

Whither Critical Management and Organization Studies? For a Performative Critique of Capitalist Flows in the Wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Patrizia Zanoni^{a,b} 

^aHasselt University, Faculty of Business Economics, SELN - Identity, Diversity & Inequality Research, Martelarenlaan 42, Hasselt, 3500, Belgium; ^bUtrecht University, Utrecht School of Governance Utrecht School of Governance, Bijlhouwerstraat 6, Utrecht, 3511 ZC, The Netherlands

Keywords: capital, CMS, Covid-19, flows, logistics, social reproduction, state

Over the last few months, COVID-19 has entered our own consciousness as a moment of profound disruption, leading in too many cases to misery and death, but also, forcing us more mundanely to reorganize our lives, work and social relations. This unexpected dis-organization of life has revealed our mutual dependency to exist, as *one* people, literally: *pan-demic*. At the same time, it has shown how these social relations constitute us as *many*, different and unequally vulnerable. How does the pandemic interrogate our understandings of power, subjection, oppression and inequality? What can we, as critical Management and Organization Studies (MOS) scholars, bring to the table of renewed theorisations of (dis)organizing during and post the pandemic?

This disruption invites us to engage more often and more thoroughly with capitalism as constituted through capitalist flows of people, goods, capital, ideas and affect – and, one could add, viruses. As David Harvey has argued, these flows organize the economy and society by increasingly ‘compressing’ space and time to ensure capital valorization, fundamentally shaping the relations that constitute us in work and society more broadly. They render us dependent on each other in specific ways, governing through ‘the modulation of divisions and of differences’ (Lazzarato, 2006, p. 119), ‘frictions’ that generate value for capital (Tsing, 2005) and render us unequally vulnerable. The COVID-19 pandemic thus calls critical MOS to address capitalist flows. Let me illustrate.

Address for reprints: Patrizia Zanoni, Hasselt University, Belgium (patrizia.zanoni@uhasselt.be).

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

Disrupting the Flow of Commodities

COVID-19 has made highly visible the global flow of commodities on which the post-1989 global economy has been built. It has brought to the fore the persistent materiality of the commodified goods and services on which all societies, include so called ‘post-industrial’ ones, rely to exist. The flows of some commodities were interrupted, such as medical equipment kept within national borders, vegetables that could not be harvested by seasonal migrant workers, food and beverages unsold in restaurants and cafés, and cultural events cancelled, putting many into misery. Other ones, re-classified as ‘essential’ to our lives, have been kept up, obliging workers in maintenance, logistics and distribution to work, putting them at heightened risk. Yet, in some other cases, new flows have been organized around non-market principles of solidarity, (temporarily) replacing flows of commodities.

While flows of ideas have been widely analysed in critical MOS, and flows of capital and people have been increasingly addressed in the wake of the 2008 crisis and on-going migration, respectively, flows of goods remain surprisingly out of our discipline’s sight. Narratives of the ‘knowledge’, ‘service’ and ‘experience’ economy, which reflect our own place in global capitalism, have led to relative neglect of the massive local and global flows of commodities on which our lives depend, with the notable exception of few recent investigations of commoditized food and textile (e.g., Böhm et al., 2020; Levy et al., 2016). Yet, if capitalism is the mode of organizing the economy and society in which wealth manifests itself largely through commodities (Marx, 1976), then these questions should be at the core of critical MOS. The literatures on logistics as a ‘science of circulation’ (Cowen, 2014) and on borders as constitutive of ‘multiplied’ labour (Andrijasevic et al., 2019; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013) can be of help to theorize how capitalism operates and valorization is ensured under intensified global competition.

Such approaches open up a range of new questions: What kinds of flows are created and maintained to render goods commodities? How are commodities produced, packaged, transported, distributed and consumed and by whom? Under which labour, environmental and other regulatory conditions? What kind of economic, symbolic and affective relations do commodities establish between heterogeneously constituted subjects involved in their flow? Where, in this flow, does value ‘stick’ and what kinds of struggle arise surrounding its distribution? Which kinds of livelihoods do they enable or hamper along their (global) flow? What contradictions become visible in these flows? Under which conditions do alternative flows emerge that de-commodify goods?

Disrupting the Flow of Care Under Capitalism

As many commentators have observed, the pandemic has highlighted the fragility of the human flows through which the biological and social reproduction of contemporary capitalist societies is organized. Forced confinement has drastically reduced human mobility, catapulting care – in the households, families, local communities, schools, hospitals, homes for the elderly, day-cares, refugee shelters, etc. – to the frontstage of public life. Under the spotlight, and against the background of country-specific structural shortages in welfare service provision, care has been recast from subordinate, devalued and unpaid work largely carried out by (racialized) (migrant) women (e.g., nurses, nannies,

grand-mothers, au pairs, neighbours) to 'essential' work. The spatio-temporal conflation of much of (white-collar) paid work and care in the homes crystallized 'work-life conflict' as a systemic contradiction of capitalist society, rather than an individual problem (of women) seeking 'balance'. This conflation also evidenced how deep inequalities in housing, income and social protection made working-class (racialized) (single-headed) working-class households disproportionately vulnerable to poverty, domestic violence, isolation, and mental health issues, fundamentally undermining their ability to care.

The visibility acquired by disrupted flows of care under the pandemic interrogates the conceptualization of waged work in the capitalist firm as a separate and distinct 'sphere' constituting the privileged object of critical MOS analysis. It invites to de-centre our perspective to adequately account for the care work and workers on which the capitalist economy is inherently predicated. Capital valorization rests on labour power that is biologically and socially largely (re)produced outside firms and markets, yet without which it cannot be sustained (e.g., Mischzynski, 2019; Zanoni, 2019). Social reproduction theory offers us a particularly powerful conceptual vocabulary to articulate this relation (Bhattacharya, 2017; Federici, 2012/1975; Vogel, 2013/1983), integrate it into our critique of capitalism, and theorize alternatives to it. In particular, it points to the contradiction between the imperative of capital valorization requiring to keep the cost of labour as low as possible and the necessity to sufficiently finance the reproduction of labour power (through the wage, social contributions and taxes) for future capital valorization.

Re-centring critical MOS research towards care work leads to novel research questions: How does capitalism socially mediate the (unwaged) care work on which it rests? What kind of economic, symbolic and affective relations does care work establish between the heterogeneously constituted subjects involved in its flow? What alternative social reproductive arrangements can repair the social by re-connecting people in new ways? How do the 'community economy', the 'provisioning economy', the 'fundamental economy' and, 'alternative economies' challenge the constitutive relation between production and social reproduction under capitalism? Through what kind of political work can care be recognized and rewarded?

Exposing the State's Role in the Governance of Capitalist Flows

An understanding of capitalism as flows further calls for critical consideration of the role of the state in their governance. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, almost overnight, national governments have deployed their power to halt certain flows and redefine the rules in order to exceptionally keep other ones going. In many cases, the procrastination of state intervention, to avoid the disruption of existing capitalist flows, has caused numerous deaths. In other ones, state intervention has taken violent and repressive forms. Despite significant differences across countries, the past months have brought a deep interrogation of the state. The neoliberal imagery of the state as, at best, a mere facilitator of capitalist flows and markets has come into flagrant contradiction with the necessity to organize society differently to safeguard it. The call of 84 super-rich to be taxed more to fund research on a vaccine is the last slap in the face: big capital asks to give more back to society, gesturing the incapacity of the state to control flows of capital.

These events are revelatory of the necessity, for critical MOS, to engage more systematically with the state, its (lack of) power, and its critical role both in reproducing, shaping and halting capital. We have been extensively theorizing the neoliberal hegemony and its consequences for contemporary subjectivities, and to some extent, contrasting the widespread idea that neoliberalism rests on the absence of the state. However, often this role is understood as context and background of what we study. We need to make the state again the object of our inquiry (e.g. Chowdury, 2020), and engage with the governance of capitalist flows of people, goods, money, data, etc. through the production and enforcement of the rules that define, fragment and connect us unequally (Dean, 2015; Lazzarato, 2006). The rich critical literature ranging from the classical work of Gramsci, Polanyi, Poulantzas, to the contemporary writings of Bob Jessop, Mariana Mazzucato, Jodi Dean, to mention only a few, can be of inspiration and help. Critical MOS should curate spaces for conversations on the constitutive relations between capital, the state, and civil society, and in particular those initiatives that strive for re-organizing livelihoods through alternative flows (Zanoni, 2020).

Attention for the state would stimulate research questions such as: How do trade, labour, environmental and safety norms established by the state make capitalist flows 'seamless'? How do different public policies intersect to fragment the population and unequally distribute vulnerability to ensure capital valorization? How do national state policies intersect with supra- and infra-national ones and with which effects on the flows shaping the livelihoods of specific subjects? Which forms of struggle are most effective in interrupting state supported capitalist flows? Under which conditions and how does the state promote alternative ones?

CONCLUSION

The disruption of capitalist flows by the pandemic has exacerbated the cleavages and power inequalities. Addressing them can help critical MOS to reconnect the places and times of production and paid work to the circulation and consumption of goods and services and, more broadly, to social reproduction. This is necessary to identify the contradictions at the heart of capitalism, denaturalize it as a mode of organizing the economy and society, and envision more just flows and novel subjectivities. While a permanent 'state of emergency' (Jessop, 2015) holds the risk of habituation, it also reaffirms the continued relevance of critical MOS's intellectual and political project.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Daniel Muzio and Christopher Wickert for their useful feedback on an earlier version of this text.

REFERENCES

- Andrijašević, R., Rhodes, C. and Yu, K. H. (2019). 'Foreign workers: On the other side of gendered, racial, political and ethical borders'. *Organization*, **26**, 313–20.
- Bhattacharya, T. (Ed.) (2017). *Social Reproduction Theory*. London: Pluto Press.
- Böhm, S., Spierenburg, M. and Lang, T. (2020). 'Fruits of our labour: Work and organisation in the global food system'. *Organization*, **27**, 195–212.

- Chowdury, R. (2020). 'The mobilization of noncooperative spaces: Reflections from rohingya refugee camps'. *Journal of Management Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12612>
- Cowen, D. (2014). *The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Dean, J. (2015). 'The party and communist solidarity'. *Rethinking Marxism*, **27**, 332–42.
- Federici, S. (2012/1975). *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*. New York: PM Press.
- Jessop, B. (2015). 'Challenges to the state, economic and political crises, and state restructuring'. *Policy & Politics*, **43**, 475–92.
- Lazzarato, M. (2006). 'Neoliberalism in action: Inequality, insecurity and the reconstitution of the social'. *Theory, Culture & Society*, **26**, 109–33.
- Levy, D., Reinecke, J. and Manning, S. (2016). 'The political dynamics of sustainable coffee: Contested value regimes and the transformation of sustainability'. *Journal of Management Studies*, **53**, 364–401.
- Marx, K. (1976). *Capital. Vol. I*. London: Penguin.
- Mezzadra, S. and Neilson, B. (2013). *Border as method, or, the multiplication of labor*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Miszczynski, M. (2019). 'Mutual dependency: Offshored labour and family organisation in post-socialist Romania'. *Organization*, **27**, 641–59.
- Tsing, A. (2005). *Friction: An Ethnography of Human Connection*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Vogel, L. (2013/1983). *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books.
- Zanoni, P. (2019). 'Labor market inclusion through predatory capitalism? The "sharing economy", diversity, and the crisis of social reproduction in the Belgian coordinated market economy'. In Vallas, S. and Kovalainen, A. (Eds), *Work and Labor in the Digital Age. Research in the Sociology of Work*, Bingley: Emerald, **33**, 145–64.
- Zanoni, P. (2020). 'Prefiguring alternatives through the articulation of post- and anti-capitalistic politics: An introduction to three additional papers and a reflection'. *Organization*, **27**, 3–16.