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# On the potential of progressive performativity: Definitional purity, re-engagement and empirical points of departure

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**Stephan Moritz Schaefer**

Lund University, Sweden

**Christopher Wickert**

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU University), The Netherlands

## Abstract

In this article we respond to Cabantous, Gond, Harding and Learmonth's critique of recent conceptual contributions that employ the concept of performativity for prompting progressive changes in organizations. All in all, we seem to share the general unease concerning the marginal impact of Critical Management Studies on re-defining organizational realities. At the same time, we largely disagree on how critical scholars could support effective, progressive changes. In this rejoinder we respond to but also absorb Cabantous et al.'s critique of progressive performativity and sketch three ways of how to advance discussions of Critical Management Studies' role in organizational scholarship.

## Keywords

critical management studies, critical performativity theory, engaged critical research, progressive performativity, relevance of critical research

It is with great interest that we read the essay of Cabantous, Gond, Harding and Learmonth (Cabantous et al., 2015) in which the authors present a substantial and fine-grained critique of recent contributions focused on the notion of critical performativity in Critical

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## Corresponding author:

Stephan Moritz Schaefer, Department of Business Administration, Lund University, P.O. Box 7080, Lund, Sweden.

Email: [stephan.schaefer@fek.lu.se](mailto:stephan.schaefer@fek.lu.se)

Management Studies (CMS) (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Spicer et al., 2009) and our related concept of progressive performativity (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015). Cabantous et al.'s main argument for reconsidering critical and progressive performativity calls for a deeper reading of performativity theories in order to unleash the full potential of what they refer to as a 'political theory of organizational performativity' (2015: 9). Such a theory, according to Cabantous et al., enables 'more powerful ways of intervening in organizations' (2015: 13). While this is broadly in line with our effort to translate performativity into programmatic action, they fear that a 'rather limited understanding of performativity . . . risks nullifying the political impact of the concept' (Cabantous et al., 2015: 2).

We appreciate Cabantous et al.'s contribution as a way of taking the debate on the practical relevance and impact of critical research further. Such was our initial ambition in 2009 when we started working on developing the concept of progressive performativity. While that paper metamorphosed substantially prior to its publication, the initial idea persisted: how could CMS-inspired scholarship have more impact on what managers actually do in and around organizations? With this in mind we applaud Cabantous et al.'s critique that paves the way for establishing a dialogue driven by the questions that have been raised in CMS repeatedly: 'How can we get CMS out of the impasse it has reached?' (see Hotho and Pollard, 2007); 'How could we turn substantial critique into transformative redefinitions of organizations?' (see Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2009). As such, we are well advised to question and reconsider our 'critical' way of seeing and ultimately aiming to change organizational realities (Delbridge, 2014). There is reason to worry that CMS, which started as a (micro)-emancipatory project (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992), will be buried high up in the ivory towers and 'become an exercise of academic indulgence' (Fournier and Grey, 2000: 22). In the words of Delbridge (2014: 96): 'CMS has proven rather less successful in exercising influence in each of the professional, policy and public domains than its proponents would have wished.'

It is this overarching concern that Cabantous and colleagues take up in their article but, with regard to our contribution, also take issue with. In the following response we consider their ideas in order to facilitate a dialectical engagement that aims for further 'rapprochement between theoretical purism and pragmatic action', to which we originally aspired (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015: 108). Such dialectical engagement intends not to merely defend our arguments, but to provide spaces for moving the debate on CMS' practical relevance forward rather than sideways. This, we assume, is our common denominator. We will therefore seek to be self-critical with respect to Cabantous et al.'s arguments, but also attempt to construct a synthesis on three grounds: the pragmatic use of concepts, the importance of modest expectations and the need for new, more engaged empirical research. We first briefly review our contribution on progressive performativity; then summarize the main points of critique by Cabantous et al., which is followed by our response to their concerns. Our rejoinder discusses what we perceive as critique of progressive performativity (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015) yet it also intermittently touches upon the related concept of critical performativity (Spicer et al., 2009).

## **Progressive performativity in critical management studies**

Progressive performativity encapsulates the general idea that critical research could stimulate the performative effects of language in a transformative way and is conceptually based

on the works of Austin and Butler. Such stimulation, we argue, could possibly lead to incremental, progressive changes in managerial behavior, which might lead to more radical changes in the long run. Important to note is our emphasis on small scale rather than large scale objectives. In order to achieve these small scale changes, we argue that critical researchers need to engage closely with managers. We refer to these encounters as micro-engagement suggesting that those should focus especially on middle managers. Micro-engagement establishes the basis for what we call ‘reflexive conscientization’: ‘the process of establishing continuous dialogue between researchers and managers in order to provide spaces in which managers are “nudged” gently to reflect upon their actions and the organizational processes to which these relate’ (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015: 120). Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, we suggest that these spaces emerge because discourses are not seen as mono-deterministic forces. Instead they leave spaces in which linguistic performances can be subverted or altered. Inspired by Ferraro et al. (2005), who investigate the self-fulfilling prophecies of economic theories, we wonder ‘if the negatively loaded language – for instance circling around transaction cost economics as sketched above – can lead to corresponding negatively perceived consequences, then it may equally work the other way round and create more reflexive and ethically informed managerial behaviour’ (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015: 115). In other words ‘micro-engagement’ and ‘reflexive conscientization’ together with possibilities of re-signification *have the potential* to lead to progression and positive change in organizations.

An important caveat needs to be made here. Our aim was not to conclusively assert the existence of these processes. We suggested a research framework to guide further empirical studies that appreciate local ambiguities and possibilities of contextually relevant changes in organizational practices. We further argued that the context of corporate social responsibility (CSR) appears to be a good empirical starting point. Indeed, Wickert and De Bakker (2015) show that CSR managers use unobtrusive influence tactics such as achieving ‘small wins’ in order to overcome internal resistance by other employees to the integration of ethical practices. Notwithstanding this, critical researchers should by no means limit their work to this context, but examine other contexts too as we will expound below.

Overall we concluded that our framework could ‘stimulate a debate on how performativity might be conceptualized in a way that could help CMS scholarship become more relevant to what managers actually do’ (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015: 127). Cabantous et al.’s contribution suggests that we have been successful in initiating such debate. They voice their concerns regarding our reading of performativity theories and question the effect progressive performativity could have on ‘organizational ontologies’ (Cabantous et al., 2015: 13).

### *Reconsidering critical performativity as a political project*

Cabantous et al. point out that to date critical performativity theories or CPT – an acronym they use to subsume the recent contributions by Alvesson and Spicer (2012), Spicer et al. (2009) and Wickert and Schaefer (2015) – incorporate ‘a somewhat confused, misleading and limited invocation of the term “performativity”’ (2015: 3) and they even refer to CPT’s understanding of performativity as ‘abstruse theory’ (2015: 8). The overall ambition to render CPT less abstruse is based on what they call a more ‘fruitful’ (2015: 3) understanding of performativity and a ‘deeper engagement’ (2015: 6) with its

theoretical foundations. This, they purport, will effect positive change in organizations, understood as having more political impact and eluding the possibilities of a 'benign managerialism' (2015: 6).

Cabantous et al. start their argument with a summary of CPT, which is followed by a critique of CPT's interpretation of the foundational texts of Austin and Butler – two key authors in performativity theory. They also touch upon CPT's ignorance of other influential performativity theories, most of all Actor-Network theorist Callon. Their critique alludes to a dualist conception within CPT which argues that subjects are located outside discourses. Instead they argue that all discourses are performative and thus form the 'condition of possibility' (Cabantous et al., 2015: 5) for subjects to exist in the first place. In other words, all language is considered to be performative and we *are* what we speak. At the same time Cabantous et al. acknowledge that discourses allow for spaces of change that enable processes Butler has referred to as 're-signification'. However, for Cabantous et al. CPT is limited in its emancipatory potential because it overlooks Butler's radical political agenda. This they seek to remedy with their own conceptual framework that adds materiality as an important factor to consider. Based on their enhanced reading of performativity theories and the incorporation of materiality Cabantous et al. then go on to propose a framework for the 'planning stage of active engagement' (2015: 8) based on six questions and three empirical illustrations.

Their most important question concerns the need to understand the constitution of the organizational actor. Cabantous et al. argue that organizational actors are constituted by various conflicting discourses that are intertwined with material practices. Individuals move between different subject positions and thus we should not focus on the spoken word but the subject-creating discourses. Accordingly they argue that these discourses should be the target of our concern. In order to do so Cabantous et al. suggest that 'we' (which presumably refers to us as critical researchers) should circulate our 'radical language' not in academic journals but 'in public spaces where it can be taken up and become part of everyday understanding of the world of work' (2015: 11). In order to exemplify these processes they provide an example of how researchers in Brazil intervened successfully in the material realm of establishing workers' cooperatives 'making possible the constitution of alternative discourses and practices supporting new identities and organizational forms' (Cabantous et al., 2015: 12).

In conclusion, Cabantous et al. reiterate that the possibility for radical and previously 'unthinkable' change stems from the work of radical scholars and their aspiration 'to become the story-tellers to entire cultures so that we can make the unthinkable generally thinkable' (2015: 14).

### **Synthesizing the critique: On the possibilities of progressive performativity**

Cabantous et al. provide three main points of critique related to our concept of progressive performativity but also the notion of critical performativity (Spicer et al., 2009). Cabantous et al. assert that 'CPT *neglects* both performativity subjects – it *overlooks* the constitution of subjects through discourse, and performativity objects – it *fails* to recognize the materiality of discourse in performative processes' (2015: 13, our emphasis). In

doing so the current CPT approach ‘inhibits the desired political potential of the concept’ (Cabantous et al., 2015: 3). We cannot fully agree here. Our aim is to show that these claims rest on a partial misreading of our arguments. More importantly they reflect a somewhat overoptimistic belief in the grand scale political potential of performativity. It is exactly this kind of belief we sought to counter with a more modest and pragmatic stance. Below, we will try to clarify and elucidate our argument. Our rejoinder focuses on three areas: the pragmatic use of concepts, the importance of modest expectations and the necessity for engaged empirical research.

### *Definitional purity: The pragmatic use of concepts*

Cabantous et al.’s first point of critique concerns what they believe to be ‘mis-interpretations’ of fundamental performativity theories (2015: 3). Our firm belief is that (within limits, of course) multiple interpretations, different readings and applications of broad concepts are not only common but also necessary in organization and management studies. This includes the notion of performativity (see Loxley, 2007 for an overview of different interpretations). Everything else, we believe, would reflect a rather authoritarian interpretation of language, which runs the risk of discursive closure. For us, one of CMS’ appeals lies in its defiance of the definitional and intellectual monoculture of positivism. The appeal and we might even say spirit of critical approaches is the pluralistic and open dialogue that is not overruled by definitional and methodological rigour (Mills, 1959).

Sometimes, however, there seems to be a broadly shared understanding of a particular concept. A case in point here is the notion of ‘anti-performativity’, which Cabantous et al. use in their article and think is ‘worth defending’ (2015: 4). If we are concerned with precise readings, like they seem to be, then the notion of anti-performativity, which they seemingly agree with, becomes problematic in the context of their overall argument. If we cannot exceed performativity and be more performative like Cabantous et al. point out, how could we then be ‘anti-performative’? As a matter of argumentative and ontological consistency Cabantous et al. should perhaps then also refrain from using or at least critique the term anti-performative, which does not seem to fit their argument that performativity as a condition for possibility cannot be exceeded. They even cite McKinlay (2010: 138) approvingly that we can ‘be no more against anti-performativity than one can be against verbs or give only qualified approval to nouns’. However, such conceptual purity, we think, is not the point here. We want to draw attention to the fact that anti-performativity has been understood by the CMS community in the sense that we should refrain from proposing knowledge that serves narrow means-ends relationships (Fournier and Grey, 2000). Thus there seems to be a common understanding that anti-performativity refers to the language of managerialism and its intention to subordinate organizational objectives to the dictate of increasing efficiency. Our common understanding of anti-performativity illustrates that we do not need to read a concept ‘correctly’ in order to move an important debate forwards.

Notwithstanding the debate concerning conceptual purism, the extant contributions to CPT on how discourses could be made more performative do not, to our understanding, establish the ontological dualism that Cabantous et al. are so worried about. They are, in fact, at least in our case, quite well aligned with the understanding Cabantous et al.

propose. Maybe, after all, we do have a common understanding of performativity? With regards to the ontological assumptions underlying progressive performativity we argue that discourses impact and constitute identities yet we believe that such discourses also provide spaces for alternative identity formations – a notion that Cabantous et al. seem to agree with. Indeed, the possible (re)-constitution of subjects through what we refer to as ‘reflexive conscientization’, makes up the core of our argument:

Butler contends that such repetitive stylized acts are subject to the classificatory and regulatory effects of discourses, which provide a nexus in which the subject is constituted. Discursive norms, however, are not laws to be followed; they are ‘law-like’ in that they can be followed but, importantly, ‘their spell can also be broken’ (Loxley, 2007: 124). (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015: 114)

Thus if we can reach a common understanding that performativity incorporates the existence of identity-shaping discourses that can be altered and changed in order to re-define organizational ontologies and the subjects relating to and formed by it, then, similar to the notion of anti-performativity we would have a working basis for aiming to intervene constructively in organizations. We could leave debates about limited understanding and ignorance behind us.

What moves the debate forward is a broadly shared basic understanding of performativity. As such the incorporation of materiality as suggested by Cabantous et al. adds to a refined understanding of CPT and is thus a genuine step forward in the debate. By considering materiality for our notion of progressive performativity, we can broaden our assumption by arguing that while performativity *originates* within the sphere of language it can under particular circumstances lead to transformative organizational practices that are inextricably tied to material artefacts (Heidegger, 1927).

For instance, in developing the theoretical foundations of progressive performativity we draw on the work of Christensen et al. (2013), who have argued that aspirational *talk*, rather than reflecting actual behaviour, may lead to the *behaviour* that actors have committed themselves to. Not far from the original arguments made by Austin (1963), this inextricably links the spheres of language, behaviour, practices and materiality. We can here make a connection to the felicity conditions of the performative utterance (Austin, 1963) – an argument we overlooked in our original article. What Austin points out is that performativity can only come into effect when the contexts in which performative utterances take place are ‘adequate’. The words: ‘you are now husband and wife’ while putting a ring on the respective fingers are only performative when uttered by a legitimized institution and not by any random person on the street. The felicity of performatives is thus an important aspect for progressive change, which includes material artefacts. We would even go a step further and argue that the human condition is inextricably linked with absorbed practices entangled with materiality (Heidegger, 1927). Christensen et al. further stress that talking about one’s ambitions helps to articulate the ideals, beliefs, values and frameworks (i.e. the felicity conditions) for decisions. Such talk could challenge old practices and lead to revised ones because it provides ‘raw material for (re) constructing behaviour’ (Christensen et al., 2013: 376). These assumptions echo Butler’s idea of recontextualization, which we pick up in our article. Hence Cabantous et al.’s

pointer to materiality is valuable in thinking through our ontological point of departure and its linkage to progressive change.

While we believe that our understanding of performativity seems to be more aligned than Cabantous et al. maintain, the question of CPT's impact seems to be a genuine dividing line.

### *Re-engagement rather than dis-engagement: On modest expectations*

Cabantous et al. argue that our framework encourages 'benign managerialism' (2015: 6). They fear that a closer engagement with managers in organizations would undermine a critical, anti-managerialist project of the CMS researcher. On the question of impact we disagree. In order to remain realistic about our impact and to cater to the idiosyncrasies of organizations, we should not *dis-engage* but *re-engage* with local organizational ontologies. Most importantly we should engage with middle managers and their mundane day-to-day struggles at work. While we develop our conceptual framework by illustrating it with the case of middle managers, we do not argue that the focus should remain limited to this group. On the contrary, we 'should also explore opportunities to engage with other potential agents of change that influence managerial behaviour, such as consultants, and investigate other areas that can serve as entry points into corporate affairs' (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015: 126). We appreciate Cabantous et al.'s reference to the importance of business schools in this regard. They need to play an important role in 'supporting new identities and organizational forms' (Cabantous et al., 2015: 12), which reflects our argument 'that investigating how "progressive" CMS research and teaching could inform each other represents a promising avenue for future research' (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015: 126).

At this point it is important to consider what re-engagement means for us. Cabantous et al. argue that critical scholars should communicate radical ideas by 'challenging ontologies and changing discourses, through their research and publications', yet they contend that 'these are not circulating widely' (2015: 14). They claim that it is essential to insert 'these critical discourses into the general ways of thinking about organizations in the wider culture' (Cabantous et al., 2015: 14). Our concern is, however, that such imperative means moving further away from, rather than closer to, progressive changes in organizations. We suggest on the contrary that we should not engage on the detached level of 'inserting' our critical knowledge into discourses. Such detachment increases the danger that our supposedly emancipatory ideology will supplant managerial ideologies. In order to counteract and prevent substituting one ideology with another we need to have organizational reality-checks lest we do not feel too secure about our emancipatory efforts. If we are willing to accept our knowledge's fallibility then we, as responsible critical researchers, need to understand, engage and enter into a dialogue with the people who we attempt to emancipate and liberate from the defining norms of organizational ontologies. As we argued earlier, these norms are 'law-like' but they could be broken (Loxley, 2007: 124). We believe that they should be broken through critical scholars' re-engagement not dis-engagement and this is what we understand as the essence of micro-engagement: the 'benign' critical researcher can become acquainted with the 'malign' manager. In sum we are convinced that there needs to be a critical yet sympathetic



dialogical engagement with managers *before* a critical researcher can make suggestions of what should and should not be done. We wholeheartedly concur with Clegg et al.'s (2006: 12) assessment of dis-engagement in CMS; namely, that 'you cannot hijack a plane by critically analysing its route from the distant ground'.

We should note, however, that Cabantous et al. provide a telling and highly illustrative case study that in fact supports our argument of re-engagement. Their case study of the Brazilian work cooperative seems to carry the first seeds of empirical illustrations and action-oriented research that we called for in our article. The example of the cooperative exemplifies the need for a local, dialogical engagement and provides empirical evidence for a model developed by critical scholars in cooperation with future decision makers and workers. We are truly impressed by the success of these cooperatives and it would be desirable to see more of this. Yet the preconditions for these organizations differ radically from other contexts. The incubation of a new organizational form under such conditions, we believe, is probably only rarely possible. In addition to pursuing such initiatives we need to deal with the 'fait accompli' of current organizational forms such as shareholder-owned multinational corporations. In other words we should strive to introduce counterbalancing factors (Adler et al., 2007) in the lion's den and at the same time vigorously promote alternative organizational forms. We fear that focusing all our energy on abandoning existing organizational ontologies for radical alternatives will overall have even less political impact. What CPT needs in order to move forward are prolonged, in-depth and methodologically creative empirical studies. Our ambition was to outline a research agenda that we believe could inspire empirical research and that departs from the dichotomizing orthodoxy that pervades CMS; namely, that the only way to achieve change is through separating the bad manager from the good researcher, with the latter proposing radical agendas that reflect their own interpretation of how the world should be.

### *Evoking progressive change: Doing 'progressive performative' empirical research*

As it stands today CPT is in its infant stage and in order to move the field forwards and lead constructive discussions we need empirical studies to corroborate, discard and challenge arguments. Evocative first-hand empirical evidence will have to show to what extent the language of middle managers in profit-maximizing organizations as a starting point for critical engagement will remain at that point – just cheap talk. Or to what extent language and spoken words will indeed materialize into new organizational practices, and perhaps even ontologies. We have drawn on anecdotal evidence in our conceptual contributions and so do Cabantous et al. in their critique.

We appreciate Cabantous et al.'s anecdotal evidence in the form of documentaries but what we think is needed are hands-on and action-oriented empirical *field* studies such as the one on the cooperatives in Brazil. Notably, King and Learmonth make a promising start by investigating experiences of becoming a manager and concluding 'that change is not impossible' (2014: 16). Based on an auto-ethnographic account of taking on the role as a manager, King and Learmonth (2014) conclude that a prolonged reading of, for instance, Foucault could potentially disrupt established managerial practices and maybe even lead to collective action. Such reasoning seems to be in line with our own argument

that engagement with managers and dialogue can lead to small scale changes and perhaps question organizational ontologies. It is this kind of creative empirical approach such as confronting managers with critical texts and prompting them to reflect and think about their practices that could give us valuable insights into whether progressive performativity is a real possibility. Or perhaps the malleable capitalist system has eclipsed our lives in such a way that endeavours for change seem to be futile (Fleming, 2009). We will not be any wiser until we have more empirical insights. This, we believe, should be the next step for the CPT project.

## Concluding remarks

We are glad to see that CPT has sparked a scholarly debate and that Cabantous et al.'s critique of progressive performativity gave us the opportunity to respond. We were happy to clarify misunderstandings or poor expression on our side but also to emphasize and underscore some of our key arguments. We would like to conclude our rejoinder citing Bruno Latour's (2004: 243) words of caution:

Is it not time for some progress? To the fact position, to the fairy position, why not add a third position, a fair position? Is it really asking too much from our collective intellectual life to devise, at least once a century, some new critical tools?

It is with this spirit in mind that we look forward to more critical tools emerging somewhere between fact and fairy.

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Stephan M Schaefer holds a PhD in organizational theory from Lund University, Sweden and is currently employed there as a post-doctoral researcher. His current research focuses on organizational creativity, managerial reflexivity and ignorance, critical management studies and phenomenology. His work has been published in edited books and various journals such as *Human Relations*, *Scandinavian Journal of Management* and *Academy of Management Best Paper Proceedings*. [Email: stephan.schaefer@fek.lu.se]

Christopher Wickert is Assistant Professor of Management and Organisation at VU University Amsterdam, the Netherlands. His research interests include corporate social responsibility, organization and institutional theory, organizational identity theory, critical management studies, social entrepreneurship and business ethics. He has published several articles as well as book chapters in the fields of CSR and organization theory in academic journals such as *Business & Society*, *Human Relations*, *Journal of Business Ethics* and *Organization Studies*. Christopher holds a PhD from University of Lausanne, Switzerland. [Email: christopher.wickert@vu.nl]