

Theory and politics in organization

Steffen Böhm, Campbell Jones and Chris Land

Spectres

Scanned from a faded old analogue print and bearing no date, this photo was taken at the first meeting of the recently formed *ephemera* editorial board in Chris' living room. Someone had suggested we should capture the moment for twenty years hence, when people asked us about it. Weird.



Image 1: Image provided by the authors

Given the rather shabby looking Christmas tree sitting on the TV, the image was probably burned onto a gelatine and silver halide film at some point in late 2000. The idea started when Steffen and Chris were the PhD student representatives at Warwick Business School, editing a PhD newsletter they called the *International journal of ephemera*. The title intended to cock a snook at academic pretensions to world-leading excellence, while simultaneously indulging some of our postmodernist pretensions by delighting in the fleeting ephemerality of life and meaning, accepting that this too shall pass, and dancing, rather than despairing, in the colossal wreckage of Professor Ozymandias’ mighty Work. The *International journal* included a ‘Mayfly of the month’, encouraging a celebration of the sheer diversity and beauty of Ephemeratopera. The name was, fittingly, not only reflective of a more abstract passing away, but of the insect of the genus ephemera, known for being born, living and dying, in Europe at least, in the course of a day each May.

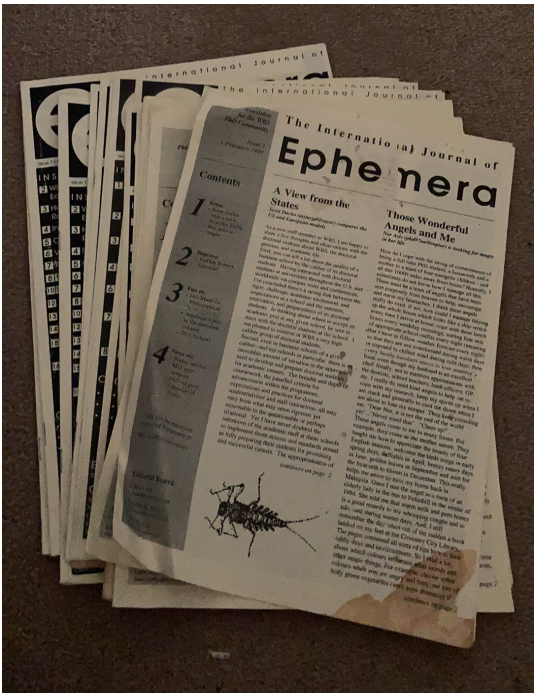


Image 2: Image provided by the authors

This all might have ended there, had Campbell not moved to the UK to join the Warwick doctoral programme in the European autumn of 1999. Our combination, and the context and gathering place of Warwick, which we knew then simply as ‘the machine’, produced a misfiring, Belbin-like logic of functionalist team-role composition. Steffen’s background in banking and consultancy had given him practical skills, an understanding of technology, and a deep, reflective mind. Chris brought an infectious energy and enthusiasm from a background in vegan anarchist wholefood cooperatives and punk-rock, including the DIY ‘zine’ scene and a youth spent playing with Letraset, typewriters and photocopiers. And Campbell had an austere commitment to reading at a time when others seemed to think that reading the original was optional and postmodern and poststructuralist theory were box-of-convenience positions rather than specific intellectual arguments.

As with all work, this project was made possible by collective efforts well in excess of the three of us. We noted in our first editorial the importance of reading groups in preparing for launching our own journal, even if we didn’t mention the specific importance of our reading of Volume One of Marx’s *Capital* through the European summer of 2000. Iain Munro, then a lecturer in operations management and now Professor of Leadership and Organisational Change at Newcastle Business School, was a part of this group, and stood out as an awe-inspiring, progressive presence at Warwick in those days. We saw that Iain was already in, but not of, ‘the machine’, and his encouragement and support of our efforts was priceless. We were also supported by comrades on the doctoral programme, such as the wonderful Torkild Thanem, now Professor of Management and Organization at Stockholm University. We were also supported from within ‘the machine’ by Keith Hoskin, the great scholar of accounting and the examination, who was Professor of Accounting at Warwick at that time. We even bid for, and were granted, £2,000 by Warwick Business School to establish and run the journal for two years, on the condition that we subtitle the journal ‘critical dialogues on organization’ rather than anything more radical. We complied, even though we found ‘dialogue’ to be a hopelessly liberal notion, and critique to be only one moment of the politics of organization.

Why, though, did the ivory towers need storming? While perhaps interesting, or even entertaining for some, anecdotes such as these are not enough to understand the conditions in and from which *ephemera* was born. To understand these requires, as C. Wright Mills so elegantly put it, paying attention to ‘the economic and political institutions of the society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals’ (Mills, 1959: 9). There are four key aspects we think are important to understand, both for the sake of historical understanding and for the theory and politics of organization today: first, the intellectual context from which *ephemera* was established and took root; second, the importance of institutions that provided the medium and nutrients for the journal’s early fermentation; third, the political-economic context of universities, and specifically business schools, in the UK at the turn of the millennium, as well as their sometimes parasitic symbiote, the publishing industry; and fourth, the very idea of organization, as verb and noun, which *ephemera* has always intended to displace and disorganize, in the hope to reach the shores of a radical new organization of life. A lot has happened over the last twenty years. As the world has changed – and, of course, we have also changed – we thought it would be worth recalling what was, and what we hoped to achieve at the time, before we move on to consider what has changed and, crucially, where *ephemera* and other related ventures might be going.

Intellectual context

Steffen and Chris had joined the MA in Organisation Studies programme at Warwick in 1997, in the department where Gibson Burrell held the Chair in Organizational Behaviour. It was the same year that Burrell published *Pandemonium: Towards a retro-organization theory* (1997). Most PhD students then, and even now, knew *Sociological paradigms and organizational analysis*, which had been published by Gibson Burrell and Gareth Morgan in 1979, or the popularizing version *Images of organization*, which was published by Morgan in 1986. By contrast with *Sociological paradigms*, *Pandemonium* was a completely different kind of book. Physically, it adopted the conceit of a bi-directional text, provisionally separated by a central reservation that the reader was actively encouraged to traverse by constructing humuments

cutting across and through sections. As well as exemplifying the best and the worst of the postmodern moment in organization theory, *Pandemonium* teetered on a threshold: tempting, taunting, inviting us to cross over, beyond mere *organization*. As readers, we could not mistake the interdisciplinarity, the erudition and the vertiginous scope of the book. If there is a parallel to this today, then it is in works such as Harney and Moten's profound ethico-ontological treatise *All incomplete* (Harney and Moten, 2021), or indeed, in the recent pages of *ephemera* itself. Putting aside all pleasantries and seeking to please none, Burrell turned effortlessly from pain and torture, to careers, witchcraft, genocide, labyrinths, Cabalism, Kafka, Sade, the peasantry, McDonald's, and Michael Jackson's penis. The text was a radical opening to difference, to the topics that were pushed out of or buried beneath the veneer of rationality reflected in the glass-and-steel frontages of business school brochures. *Beneath the atrium, the abattoir*. It featured a family tree and a 'scratch and sniff card'. In terms of the intellectual context in which *ephemera* arose, this radically open encounter with the breadth of what could count as meaningfully within the remit of 'organization', and of 'organization theory', was essential. The book threw open the windows of perception and issued at least one invitation to jump. *Sociological paradigms* had created a two-by-two matrix upon which self-conscious scholars could nail themselves and their thinking, adopting a position from which to fight the ensuing 'paradigm wars'. *Pandemonium* offered a radical opening of organization theory to its constitutive yet endlessly silenced outside, its repressed others, and opened to a creative practice of reading and writing that not only tweaked the nose but punched the face of the positivist reactionaries holed up in the business school.

Pandemonium was not only revolutionary in its content but also as a physical text. The leitmotif 'linearity kills' is repeated and reworked throughout the book, which in its form simultaneously seeks to escape linearity, doubling back on itself in the bottom half of each page, inviting transversal readings across the 'central reservation', and constructing linkages that might escape the author's narrative. Such a device was only possible at a moment at which the Gutenberg era was drawing to a close. The World Wide Web was becoming well established and the rise of new forms of hypertext – which itself dates

back at least as far as the earliest Talmudic commentaries – constituted a condition of possibility for both a text like *Pandemonium* and for our choices in distribution for *ephemera*.



Image 3: Image provided by the authors

The first issues of *ephemera* were printed and bound in paper at the University's print services, with funding that had been provided by Warwick Business School. The decision to print physical copies reflected a continued commitment on our part to a hierarchy of the printed text over the digital. Even then, the very ephemerality of the internet aroused suspicion and seemed inadequately substantial to count as legitimate knowledge. Some of us today still retain this faith in the durability of the physical, which is at least in part a hangover of the cultures and religions of The Book. For us, printing copies with an ISSN number meant that we could submit them to the British Library in London for archiving in the edifice of the Euston Road atheneum. This was important for us as academic neophytes. Our induction to the scholarly community of organization studies was through the written text, as much as it was through conferences. This was a time at which we would each spend hours every week in the university library browsing the most recent

editions of journals. While printing on paper was perhaps not ‘efficient’, this meant we viewed a journal issue as a coherent whole, an agora where the public of our discipline gathered to share their ideas. Many of those ideas would not be relevant to our own research, but this practice of reading a journal *as* a journal, as one can attend to the time of listening to a musical recording *as* an album, informed how we thought of a journal. Each issue should have a certain consistency: a not entirely contrived theme and an editorial introduction which did not merely summarize or repeat the articles but took a position. This stands in stark contrast to the most common practice of academic reading today, which, more often than not, is so time-constrained that meandering through stacks of books and journals has been by and large replaced by searches using algorithms responding to a pre-given research question. This enables a more efficient use of time but places this imperative of ‘search and cite’ over belonging to a community of scholars. It also allows members of a field to plead blind ignorance of developments elsewhere, or even in their own discipline. This has also shifted the control over research data from journal editors to the publishers in charge of the citation indexes and databases.

We will return to both of these points – the changing nature of the university itself, and the political economy of publishing – below, but first it is worth returning to the specifically institutional medium that enabled *ephemera* to materialize. The University of Warwick had porous disciplinary boundaries, with students and staff organizing joint seminars and reading groups with peers in philosophy and sociology. In addition to this open, curious, and interdisciplinary – if not downright undisciplined – environment, and despite Warwick’s not unfounded reputation of being run like a corporation (Thompson, 1970), the university, at that time, was still governed and managed in significant ways by academics, rather than by the managerial cadres running universities today who come from another quite different world than that of the scholar.

Institutions

In the case of *ephemera*, we benefited enormously from the generosity of established academics in writing for us and sharing contacts through their networks. This allowed us, from the very beginning, to publish contributions by established luminaries including John Armitage, David Boje, Robert Cooper, Catherine Casey, Gary Gemmill, Silvia Gherardi, Ruud Kaulingfreks, David Knights, Rolland Munro, Martin Parker and Hugh Willmott. In the summer of 2001, we therefore organized and hosted a roundtable at the European Group for Organizational Studies (EGOS) conference in Lyon, which was subsequently published in our third issue (Boje et al., 2001). We also had the good fortune of working with younger and then-emerging scholars including Alessia Contu, Peter Fleming, Saoirse O'Shea, Alf Rehn, André Spicer, Samantha Warren, Ed Wray-Bliss, Ann Rippin, Tazio Mueller and Bent Meier Sørensen, who have since gone on to profoundly reshape the research agenda in critical management and organization studies and beyond. While many supported us, and the depth of this support should not be underestimated, support was far from universal. We were all taken aside at one time or another and told to stop wasting our time on *ephemera*. 'It has done all it can do for you,' we were told with a patronizing sneer: 'Now you need to start publishing in real journals.' We tried to resist playing the game by those rules and did so because of deep moral and political commitments. We saw then, and we see today, careers built on incremental 'insights' repeated, every time with a minor twist, so that one paper became ten. We saw the moral and intellectual degeneracy to which this practice of 'salami slicing' led. We had long discussions as to whether we should aim for ABS (Association of Business School) list ranking, which is often used in the UK business school context to determine the quality of research output. On the one hand, it was clear to us that supposedly 'low quality' journals published great work, whilst the top-ranked journals repeatedly published tedious dross. The Research Assessment Exercise in the UK, which later morphed into the Research Excellence Framework, was also complicit in a model of privatization of knowledge. 'I have my four 4s,' was becoming a marker of job security and academic success in UK academia at the time. This was the antithesis to the collective and open practices of scholarly, intellectual

endeavour that so excited us when we read, wrote, taught, and discussed ideas and research findings. While the journal was originally based at Warwick, it included work by thinkers based mainly, but not exclusively, across Europe. Upon finishing their PhDs, Chris and Steffen took up lecturing positions at Essex, while Campbell moved to Keele to finish his PhD before moving to Leicester, where Gibson Burrell was setting up the School of Management as an alternative to the slick, corporate servitude that WBS was pursuing. As Leicester quickly became the powerhouse of critical management studies, Campbell started working with a new generation of brilliant young academics, several of whom would contribute and ultimately take on leadership of the project, including Armin Beverungen, Nick Butler, Stephen Dunne, Stevphen Shukaitis, Sverre Spoelstra, and others.

While the funding of the journal was tiny in relation to business school operating budgets, perhaps the most important aspect of the support of Warwick, Leicester and Essex was symbolic. The personal commitment and support of Keith Hoskin at Warwick was invaluable but also afforded a degree of institutional legitimacy. As universities become ever more risk-averse and define excellence according to narrow, individualized and predetermined criteria, such activities are increasingly threatened. In a context in which most senior academics today are cowed by their institution and brutally suppressed or victimized when they speak out against the revolting practices of their institutions, support for such a venture today requires a courage that is in increasingly short supply. This journal was only made possible by those willing to take a risk, and with enough good fortune and privilege to be able to bear the costs of taking those risks.

In significant ways, *ephemera* was clearly connected with the project to develop and institutionalize 'Critical Management Studies', even if the journal was generally seen from both within and outside as being well to the left of not only most of organization studies but also of critical management studies. In many ways, the journal moved with the changing fortunes of different institutions experimenting with critical management education. Hence, the original connection with Warwick, which had been important in the rise of critical management studies in the late 1990s, and then with Leicester and Essex. Keele had also been another key location for critical

management studies in the late 1990s, before financial and managerial ineptitude ultimately spurred a mass exodus to Leicester. Through the 2000s, Essex recruited heavily in CMS, with both Chris and Steffen working there for a number of years before moving to Leicester and Exeter respectively. By the late 2000s, Queen Mary rose as a centre for Critical Management Studies, with the arrival there of Gerry Hanlon, Stefano Harney and Cliff Oswick from Leicester. Through the 2010s, centres of critical management education rose at Bayes Business School (formerly Cass Business School), the Open University and Bristol. Both critical management studies and the *ephemera* project found significant support in the slower and potentially more stable build-up of critical management scholarship at Lancaster and Manchester, where critical management studies has been fostered since the 1980s, and is now alive and well at Cardiff, Copenhagen, Glasgow, Grenoble, Lund, Macquarie, Massachusetts, Newcastle, Northumbria, Oxford Brookes, Rio Grande do Sul, St Andrews, Sydney, York and many other places around the world. Even as senior management at Leicester are seeking to burn critical management studies and political economy to the ground in an autocratic and thoughtless attack on the very principles that justify the university, these acts of institutional vandalism must be resisted with all of our efforts, while recognizing that the rolling counter-insurgency will always return and, at the same time, that critique will always find new forms and locations.

Open access

In this account of the peregrinations of *ephemera*, and of CMS, it is clear that the journal has been embedded, ever since its inception, in the contradictory space of the neoliberal university. On the one hand, this space is characterized by a seeming friendliness to openness, multiculturalism, innovation, difference and critique. On the other hand, though, this openness, which is central to capitalist organizing (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988), is immediately territorialized into the pursuit of commodified knowledge and identity production, which has been called ‘the new treason of the intellectuals’ in higher-education (Docherty, 2018). This treason has been driven by an ideology of privatization that is directly in opposition to everything *ephemera* stands for. *ephemera* has always been about not just openness but

understanding the contradictions of openness in capitalist regimes of organization; understanding that openness requires difference, free access to knowledge, radical thought and democratic participation, but also realizing that the neoliberal university is dedicated to enclosure. The neoliberal university erects walls around knowledge in precisely the same moment as it promises 'widening participation'; it promises open access policies while restricting access to those who can afford to pay for 'gold open access'; and it promises to democratize the benefits of research to all while privatizing such knowledge through new IP regimes.

Widening participation is particularly telling in relation to the fate of the business school, as this is the discipline that has perhaps benefited the most from such policies in the UK. Approximately 50% of the population between 17 and 30 years of age now participates in higher education. This raises the question, what are these participants actually accessing? Here the answer is educational 'products' driven by consumer demand and a pseudo-interactive model of gamified 'engagement', monitored by dashboards, satisfaction scores, and continuous assessment. This has pushed out the difficult, obdurate work of thinking, reading, listening, and writing, in favour of entertainment and employability. Worse still, this 'access' has to be paid for: mortgaged as a debt against the student's own future in the hope that this future will be more prosperous. As Docherty (2018) notes, this limits the benefits of a university education to those who directly participate. This benefit is itself coded in terms of increased graduate earnings: the promise of a slightly higher position on the income distribution curve for those prepared to gamble. In practice, this debt cancels the future, offering only an infinite horizon of 'more of the same': a continuation of wage labour under capitalism to pay the debt that gave you access to the work in the first place (Lazzarato, 2012; cf. Fisher, 2008). Increased student intake at the business school does nothing to challenge the conditions that gave rise to socio-economic inequality in the first place, but just plasters over these social fractures with a thin veneer labelled 'meritocracy'.

This bait-and-switch around openness has also driven the move to open access in publishing. We cannot claim to have been pioneers of open access, which has a much longer history. But *ephemera* was, from the start, committed

to a principle of radical open access: no one was charged for access to the work published and the publication itself was collectively managed by the community of those writing for the journal. We could not have even imagined at the time that authors might be required to pay to have their work published in an open access forum. This stands in stark contrast to the ‘open access’ that now dominates the university landscape. Research funders, directors, librarians, and even the Research Excellence Framework in the UK insist that work is published open-access. The rationale here is a good one. Most of the research undertaken globally, and most of the innovation for that matter (Mazzucato, 2013), is publicly funded, whether directly or via student debt underwritten by the public. As such, the public should have access to this knowledge, so that its benefits are not restricted. There are two flaws with this idea, however. First, knowledge is always restricted in some ways. At the most basic, membership of a linguistic community is required to read and participate, but in most cases this is a specialist community, with participation being based on prior understanding, cultural references, and even in-jokes. Knowledge thus requires socialization into a discursive community, so mere availability does not constitute openness. Second, the openness of contemporary open access (OA) publishing is strictly one-way: academics publish, and the (educated) public reads. Although some articles (OA Green) are published on university repositories, the common standard (OA Gold) are most commonly pay-to-publish, so that having a voice in this open-field is limited to those with institutional OA budgets, or the money to pay-to-play (Beverungen et al., 2012).

The perverse incentives this gives rise to are manifold, but we will give just one example. The journal *Sustainability* is published by MDPI, a commercial publisher, based in low-tax Switzerland, as many publishers are. MDPI has a stable of over 300 journals that are published open-access. The journal itself deals with a hugely important topic, as sustainability concerns everyone on this planet, and is under threat from a wide range of sources from unstable political and financial regimes to global warming and climate chaos. The journal itself, however, published 10,691 articles in 2020: more than any academic working in this area could possibly read. In contrast, a journal like *Organization Studies* publishes in the region of 5-6 articles in each of its 12

editions: 60-70 articles a year. The logic for MDPI should be quite clear, however. Their Articles Processing Charges (APCs) for Sustainability are 1,900 CHF (approximately £1500 at the time of writing, or €1,700, or US\$2,000). The journal waives 25-27% of these fees, but even so, on the basis of 2020 this would mean that just this one journal brought in revenues of around £11.7 million to MDPI. That money, like access fees through library subscriptions, was mostly funded through public monies (whether grant or student-debt funded), channelled through OA funds in universities. This enclosure comes on top of the capture of the inevitable free labour that is gifted to all journals: the unpaid work of editors, reviewers and authors, working beyond academic contracts, or on weekends, with no direct recompense to themselves or their institutions (Beverungen et al., 2012).

Such unpaid work, of course, is an essential part of *ephemera* too. The journal was only made possible through the unpaid and largely unrecognized work of its wider community. Here we want to give tribute and credit to all of those who have done that work either for nothing or at a direct cost to themselves. We have all been discouraged in certain ways. We should perhaps not be surprised when we are told by university functionaries that edited volumes ‘do not count’ as research outputs, or when we are told by unthinking para-academics ‘I am not saying that you should regret all of that editing work, it’s just that...’. But at least with *ephemera* the benefit was for the community we all belong to, rather than to further augment the millions flowing into Swiss bank accounts on the back of our hard work. Free and open access, not enclosure. Common goods, for collective benefit. The publishing industry is central to all academic and intellectual work, and yet so often it is outside of academic control and parasitic upon the work of academics and students. We wanted the journal to be free and accessible to all, not via a rent-extorting paywall, and publishing to be without financial cost to the author. We are glad that this ethos remains a core principle of the journal today.

The open access publishing model of *ephemera* has always opened itself to readers and authors from outside privileged institutions in the Global North. While diversity was one of our key goals from the beginning, the radicalism of the early years was clearly limited in its attention to gender, sexuality, race, colonization and imperialism, while the theoretical terms of reference were

in the early years by and large centred on Europe. Through his involvement with, and research on, social movements, particularly the World Social Forum, in the first decade of the new millennium, Steffen developed deep and meaningful relationships with academics and activists in South America and other parts of the Global South, particularly friends and colleagues at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil. This led to special issues, such as 'The organisation and politics of social forums' (2005) and 'América Latina / Latin America' (Misoczky, 2006), which provided radical new vistas of 'organization' beyond the institutions that are normally analysed by organization and management scholars, even those of the 'critical' kind. With this political move, the journal developed a deep affinity and solidarity with emancipatory struggles around the world well before the irreversible demand for decolonization came to centre stage.

We are glad to say that over the past twenty years, *ephemera* has become increasingly diverse. Rather than becoming institutionalized in, and dominated by, one particular context, the journal has continuously questioned the boundaries of organization studies. It has practiced a radical interdisciplinarity that has yet to find an equivalent in the field. We are always astonished and pleased to see the wide and diverse readership and authorship of *ephemera*. It attracts attention by geographers, sociologists, historians, anthropologists, political theorists, psychologists and many others – not to mention the various business and management disciplines. What is unique here is that the journal's readers and authors have a lust for a radical interdisciplinarity that goes well beyond the usual calls by the academy for interdisciplinary methods. In 'The atmosphere business' (2012), for example, in an all too rare exploration of the relationship between business organizations and climate change, the journal presented contributions from a wide variety of academic backgrounds and disciplinary approaches. The form here again mattered, constituting a politics in itself, acknowledging that the climate crisis should be approached through an ethos of radical inclusivity and diversity, providing a critique of the commodification approaches that climate capitalism offers in the form of 'net-zero' and 'carbon market' solutions. The journal continues to engage with topics that no other organization and management studies journal would touch, as with the recent

issue 'América Latina / Latin America: Again (and again)' (Misoczky et al. 2020), which renews its interest in social movement struggles of the Global South.

Yet, there are limits, of course, to what *ephemera* has been able to achieve. There are always possibilities of radical critiques of one's own organization and organizing. When we were directly involved in the day-to-day running of the journal, it was all too clear that editing a journal is a political process in itself. Openness does not just happen and cannot just be yearned for. It needs to be worked on, and forever renewed. We hope that the current editorial collective will continue in this struggle of diversity, continuously questioning identities and politico-economic structures of organization, including that of academia itself. The political work of critique should continue and intensify, involving topics that are not yet fully central enough in the journal, including racism, white supremacy, ongoing colonialism, the lives of animals other than humans, the planetary ecological crisis, along with indigenous organizing, new forms of political organization, new and unforeseen struggles, and the return of the idea of communism. The journal, we hope, will continue to push the boundaries of the field of organization studies, including its own boundaries. Journals, more than ever, have to think beyond their own form, thinking about their audiences and the limits of their form. In an age of shorter and shorter attention spans, how do we communicate complex concepts and conceptual insights? How do we take 'theory' seriously when there is a growing distrust of 'experts'? How, indeed, do we organize the publishing industry in an age where a new, radical enlightenment is needed? This requires ever new lines of flight, questioning taken-for-granted assumptions of what 'organization' is, how it is to be done, and to what ends it is put.

Organization

To start anything anew requires using an old language but at the same time causing it to stutter, break-down, and forge new associations. It was clear from the beginning that we were proposing to use the word 'organization' in a quite different sense from its dominant meaning. This was not an effort to

simply make 'organization' an indiscriminate shibboleth that could mean anything to anyone. We used and continue to use the idea of 'organization' in a specific way. When we started *ephemera*, one of the key reformulations that we and our associates were concerned with involved questioning the static, fixed and seemingly completed result that was called 'the organization' and instead drawing attention to the practices that establish and reproduce those apparently durable forms. This was put in a number of ways, whether as a movement from thing to process or from organization as a noun to organizing as a verb. In this we were consciously twisting the word 'organization', and key to this expression was that certain key aspects of organizational life are and remain 'in organization'. This requires a recognition that social forms do not arise 'spontaneously' through the interaction, in whichever form, of individuals. Rather, social and organizational forms are put in place (*gestellt*) in an always determinate way. This both draws attention to the fact of organization that lies behind much that appears to others to be merely natural or spontaneous, but moreover it opens the space for contestation and organizing things differently. To say that things are 'in organization' means both that they are organized by concrete processes that can be understood, and, at the same time, that this fact of continuous organization indexes the fact that they are not (yet) completely closed and their possibilities for transformation are not completely dead.

We found the key intellectual touchstone for this kind of thinking in the work of Robert Cooper. The generation which came before us had been inspired by the writing, teaching and thought of Cooper, both those who had worked with him at Lancaster in the 1970s and in the encampments in Manchester and Keele from the 1980s and 1990s. In 1976, Cooper published his remarkable essay 'The Open Field', and through the 1980s pressed, with others such as Gibson Burrell, for an opening towards deep engagement with philosophy and theory (Cooper and Burrell, 1988; Cooper, 1989). This wave would break at the end of the 1980s with the self-assured arrival of 'the theory and philosophy of organizations' (Hassard and Pym, 1990).

We always wanted to link this rise of open and deep theoretical reflection with equal urgency for politics and social change, thus 'theory *and* politics in organization'. We could clearly see that both theory and politics are never

done by individuals in isolation from social processes, but that they are always, for better or worse, organized in a particular way, with their own inclusions and exclusions. The goal then was to organize theory, to provide it a platform and a place to live, to foster new pathways and support creative minds. This involves taking on the editorial apparatus and finding ways to organize differently. Likewise, politics is also always organized, in one way or another. By openly linking to fields of politics and political experimentation, which organization theory had so often claimed to be outside its purview, even if we all know that some of the most important changes historically in how organizations are structured arose directly from state and extra-parliamentary politics, we wanted to bring politics back in, to contest the depoliticization of organization theory, and thus to bring about something of an ‘undepoliticization’ of the theory of organization.

Clearly, ‘theory’ and ‘politics’ are not just things that happen to ‘organizations’, but rather are also organized in particular ways. They are contested terrains; they are open to being organized in other ways, and our efforts to change them cannot eschew being involved ‘in organization’. We have written at length about these challenges, in for example Steffen’s demand for the repositioning of organization theory (Böhm, 2006), Campbell’s call that political organization always maintain the dialectic of politics and organization (Jones and Walsh, 2018), and of Chris’s relentless search for alternative forms of organization (Parker et al., 2014).

A fear of achieving perfection is immobilizing when it holds us back from doing anything. While we would hesitate to claim any full or final victories, at the same time we are immensely proud of what *ephemera* has been able to achieve, from our own initial efforts to the massive and ongoing efforts by those who have led the journal since. Minor victories have been won. Today, the international field of organization studies is certainly more diverse and more critical in its approach and outlook. More voices are being heard, although of course the market knows how to package and sell once-radical ideas to its customers. Clearly, a sense of defeat is invited by the massive and overwhelming counterrevolution that has been waged against progressive thought and politics over the past fifty years. While many today name the neoliberal onslaught effected through government policies from the 1980s, in

terms of the recent history of the West, this reflects one crucial but not isolated aspect of a fifty year war that has sought to repudiate and go back on everything that was hopeful in the 1960s, whether this arose in the form of the insurrections of 1968, the success and vision of Black Panther Party, the Womens' Liberation Movement, the refusals of war and police brutality, the demand for equal rights or the radical critique of the limits to economic growth expressed by the environmental movements.

Almost every element of this vision, other than what can be superficially entertained or turned into market segments, has been the subject to a relentless refusal over the past fifty years, in a sequence of which the most recent atrophy of the United States political system is merely the most recent symptom. This counterrevolution has been waged on economic and political terrain, to be sure. It has also been fought on ideological and scientific terrains, even if this resulted in something quite different from the triumph of the best ideas. Rather, the fifty-year war of reaction against critique and difference has sought instead to immobilize and apparently 'question' progressive ideas, such that the force of reaction does not even claim that they are on the right side, but, rather, seek to foster doubt in their opponents. Here, the ideological offensive has again learned from and fostered the worst corporate manipulations in order to doubt the hope or prospect of anything that might look like progress (Oreskes and Conway, 2010).

We know this world is broken. There are so many crises that surround us: the climate crisis, the pandemic, the ecological crisis, the social crisis, the crisis of dignity and ethics. Sheer greed seems to dominate most organizational affairs these days. Some say: don't just focus on the negatives. Correct. We must see the positives; the love and the humane; the sheer resilience of those against whom war has been waged for so long. Yet, we maintain that critical theory has taught us of the need to transit through a moment of utter despair. To not do this would be to be less than human. To despair is to come face to face with reality. To generalize a sense of failure is to become political in the hope to make things better, or at least 'fail better'. *Worstward Ho!* The point of going through negativity is to arrive at a more positive, more inclusive and progressive world, or at least to keep trying for it.

Despite many defeats, we retain the same utopian optimism that motivated us when we started *ephemera* at the turn of the millennium. The question of course is what can be done today. If we allow the current state of the world to be the end of the matter, then we have abdicated responsibility, we have reneged on the promises that the present also contains. As the new youth put it today, 'Everything is fucked...but the point is to move beyond that' (Jaques et al., 2018). This moving beyond has always been our project, and, in this sense, if things have been moved even a little bit, then *ephemera* has been worth all of our efforts. Indeed, everywhere today we are surrounded by those working incredibly hard to make the world, at least for some of its participants, a little less fucked than it currently is. For some this means working within their organization, whether this be 'public' or 'private', to move beyond the impasses of today, even when knowing that so little can be done without confronting the economic and political system directly. Others constantly feel the need to step outside their organization, to speak loudly and clearly for the new world and to take to the streets to demand it. For many young people today, there is literally nothing to lose. And for us it remains that the new world will not simply be rationally legislated into being by however well-intentioned elites who would speak for and on behalf of others. No, society changes in the direction of the many precisely because of the rising up of the voices of those who until then had been counted as nothing. So small that they seem to count as nothing, it is these tiny creatures which promise to spring to life each May, on which we must wager our every hope.

references

- Boje, D., S. Böhm, C. Casey, S. Clegg, A. Contu, B. Costea, S. Gherardi, C. Jones, D. Knights, M. Reed, A. Spicer and H. Willmott (2001) 'Radicalising organisation studies and the meaning of critique', *ephemera: critical dialogues on organization*, 1(3): 303-313.
- Beverungen, A., S. Böhm, S. and C. Land (2012) 'The poverty of journal publishing', *Organization*, 19(6): 929-938.
- Böhm, S., A.-M. Murtola and S. Spoelstra (2005) 'The atmosphere business', *ephemera*, 12(1/2): 1-11.

- Böhm, S. (2006) *Repositioning organization theory: Impossibilities and strategies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Böhm, S. and C. Jones (eds) (2001) 'Responding: To Cooper', *ephemera: critical dialogues on organization*, 1(4): 314-422.
- Burrell, G. (1997) *Pandemonium: Towards a retro-organization theory*. London: Sage.
- Burrell, G. and G. Morgan (1979) *Sociological paradigms and organizational analysis*. Aldershot, UK: Gower.
- Cooper, R. (1976) 'The open field', *Human Relations*, 29(11): 999-1017.
- Cooper, R. (1989) 'Modernism, postmodernism and organizational analysis 3: The contribution of Jacques Derrida', *Organization Studies*, 10(4): 497-502.
- Cooper, R. and G. Burrell (1988) 'Modernism, postmodernism and organizational analysis: An introduction', *Organization Studies*, 9(1): 91-112.
- Deleuze, G. and F. Guattari (1988) *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Docherty, T. (2018) *The new treason of the intellectuals: Can the university survive?* Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Fisher, M. (2008) *Capitalist realism: Is there no alternative?* Alresford: Zero Books.
- Harney, S. and F. Moten (2021) *All incomplete*. Colchester: Minor Compositions.
- Hassard, J. and D. Pym (1990) *The theory and philosophy of organization*. London: Routledge.
- Jaques, N., L. Johns, J. Roberts, J. Somaiya and S. Walsh (eds.) (2018) *Everything's fucked: But the point is to go beyond that*. Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland: GLORIA.
- Jones, C. and S. Walsh (eds) (2018) *New forms of political organization*. Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland: Economic and Social Research Aotearoa.
- Lazzarato, M. (2012) *The making of the indebted man: An essay on the neoliberal condition*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).

- Mazzucato, M. (2013) *The entrepreneurial state: Debunking public vs. private sector myths*. London: Anthem Press.
- Misoczky, M.C. (2006) 'América Latina/Latin America', *ephemera*, 6(3): 224-390.
- Misoczky, M.C., P.R.Z. Abdala and S. Böhm (2020) 'América Latina/Latin America: Again (and again)', *ephemera*, 20(1): 1-239.
- Mills, C. W. (1959/2000) *The sociological imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Morgan, G. (1986) *Images of organization*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.
- Oreskes, N. and E.M. Conway (2020) *Merchants of doubt: How a handful of scientists obscured the truth on issues from tobacco smoke to global warming*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Parker, M., G. Cheney, V. Fournier and C. Land (eds.) (2014) *The Routledge companion to alternative organization*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Thompson, E.P. (ed.) (1970) *Warwick University Ltd: Industry, management and the universities*. London: Penguin.

the authors

Steffen Böhm's family origins go back to a Ukrainian farming village. The tumultuous twentieth century led to his family being displaced not once, not twice but three times, being continuously pushed from East to West. Unintentionally and perhaps unconsciously following the historical journeys of the Celts, Steffen has now arrived at one of the most Western and peripheral outposts of Europe, Kernow (Cornwall). Peripheral thinking is something he has embraced ever since he started his academic journey more than 20 years ago, resulting in, for example, the co-organization of a two-week *ephemera* conference on a train from Helsinki to Beijing and co-founding the open access publishing press *Mayflybooks* and the open access journal *Interface: a journal for and about social movements*. Most recently, he's taken his editorial craft to the new Environment and Business Ethics section of the *Journal of Business Ethics*.
Email: s.boehm@exeter.ac.uk

Campbell Jones was born in Ōpōtiki, a small town in Te Moana-a-Toi (the Bay of Plenty) on the East Coast of Te Ika-a-Māui (the North Island) of Aotearoa (New

Zealand). After studying at the University of Auckland and the University of Otago, from 1999 until 2010 he worked at Warwick Business School, Keele University, the University of Leicester and Copenhagen Business School. Since 2011 he has been based at the University of Auckland, most recently as convenor of the sociology programme. He is a researcher for the left think tank Economic and Social Research Aotearoa, convenes the University of Auckland Critical Theory Network, and organizes reading groups on Lacan's seminars and Marx's *Economic manuscripts of 1861-63*. He has edited 25 volumes of the works of others and is writing a book about work.

Email: campbell.jones@auckland.ac.nz

Chris Land is paid a salary by Anglia Ruskin University in the UK for being a 'Deputy Dean for Research and Innovation'. Mostly this seems to involve spreadsheets, meetings, emails, and a labyrinthine online system called 'Business World' that sucks the life-force from any mortal who braves the log-in page to enter its benighted digital depths. He also tries to write about work and organization and is currently struggling to make sense out of craft, folk, nostalgia, fetishism, hauntology, and post-digital cultural imaginaries, mostly through the lens of 'craft beer'. Despite filling several notebooks with scribbles, little of this work has yet seen the light of day.

Email: chris.land@aru.ac.uk