(Re)Moving Blinders: Communication-as-Constitutive Theorizing as Provocation to

Practice-Based Organization Scholarship

ABSTRACT

Practice-Based Organization Scholarship (PBOS) is significant, but its vision is narrow. It aims to show organizational scholars that what are taken to be entities are better understood as the accomplishments of ongoing practices; in doing so, it seems to re-imagine the organization studies field. Yet PBOS suffers from some encumbering blind spots, particularly with respect to its conceptions of agency and its ability to theorize "the" organization. I offer Communication as Constitutive of Organization theorizing—itself a variant of practice thinking—as providing some helpful remedies to those problems. Both approaches, however, have trouble seeing domination in organizing, so a further provocation builds on their shared interest in new materialist theorizing to articulate a novel approach to exposing the conditions and conduct of organizing.

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We scholars learn early on to locate blind spots. "Blind spot" originally referred to optic disks' failure to register images from one or the other eye based on objects' position in our visual field, but moved to the figurative domain (accompanying our rampant use of ocular metaphors: Kavanagh, 2004) to signal cases when our focus on one facet of a phenomenon leads us to ignore other features. Understood this way, blind spots are inevitable, and we're particularly well-versed in pointing them out in others' work: In our seminar rooms and lecture halls, when we read and review manuscripts, and in casual conversations we deploy favored lenses to note overlooked factors, conceptual gaps, and disregarded situations in the theories and research we encounter.

As a deliberate provocation to debate, I engage in a bit of blind spotting with respect to Practice-Based Organization Scholarship (PBOS). Scholars across organization studies have turned to *practice* as a metatheory to portray the social world as far less solid than it appears, thereby countering reductionist assertions of entitativity in conventional theories of organization (i.e., those that turn abstractions into entities with explanatory power, like structure, technologies, institutions, or ideologies). PBOS argues that reductionism is a conceptual oversimplification that blinds us to the complexities of organizing, yet it exhibits a couple of concerning blind spots of its own. I propose that theory aligned with the interdisciplinary Communication as Constitutive of Organization (CCO) movement—a version of practice theorizing itself—can help alleviate two of those, in part by reframing practice *as* communication. Yet a third blind spot afflicts both perspectives, so the last section provides a

double provocation, challenging both PBOS and CCO to hone their critical eye through an engagement with new materialist inquiry.

<div align="center">**Practice Theorizing's Blind Spots**</div>

"Practice theory" names a family of perspectives or stances—there is no canonical *theory* of practice—that highlights how reality is a complex and ongoing *accomplishment*. For Schatzki (2002, p. 87), a practice is "a temporally evolving, open-ended set of doings and sayings linked by practical understandings, rules, teleo-affective structures, and general understandings." Such a stance defines the social world "as a vast array or assemblage of performances made durable by being inscribed in human bodies and minds, objects and texts, and knotted together in such a way that the results of one performance become the resource for another" (Nicolini, 2012, p. 2). Such a stance translates into three PBOS commitments: That situated actions are consequential for the generation of social life, that dualisms are to be transcended in favor of dualities, and that relations (rather than entities) are the basis upon which phenomena exist (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). Units of analysis are thus no longer individuals, structures, or organizations, but *practices*.

A practice stance encourages us to reconceptualize traditional organizational phenomena. It has valuably altered thinking on organization studies fundaments such as knowledge, technology, identity, leadership, and strategy; each topic enjoys a substantial and growing body of research and theory (Corradi, Gherardi, & Verzelloni, 2010). Drawing on those three commitments, PBOS advances beyond the constructionist move (i.e., what is taken to be a social fact is really a construction that could have been otherwise) to more radically argue that organizational phenomena *are* practices. In other words, knowledge, technology, identity, leadership, and strategy are made real *only* in situated doings and sayings; they have no

independent or "objective" existence. Importantly, PBOS sees these moves as not producing more "accurate" studies of organizational phenomena (practice thinkers reject a correspondence model of truth), but as a more thoroughgoing re-orientation for the entire field.

That ambition makes it imperative to examine epistemological commitments. Importantly, PBOS suffers three concerning blind spots[1]. First, practice-oriented projects tend to leave "the" organization uninterrogated. For instance, PBOS reframes a prevalent organizational phenomenon like the development of organizational strategy in terms conductive to practice thinking, giving rise to a new and fertile field: Strategy-as-Practice (SAP). Scholarship falling under this mantle shifts attention away from strategies as documents created by executives, instead focusing on the enabling and constraining influences on strategy-making, what happens in episodes of strategy-making, and the roles and identities of the practitioners (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Yet even in scholarship associated with SAP, organizations are frequently portrayed as *contexts* or *containers* for action, pre-existing systems *inside of which* action proceeds—rather than the recurrently produced consequences of, and participants in, practice (see Chia & MacKay, 2007; Fenton & Langley, 2011).

Second is a limited imagination around agency. Practice perspectives provide an opportunity to think of agency as distributed across (or the provisional outcome of) the heterogeneous participants in a practice; some even insist upon it. Efforts to study agency as exceeding the human have been limited in PBOS, however (Bell & Vachhani, 2020), and some scholars actively resist efforts to situate agency anywhere other than *in* the individual. Doing so, however, effectively reinstates the very dualism practice theory seeks to eradicate (see discussions in Boudreau & Robey, 2005; Rasche & Chia, 2009). As one piece of evidence in this direction, the primary source of data in the majority of SAP research is interviews with

organization members, but even studies that use observational techniques generally retain the individual (or groups of them bound up in routines) as the font of intention and action, looking to other elements (e.g., documents, spaces, and prescribed strategizing techniques) largely as tools appropriated by human agency (see Abdallah, Basque, & Rouleau, 2018; Lê & Spee, 2015).

A third blind spot is that PBOS tends to ignore "critical" questions revolving around how control and domination are iteratively re-accomplished in practice. Research that "zooms in" on practice develops detailed accounts of accomplishment, whereas "zooming out" fosters understandings of how local practices are linked to a "wider picture" and can "reproduce existing social arrangements or generate tension and conflict" (Nicolini, 2012, p. 230). PBOS analyses thus supply alternatives to reductionist accounts of organizational phenomena, but they generally elide critique and transformative redefinition. Scholars who wish to employ theory to interrogate discrimination, oppression, or domination tend to be left wanting by PBOS (see Clegg & Kornberger, 2015; Gherardi, 2009).

CCO: (Re)Moving Blinders

The thesis of this provocation is that engaging with Communication as Constitutive of Organization (CCO) thinking can help remove, or perhaps merely alter, PBOS's blinders. In one sense, this assertion is ironic, since the CCO project is a form of practice theorizing itself. But its reframing of practice and its accomplishments *as communication* marks CCO as unique in the practice-based universe. There are several introductions to CCO that offer a more detailed introduction to that uniqueness, as well as to its three dominant traditions, than I can deliver here (e.g., Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009; Brummans, Cooren, Robichaud, & Taylor, 2014). This section focuses, instead, on the question of how CCO thinking can address the first two PBOS blind spots.

Blind Spot #1: "The" Organization

At base, CCO thinking challenges ontological assumptions regarding organization. It starts with a conceptual reversal: Instead of seeing communication as one among many processes occurring within an organization's pre-existing boundaries, it asserts that organization occurs *in* communication—and nowhere else. Drawing on the lessons of the linguistic turn, communication becomes the manifestation of neither actors' interiorities nor systems' deep structures; it is, instead, "*the ongoing, dynamic, interactive process of manipulating symbols toward the creation, maintenance, destruction, and/or transformation of meanings, which are axial—not peripheral—to organizational existence and organizing phenomena*" (Ashcraft et al., 2009, p. 22. Emphasis in original). I revisit (and challenge) this conception below, but as a foundational move—it is positioned as the constitutive *metamodel* for the diverse field of communication (Craig, 1999)—this definition of communication is useful for its shift of emphasis from the simple representation or exchange of information to the generation of (intersubjective) meanings. If "organization" refers to a system of meanings, it can *only* be produced and transformed in communication.

"Organization," however, harbors several referents (Schoeneborn, Kuhn, & Kärreman, 2019). One is a noun (organization), an entity to which people, in everyday language, attribute ontological independence (i.e., "it" exists outside its ongoing re-creation). A second is a verb (organizing), where attention turns to iterations of coordination and control located in the conduct of activity. The third is an adverb (organizationality), which highlights ephemeral, liquid, and partial coordinated action that scholars frequently ignore because it occurs outside formal established systems (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015; Cruz & Sodeke, in press). The noun promises an answer to the question of what an organization *is*; the verb to the question of how

organizing is *accomplished*; the adjective to the question of when and where flows of activity look organizational *by degrees*. Distinctions of this sort align with PBOS thinking, but its scholars are frequently content to treat "the" organization as uninterrogated background, the bounded system *inside* of which action unfolds (Vásquez, Bencherki, Cooren, & Sergi, 2018).

In explaining how both the verb and the noun versions of organization are fundamentally *communicative* deeds, CCO scholars offer a remedy to the first blind spot. Those who address the noun question (how does the practice of communication constitute the "entity" taken to be the organization?) deploy communication to explain organizational emergence, persistence, and transformation, showing that entities are the ongoing outcomes of communicative practice. One route here is to examine the ways in which "the" organization serves a *representational* function (Nicotera, 2013), where the discursive token of the organization is marshalled in conversation to shape action. When interactants deploy the noun standing for the organization in conversation, they incarnate it and ascribe interests to it (and treat it *as* an "it") that supersede those of any individual agent (Cooren, Brummans, & Charrieras, 2008). Such a move suggests a mutual determination, where communicative practice depends on the existence of a putative entity to which actors can attribute motive and intention to guide their action—but that "entity" simultaneously depends on its recurrent manifestation in interaction for its persistence (Taylor & Van Every, 2014).

An alternative approach to the noun question considers the functions communication must perform to underwrite the independent existence of an organization. McPhee and Zaug's (2000) Four Flows model posits four intersecting flows that must be present to distinguish an organization from other social forms: reflexive self-structuring, activity coordination, membership negotiation, and institutional positioning. When analysts attend to the intersections

between these four flows, they necessarily cast their gaze across levels of analysis while maintaining a focus on communicative practice. The model encourages researchers to specify the practices comprising each flow; it also directs attention to the tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions across flows that can be missed by PBOS scholars who focus on practices other than organizing.

The second path to overcoming PBOS's blind spot regarding "the" organization is to focus on either the verb or the adjective and its ongoing accomplishment in communication. In this vein, CCO scholars show how processes of organizing are unstable communication processes. When analyses revolve around how organization becomes present in the production of place (Crevani, 2019), bike commuters' collective action (Wilhoit & Kisselburgh, 2015), or the communal (in)visibility summoned from marketplace vendors by situational demands (Cruz, 2017), organizing is not merely about processes occurring *within* a system's boundaries, but is about the accomplishment of temporally situated and transitory phenomena in the doing of coordination and control. For instance, studies that examine how organizations are conversationally invoked as discursive/material tokens carrying particular motivations and trajectories—invocations that discipline interactants' thought and action—exemplify a CCO attention to organizing-in-communication (e.g., Porter, Kuhn, & Nerlich, 2018). Organizing and organizationality, as contrasted with (but not rejecting) organization, become precarious communicative practices with influences and trajectories more complex and contradictory than conventionally understood.

Drawing from these paths, the claim is that PBOS should embrace CCO stances to re-conceive "the" organization. Doing so will enable it to move beyond seeing organization as mere context, instead considering how situated accomplishments necessarily *constitute* the very

organizations that come to be accorded agency, and simultaneously deployed as discursive tokens, in those same practices.

Blind Spot #2: Conception of Agency

At the level of theory, PBOS generally acknowledges the value of elements in the social scene beyond persons and their intentions. But in empirical studies, PBOS tends to restrict agency to individuals. Frequent theoretical touchstone Anthony Giddens is explicit in acknowledging a multiplicity of influences on practice while limiting agency to the person, but many other influential writers likewise embed the individual in the social while maintaining a focus on *the person's* causal power. Doing so betrays the theories that drive PBOS (Gherardi, 2017).

Fortunately, CCO thinking offers two ways out of this reductionism. One response is offered by CCO theorists who appropriate Niklas Luhmann's systems theorizing, a view in which humans are accorded *no* causal power because social systems simply do not include them. Instead, social systems, including organizations, are comprised of communication events that generate the system's (re)production. Communication here is not what individuals do; it is what *the system* does. The network of communication events produces that which observers recognize as structure and agency (Cooren & Seidl, in press). For CCO thinkers of a Luhmannian stripe, then, agency is not about individuals or their psychic systems (even if "situated"). Instead, communication is about the system generating information that contributes to that same system's decisions. Agency is the result of affixing of decision rights to particular nodes in the communication network (Blaschke, 2018), and the role of the analyst is to track the flow of communication events and episodes over time—the *practice* of communication—to understand how decisions (re)produce the organizational system.

Another resource comes from those CCO scholars who think of agency as something impossible to invest in *any* single entity. For several authors associated with the "Montréal School" of CCO, agency is *hybrid* in the sense that humans and nonhumans are always constitutively entangled in the production of action. Although some interpreters have taken this to suggest that putative entities like texts, algorithms, or buildings *possess* agency, a hybridity stance holds that the interests and intentions attached to any actor must always become "materialized" by drawing upon (or inscribing themselves in) rules, roles, objects, numbers, sites, images, bodies, and the like (Fauré, Cooren, & Matte, 2019). Action, accordingly, is the production of an ensemble, or plenum, of agen*cies*. Moreover, what becomes deemed "an agent" is an accomplishment, one that relies on enrolling other elements of that plenum and making them matter in "nominating" one element to stand for the whole (Cooren, 2010; Taylor & Van Every, 2014). A hybridity stance calls analysts to examine situated, interactive practices of communication, with an eye toward how those elements are positioned as motivated, animated, or restricted by particular agencies in the network.

CCO offers, then, a radical reconceptualization of agency. Such a reconceptualization offers PBOS an opportunity to attend to the multiplicity of forces implicated in the production of action and organization, as those advocating for investigations into (for instance) communities of practice advocate (Mørk,et al., 2010). Yet a CCO stance goes further, re-describing agency as always a conjoint or network accomplishment, and then linking that hybrid agency with the emergence of organization and the array of tensions it encounters. A hybridity stance on agency thus implies seeing organization, in both its noun and verb forms, as significantly messier than PBOS has typically pursued.

Blind Spot #3: Re-imagining Critical Theorizing

No provocation exercise would be complete without turning the blind spotting around to address CCO's own myopia (indeed, the notion of [re]moving blinders insinuates that additional blind spots may be created by repositioning). As mentioned above, PBOS has created relatively little purchase on questions of power, control, domination, and resistance, though there have been some impressive strides in feminist PBOS (e.g., Harris, 2016; Janssens & Steyaert, 2019; Linstead & Pullen, 2006) and corners of SAP scholarship (e.g., Clegg & Kornberger, 2015). Because CCO scholars' aim has generally been to address ontological questions rather than axiological concerns, they have likewise had little to say on these themes. The result is that PBOS and CCO analyses risk becoming anodyne: By offering re-descriptions of phenomena, they often lack a position from which to critique organizing practices. In other words, both CCO and PBOS denaturalize the status quo and encourage reflexivity about practice, but come up short with respect to the transformative redefinitions that pursue emancipation in working and organizing (see Fournier & Grey, 2000).

But perhaps a focus on emancipation is a limiting way to think of critical theorizing today (see Ashcraft, 2018; Mumby, 2019). This third provocation, directed toward *both* practice theorists and CCO scholars, imagines a revived and revised critical stance, working it out in three steps. It draws upon *new materialist thinking* (sometimes termed relationality, the ontological turn, or sociomateriality), a body of thought that complexifies claims of causality, re-conceptualizes entities as relations (in the response to the first blind spot), and broadens notions of agency (as in the second) (Fox & Alldred, 2017; Kuhn et al., 2017). Increasingly, both PBOS and CCO scholarship have embraced new materialism, but they have generally not used that thinking central to engage with "critical" questions.

To illustrate this alternative critical stance, I enlist an abbreviated example of an explicit effort to alter corporations' practices. Larry Fink, the head of the world's largest investment firm, BlackRock, has established a reputation among the financial class for writing a yearly letter to CEOs of the companies in which his firm has a stake. Over the past several years, these letters have enjoined CEOs to redirect their firms' strategies to embrace a sustainable and inclusive capitalism. Fink's letters carry special weight, and coercive power, because of his firm's centrality in global finance. The letters receive considerable praise and criticism (Fink, 2015; Kramer, 2019), but the issue of interest to PBOS and CCO scholars would likely concern how the letters stimulate practices of strategy (e.g., deployment of tools and methods of strategizing) that embrace or reject (or both) Fink's call—alongside a recognition that those practices participate in the organization's constitution. The vision would likely start as one in which firms exist as entities that may be catalyzed by these external stimuli.

Assemblage

How would a new materialist critical inquiry approach this case? A first step would reframe organizing and communicating as unfolding in and through *assemblages*[2], and thus not beginning with the firm as an assumed ground upon which action proceeds. Doing so requires re-working the conception of communication provided above. That definition positioned meaning as the outcome of symbolic action, a move that centers human discursive activity while pushing materiality (key to most theories of practice) to the margins. Ashcraft et al. (2009) recognized this problem, and offered an alternative conception of communication better suited to new materialist thinking: "the ongoing, situated, and embodied process whereby human and non-human agencies interpenetrate ideation and materiality toward realities that are tangible and axial to organizational existence and organizing phenomena" (p. 26). This (admittedly unwieldy)

definition frames communication as the practice through which a variety of elements enter into relationship, and it is from such relations that realities materialize. This is not simply constructionism with some material "stuff" added to the mix; it rejects subject-object dualisms to position communication as far more than the human discursive acts that generate meaning. Communication, instead, is where *and when* connections between elements become materialized as a knotty relational complex; it is in and through this materializing of connections that meanings become happenings, observers make attributions of agency (because agency is irredeemably hybrid), and the trajectory of a given practice takes shape (Gherardi et al., 2019; Kuhn et al., 2017). Another way of saying this is that agency is a *by-product* of the knotty relational complex's becoming, and that becoming occurs in and through communication.

That communicatively constituted "knotty relational complex" *is* the assemblage. More than merely a network of pre-existing entities, *assemblage* signals the presence of a vital network—it is noun and verb simultaneously—of human and nonhuman agencies animated by a variety of activity "flows." What we take to be "organizations" may be understood as nodes (or centers of gravity) in this network, but those nodes are ongoing products of heterogeneous intersecting forces—assemblages, and thus not taken-for-granted entities—themselves. Branding, entrepreneurship, algorithmic management, and activism (to name just a few) are flows requiring the weaving together of many participants in the assemblage that, together, generate the events that manifest as such practices. In this line of thinking, the assemblage is itself *agentic* because it is both the site and surface of practice (Gherardi, 2016; Robinson, 2016).

Ontological Multiplicity

A second step is a recognition that any assemblage is *ontologically multiple*. This means that "it" can be communicatively constituted—staged, enacted, produced—many different ways.

"The" assemblage is not an object that simply seems different to human actors gazing at it from different social locations (as in the Indian parable of the blind men and the elephant); instead, ontological multiplicity is about *becoming* many different "realities" depending on the logic constituting the practice (de Laet & Mol, 2000). The practice doesn't just look different; it *is* ontologically distinct. The questions of interest to a new materialist critical investigation, then, become which reality will be produced, which participants will exercise authority with respect to the assemblage's emergence and stabilization and what tensions characterize its persistence.

A recognition of ontological multiplicity also offers a theory of change. It paints a picture of assemblages' radical indeterminacy, one in which the assemblages constituted by flows of communication make them "*precariously open to disruption*" (Mease, 2019, p. 412. Emphasis in original). Indeterminacy resonates with the notion of *aleatory materialism* (Althusser, 1994): contingency and chance in the assemblage's potential to become something altogether unexpected. A given logic of practice can transform, pursuing a novel trajectory as the assemblage encounters fresh events and (socio)materialities. For Bennett (2010, p. 49), aleatory materialism "is for the sake of freedom conceived as a persistent capacity of the natural world to surprise—to produce events not fully determined by their antecedents." Aleatory materialism thus forces a reckoning with the intrinsic dis/orderliness and continual becoming of organizing, which both PBOS and CCO tend to push outside their conceptual gaze in the interest of exposing the accomplishments generating the organizational phenomena upon which they focus[3] (Cooper, 1986; Vásquez & Kuhn, 2019). Ontological multiplicity, in contrast, allows an analyst to remain open to the "queerness" (Barad, 2012) characterizing the operations of assemblages.

Critiquing Constraints on Becoming

A third step is needed to make a new materialist approach *critical*. Although new materialists share a desire to re-imagine the subject, reassess ethics, and explore what counts as agency, they also acknowledge that a "newfound attentiveness to matter and its powers will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression, but it can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of [being] inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations" (Bennett, 2010, p. 13). Conceptions of "the ethical" emerge from that network of relations (i.e., the assemblage), so critique must also make reference to its logics and their consequences, with attention to the assemblage's ongoing becoming—its growth toward the production of difference. A transformative redefinition, via the potential for alternative logics, requires two moves of critique.

Assessing inclusion/exclusion. First is an appraisal of how the assemblage-in-practice makes agency flow to, or from, particular actors or relations, with a consideration of the (ethical) justifications for such activity. For thinkers like Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the imperative is to critique forms of authority that constrain the assemblage's connection-making potential, its potential to "become-other" and engage with novel problems, by seating decidability in only one location and rendering some elements outside its borders. Each of these practices is about boundary-making, which presents authority in/of the assemblage as a product of everyday practice: "The global is no longer somewhere 'out there', the relentless juggernaut of globalisation, with no one to blame for job cuts, rising carbon dioxide emissions and so on . . . Instead, the global is also made right here, wherever we live" (Müller, 2015, p. 35). Localized acts of inclusion and exclusion produce the boundaries that make becoming (im)possible.

Novel connection-making. A second move is to locate affirmative possibilities for new connections across and beyond the assemblage to enable new becomings, as indicated in the section on ontological multiplicity. For Braidotti (2017, p. 21), the task of new materialist critical theory "is activating subjects to enter into new affective assemblages, to co-create alternative ethical forces and political codes." The aim is to conceive of possibilities for assemblages to embrace variety, freedom, and growth through communicative practice (Guattari, 2000; Ergene, Calás, & Smircich, 2018). Such possibilities could be provoked by unanticipated reconfigurations of relations between the material and discursive (Mazmanian, Chon, & Dourish, 2014), narratives that contest existing logics of connection (Chia & MacKay, 2007), spectacles that expose the protective opaqueness of value chains (Flyverbom & Reinecke, 2017), or events that make new connections across assemblages (Ashcraft & Kuhn, 2018). Perhaps disappointingly, the notion of the assemblage's "becoming other" through novel connection-making cannot comprise a straightforward normative stance from which one might pass judgment on a given practice. Responsibility, or response-ability, instead involves a responsiveness to continual assemblage growth (Painter-Moreland, 2011).

BlackRock Illustration

Considering the BlackRock case as an elucidatory example of how the sort of analysis described in this section might proceed, one might begin, in the *assemblage* step, by positing the existence of many conflicting forces populating the practice—not merely the corporate sites—into which Fink's letters enter. The forces comprising the assemblage might include executives' (perceived) authority over firms, the doctrine of shareholder primacy, activists' pressure on firms, the wide circulation of calls for sustainability, racist histories of corporatized colonial activity, the financialized paternalism lurking in Fink's assertions, corporate equity prices,

unequal flows and distributions of wealth, the social prestige of companies' association with BlackRock, accounting frameworks and corporate legal codes, and the uses to which firms and firms' capital are put. The picture is one of a heterogeneous network of forces—what Ingold (2015) reframes as *meshworks,* emphasizing intersecting flows rather than connected entities— that, in its unfolding, comprises a contested practice of "conscious" capitalism that Fink's letters summon. The challenge in this first step, accordingly, is to simultaneously depict the agencies comprising the assemblage while also attending to logics of practice that enact and extend organizing across time and space and make the assemblage hang together.

The second move is a recognition of *ontological multiplicity*. Fink's letters hail the corporation—again, as a node in the assemblage—through its orthodox "reality" as a neutral tool of rent-seeking, profit maximization, and wealth distribution, accomplished through resource exploitation. Here, the firm is controllable by its executives, and though the letters urge executives to create a new reality, they rely on a configuration of laws, material resources, intra-organizational authority, and human bodies (among other forces) to make such agency happen.

Ontological multiplicity offers new materialist inquiry license to examine how any organization harbors a *range* of realities materializing in the practices in which it is invoked: "it" is force of socioeconomic domination; "it" is a lever for social and environmental justice; "it" is a citizen in a *polis*; "it" is a community; "it" is a production function; "it" is an appendage of algorithmic governance. New materialist inquiry would thus consider Fink's letters to be *events* with the potential to summon alternative configurations of forces comprising the assemblage. But it would also remain open to the potential that the letters, as discursive elements, intertwine with more conventionally material events (such as environmental carnage, gun violence, or disease contagion) to catalyze practice. The analyst's task would be to trace how the assemblage,

as configuration, meets events that foment disorder and induce organizations to become-other via practices such as demonstrating responsible citizenship, engaging with forces of activism, or insulating the firm by "fissuring" its relations (Weil, 2014).

The exploration of the "eventness" of ontological multiplicity brings forth the ethical claim—and thus the basis of critique—of new materialist inquiry under the banner of the *assemblage growth* via *novel connection-making* (its capacity to become-other). The issue revolves around the question "given this event, how is our collective to be built"? (Bryant, 2011, p. 29), where "the collective" is the configuration of the assemblage, and "building" is far from a human-centric activity. Because Fink's letters participate in the production of the very pernicious social and environmental consequences he seeks to change (e.g., those introduced above as marking the assemblage), efforts to alter only *firms'* practices—via only strategists in those firms—is likely to ironically *prevent* novel connection-making. If authority adheres to only the traditional agents (i.e., corporate executives), and if authority excludes flows of, for instance, environmentalist activism and alternative logics of corporate governance, firms are unlikely to experience the growth, the becoming-other, Fink purports to desire. In other words, unless events modify the sociomaterial relations of authority that have generated a given logic of practice, the potential for substantive change is limited at best. Even recognizing this, a new materialist sensibility encourages analysts to remain attentive to the possibility of novel and affirming becomings, singularities that emerge from unexpected re-configurations in the assemblage.

Re-imagining a critical project through an engagement with new materialisms is a provocation to PBOS and CCO alike. It is an accusation that we have neither adequately addressed the impacts of our analyses for interrogating the conditions under which organization occurs, nor have we used our explanations to imagine affirmative alternatives to dominant

practices. The three steps offered here—defining assemblage, conceptualizing ontological multiplicity, and critiquing constraints on the assemblage's becoming—diverge from conventional critical theorizing, but offer new imaginaries of creation and connection, rooted in sociomaterial communicative practice.

Conclusion

Noticing blind spots is essential to carving out unique perspectives and to making theoretical progress (not to mention being provocative). Yet one might reasonably ask whether a focus on communication, as in CCO, might itself be blind to PBOS's obvious strengths. Weick (1980) might suggest that I've committed *blinding spotting*: "When people spot a phenomenon and single it out for attention, this activity often mutilates the context and blinds people to the reality of overdetermination" (p. 184). My argument hinges, however, on refusing to see communication as merely one among many practices, as only one organizing phenomenon. A CCO frame provokes—or rather invites—PBOS by reframing practice *as* communication, which implies the hybridity of agency and the multiplicity (as well as the dis/ordering evanescence) of organization. From there, building on CCO's and PBOS's shared-yet-underdeveloped interest in new materialisms creates the potential for a new, and potentially fruitful, image of critical theorizing. When we acknowledge these blind spots, new vistas appear on our theoretical horizons.

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[1] I'm obviously painting with broad and unsubtle strokes here. Certainly, not all practice theorists in organization studies commit these offenses--hence the hedging "tend to" and "generally" language in this paragraph. If this Provocation to Debate were my entry in an actual debate, my response would be that I'm pointing toward a central tendency and a habit, not to a problem endemic to PBOS.

[2] New materialists often draw on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) use of the associated French word *agencement* rather than assemblage to emphasize *activity* and *agency* across a heterogeneous and indeterminate network. For simplicity's sake, I employ the term *assemblage* here.

[3] Witness Nicolini's (2012) attention to "performances made *durable*" and "*knotted together*" in the definition offered in this essay's first section.