

10

UNCRITICAL CONSTITUTION

CCO, Critique and Neoliberal Capitalism

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Introduction

Since the Frankfurt School, the means of communication are not merely viewed as channels of information's transmission that coordinate interaction or as a means of mass manipulation. Communication has also been established as a social process that produces and reproduces the capitalist logic thereby contributing to the emergence of mass consumption, globalization and industrial production. Through their conception of cultural industries for instance, Adorno and Horkheimer (1972) highlight how the means of communication, such as radio, films, and magazines, generate alienation and passivity and how mass-produced culture is dangerous for individuals and society at large. In their portrait of the North American society of the 1950s and 60s, the means of communication were portrayed as transforming everything into commodities that serve economic purposes. Building on a Marxian perspective, this early version of Critical Theory established communication as the *locus* of capital accumulation (Fuchs, 2020). Since Adorno and Horkheimer's writing, communication scholars took over this critical stance (Aubin & Rueff, 2016) addressing media (e.g. Ott & Mack, 2009), labor (e.g. Fuchs, 2020) or technology (e.g. Wajcman, 2007), among others.

Whereas communication fields ranging from media studies to intercultural communication adopted rather early a critical stance, organizational communication has been slower in taking this turn. Long confined to functionalist or interpretivist approaches, scholars were mainly addressing how communication "in" organization could be optimized to ensure its proper functioning. The communicative constitution of organization perspective (hereafter CCO) can be traced to the 1980s when interpretative and critical scholars started to question the functionalist paradigm (Boivin, Brummans, & Barker, 2017, p. 4). Although the CCO perspective – which we in this paper operationalize to scholarship influenced by the Montreal School, although we think that our argument has longer reach – has made a fundamental theoretical contribution in organizational communication, it lacks a critical dimension. We acknowledge that several CCO scholars are sensitive to the critical potentialities of seeing communication as constitutive of organization, focusing on gender issues (Ashcraft, 2004; Mumby & Ashcraft, 2006), branding (Mumby, 2016, 2019), power and authority (Bencherki, Matte, & Cooren, 2019; Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009), resistance in the workplace (Mumby, 2020; Mumby, Thomas, Martí, & Seidl, 2017), or alternative organizations (Del Fa & Vásquez, 2020; Wilhoit

& Kisselburgh, 2019). However, critical CCO scholars can be counted on the fingers of one hand; also, few of them focus on neoliberal capitalism in their conception of both communication and organizations. Even if some propose an alternative route to pursue “critical” theorizing via new materialism (see Kuhn, 2021), it’s still a blindspot in the CCO perspective. This chapter makes a modest attempt to rectify this shortfall. Indeed, we do believe that developing a theory of the social (which CCO purports to be in some respects) must consider the hegemonic social order already put in place by neoliberal capitalism.

Thus, drawing on the invitation of Kuhn, Ashcraft and Cooren (2017) to understand neoliberal capitalism as a participant inextricably bound up in socioeconomic practices that “make” communication, we state that capitalism participates in the *organization* of the social. From that premise, we consider it imperative to consider capitalism as such to develop a critical perspective of CCO. Moreover, building on the theoretical premise that communication is a *relational practice* (Cooren, 2020) by which various beings relate to each other through other beings, we will question the character of this relation by stating that, fundamentally, this relation is formed or informed by capitalism. By forming and informing, we understand capitalism as the main way individuals have been socialized to engage with the world and have thus internalized a capitalist way of living (we will come back to that). Considering capitalistic practices this way permits us to address, for example, questions of power and innovation, but also alternative organizing and anti-capitalist resistance. In doing so, this chapter aims to develop CCO’s ability to make a critical contribution. Informing a theoretical perspective will bring us to open up empirical questions and propose avenues to empirically explore these issues.

This chapter aims at theorizing a critical approach to CCO in several ways: first by showing that CCO’s scholars’ interpretation of pragmatism occludes a critical dimension in their analyses; second, by engaging with critical theorizing and its connection points to CCO; and, third, to show how the lack of a critical understanding of neoliberal capitalism is hampering the critical potentialities of CCO.

The Constitutive Approach to Communication: The Linguistic Turn and Pragmatism

At heart, the key contribution of the CCO perspective is an attempt to keep the intellectual promise of the linguistic turn for understanding organizing and organization. The standard interpretation of the linguistic turn is that language is somehow important in the creation and maintenance of organization (see, for example, Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). As pointed out by Deetz (2003), this interpretation occasionally becomes highly problematic: “[t]he problem of language as the ‘mirror of nature’ that preoccupied the positivist was replaced by simply focusing on the ‘mirror’ as an object” (Deetz, 2003, p. 425).

What does the linguistic turn mean if pushing further than language is somehow important? It attacks, on philosophical-theoretical grounds, the widely accepted idea that language is a system of reference attributed with the power of denoting objects “out there” (Cooper, 1989). Rather, “language is a structure of material marks or sounds which are in themselves ‘undecidable’ and *upon which meaning has to be imposed*” (Cooper, 1989, p. 480, emphasis in original). Symbolic systems such as language do not contain meaning. On the contrary, meaning is assigned by users to distinguish certain experiences from one another. Language is external and real. It – and potential meanings generated through it – forego any experience of what is external to it, since experience gains its shape and intelligibility through language.

Deetz (2003) points in particular to how the linguistic turn may be used to problematize taken-for-granted dualisms, such as the subject-object distinction. He also shows how the

standard interpretation of the linguistic turn reintroduces this dualism by turning language into an object and the perspectivism implied by accepting that all seeing is seeing-as-something into subjectivist points of reference of equal rank: “the personalization of the idea of ‘standpoint’ or ‘position’ has protected personal experience and alternative forms of knowledge from an interrogation of their politics and construction” (Deetz, 2003, p. 425).

We don’t deny that the CCO perspective is well equipped to deliver on the promise of the linguistic turn. In particular, we accept that it is particularly useful for doing away with the obfuscation that is inherent in dualisms such as subject-object, micro-macro and structure-agency. However, we claim that the CCO perspective has largely failed to tap into the origins of the linguistic turn to offer a deeper and sharper critique and understanding of the role of language and communication for organizing and organization. In particular, the CCO perspective typically fails to problematize the relationship between language and social reality by refusing to explore the possibility that social reality might already be constituted by frozen social relations, held together by ideology and fixed power relations.

The Blind Spots of Pragmatism

The CCO perspective avoids the personalization of position but has instead introduced its own version of avoiding a political and critical understanding, primarily by understanding language as an unprejudiced tool. We trace this turn of affairs to the pragmatic theoretical roots of the CCO perspective. In doing so, we can understand why and how CCO has developed as a non-critical approach. The founders of CCO (James Taylor, Elizabeth Van Every and François Cooren) anchored their thinking in pragmatism coined by Dewey, Mead, Peirce, Garfinkel, Sacks, Schegloff and Wittgenstein, to mention just a few (Brummans, Cooren, Robichaud, & Taylor, 2014). This philosophical influence, and the way CCO scholars have appropriated its premises, is not without consequences and contributes to a sort of “neutralization” of the concept of communication (and, by extension of interactions and of the organization).

It’s important, first and foremost, to recall that pragmatism was born in the United States while liberalism was emerging and spreading. It is influenced by empirical social sciences and cognitive fields such as psychotherapy. It breaks with European philosophy which relies upon literature and European linguistics, which was speculative and less data-driven (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). Pragmatism was coined as a method for which the truth is relative: what is true is always useful according to the interests of life. Moreover, for pragmatists (such as James, for instance), truth is always linked with actions, as actions and experience are at the core of this philosophy. Indeed – and of importance for the CCO approach – for pragmatists such as Sacks or Garfinkel, the origin of the social world is to be found in interactions. As Cooren says with great clarity in Schoeneborn et al. (2014):

A pragmatist epistemology calls into question both subjectivism and idealism, on the one hand, and empiricism and materialism, on the other, *by refusing to determine a starting point in the act of knowing, inquiring, or investigating.*

p. 288, emphasis added

The last sentence seems quite problematic as it tends to neutralize the interaction and exclude from it everything that seems to be “not there”. Also, it obfuscates what is really going on, as it is more accurate to state that pragmatic inquiry starts haphazardly (and also inevitably informed by structural bias) rather than from nowhere. Indeed, supposing that there is nothing outside

the text, no “starting point whatsoever”, refuses to acknowledge the existence of a regime of truth à la Foucault (2012), a point we will develop below.

In other words, pragmatism applied this way seems to purge society of norms, values and social order. As Lewis Munford writes as he talks about “pragmatic liberalism”, he states that pragmatism (1940, n.p.):

minimized the role of instinct, tradition, history; it was unaware of the dark forces of the unconscious, it was suspicious of either the capricious or the incalculable, for the only universe it could rule was a measured one, and the only type of human character it could understand was the utilitarian one (...).

Munford’s quote illustrates our point, which consists in underlining how pragmatists “flatten reality” in focusing only on what is seen. As it disregards the complexity of the implicit (or not) rules that dictate behaviours, beliefs, relationships, consumption, decisions-making, etc., pragmatism empties reality from what *organizes* it.

Furthermore, pragmatism is represented by a variety of authors who did not share the same political opinions. For instance, we recall the famous Dewey–Lippmann debate, which opposed two very distinctive view of liberalism: a progressive liberalism for Dewey and a “new liberalism” for Lippmann (which will prevail and pave the way to neoliberalism (Stiegler, 2018)). Even if the two authors did not share the same political views, they share the assumption that social science is a research posture in which the researcher is key in the transformation of the social (see for example, Dewey, 1938). In that sense, pragmatism is not merely theoretical but has in its roots the will to act concretely on society. **Pragmatism** can be seen as the origin of action research and the definition of social science not solely as analytical theorizing but also as an invitation to act and change society. CCO scholars have avoided this element of their pragmatist stance. Indeed, few are the CCO researchers who are willing to change or act upon a phenomenon. On the contrary, they often stand on their theoretical ground. In that sense, if CCO claims to be pragmatist it has to reconnect with this transformative gesture and that can be a first step towards a critical stance. Moreover, a similar critique has been lobbed at critical theory in organization studies which testify the need to address it bluntly and seriously to find avenues of action for social changes (Spicer et al., 2009; Parker, 2018).

Finally, a core assumption in the CCO approach is “that a variety of forms of agency is always in play in any interaction”, a phenomenon that Cooren calls, metaphorically, “ventriloquism” (2012, p. 4). Ventriloquism refers to our capacity to make other beings say or do things while we speak (Cooren, 2012, p. 4). We don’t disagree that a variety of forms of agency is in play in any interaction, but it is important to realize that interactions only rarely happen in open play. Ventriloquism stated this way may overestimate the free play of agency. To be fair to Cooren, his argument does not exclude constraints on ventriloquism, but it is clear that the fascination is on the play of agency, not its limits. This obfuscates the rather plain insight that a lot of interaction, if not most, plays out in games that are rigged, where actors are framed, and where agency benefits distinct interests.

Critique and Organizational Communication

Being critical: what is the point? After all, critique only exists in relation to something other than itself: it is an instrument, a means for a future or a truth that it will not know nor happen to be, it oversees a domain it would want to police and is unable to regulate. It is a function which is subordinated in relation to what philosophy, science, politics, ethics, law, literature, etc.

positively constitute (Foucault, 2007). At heart, a critical approach advances the idea that we are not stuck with a particular social world at hand. The social world is understood as a construction that is welded together through social processes and thus could have developed differently. “Critical” in this context means to interrogate society at large and in relation to particular cases while acknowledging power relations (inequality, racism, sexism, etc.) and means to overcome them (social justice, peace, resistances, etc.). Here, a critical understanding is understood as an engagement with ideas, ideologies and institutions to encourage liberation and reduce repression. Put bluntly, a critical understanding explores the effects of power, resistance, the division of labor, marginalization, tension, and difference.

Why do we need a critical approach of CCO? In order to answer this, we turn to Foucault, who famously asks the question, “what is critique?” (2007). Even if this question may appear innocuous, it addresses the relation directly between individuals, truth, power, and what Foucault refers to as the “art of being governed”. Indeed, for Foucault, being critical (and developing a critical theory) is an attitude that asks two questions: how are humans governed? And how could they not be governed *like that* (2007, p. 44)? He recalls that through history humans have been governed in a certain way and following a specific “regime of truth” that subjugates individuals through mechanisms of power (2007, p. 47). Foucault calls this way of being governed “forms of governmentalization”, an expression that stresses that governing humans is an ongoing process that oscillates according to the regime of truth in power.

The critical attitude aims at transgressing this “governmentalization” or way of being governed and gives individuals the right to question the regime of truth (2007, p. 47). In other words, a critical attitude is “the art of voluntary insubordination” (Foucault, 2007, p. 47). Thus, it is definitely an act of resistance that creates a breach in the form of governmentalization. Therefore, it supposes a double thought process: firstly, defining very precisely the regime of truth at play regarding the object of study; and secondly, considering disruptions and resistances. In other words, cultivating the art of insubordination while exploring the politics of truth (Chamayou, 2018). For these reasons, the critical attitude is *relational*, as it is not exterior to the truth it wants to overcome and to the ruptures it aims at.

Considering critique as such for CCO scholars has two main implications. First, we have to acknowledge that capitalism is a dominant regime of truth according to which large tracts of “the social” are organized. More than merely acknowledging it, we indeed have to explore it closely and identify its mechanisms through communication. Secondly, we have to be attentive to, and aware of, the possible breaches created and the moments when this regime of truth vacillates. In other words, the point is to explore the (un)doing of capitalism with a CCO perspective.

Critique and Organizations

Mumby and Ashcraft (2017) have done a substantial job in reviewing critical approaches in organizational communication. They start from critical approaches in communication to explore the question in organization studies and then in organizational communication. They disclose the various influences of the critical stance from Marxism to poststructuralism and post-colonialism, and recall the premises of critical approach in management with the emergence of the Critical Management Studies community in the early 1990s.

As Mumby and Ashcraft (2017) summarize, critical approaches of communication focus on discursive struggle, the relationship between democracy and organization in contemporary capitalism (e.g. corporate colonization: Deetz, 1992), the promise and limitations of alternative organizational forms, and attention to identity. Above all, critical approaches to

organizational communication have shown increasing concern for investigating communication as it constitutes the power of organizing. In other words, attention has gradually shifted away from organizational communication as a political phenomenon that occurs within already established organizational containers, and toward communication as a mode of explaining the formations and practices of power that constitute the organizing process (Mumby & Ashcraft, 2017, p. 20) .

Foucault's take on critique has been incorporated in a more general form in management and organization studies by way of critical management studies (CMS). CMS highlight the power relations implied in managerial and organizational arrangements. At the heart of CMS, the idea of "management" is systematically questioned, and treated with suspicion. The purpose is not to question the usefulness of management practices per se, but rather to scrutinize the social costs of these practices (Adler, Forbes, & Willmott, 2008; Alvesson, Bridgman, & Willmott, 2009; Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Parker, 1995; Parker & Parker, 2017).

Fournier and Grey (2000), in their seminal article on CMS, state that a critical perspective draws primarily on three principles: "non-performativity", "de-naturalization", and "reflexivity" (see also Grey & Willmott, 2005). By non-performativity they draw on Lyotard (1984) and argue that critical perspectives should resist attempts to equate efficiency with progress and that instrumental rationality per se might be destructive, as seen in Habermas's (1987) argument about the colonization of the life world. De-naturalization states that CMS involves a deconstruction of the false claim that social reality is given and not an artifice emerging from social construction processes (Fournier & Grey 2000, p. 8). By reflexivity, they mean that CMS should be explicit about the assumptions and vocabularies it engages with, and reflect upon framing effects, limits, and shortcomings.

We argue that denaturalization has particular weight for understanding the potential of critique inherent in the CCO perspective. Fournier and Grey render denaturalization as primarily an ontological and political move. For them, denaturalization is a matter of realizing that existing knowledge emerges from already established perspectives. It is organized around what is written in, as well as with what is written out: denaturalization questions the privileged position of the established truths established by particular perspectives, vocabularies, and groups of people, and opens up space for what is written out – voices and experiences not covered by established epistemic practices. It also opens up the possibility of generating knowledge about a radically different society, either as giving voice to the muted or the voiceless, or by providing a space in which "whereas-if" and "what-if" realities can be articulated.

Deetz's (1992) concept of discursive closure provides an illustration of how an organizational communication perspective can be mobilized for purposes of critique. Discursive practices, Deetz observes, are not in themselves neutral. They have capacities to lead to the potential suspension of preformed convictions and relatively unconstrained production of understanding. However, they also have the capacity to lead to the suspension of dissent, difference, and discussion. Discursive closure is driven by the latter kind of practices. Since the practices themselves are "tactical", rather than "substantive", they are often hard to notice.

Discursive closure can happen in numerous ways. Deetz enumerates eight important ones: disqualification, naturalization, neutralization, topical avoidance, subjectification of experience, meaning denial and plausible deniability, legitimization, and pacification. For the purposes of this chapter, we will pay attention to naturalization as discursive closure, as it illustrates the importance of denaturalization as critique. Naturalization occurs, per what we discussed above, when something is written in, at the expense of what is written out (Fournier and Grey, 2000). It happens when a way of approaching a subject matter is presented, and accepted, as the way things are by nature and default. Naturalization often appears as an engagement with social

relationships and subjective constructions as natural, fixed and external objects. For example, in neoliberal capitalism, freedom is rendered as choice between options, need fulfillment as consumption, and human enterprise as trade, all regulated through the market mechanisms and the superpowers of authoritative finance. Liberty becomes choice, needs become wants, and self-realization becomes the accumulation of wealth.

Processes of naturalization deny alternative formulations of experience. Taken far enough, they deny the possibility of alternative experience itself. The naturalization process becomes materialized and emerges as a social fact. Neoliberal capitalism, for example, can be questioned as a matter of intellectual exercise but it cannot easily be decolonized from our lived experience. Over time, discourse and language have power effects. There is power in the rendering of society in a particular way. Foucault's ideas of truth regimes and power/knowledge show us how this dynamic unfolds: discourse establishes realities that power can operate from, which makes new forms of discourse possible, which makes new manifestations of power possible to operate, and so on.

The Ideological Content of Neoliberalism

Even if the term “neoliberalism” was coined for the first time in the late nineteenth century, it is associated with a specific transformation of capitalism in the 1980s. More specifically, neoliberalism is an ideological reaction from capitalists who felt threatened after the uprisings of the end of 1970s (Brown, 2017; Chamayou, 2018; Gibson-Graham, 2006; Harvey, 2005). Some tend to date its advent to Reagan's election in 1981, since he was inspired by liberal economists such as Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek, who were strong advocates of Adam Smith's *laissez-faire* capitalism. Neoliberalism is also associated with economic liberalization including deregulation, privatization, free trade and austerity (e.g. Dardot & Laval, 2009; Harvey, 2005). Decolonial and feminist thinkers add to this list social oppression, such as sexism, patriarchy and systemic racism (Braidotti, 2019; Federici, 2019; Haraway, 1988; Lorde, 1984; Vergès, 2019). Other terminologies can refer to neoliberalism such as advanced capitalism (Pineault, 2008), platform capitalism (Srniczek, 2016), surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019), or communicational or informational capitalism (Dean, 2009; Fuchs, 2020). We chose to stick with the term neoliberal capitalism as we believe that it includes all of these specificities.

There is not any great secret about it: neoliberal capitalism has numerous negative effects for both human and non-human (see among many others: Braidotti, 2019; Deleuze & Guattari, 1980; Stengers, 2008). Neoliberalism, the “new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2011), is not merely a political economy dominated by free-trade and financial transactions. Indeed, as Dardot and Laval (2009, p. 5) put it, “neoliberal capitalism is about the way we live, feel and think” (our translation). In short, it “is no more and no less the very form of our existence, meaning the way we *have* to behave, to relate to each other and to ourselves” (2009, p. 5, our translation and emphasis). This definition brings the two authors to consider neoliberalism as a form of rationality that structures and organizes the rulers' actions and the behaviors of those who are governed (Dardot and Laval, 2009). The main consequences of neoliberalism rendered this way are global competition, economic struggles and inequalities, ordering of social relations within the model of the market, transformation of the individuals and the state into corporations (corporatization), exploitation of the subalterns (women, people of color, individuals from “undeveloped” countries), and earth destruction (Federici, 2019; Haraway, 2015; Malm, 2017; Vergès, 2019).

Following these broad definitions and claims of effects, we understand neoliberal capitalism as a complex and multifold hegemonic ideology that governs our behaviors, bodies, minds,

actions, etc. Ideology is an evergreen in social science. It has many meanings and uses. In early Marxism ideology was used to explain false beliefs covering up a dominant social order. These false beliefs refer to the notion coined by Marx of “false consciousness” which points to the fact that the tenants of the dominant ideology (a.k.a. the capitalists and the *bourgeoisie*) are blinded by the illusion that capitalism is an eternal and fundamental part of history. Their false consciousness prevents them from considering the totality of history and the historical processes that bring an established state of facts. Because of its link with the notion of false consciousness, ideology has a persistent bad connotation. More recently ideology is typically understood as a system of ideas and values (Freeden, 2003). Geertz (1973) summarizes the key differences between these conceptions in distinguishing between an interest and a strain theory of ideology. The interest theory of ideology uses the concept to explain a social group’s or class’s quest for power. The strain view considers ideology as a concept for understanding how social groups engage in ways to reduce stress and anxiety due to lack of cultural resources (see also Swidler, 1986; Kunda, 1992).

In this chapter we align our argument to the strain theory of ideology. We use ideology to refer to avenues for decontestation (Freeden, 2003) – making essentially contestable concepts less contentious, a move that will help us propose a critical approach to CCO. In this sense, ideology is primarily a device to cope with ambiguity and the indeterminacy of meaning. Understood this way, ideology offers a way to understand how communicative practices become materialized. The neoliberal ideology, in our contemporaneous era, orders and governs patterns and suppresses surplus meaning: it frames liberty as choice (rather than other kinds of freedom), fulfillment as consumption (rather than maturity and autonomy), and self-realization as accumulation of wealth (rather than other ways to grow and develop as human). Indeed, it aligns language and symbols with strategies for action (Swidler, 1986) and suppresses and marginalizes dissent and difference. Nonetheless, as an ideology, neoliberal capitalism is neither solely an economic system nor it is a “background” or a “frame”; rather, following Foucault (2004), we view it as a mode of being organized and governed: as a *regime of truth*. It’s an imposed and created way of living that has been integrated into our life and bodies (Brown, 2017; Federici, 2019; Guattari, 1981). Moreover, as Gibson-Graham puts it: “We cannot get outside capitalism” because “it has no outside. It becomes that which has no outside by swallowing up its conditions of existence” (2006, p. 258). However, this is not to say that life can be reduced to neoliberal capitalism only. We think of neoliberal capitalism as we think of family: impossible to escape, which does not mean that it is always in your face, but always in some ways affecting you. Following this, we make the assumption that neoliberalism is *an organizing ideology* that emerges through a patchwork of politico-socio-economic (and communicational) practices (Kuhn, Ashcraft, & Cooren, 2017) which is constitutive of our modern and occidental existence. This is the fundamental assumption of our conceptualization of the communicational constitution of neoliberalism. In some ways it echoes Mumby’s (2019) CCC (for Capital Constitutes Communication), but with slight differences that we review further. Furthermore, even-if neoliberal capitalism is all-encompassing it is not at totalitarian system emptied from the potentialities of resistances and decontestation. Following a more Gramscian-inspired conception of ideology, the hegemonic ideology can shift following revolution or classes struggle. So, it is still possible to create and imagine breaches (Holloway, 2010). Recognizing the hegemonic status of neoliberal capitalism does not equal refuting the possibilities of unpacking it, on the contrary, it opens the ways to think how is it possible to transform it from the inside. There are also places in the world where neoliberal capitalism is not hegemonic. For example, the situation in China is better characterized as authoritarian state capitalism (Xing & Shaw, 2013), rather than neoliberal capitalism.

The Communicative Constitution of Neoliberalism

Three Challenges

Kuhn, Ashcraft and Cooren (2017) invite us to think of capitalism in the conceptualization of communication as constitutive of organizations. Thus, capitalism is there defined not as a background figure nor as an external force, but as a set of socioeconomic practices constitutive of organizations. Such an approach echoes Mumby's (2016, 2019) work and his "CCC". Focusing on marketing strategies, Mumby states that a brand is the symptom of communicative capitalism. Drawing on Dean's (2009) idea of communicational capitalism, Mumby shows how capitalism is organized and organized in return through communication (and more specifically through branding practices). On the other hand, Kuhn et al. think that capitalism organizes practices and action. In both cases, "doing capitalism is communication" (2017, p. 28). We want to extend these two avenues to consider capitalism in a constitutive approach by (1) reaffirming that *doing capitalism is communication* (even if we avoid to reduce communication to branding as Mumby tends to do); (2) insisting that *communication is doing capitalism*, in the sense that as an organizing principle, neoliberalism also constitutes communication; and (3) finally stressing that this avenue opens up a breach to *undo* neoliberal capitalism.

Neoliberal capitalism offers three challenges for CCO: the formation of *meaning*, the rendering of *agency*, and the making up of *speaking objects*. First, meaning is challenging to the CCO perspective in the sense that in neoliberal capitalism, ideology is loading the dice of meaning production: some meanings matter more than others. For example, enterprise is a matter of creation of wealth, not about exploring the horizons of what is possible. Liberty is having choices from pre-set menus, not about freedom of expression. Need fulfillment is about consumption of given goods and services, not about self-actualization and self-realization. CCO does have notions that may be helpful here: for example, the idea of authoritative texts, as discussed by Kuhn (2008, 2012). However, there is also a widely shared concern that dealing directly with the concept of meaning would be beside the point and counterproductive; this position is most clearly staked out by the Montreal School. Indeed, from its perspective, what really matters is what communication *does*, not what it *means* nor whether meanings are to be found "within" the communication process (Bencherki, Matte, & Pelletier, 2016).

The problem here is that sometimes meaning – perhaps oftentimes – is the mechanism through which communication *does* things, in the sense that communication is typically done by competent speakers who share a universe of understanding. For example, the negotiation of a salary is impossible to make sense of without a preunderstanding of the selling of labor according to market prices in a neoliberal order. This competency (or the lack of it) frames people's capacity to participate in communication. In this sense, it is the social order that *constitutes communication*, not the other way around.

One way to better incorporate the neoliberal shaping of meaning into the CCO perspective, in a way that is compatible with this perspective's focus on tensions and struggle, is to recognize that tensions and struggle predominantly run up against a pre-existing order. This point is not a bid to recover fundamentalist assumptions about how human groups are colonized and fully regulated by shared meaning. We are arguing that it is important to be able to show how preformed and decontested meanings "do" communication and how they introduce vectors for action.

Second, the expansion of agency beyond human beings to include objects, devices, and "stuff" is helpful and productive. However, it also raises the question of where agency is preformatted by the social order at hand. It might be theoretically true that just about everything

can operate as a communication device and “make a difference” (Cooren, 2006) in social situations. However, this is empirically unlikely. The critical question is the co-optation of agency. An object may have an agency, but this might be by design, if the object is human-made. The question here is to what we attribute agency and the (power) effects of its intervention. For example, in the case of a control system for regulating organizational performance, does agency reside in the system itself, among the technicians who designed the system, or among the managers who reap its benefits? Or in all of the above?¹

Third, there is also the issue of selecting the “speaking” objects. In a world where agency is the exclusive domain of humans, this question is relatively easy to resolve. Basically, the “speaking” objects are the people involved in the context under study, since they are the only objects that are deemed competent to speak. In a world where objects and devices also “speak”, or at least partake in communication processes (see Rennstam, 2012), this question becomes more complicated. Cooren’s (2010, 2012) notion of ventriloquism offers a way to understand the mechanism of speaking for others, but it does not provide an account for which actors are *given the right to speak*, and what they are entitled to speak of. It is also possible to argue that ventriloquism per se facilitates naturalization as it obfuscates who is actually talking.

Communication as a Relation

These three challenges are intrinsically related to one of the main CCO premises: that communication is a relation. Relationality, as Kuhn and colleagues recall, “can facilitate novel ways of attending to social problems” (2017, p. 4). And they indeed pave the way to a relational and communicational perspective of a crucial trio in our social world: work, capitalism, and organization.

Following a constitutive approach of communication, assume that we organize ourselves *through* communication. Phenomena of all kinds emerge and are organized through the interactions of several and multiple-genre actors (usually referring to “non-humans” or other than humans) who populate “reality”. In this view, communication is not a medium, rather it is the fundamental dynamic principle of our existence (Cooren, 2018, 2020). Communication has thus a highly relational function: it puts things in relation on a communicational scene where interactions constitute organizations (seen as arrangements or dispositions). In a specific place, at a specific time, things in interaction are disposing themselves to create a specific arrangement. To be interested in a relational definition of communication shifts the focus from people who speak and write towards the links, the relations that move humans and things in the world. Communication should therefore be conceived of as a set of relational practices – by which various beings relate to each other through other beings that or who act as their intermediaries/voices/media/representatives:

If someone or something indeed makes a difference (i.e., is the author of an action), it is because it is not only he/she/it who/that is acting, but also what or who he/she/it represents, i.e., make present (again).

Cooren, 2020, p. 9

That conception of communication is highly influenced by new materialism (see Cooren, 2020), which stipulates a fundamental relationality of the world (the universe). Relationality is thus defined as an ontological dimension. Seeing communication through this conception invites one to consider communication thus also as ontological.

Moreover, building on those premises, communication refers to the way two (or more) beings “are held in common” together through a third being² (Cooren, 2018, 2020). In some ways, this conception of communication echoes how some liberals conceptualized the private firm in the 1970s. Indeed, Chamayou (2018) shows how management scholars back then defined the private firm as a nexus of horizontal relations, emptying it of class struggles and power relations. An organization was not taken to be a real entity anymore: it was merely a “misleading name given to a set of contractual relations” (Chamayou, 2018, p. 148, our translation). Seeing organizations just as relations equals emptying them of everything that makes the organization for instance unequal, sexist and/or authoritative. The CCO approach, in focusing only on relations, tends to do the same as the liberals of the 1970s: it avoids defining the organization and neutralizing the relations. The task at hand is thus to *redefine* this relation approach of both organizations and communication. And we think it passes through the characterization of the *relations* CCO scholars are talking about.

Indeed, a question remains unanswered: *how* are people/things/other-than-human held in common? Or, to put it differently, what is the nature of the relations that hold people/things/other-than-human together? Following our critical stance, we state that these relations are informed by neoliberal capitalism (as defined above from the concept of ideology). Thus, we have to consider it as a fundamental actor in this relational (and communicational) process. Indeed, as we have already highlighted, neoliberal capitalism is an organizing ideology that structures how to behave, live, think, relate to nature, etc. That echoes Dardot and Laval’s definition of neoliberal capitalism cited above, as well as Kuhn, Ashcraft and Cooren’s (2017) statement in which they agree that:

what is commonly taken to be actors and factors creating contemporary capitalism – individuals, organizations, markets, public policies, structures, as well as the very figure of the “new economy” – emerge from, and are performed in, communication (when communication is understood as a dynamic practice).

2017, p. 27

This definition of relationality supersedes a conception of relations as “connections”, only, and acknowledges that these relations are “the effects of [communicational] practices” (Kuhn et al. 2017, p. 27) that are themselves moved and informed by a specific ideology/“regime of truth” (as Foucault would say): neoliberal capitalism. The definition we bring here highlights the three challenges mentioned. Indeed, the formation of *meaning*, the rendering of *agency*, and the making up of *speaking objects*, all three are entangled and moved by the hegemonic organizing ideology that neoliberal capitalism incarnates today.

We can thus add to our definition of communication, seen as a set of relational practices, that this set of relational practices is moved by neoliberal capitalism in the sense that the latter penetrates the way we “hold in common”. It is in this conception of relations that we state that neoliberal capitalism *does* communication and that communication *does* neoliberal capitalism. And this is accomplished through a variety of practices which range from interactions, discourses, actions, affects, and so on. Thus, the organization is not merely a set of neutral relations but rather the product of a series of neoliberal practices which define how people (and things) relate, how decisions are made, how texts are written, etc.

Moreover, such a conceptualization of communication and organization is useful to address further questions of resistance within organizations. Indeed, practices of resistance are part of this unmaking of neoliberal capitalism. Practices in-formed by neoliberal capitalism can be

substituted and unmade by other ways of organizing (cooperatives, self-governance, participatory democracy, decolonial rules, etc.). And if organizations are the effects and products of neoliberal relations that induce negative power relations, work exploitation, unequal gender divisions, and so forth, we have to undertake a close scrutiny of the practices that can *deconstruct* this factual situation. In that sense, the CCO perspective can become an important theoretical tool for change. In this vein, Wilhoit and Kisselburgh (2019) mobilize a CCO approach of resistance. More specifically, using a study on bike commuters, they show that resistance is the product of multiple human and non-human actants. Their work is a promising avenue to theorize resistance (outside the workplace) with a CCO approach anchored in relationality. However, they still miss the central question: *what* are people resisting through bike commuting? To put it differently, they obfuscate the hegemonic and dominant ideology that makes bike commuting into a “thing”. Our critical approach of CCO would question first and foremost the source of the resistance and on what basis it takes place. That – we think – is an avenue to consider the “undoing” of hegemonic ideology and a way thus to deconstruct it through communicational practices.

Implications and Conclusion

As we have shown, the constitutive approach of communication, in its pragmatic roots, presents several drawbacks. However, CCO can be freed from its origins to deepen its critical potentialities. This is possible by focusing on its relational dimension and by engaging with the “material turn”. Our proposition has several implications. First, it opens up the reflection and the study of how we (collectively and individually) *do* neoliberal capitalism through our communicative practices. Secondly, it permits us to address further, for example, questions of power but also alternative organizing and resistance as ways of “undoing” capitalism. Indeed, once we agree that we are intrinsically entangled in capitalistic communicative practices, we must ask how we can (un)do these relationships. We have to think breaches, gaps, resistances and alternatives.

In sum, our approach invites one to consider the political potentialities of CCO. When we consider the neoliberal dimension of communicative practices, we invite a study of neoliberalism in terms of interactions (interactionally) but also of transactions (Taylor, 2011). We emancipate ourselves from a merely “macro” vision of neoliberal capitalism, viewed as a transcendent system. Viewing neoliberalism communicationally, as a relation that holds people/things together, allows analysts to dissect society at large. In sum, as such, the constitutive approach gets out of the organization and permits us to think what holds society in common.

Now, the next step is to focus on the empirical questions and to mobilize this theoretical proposal empirically. Indeed, some questions still need discussions and reflections: how can we “follow” the neoliberal relations? Which methods are appropriate to render the neoliberal organizations of both organizations and the social world? As CCO scholars we have to engage in empirical work towards such a perspective to disclose the *doing* of neoliberal capitalism in order to transform it from the inside out.

Notes

- 1 The Montreal School assumes that no single thing has or possesses agency, but that agency is always a hybrid term. Indeed, agency is always the result of a multiplicity of “things” acting together (Bencherki, 2018; Cooren, 2020; Latour, 2006).
- 2 As Cooren recalls, the proto-Indo-European root of the word “communication” is “ko-moin-i”, which means “held in common” (2018, pp. 283–284).

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