The Body:  
Philosophical Paradigms and Organizational Contributions

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**Abstract**

This chapter offers a selective discussion of organizational scholarship on the body and its engagement with philosophy. I first identify six ways in which organization theory has engaged with various philosophical paradigms to explore different and partly overlapping aspects of the body. Identifying body politics as a point of partition in this literature, I focus on the contributions and limitations of extant writings that have explored how the body constitutes an object and subject of knowledge and power in organizations. Whereas poststructuralist, feminist and Marxist philosophy provide crucial insights into the politics of embodied relations, phenomenological philosophy is a useful complement though largely apolitical in its own right. Furthermore, I discuss the politics and ethics of embodied research and the possibilities for an embodied ethics of organizational life. I explain the body’s absent presence in the classical and current mainstreams of organization theory by highlighting the field’s silent adoption of the Cartesian mind/body dualism. Finally, I discuss the value and dilemmas of exploring the body in organizational life through philosophy.
Introduction

Given the constrained relationship that organization theory and philosophy have towards the body, it may seem ironic to deal with the body from the perspective of organizational philosophy. While organization theory was founded on a Cartesian mind/body dualism that deems the human mind rational and capable of managing the allegedly passive and irrational body, few philosophers, before or after Descartes (1996[1641]), have managed to think beyond this dualism, and no one has managed to think without it. Even Spinoza (1994[1677]), who remains one of Descartes’ strongest critics, had to interrogate the mind/body dualism to move beyond it. But despite these snags it is worth reminding ourselves that organization theory’s rising interest in the body coincided with a growing interest in philosophy at the end of the twentieth century – with a vibrant paradigm debate (e.g. Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Jackson and Carter, 1991; Willmott, 1993) and a curiosity for poststructuralist ideas and concepts (e.g. Cooper and Burrell, 1988; Hassard and Pym, 1993).

It is not unusual for fin-de-siècles to harbour avant garde movements in thought and practice, and in certain quarters of organization theory continental variants of philosophy were embraced with enthusiasm in a quest to push the frontiers of the field – to rethink the concept of organization and to re-evaluate the relationship between organization and the human. By engaging with the semi-philosophical poststructuralism of Foucault in particular, organization theorists started to challenge dominant notions of disembodied organizations and cognitivist models of the human. Burrell’s and Cooper’s pieces in the journal Organization Studies were particularly important in this respect (e.g. Burrell, 1984, 1988; Cooper and Burrell, 1988). The Body and Organization anthology (Hassard, Holliday and Willmott, eds, 2000) was another landmark publication, pulling together contributions from various organizational and philosophical paradigms – poststructuralist, feminist, phenomenological, and critical theorist.

Since then, a growing literature has generated significant insights about bodies within and around organizations. Even though philosophical engagement is lacking or limited in parts of this literature, much of it is influenced by philosophical concepts of the body. To simplify, it may be argued that organization theory has dealt with the body in the following six ways: (1) drawing on poststructuralist and feminist philosophy, the body has been construed as an object of discursive construction and disciplinary control, discrimination, oppression, and identity expression; (2) building
on materialist varieties of feminist and poststructuralist philosophy, the body has been explored as a force of desire and resistance that precedes and exceeds discursive construction and disciplinary management; (3) with inspiration from Marxist philosophy, the body has been examined as a subject and object of work and a target of capitalist exploitation; (4) utilizing phenomenological philosophy, the body has been investigated as a subject and object of lived experience and social interaction, work, management and knowledge creation; (5) moreover, phenomenological and feminist philosophy have been combined to explore the body as a subject of qualitative research methods; (6) finally, through readings of feminist philosophy as well as the philosophical works of Levinas and Spinoza, the body has been construed as an ethical subject that (a) foregrounds recognition of the other, or (b) pursues affective relations in organizational life.

The area’s overlapping concerns illustrate the difficulty of tracing a specific contribution in organization theory back to a specific philosophical paradigm. Apparently distinct conceptualizations of the body are not necessarily unique to one paradigm, and individual writers have drawn eclectically on concepts and ideas from different paradigms in one and the same text. Meanwhile, disparate concerns and conflicting arguments means that it is meaningful to highlight the concepts and approaches that characterize specific paradigms and organizational contributions. Body politics has been a point of partition in this respect – a primary concern in the poststructuralist and feminist literature, less so in phenomenological research. But before elaborating how the body has been investigated as an object and subject of knowledge and power in organization theory, I must say something about why the body was neglected for so many years.

**The body’s absent presence in organization theory**

Following Dale’s (2001) tenet of the anatomization of organization theory, the neglect of the body can be traced back to the field’s Cartesian heritage, to its silent adoption of the mind/body dualism, and to the establishing of the social sciences as a distinct area of scholarly inquiry. Although Descartes’ philosophical treatment of the mind-body relationship received limited attention amongst the founding figures of the social sciences and their successors in organization theory, it did shape the epistemic
boundaries of the social sciences and basic notions of what it means to do social science research.

When Durkheim (1982[1895]) sought to establish the social sciences as independent from the natural sciences in the late nineteenth century, he lauded Descartes’ rationalism and effectively accepted the Cartesian denigration of the body. Emphasizing the need to focus on the *sui generis* of the social, Durkheim insisted on an epistemic division of labour, where the social sciences should focus on objects of knowledge unique to the social world of humans and avoid phenomena associated with the natural world. Although Durkheim exploited organicist metaphors and argued for a naturalist social science that would employ the objectivist methods of the natural sciences, this tuned social science inquiry into the semantics of social life and away from most things physical.

The pioneers of organization theory at Harvard University in the 1920s and 30s were well aware of Durkheim’s programme, and his work has been a profound influence on the disembodied theorizing that continues to dominate organization theory. Mayo and his colleagues at the Harvard Fatigue Laboratory were particularly influential in this respect. Initially concerned with the effects of physical factors such as exhaustion amongst manual labourers (Dill, 1928) and the illumination of work environments, they eventually concluded, with the Hawthorne Effect, that physical conditions have a negligible impact on the output and efficiency of work groups compared to the social effects of being observed (Landsberger, 1928; Mayo, 1933). But like Durkheim, this did not prevent them from embracing the organism metaphor, thus continuing a tradition going back to Plato’s *Republic*.

This anatomization is continued in the classical and current mainstreams of functionalist, structuralist and critical research, from the cultural-cognitive frameworks of Simon, March and neo-institutionalism, to Morgan’s ‘images of organization’, to the socio-linguistic patterns of critical discourse analysis. The management skills, institutional logics, symbolic constructs and politicized discourses emphasized in these approaches are typically deemed separate from the bodies that enact them, experience them, and are targeted by them.
Body politics in organizational life

Ultimately, our engagement and disengagement with the body has consequences for our understanding of human nature, the nature of organization, and the conditions under which people in organizations live and work. In the most concrete, these questions are matters of body politics – how bodies interact in, precede and exceed relations of power and knowledge. This was a key concern in some of the first texts that engaged with the body in organization theory. Informed by poststructuralist and feminist philosophy, pioneering work in the area started to grasp body politics as struggle, as dynamic and extra-oppositional relations of power and resistance between bodies.

In one early text, Burrell (1984) drew on Foucault’s poststructuralism to examine the processes of desexualization that underpin the management of people in organizations and the resistance this provokes amongst employees. In a genealogical manner, Burrell invokes historical examples from pre-industrial and industrial organizations, including the elaborate codes of punishment for various sexual activities that were instituted in medieval Catholic monasteries and the long working hours that were imposed in early industrialism to minimize the time available to workers to engage in sloth, sex and ‘bingelike consumption’ (p. 107). These disciplinary measures were implemented, Burrell insists (with Foucault, 1979), because sexual activity amongst employees was regarded a widespread problem.

Although Burrell’s primary concern was with the management of sexuality and the significance of sexuality as a force of resistance, this raises fundamental issues regarding the nature of the body in organizational life and the relationship between the body as an object of discipline and discourse: following Foucault’s (1979: 95) tenet that ‘where there is power, there is resistance’, the body becomes an object of disciplinary control in organizations because it is a sexual subject of desire and transgression; and, via Foucault’s (1979) concept of bio-power, Burrell argues that the control of sex became a crucial element in the wider control of individual bodies and populations, which required sex to become an object of discourse, whether religious, judicial, economic, or scientific.

However, Burrell also gestures towards feminist and Marxist concerns, (i) acknowledging that sexualized bodies are victims of discrimination, harassment and rape in organizations, and (ii) arguing that the politics of desexualization through
bodily discipline is underpinned by an economic doctrine which assumes that disciplined and desexualized bodies are more productive than promiscuous ones.

The discursive construction of the body is more clearly brought out in organizational research that draws on Butler’s feminist poststructuralist philosophy. Again, sexuality and gender are primary concerns, as illustrated in Brewis et al.’s (1997) discussion of female power dressing and male transvestism. And again, the body is not reduced to an object wholly consumed and shaped by discourse, but reiterated as a medium of identity expression and resistance. Acknowledging that bodily materiality precedes and exceeds discourse, Brewis et al. argue that ‘the materiality of the body has come to signify culturally specific ideas’ (Butler in Brewis et al., 1997: 1277). As individuals, we therefore understand ourselves as masculine or feminine and perform gender and sexuality in relation to dominant discourses of masculinity and femininity. This view is intensified in Butler’s (1993) own work, where she argues that ‘the materiality of sex is constructed through a ritualized repetition of norms’ (1993: x). Whereas bodies that conform to dominant discourse are intelligible, legitimate and liveable, bodies that transgress these norms by expressing alternative gender identities either become unthinkable, abject and unliveable, or embody forces of resistance that make gender trouble by challenging the binary opposition between masculinity and femininity as well as the assumed correspondence between social gender and biological sex (see also Hancock and Tyler, 2007; Thanem and Wallenberg, 2014).

This theme has been further explored in accounts engaging with the semi-materialist philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari (1988) as well as with feminist interpretations of their work. In some of my own work I have mobilized their concepts of ‘the body without organs’, ‘becoming-woman’ and ‘creative involution’ to explore how transgender and marginalized bodies precede, subvert and exceed the binary sexual-social order (Thanem, 2004, 2006). In a similar vein, Linstead and Pullen (2006) utilize their concept of ‘the rhizome’, along with Braidotti’s (1994) and Grosz’s (1994) feminist commentaries, to explore the body’s ungendered and multiple corporeality. Via the ideal case of transgender, they argue that every body’s pre-discursive corporeality is multiplicitly genderful and ungendered. In contrast, other accounts have utilized Irigaray’s (e.g. 1985) work to explore the essentially different corporeality of women in relation to life and work within and around organizations (see e.g. Vachhani, 2012; Phillips et al., 2014).
Without ignoring that discourse has disciplinary effects on bodies, these literatures pay more attention to the corporeal forces of bodily desire that precede and exceed, transgress and subvert discursive and disciplinary arrangements. While later studies have problematized the power of transgender bodies to exercise resistance in organizations (see Schilt and Connell, 2007; Thanem and Wallenberg, 2014), the topic of embodied resistance remains empirically and conceptually underdeveloped. And even though Deleuze and Guattari operated in the interstices of philosophical concepts and political tools, we still know little about the bodily practices through which people exercise resistance, and how embodied resistance is exercised beyond the context of identity politics. To further advance our understanding of body politics in organizational life it would therefore make sense to move beyond the micro-politics of discourse, discipline and identity, elaborate Deleuze and Guattari’s libidinal politics of desire, and reconnect with Marxist questions of capitalist exploitation.

Not that organizational research has neglected the parallel concerns of poststructuralism and Marxism (Burrell, 2006; Wolkowitz and Warhurst, 2010), or how capitalist firms turn the body into an object of exploitation and a possible subject of resistance. Post-Marxist and feminist research on the labour process has provided significant insights into how capitalist exploitation is facilitated by (i) subjecting service employees to disciplinary regimes of aesthetic and emotional labour that increase value creation in face-to-face interaction with customers (e.g. Witz et al., 2003; Wolkowitz, 2007), and by (ii) inscribing manual labour with stigmatizing notions of dirty work that push down salary levels (e.g. Simpson et al., 2012). And even though the dominance of sociological concerns undermines philosophical engagement in much of this literature, Marx’s influence is obvious, making it possible to understand how the body is both a subject of labour and a socially constructed product of labour (Wolkowitz and Warhurst, 2010), how it is appropriated as a source of labour and value production and transformed into a target of exploitation that requires disciplinary management and differentiation. Like the poststructuralist body, the Marxist body is part socially constructed, but in Marxism it is constructed through labour rather than discourse.

However, Marx has more to offer if we follow the heterodox Marxisms of Deleuze and Guattari (1984) and Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004). While labour process studies construe the body as a subject and product of labour and an object of exploitation, Deleuze and Guattari take Marx further by exploring how the political economy of
capital is intersected by a libidinal economy of desire. As Hardt and Negri remind us, Marx (1973) addressed forces of human desire in the *Grundrisse*, through his concept of ‘living labour’ – the creative energy that enables and escapes the control of capital. In our current era of knowledge work and aesthetic labour the general intellect has come to infiltrate ever more lines of work; at the same time, the increasing conflation of work and life makes it more difficult to distinguish between the values that are produced by employees at work and outside work. Whereas the creativity of living labour increases the total amount of value produced, it becomes increasingly difficult for capital to capture, control and exploit these values. In Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, the reterritorialization of desire by capital is exceeded and subverted by the productive, excessively creative and deterritorializing forces of desire.

The libidinal politics of living labour necessarily takes us in the direction of lived embodiment, and appeals to embody the labour process have hinted that more attention needs to be directed towards the embodied experiences and practices that constitute living labour (Wolkowitz and Warhurst, 2010). Lived embodiment is traditionally a phenomenological concern. But even though previous research has utilized the phenomenological philosophy of Merleau-Ponty (esp. 1962) to show how the body is an active medium of work, management and knowledge creation (e.g. Küpers, 2005; Yakhlef, 2010), phenomenological research has so far offered limited insights into the politics of embodied relations.

**Embodied writing and methods in organizational inquiry**

Meanwhile, phenomenological and feminist ideas inform recent efforts to explore the methodological challenges of researching bodies within and around organizations, and to experiment with embodied forms of writing that are more in tune with the affective and extra-cognitive nature of embodiment. In some of my own work (e.g. Thanem and Knights, 2012) this has helped me write my body into the research process, turning it into a source of auto-ethnographic engagement to reflect about my embodied experiences as a male transvestite academic, trying to make sense of how my embodiment affects the research process and relations with research participants (see also Brewis, 2005; Sinclair, 2007). Others have pursued embodied writing via the *écriture féminine* of Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva, articulating embodied experiences forcefully, directly and poetically, against and beyond the phallogocentric abstractions
dominating academic prose (e.g. Phillips et al., 2014). Höpfl’s (e.g. 2005) writing is unique in this respect, expressing the powerful intersection of life, work and organization in the flesh.

Efforts have also been made to explore new tools and techniques for generating data about bodily practices and experiences. This goes beyond the ethnographic recognition that the researcher’s body is ‘the main instrument of ethnographic knowing’ (Yanow, 2012: 33). Slutskaya et al. (2012) have shown how photoelicitation facilitates conversations with initially reticent participants, spurring butchers to share embodied experiences such as ‘the “fleeting” and pleasurable sensation of a sharp knife passing smoothly through meat’ (p. 29). In a different vein, Riach and Warren (2014) have developed an olfactory method, mixing videotaped smell interviews, paper strips and audio smell diaries with face-to-face interviews, and powerfully grasping the somatic work that people engage in to deal with their sensory experiences, whether smelly colleagues or stinking sandwiches.

Not that embodied research is without risks – of narcissism as authors indulge in our own pains and pleasures, of methodological fetishism that reduces embodied research to a question of tools and techniques, and of ethical dubiousness as we encourage participants to revisit painful experiences of harassment, burnout and degradation. Still, isn’t it more problematic to submit to the lifeless procedures of the disembodied convention? After all, embodied accounts might destabilize rather than reify authorial identities. Moreover, painful accounts can be told as long as participants are comfortable with doing so – and they need to be told to express how social problems translate into personal troubles. Since we cannot rid ourselves of our bodies, however much we try, we cannot, Höpfl (2005) argues, write other than in the flesh.

**Bodily ethics**

While these issues force us to ask ethical questions about how we embody the research process, the body actualizes broader questions about the ethics of organizational life, including what forms of life are possible in organizations. Recent attempts to develop an embodied ethics of organizations have tended to mobilize a Levinasian and ‘impossible’ ethics of recognition, which puts the face-to-face encounter with the other as an embodied given which demands absolute recognition of the other, infinite
responsibility for the other (e.g. Hancock, 2008; Rhodes, 2012), and radical openness to the gift of the other, even at the risk of violence and death (Jones, 2003). Although Levinas (e.g. 1969) separates ethics and embodiment from politics and organization, parts of this literature argues that Levinasian ethics enables organizations to be embodied in ways that make them more diverse and inclusive, and more respectful towards difference.

Against this position, Wallenberg and I have recently argued that Levinasian ethics and its separation from politics and organization is unrealistic, unsustainable and unhelpful (Thanem and Wallenberg, 2015). Instead, we have pursued an embodied ethics of organizational life through Spinoza’s (1994) affective ethics. Neither a moral rule system nor an infinite duty to recognize the other, Spinoza offers a theory of the good, powerful and joyful life by asking what bodies can do. And rather than an unrestrained, irresponsible and individualistic quest for power and freedom, this suggests that we enhance our capacities to affect and be affected by relating to a variety of different bodies.

As bodies are related in our strivings to affect and be affected by others, ethics involves enhancing our affective capacities to do so. While this appetite leads individual bodies to seek to enhance their power and freedom, Spinoza suggests that joyful and powerful ethical relations can only be crafted and sustained by communities of reasonable individuals who take responsibility for honouring and nurturing the difference and freedom of others. Hence, we must understand the limits of our freedom, take responsibility for how we affect and are affected by others, and pursue encounters that enhance our own and others’ bodily capacities. But since we can never suppress or fully understand our bodily desires, we must experiment with how we relate to our own bodies and to embodied others, and open ourselves up to affect and be affected by a variety of different bodies in a variety of ways. Although organizations frequently diminish our opportunities to do so, we must strive to subvert such powers by exercising our bodily capacities in concert with others – not because we selflessly recognise the other or selfishly care for ourselves only, but for our mutual and open-ended flourishing.
Limitations and future directions

This discussion of embodied ethics draws attention to some of the challenges that arise from organization theory’s engagement with philosophy – accusations that philosophy is an abstract, jargonized and impractical exercise that diverts attention away from the everyday problems of real people in real organizations, and that organization theorists rarely have the skills to engage properly with philosophy or the space available to do so in writing. However, I would insist that continued philosophical engagement is crucial for the future flourishing of organization theory, including our ability to engage with the body as an object and subject of knowledge and power.

Since the body occupies a terrain between the natural and the social, the material and the discursive, organizational writings on the body actualize fundamental issues of philosophical inquiry – ontological, epistemological, anthropological, ethical, and methodological: What is the relationship between the body and our knowledge of the body? To what extent are our bodies naturally given, and to what extent are they constructed by the concepts and ideas that we use to make sense of them? Are our bodies determined by natural, historical, and social laws, are we able to recreate our bodies as we wish, or are they indeterminate products of a multiplicity of material and discursive forces? Do our bodies undermine our capacity to generate knowledge and make rational decisions, or are they subjects of learning and decision-making? Should we seek to master and curtail our bodily desires in order to live virtuously, or is it through bodily encounters with others that the good life must be pursued? Is it possible to study bodies in a disembodied fashion, or does embodied research require embodied methods and styles of writing, by which we express the visceral experience of being immersed in the field? While there are no simple answers to any of these questions, it would be a mistake to assume that they only concern the philosophically minded student of bodies in organizations.

For students of organization, philosophical engagement is a balancing act. Too much philosophy risks diverting attention away from the embodied and political realities that people in organizations inhabit. Too little philosophy might bog us so far down in the dominant social order that it blocks conceptual and theoretical sophistication, and prevents us from asking fundamental questions about what a body is, what bodies experience, and what bodies can do. However, if we pose such questions through a combination of empirical exploration and conceptual experimentation, we might be able to investigate the problems that we encounter with
our bodies in organizational life through nuanced concepts, and we might be able to explore radical trajectories of embodying organizational life.

References


