some have sought to include this work in what is called an 'ontological turn' that cuts across anthropology and science and technology studies (Henare et al., 2007; Pederson, 2012; Holbraad and Pederson, 2017) and which traces a lineage back to Latour, Strathern and Viveiros de Castro.

The various contributors to this Special Issue took up the challenge of attending to new directions in ethnography and the various questions we posed in different ways. Donncha Kavanagh, Gianluca Miscioni, and Paul Ennis suggest that the simultaneity of the financial crisis and the emergence of Bitcoin provides an opportunity to renew and refresh both our questions of what is money, but also what becomes of ethnography in a technologically saturated everyday. In their paper, Bitcoin is treated as an emerging object of concern that is never settled, never geographically or temporally bounded and thus never open to treatment as a conventional ethnographic field site. To retain the sensibilities of ethnography, while retuning our forms of engagement and analyses through these ever emerging digital matters, requires a form of ethno-resonance they suggest. Through such resonance, Bitcoin can be studied while a critical distance is maintained through which the cyberlibertarian orthodoxies of emerging cryptocurrencies can be analysed. What emerges is something akin to a scaled-up ethnomethodological breaching experiment, firstly for money with the financial crisis and Bitcoin both encouraging speculation on financial futures. But also, secondly, of ethnography: just what can it mean to now study something without a field?

A more conventional treatment of ethnomethodological precepts, although never less than technologically saturated, is pursued in Paul Luff and Christian Heath's study of centres of co-ordination. Here visible problems and how they might be practised, forms the object of concern. In place of a focus on breach, comes a study of the on-going practices through which the co-ordination of technology, organisational arrangements and participants are enabled through sequential and interactional work. Technological saturation in the control room, however, only provides circumscribed access to the material environment where problems are taking place. In a similar manner to Bitcoin, this raises questions for the ethnographer. Ethnographic study must now become both multi-sited and multi-modal, engaging various techniques for recording the visual and auditory traces of the control room. Although both papers relate to ethnomethodology, to technological saturation and emerging objects of concern, Kavanagh and colleagues respond methodologically through resonance, whereas Luff and Heath respond through up-close study of sequences of naturally occurring action.

An alternative methodological response to the ever emerging, technologically saturated workplace is provided by Nathan Wittock, Michiel De Krom and Lesley Hustinx. Their study of blood takes a praxiographic approach to the organisational co-ordination of blood's multiplicity. For these authors, praxiography involves paying close attention to activities, events, buildings, instruments, procedures and objects, enabling blood itself to be an active participant in the study. Their particular concern is for co-ordination once again, but this time the ways in which distinct and even incoherent enactments of blood can be sequentially and temporally co-ordinated in order for the organisation to continue to sensibly treat its central matter of concern. Praxiography, drawing on Mol (2002), thus requires a move away from a pluralistic approach to objects, with various actors focusing on different aspects of the same object, to multiplicity that signals the enactment of different versions of the object. What then emerges within the organisation of Belgian blood donation, is blood as a gift, and as suspicion, and as management, and as research, and as economy.

From resonance, to studies of co-ordinated practice, to research on the praxiographic co-ordination of different versions of the object, we can discern different matters of concern each emerging through distinct technologically saturated everyday. For our purposes in underscoring new directions in ethnography, we can also start to trace out the methodological contours of these investigations into challenging objects: the need to find distinct ways of making something as elusive as Bitcoin open to analysis through ethnographic sensibilities; the challenges for ethnographers in accessing the material environments of problems that require a response through control rooms; and the complexities produced via the organisational co-ordination of ontological multiplicities. What these challenges start to reveal is that ethnography and ethnographers are taken in new directions through these studies.

Two of the papers offer a response to the difficulties of grasping elusive objects, through text. For Cochoy, Hagberg and Kjellberg, the history of the digital is a story that cannot be separated from its etymological roots in the digit. In their study of pricing practices, ethnography becomes literally translated into the writings of the people – in this case, shopkeepers. The latter are central, it is suggested, to changing practices of price-writing and to the emergence of digital forms of price communication. Through close-reading of



Progressive Grocer, the authors suggest that a move from coded to open prices, from hand-written to printed displays of pricing can be explored. In place of up-close study of the moment to moment activities of key figures – which in this paper would be mid-twentieth century shopkeepers – comes up-close study of the promotional texts through which new pricing technologies and techniques were enabled. From an ethnography in the hands of the researcher, comes an ethno-graphy through the hands of the shopkeeper (at least mediated via Progressive Grocer).

In the same way that twentieth century shopkeeping is now unavailable as a contemporary practice to be observed by the ethnographer, Daniel Tischer, Bill Maurer and Adam Leaver suggest contemporary financial practices are full of opacity. The document then provides a route into these otherwise obscure worlds. Here collateral debt obligations provide the ethnographer with a textual entry point into finance, but not simply as a written record cast free from the richness and difficulty of ethnographic study. These documents enact. They put the ethnographer in the same position as an investor whose decisions on investment may well be shaped by the available documentation. The documents themselves provide something akin to a tourist guidebook, establishing and maintaining relations between various market entities. The documents are thus brought to life through allusion (or one might say resonance with) the history of ethnographic interest in markets, in particular Geertz's study of the bazaar. Whereas for Cochoy and colleagues the texts of Progressive Grocer enable access to the writing practices of shopkeepers, for Tischer, Maurer and Leaver, collateral debt obligations provide a guide to the travails of the bazaar.

What these papers share in common is that contemporary ethnography appears to be characterised by a shared and active pursuit of unconventional fieldsites. From Bitcoin to blood, from recent history to financial opacity, ethnographers are increasingly seeking to enter organisational settings that require a deep and challenging rethinking of what does, and what ought to, constitute ethnography. This is made most apparent in the paper by Ann-Christina Lange, Marc Lenglet and Robert Seyfert on algorithms used for high frequency trading in financial markets. Their emphasis is on objects of ignorance as matters of concern. As algorithms increasingly participate in trades that are beyond the speed of human traders, with automated decision making taking place

outside the knowledge of human participants, ignorance abounds for both participants and researchers. This version of the technologically saturated everyday requires a further imaginative leap if it is to be engaged by ethnographers. Lange and colleagues draw on Serres (1982) to develop the quasi-object and quasi-subject as a means to capture something of the relations between traders and algorithms. What this suggests is that we need to rethink ethnography once again, but this time by also thinking algorithmically.

If algorithms provide a logic for organising the world of financial trading, Helene Ratner and Christopher Gad suggest that databases, data warehousing and data infrastructure provide new and emerging means for experimentally managing contemporary education. The move to make Danish schools' performance public and comparable through these data infrastructures, has opened up the opportunity for experimentation, establishing and cutting relations between various entities. But the organisational world being made is also always unfinished. Borrowing from Strathern, the connections are partial, relating to different concerns and always necessarily still in the making.

## **Conclusion**

With this special issue we sought to stimulate management and organization studies scholars to (re)think the possibilities for organizational ethnography in the wake of various developments in theory and practice associated with post-reflexive ethnography, or after-postmodernism. We were particularly interested in studies that were tackling what we see as "new objects of concern" in management and organization studies. Within mainstream approaches to management and organization studies these objects of concern might appear exotic or even insignificant. To us, they seem to be possible portents of a new era giving rise to phenomena that falls outside the customary analytical distinctions and dualisms of modern social science. In these conditions the macro and the micro are no longer the stabilizing heuristics they might have once appeared and this is why it is important to explore the ways in which the arbitrary might become the rule, or the ways in which the traditional dualisms of the social sciences – macro/micro, global/local, structure/agent – become unsettled and redrawn, or even inverted and displaced under the influence of such objects of concern. In tracing the genealogy and effects of these new objects of concern we may discover new

organizational phenomena – or perhaps they are here already, but still unseen within the dominant disciplining of the subject and its managerial practices.

What these articles reveal is that a formal organization is not a tribe, not an *ethnos* of any kind. At present, organizing takes place among, between, and outside formal organizations. But exactly because of that, new tribes, or "communities of practice" arise and join the old ones, such as professions. Most importantly, the "tribes" have widened, as the researchers noticed the presence of what we might call, following Michel Serres (1982), quasi-objects and quasi-subjects that play a big part in tribal life. And to study such wide tribes, no "anthropology lite", justly criticized by Paul Bate (1997), is enough to do a proper "participant observation". One has to do it – to buy bitcoins, to treat algorithms as actants, to follow the flow of blood, or to trace the origins of taken for granted innovations.

True, an increased attention to objects of concern has been made possible by new technologies, digital as well as visual. After many years of neglect, objects and technologies become again foci of organization studies. Together with our colleagues who study science and technology, we hope to be up-to-date with the newest trends in global organizing. And as to the methods used, perhaps one needs to be reminded by Stephen Toulmin (2001: 84), that the term *methodos* referred to pursuit of any goal, with no particular reference to obligatory procedures. Anything that permits us to reach the goal by ethically approvable ways will do.

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