Moving Critical Performativity Forward

Mark Learmonth, Nancy Harding, Jean-Pascal Gond and Laure Cabantous

Introduction

The four of us have, in our different ways, spent a good deal of time over the last decade or so thinking about performativity and its relationships with organizing practices. We remain convinced that many of the fundamental ideas associated with the term are intellectually interesting *and* politically important. It also happens to be the case that we want to engage with the world, but we see no conflict between doing so and remaining committed to the traditional academic ideals of rigour and careful reading of scholarly sources. So our intent in publishing Cabantous et al. (2016) (and the companion paper Gond et al. 2015) was primarily to further the debate on performativity in organization studies. We touched on topics like engagement and CMS because they are part of the wider scene for some of the arguments about performativity conducted in this journal, rather than because they were central to our arguments.

Let us start by saying how pleased we were, therefore, to read the response from Schaefer and Wickert (2016). They engage creatively and interestingly with our arguments, and while we may not always agree with them, their work takes debates about performativity further forward and in new directions. Not so Spicer et al.'s (2016) contribution. Rather, we are attacked for the very idea of engaging in such an arcane 'intra-academic topic', allegedly of no relevance to those outside a sub-field of a sub-field of the academic community – although we are far from the only ones to criticise their interpretation of performativity (Fleming and

Banerjee, 2016; Spoelstra and Svensson 2016). Nevertheless, Spicer et al. (2016) remain uninterested in defending their claims about performativity per se – seemingly much more concerned to further debates about engagement and CMS. But we would never have started a debate with them in the first place had they simply stuck with notions like critical engagement. Why, one wonders after such a rejoinder, did they invoke performativity at all? But they did, and we are still very happy with the arguments as originally presented.

However, we have no wish to trespass on readers' time with a lengthy, point-by-point rebuttal of Spicer et al.'s (2016) rejoinder. Rather, in the interests of pursuing our original intent – furthering debates about performativity – we briefly draw attention to some of the possible performative effects of Spicer et al.'s commentary. Doing so allows us to show why the performativity debate remains important – from an intellectual, political, and even perhaps a personal standpoint. It also allows us to show why making an effort to try our best to understand performativity in the work of Austin and the other thinkers who have used the term should not be dismissed as arrogant 'author-itarian' theoretical policing, but as an example of the kind of contribution we as academics (specifically as academics) can make to the world.

The Emptiness of Triumph

Austin suggests that one particularly exemplary performative utterance is the naming of a ship. Spicer et al.'s opening pronouncement: "We may be witnessing the appearance of a third wave of Critical Management Studies" (2016: tba) is presumably, like the naming of a ship, intended to bring about what it says. So, might this statement be performative in the

sense of naming a new "wave" of CMS which their paper then launches? Does it also performatively bring into existence earlier waves of CMS – so that their paper can duly sink them? Austin's answer to such questions would be that whether statements can be performative depends, in part, on whether or not they enjoy a felicitous context.

Spicer et al. (2016) certainly work hard to bring a felicitous context into existence, primarily by trying to establish their own author-ity to make such big, bold claims. Their first strategy appears to be to 'big' themselves up. While objecting to our own author-itarianism (apparently we cite Butler 37 times), they cite their own work rather more extensively than we cite Butler's (Alvesson's work is cited 42 times, and Spicer's work 39 times!), presumably wishing to impose themselves as the 'dict-authors' of the CMS field they envision. While objecting to us wasting time on intra-academic debate, their response is to write a rejoinder that is almost twice as long as our original paper and explicitly targets a sub-field of the CMS community – whereas our attempt was to open the debate to other management scholars. Indeed, they seem to take it for granted that their own work is an exemplar of something intrinsically superior and "third wave," entirely outside the "problems that haunt Critical Management Studies, and Organisation Studies more generally" (2016: tba).

Their second strategy to create a felicitous context appears to be to dismiss the contributions of others. We learn, for instance, that so much work in CMS is "bullshit" (a term that occurs 14 times in their paper). Or that "would-be critics [falsely get] the sense that they are engaging in something radical when they visit the local cinema" (2016: tba) – presumably then, they would have refused to join the CMS Division visit to a special screening of *The*

Corporation at the 2015 AOM in Vancouver. While allowing that we ourselves may have done things that are worthwhile in the past, Spicer et al. (2016) also give us the benefit of their views about our own shortcomings in relation to how we might (or might not) engage with the world.

We interpret all of this rhetoric as being aimed at creating a felicitous context for their claims about the next phase of CMS's development to become performative. Indeed, we agree with Spicer et al (2016: tba) that, as they put it:

> if you look at the now extensive debates about performativity, there are constant concerns around these: The language which a speaker reiterates within their speech act, the style or way the speech act itself is done, the context in which the speech act takes place, and the potential effects of the speech act.

However, it remains to be seen whether (what we interpret as) Spicer et al.'s self-assurance bordering on arrogance and pomposity (cf. Warwick, 2015:2) will create a felicitous context for the performativity of their statements about the emergence of a third wave of CMS. Whether or not it proves to have a felicitous context for a third wave of CMS, some of their words may well prove to be performative in a different way: performative in reinforcing the already all too prevalent big-beast, alpha-male culture that besets and bestrides the academic world, with CMS remaining (however paradoxically) no exception to this rule.

And yet, performativity is political and material

Even more saddening is the direction that Spicer et al. (2016) provide for critical performativity research, and related engagement. For us, it is important to save the critical performativity idea from becoming solely a 'guilt-management tool' for CMS scholars in lack of engagement with practitioners. Indeed, Spicer et al.'s (2016) approach brings us back to the long-standing debate on the 'academic-practitioner gap' and 'rigor versus relevancy' in management. They do so with a slightly more critical language but, unfortunately, the solutions they offer are far from being creative: the kind of 'transfer strategies' they suggest for the 3rd wave CMS as best-practices have already been discussed extensively, and their limitations are well-known (see, e.g. Kieser, Nicolai and Seild, 2015).

Their approach also brings us back to the early work on discourse that ignored the material organizing of politics. Without material organizing, however, we wonder how the 'forums for deliberation' that Spicer et al. (2016: tba) call for could be created *concretely*? What will be the organizing and power dynamics of these forums? Spicer et al. (2016) provide us with no insight about how to create such forums. We contend that these questions cannot be simply left out when it comes to discussing engagement, and that management scholars should also consider how to materially organize the kind of political debates they call for (for a discussion of what it takes to organize "hybrid forums" see Callon, Lascoumes and Barthes, 2009). Avoiding the central question of the engineering of critical (or progressive) theory through material devices and organizational designs can only undermine CMS.

In contrast, we reaffirm the importance, in our eyes, of the fundamentally political *and* material dimensions of performativity. Our aim is to stand on the shoulders of giants – CMS already knows how to do this well – by building on the solid theoretical resources that are

already out there (provided by Austin, Butler, Callon, Latour and many others…) in order to develop an agenda which is both theoretically robust and politically impactful. Theoretical soundness and political impact are two things that we do not see as contradictory. As a matter of fact, prominent scholars from social science have been able to reconcile them; see for instance the '*Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons*' that Michel Foucault co-created and that had lasting effects in France; see also the political engagement of Judith Butler, and the influence her work has already had at the UN. If, as academics, we forget theoretical soundness, then we are destined to remain forever mere shadows of investigatory journalists (like Naomi Klein) or documentary producers (such as Ken Loach). Surely, as academics we need to help to create the intellectual climate within which activists can do their work. Finally, we are delighted to see that since we engaged this debate, a stream of studies on performativity – from political economists (Braun, 2015) sociologists (Cardwell, 2015), accounting (Vosselman, 2014) and organizational scholars (Nyberg and Wright 2015) – has flourished. This body of work demonstrates the value of cross-fertilizing creatively yet mindfully and in a theoretically informed manner insights using Callon, Butler and others, in order to develop an analysis of performativity that mobilize its underused political potential while recognizing its profoundly material dimensions.

References

Braun B. (2015) From performativity to political economy: Index investing, EFTs and asset manager capitalism. *New Political Economy*.

Cabantous L, Gond J-P, Harding N, et al. (2016) Reconsidering critical performativity. *Human Relations*.

Callon M., Lascoumes P. and Barthe Y. (2009) *Acting in an Uncertain world: An essay on Technological Democracy,* Cambridge, MA, USA and London: MIT Press.

Cardwell E. (2015) Power and performativity in the creation of the UK fishing-rights market. *Journal of Cultural Economy*.

Gond J-P, Cabantous L, Harding N, et al. (2015 - forthcoming) What do we mean by performativity in organizational and management theory? The uses and abuses of performativity. *International Journal of Management Reviews*.

Fleming P and Banerjee B. (2016) When performativity fails: Implications for Critical Management Studies. *Human Relations*.

Kieser A, Nicolai A and Seidl D. (2015) The practical relevance of management research: Turning the debate on relevance into a rigorous scientific research program. *Academy of Management Annals* 9: 1-115.

Nyberg D. and Wright C. (2015) Performative and political: Corporate constructions of climate change risk. *Organization*.

Schaefer S.M. and Wickert C. (2016) On the potential of progressive performativity: Definitional purity, re-engagement and empirical points of departure. *Human Relations*.

Spicer A., Alvesson M. and Kärreman D. (2016) Extending critical performativity. *Human Relations*.

Spoelstra S., and Svensson P. (2016) Critical performativity. The happy end of Critical Management Studies? In: Prasad A, Prasad P, Mills A.J, and Mills J.H. (eds) *Routledge Companion to Critical Management Studies.* New York: Routledge, 69-79.

Vosselman E. (2014) The 'performativity thesis' and its critics: Towards a relational ontology of management accounting. *Accounting and Business Research* 44: 181-203.

Warwick P. (2015) Book Reviews: The Triumph of Emptiness; Consumption, higher education and work organization. *Business History*.