The democratic rejection of democracy: Performative failure and the limits of critical performativity in an organizational change project

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Abstract

'How do we introduce democracy democratically to people who are not sure they want it?' This question was posed to us at the outset of what became a three-year experiment in seeking to implement more democratic organizational practices within a small education charity, World Education. World Education were an organization with a history of anarchist organizing and recent negative experiences of hierarchical managerialism, who wanted to return to a more democratic organizational form. An ideal opportunity, we thought for the type of critical performative intervention called for within Critical Management Studies. Using Participant Action Research, which itself has a democratic ethos, we aimed to democratically bring about workplace democracy, using a range of interventions from interviewing, whole organization visioning workshops through to participating in working groups to bring about democratic change. Yet we failed. World Education members democratically rejected democracy.

We reflect on this failure using Jacques Derrida's idea of a constitutive aporia at the heart of democracy, and suggests the need to more carefully unpack the difficult relationship between power and equality when seeking to facilitate more democratic organizational practices. The paper presents an original perspective on the potential for, and limits of, a critical performativity inspired interventions in organizations.

Introduction

In a desire to make a difference in the work of work and organization, Critical Management Studies (CMS) scholars have moved from negative critique as distal judgement, to an affirmative engagement with 'alternative' practices of organization (Parker et al., 2014a; 2014b; Parker and Parker, 2017; Reedy et al., 2016; Reedy and King 2018; Kokkinidis, 2015a; b; Cabantous et al., 2016; Fleming and Banerjee, 2016; King and Learmonth, 2015; Learmonth et al., 2016a; Spicer et al., 2009; 2016; Wickert and Schaefer, 2015). CMS is increasingly concerned with exploring alternatives, organized around explicit normative values like democracy, autonomy, participation, equality and solidarity (Parker et al., 2014b). The intention is '*to create a sense of what could be* … requir[ing] us to ask about the *organization to come*, rather than focusing on rejecting the organization that we currently have' (Spicer et al., 2009:551 our emphasis). This creates the potential for affirmative, critical performative interventions by CMS scholars. Yet few have undertaken such interventions themselves (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015). This paper reports on an innovative attempt to intervene in producing more democratic workplace practices. Our account suggests that, contra the expectations of some CMS academics, such interventions may not be straightforwardly welcomed by sympathetic managers (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015; Alvesson and Spicer, 2012), activists (Willmott, 2008), or even employees. Rather, there are intractable, conceptual issues around how we understand the concept of 'democracy' that render organizational democracy problematic, or maybe even impossible.

To develop these ideas, this paper reports on our experience of a critical performative intervention: a participative attempt to implement more democratic organizational practices in an education charity. This experiment was both a success and a failure. It was a success insofar as our work with the organization (World Education[1]) was a democratic, participative and collaborative research project, that helped them review their structures and practices. Yet

it failed inasmuch as our attempt to use this democratic process to establish the results we hoped for, more democratic structure and practices within World Education. World Education democratically decided to reject democratic organizing.

We analyse this somewhat paradoxical outcome of our intervention – the democratic rejection of democracy – in several ways. First, by examining the many reasons why workers at World Education rejected democracy, including the limits to strategic and operational autonomy imposed by the organization's environment (Blee, 2012), the risk of intensified self-exploitation and responsibilisation (Barker, 1993; Ryfe, 2005), and the significant investment of time and commitment democratic organizational forms require (Blee, 2012; Polletta, 2002). The goal of democratic organizing, even in our seemingly felicitous context (Fleming and Banerjee, 2016), is up against deep-rooted cultural and symbolic assumptions requiring individuals and groups to challenge and overturn such embedded beliefs (Polletta, 2002; Zoller, 2000). Encouraging members to challenge such beliefs is itself an exercise of power, raising twin questions concerning who counts in democracy: who can participate, and whence their power (*cracy*) as a people (*demos*) derives.

Karen Ashcraft (2001) answers this question in her study of a hybrid feminist organization by suggesting that hierarchical authority may be necessary to encourage people to act democratically. We develop this tension between democracy and power through the work of Jacques Derrida on the 'democracy *to come*', which we suggest parallels, but also radicalises, critical performativity's notion of the 'organization to come' (Spicer *et al.,* 2009). Derrida's work has been widely used within CMS, mostly focussing on his idea of deconstruction, analysing the relationship between language and the world to which we often assume language corresponds (for a review see Rasche, 2011; Cooper, 1989). Within critical studies of management, Derrida's ideas have been particularly associated with the close reading, and deconstruction of management texts (Kilduff, 1993), enabling taken-for-granted

assumptions to be questioned and challenged by examining elisions and aporias emerging from writing (Learmonth et al., 2012).

Such an approach might be seen as the antithesis of critical performativity, particularly as Derrida's approach has been accused of nihilism (Rasche, 2011). However, as Learmonth et al (2016a) argue whilst this hardly fulfil conventional notions of what is 'useful' research (i.e. immediately applicable), such an approach, in common with other critical theory, requires us to ask deeper questions, which might be more 'useful' in the long-run (2012). For the purposes of this paper, our analysis focuses on Derrida's notion of the aporia within democracy. The democracy *to come* is not a future state that might be realised, even in a few years, but is constitutively impossible. Ontologically democracy is aporetic first because it depends upon the non-democratic exercise of power to establish it, and second because ontologically, democracy takes the form of a promise that is necessarily deferred into a future that is always 'to come' but never actually arrives. Our paper offers an alternative understating of the organization to come: as that which cannot be realised because it is literally *impossible,* not merely difficult (cf. Griffin et al., 2015; Learmonth *et al.*, 2016b). By rigorously interrogating the concept of democracy in organization, we make an original and significant contribution to both the literature on critical performativity in CMS, and to studies of management and organization drawing inspiration from Derrida (Kilduff, 1993; Griffin *et al*., 2015; Rasche, 2011; Learmonth *et al*., 2012; Cooper, 1989). Together, these resources allow us to reflect on the *performative* failure of our intervention with World Education, to better understand the limits, and potentials, of CMS's critical performative turn.

The paper starts with a review of critical performativity and democratic organization before explaining the methodology we used: participatory action research. After an overview of our intervention, and rationale behind it, we explain the background of our case organization: World Education. This is followed by a thematically structured overview of

how hierarchy, and then equality and democracy, were understood within the organization. The final discussion, drawing upon Derrida's idea of a democratic aporia, considers the case, and our role in it, in terms of the tensions that arise in democratic organizing. Our conclusion offers several ideas for future research that would enable CMS academics to make a difference to organizational practice. However messy, difficult, and even impossible, democratic interventions in organizations are, we would not like to discourage further experiments. The experiences reported in this paper are presented as a springboard to rethink democracy, what it means for organizing, and what it means for doing research *with* organizations.

The performative/democratic organizing to come

Proponents of Critical Performativity claim we are witnessing a third wave of CMS: the 'performative turn' (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Spicer et al., 2009; 2016). They argue that CMS has been too focussed on critiquing orthodoxy without proposing alternatives (Alvesson et al., 2009b; King, 2015; King and Learmonth, 2015). Consequently 'large swathes of CMS [are] utterly ineffectual in engaging even our own students and colleagues, let alone a broader public' (Spicer et al., 2009:541). This occurs, they claim, because critical scholars critique the world 'without taking responsibility for what is replacing it' (2009:542-543). They call for a greater intervention into practice (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015), 'focusing on issues of public importance; engaging with non-academic groups using dialectical reasoning; scaling up insights through movement building; and propagating deliberation' (Spicer et al, 2016:227).

Whilst we applaud this call for greater engagement with changing organizational practice, we have concerns about how Critical Performativity has been defined and operationalised. In defining Critical Performativity, Spicer and his colleagues place

themselves in opposition to the anti-performative stance taken by Fournier and Grey (2000:8). Spicer and his colleagues depict this anti-performative stance as a withdrawal from practice, dooming CMS to irrelevance. Yet we believe that this reading of Fournier and Grey is misplaced. The third part of Fournier and Grey's paper explicitly deals with how CMS can productively engage with management practice. Furthermore, Fournier and Grey's description of anti-performativity draws upon Lyotard (1984) to locate performativity as 'the intent to develop and celebrate knowledge which contributes to the production of maximum output for minimum input; in involves inscribing knowledge within means-ends calculation' (2000:17). Thus for performativity to be *critical,* Fournier and Grey argue, we need to move beyond a narrow 'performative' concern with 'efficiency, effectiveness and profitability' in favour of 'notions such as power, control and inequality' (2000:17). These concepts enable CMS to break the often taken for granted relationship between 'knowledge, truth and efficiency' (2000:17) and interrogate both the means and ends of management and organization, judging organizations on other values and normative commitments. For Fournier and Grey, as with Lyotard, it is not performativity that is problematic, but an exclusive concern with efficiency. What then are CMS's normative commitments?

A concern with 'power, control and inequality' provides a starting point for unpacking CMS's normative commitments and constructing a ground for an affirmative, critical performativity. Whilst there is no definitive agreement on CMS' normative underpinnings, Alvesson and Willmott's foundational texts (1992 & 1996), provide a good starting-point. They argue that critical perspectives should champion 'ideas about 'autonomy', 'responsibility', 'democracy'' (1996:19; see also Spicer et al., 2016; Fournier and Grey, 2000; Wickert and Schaefer, 2015:113). The critical evaluation of management practice should be conducted in terms of substantive values like social justice, equality and freedom, rather than the instrumental maximisation efficiency without regard to the wider

implications of either means or ends. CMS is thus part of a critical tradition of working towards a 'domination-free world' (Barros, 2010:167), self-determination and emancipation (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992).

One way in which CMS has sought to inaugurate a domination-free world is through the critique and denaturalisation of hierarchy as inevitable and the 'normal state of affairs' (Atzeni, 2012:1; Fournier and Grey, 2000). Challenging the notion that hierarchy is 'common sense' (Blaug, 2000), CMS has shown how hierarchical workplaces can generate systemic inequality, symbolic violence, and asymmetrical power-relations, disempowering the majority of employees (Acker, 1990; Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Knights and Willmott, 1992:766). Child argues that hierarchy 'restricts people's freedom of action and expression' and health and well-being (2009:504), Malleson that it 'undermine[s] the freedom of large numbers of working people to adequately control their own lives' and is 'deeply damaging to most workers' freedom' (2014:27 and 29), and Blaug that it has 'deleterious psychological effects that include dehumanisation' (2009:86). This normalisation of hierarchical organization leaves '[b]roader and deeper ethical and political issues and questions-such as the distribution of life chances within corporations or the *absence of any meaningful democracy in working life*' unquestioned (Alvesson et al. 2009a:10 our emphasis). Such critiques are based therefore on notions of social justice, equality and freedom rather than efficiency.

Echoing Critical Performativity's call for more concrete 'claims about what it [CMS] actually wants and desires' (Spicer et al., 2009:542), research on alternative organizing has moved beyond the denaturalization of hierarchy towards the affirmation of non-hierarchical organizational forms. Based on the principles of equality (Maeckelbergh, 2009; 2011), freedom from domination (Griffin et al., 2015) and emancipation (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992), critical studies have begun to conceptualising alternative modes of organization on the

basis of an affirmative commitment to values like democracy, participation, equality and solidarity. In doing so they can provide normative foundations for organizing *otherwise* (Parker et al., 2014b; Wickert and Schaefer, 2015).

Democracy has been a particularly powerful value in CMS, drawing on its post-enlightenment roots in European Critical Theory and inspired by well-established forms of economic organization like workers' co-operatives (Cheney, 2002; Paranque and Willmott, 2014), feminist organizations (Ashcraft, 2001; Ferree and Martin, 1995), anarchistic social movements (Reedy et al., 2016; Sutherland et al., 2014; Land and King, 2014), prefigurative experiments in Europe and South America (Kokkinidis, 2015a; b; Atzeni, 2012; Cheney, 2002; Daskalaki, 2017; Blaug, 2000), and a wide range of other, non-capitalist practices of self-management (Gibson-Graham, 2006; 2008; Blaug, 2000; Kokkinidis, 2015b). The fundamental concern in these 'alternative' organizations is with democratic self-management, freedom from coercion, and equality. 'The central claim in these organizations is that all those who would be affected by a decision have a right to be invited to take part in making it, usually through consensus-oriented or "super democracy" methods that require a good deal more than a plurality before a decision is taken' (Rothschild and Stephenson, 2009:801).

These approaches share a concern with moving beyond a critique of hierarchy, to explore what 'good' organization looks like. The idea is to 'create a sense of what could be … requir[ing] us to ask about the organization to come, rather than focusing on rejecting the organization that we currently have' (Spicer et al., 2009: 551). Reedy and Learmonth draw on anarchistic concepts to suggest that alternative should include 'conviviality, mutual support, self-sufficiency, environmental sustainability, individual autonomy … or even the transformation of society at large' (2009:244). Maeckelbergh calls for horizontal democracy to limit power inequalities (2011), Parker et al state that organizational goals should be congruent with their structures, linking means and ends (2014b), and Kokkinidis argues that

organizations should be based on autonomy, enabling the realization of self-creative

subjectivities (2015b). Mobilising the notion of prefiguration, these idea is that organizations

should match means and ends, realising 'good' organization in current practice, rather than

subordinating means to the more efficient realisation of ends (Reedy et al., 2016). This

emphasis on democratic practices of organization raises two challenges. First, we need to

take care not to lose our critical faculties in embracing alternative organizations. As we

explore in our discussion, there are well-documented negatives to democratic organizing as

well as positive potentials (see for instance Freeman, 1972; Polletta, 2002; Zoller, 2000).

Second, to produce such organizations, we are required to develop new methodologies if our

role, as academics, is to develop and foster positive organizational change, rather than simply

critiquing from a distance. It is this point that provides the starting point for our own attempt

at a critical performative intervention in an organization – World Education (WE) – who,

following a minor crisis at the end of a difficult period working under a director, wanted to

return to their more anarchistic, directly democratic roots. To work on a research project *with*

the organization, rather than *on* them, we drew inspiration from Participatory Action

Research as a practical methodology for doing critical performativity as a research

intervention.

Methods: Critical performativity and participant action research

Central to the idea of critical performativity is the move from critique as negation to

affirmation. Spicer *et al.* elaborate what this means through a series of practices that should

inform critical performative research:

'*Affirmation*, through working in close proximity to one's object of critique; an *ethic*

of care, which involves taking the concerns of those studied seriously; a *pragmatism*

orientation, which entails working with already established discourses through limited questioning; a *focus on potentialities* through uncovering alternatives; and a *normative* stance, through clarifying one's ideals' (2009: 545–554 summarised in Alvesson and Spicer, 2012:337)

Whilst there are few studies embodying all of these principles, some examples can be found. King and Learmonth (2015) use auto-ethnography to explore the performance of critical perspectives in practice. Alvesson and Spicer suggest working in partnership with managers, to 'understand and engage in the process rather than imposing the researcher views' (2012:377) and 're-imagine future social arrangements' (2016:241). Similarly Wickert and Schaefer argue that critical scholars should work with middle-managers to 'unleash their potential role as internal activists', thereby 'gradually talking new practices into existence' through 'continuous dialogue between researchers and managers [where] managers are "nudged" gently to reflect upon their actions and the organizational processes to which these relate' (2015:110 & 120). Alvesson and Spicer imagine the changes a fictional manager would have undergone (2012), though stop short of making such fictions a reality. Critical Performativity thus offers a set of principles for working with organizations to challenge managerial orthodoxies and consciously *perform* alternative organizational logics, but is a little short on suggestions for how to do this in practice (Reedy and King, 2018).

To address this lack of practical suggestions, we have turned to Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR offers an approach that resonates with Critical Performativity but with a more developed focus on the research relationship (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013; Huzzard and Johansson, 2014; Kindon et al., 2007; Varkarolis & King, 2017). PAR is a wide-ranging tradition influenced by Lewin's Action Research (1946), Freire's *conscientização* (1970), Tandon's community-based research (1988), feminism, and Marxism (McTaggart, 1997).

Whilst it has had a rather limited uptake in organization studies (Gorli et al., 2015), it does provide three main features that are relevant for a democratically orientated Critical Performativity: 1) participant led research topics; 2) democratic and collaborative knowledge production, challenging power differentials within the research relationship; 3) a concern with treating social processes as an end in themselves. It is to these that we now turn.

Principle 1: Producing participant led research topics

PAR seeks knowledge that is 'useful to groups [studied] in their struggles' (Chatterton et al., 2007:219) and to 'improve the lives of those who have participated' (McTaggart, 1997:26). Rather than structuring projects on the basis of academic research agendas, PAR involved participants in identifying research topics and designing projects (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010; Chevalier and Buckles, 2013). For Huzzard and Johansson PAR conceputalizes 'knowledge creation as a joint enterprise [which] entails a rather intimate, high-trust collaborative relationship or ethics of care' (2014:81). Although this can focus research on the practical problems faced by practitioners, potentially compromising the anti-performative stance advocated by Fournier and Grey (2000), it also places collective political self-determination at the heart of knowledge production, rather than in the service of a more narrowly economic, or governmental policy focus. Thus PAR has the potential for the affirmative, engaged scholarship advocates of Critical Performativity are calling for.

Principle 2: Treating social processes as ends in themselves

The second main principle of PAR, is its refusal to subordinate means to ends (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013). In this regard PAR operates in a similar way to the anarchist principle of prefiguration (Maeckelbergh, 2009), which insists that meaningful social change can only be realised by a methodology that practices the same principles in its processes that

it seeks as an outcome: democratic, participative, egalitarian organization. From this perspective, an emancipatory outcome cannot result from an oppressive or exploitative process, so means should follow ends.

Principle 3: Democratic and collaborative knowledge production

Following the second principle of treating social processes as ends in themselves, PAR engages in collaborative knowledge production in a horizonal and democratic manner (Manzo and Brightbill, 2007:38). PAR thus has 'a democratic commitment to break the monopoly on who holds knowledge and for whom social research should be undertaken' (Fine, cited in Kindon et al., 2007:11). Within PAR researchers should 'strive to diminish their own expert status' (Kesby et al., 2007:20), to recognise, and overcome, power-differentials within the research relationship, and see participants as co-investigators, working equally with researchers (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010). This means that 'considerable energy must be directed at ensuring reciprocity and symmetry of relations in the participatory action research group' (McTaggart, 1997:33).

Whilst full collaboration during all phases of reflection and action is the ideal (McTaggart, 1997), the 'levels of participation by co-researchers and participants may vary significantly' (Kesby et al., 2007:15). PAR does seek to put the participants at the centre, with the goal of producing (emancipatory) change 'where people work toward the improvement of their own practices' (McTaggart, 1997:34). Critical forms of PAR (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013) are thus committed to democratic and emancipatory practice (Nugus et al., 2012:1947), placing emphasis 'on unveiling suppressing power structures and, through reflective efforts, developing a consciousness of the group's situation and finding ways to struggle against and liberate from these powers' (Johansson and Lindhult, 2008:99). Rather

than emancipation from above, PAR's goal is to support 'people's struggles to free themselves from obstacles and unnecessary coercions and restrictions' (2008:105).

Although it chimes with Critical Performativity, we would argue that PAR is more attentive to the potential power-relations within the research process that Critical Performativity is (Reedy and King, 2018). In adopting this approach, starting from members' everyday experiences, our intention was to avoid imposing a dogmatic conception of democratic organizing and instead simply provide some tools and techniques for enabling a democratic process of self-determination. Having outlined the principles on which our intervention was based, we now turn to our case study.

Introducing World Education

World Education is a small, not-for-profit organization based in the middle of the UK. They began life as a radical social centre in the 1980s, comprising a community space and wholefood café, providing facilities for hunt saboteurs, environmental activists, and other social movement organizations (WE annual review 2012). Organized according to anarchist, radical democratic principles, the centre was a 'completely non-hierarchical organization' (Steve). Over time the group started successfully applying for funding for environmental, social projects and then formal education work. As funding streams grew to over £400k per annum, tensions developed between WE's radical background and the structures emerging to manage work processes, partnerships and funding. This eventually led to the establishment of a formal not-for-profit organization with service provision coming to dominate political activism. This process continued until a Director was appointed, on a significantly higher pay scale, and vested with formal, hierarchical authority, breaking with the organization's founding principles of democracy and equality. After 2008, austerity ended WE's core funding, which paid the Director's salary, so she departed, leaving a gap at the top of the

organization. It was in this context that we were invited to work with WE to develop less hierarchical working practices.

Today WE are a small, but established, charity. During the three-year research period WE's funding levels fluctuated between £150–280k pa., and their workforce varied between 2–5 paid, part-time, project workers, aided by 3–8 volunteers. These were split into two teams: the Schools team delivered a formal programme of curriculum support, concerned with global education and active citizenship, and funded by local authorities and government agencies; the Community Education team focussed on youth work, for example, using hip-hop and rap to explore social issues, inspired by the radical pedagogy of Freire's *conscientização* (1970). WE employed a part-time administrator, who supported both teams, and a part-time finance coordinator who prepared funding bids and wrote project reports. Staff met weekly to discuss projects and work-related issues as a team. As a formally incorporated charity, World Education was overseen by a volunteer Board of Trustees. In accordance with Charity Commission regulations, the Trustees' main responsibility was to ensure that WE worked within its charitable interests, managed their resources responsibly, and were run effectively and within the law. Trustees oversaw WE's mission and provided strategic direction rather than the day-to-day operations, which were left to the staff. The Chair of the Board of Trustees served a 2 year term, so we dealt with three Chairs over the research period. In addition to the Chair there were 8 to 12 other trustees who met monthly. As Claire (a Trustee throughout the research period) stated 'I'm not sure who is on the [Board of Trustees]. Not everyone is at every meeting'.

Our research ran between April 2012 and December 2015. We attended 18 meetings, facilitated 5 interventions (between 2 hours and whole days), conducted two full rounds of interviews with all staff and some trustees, and had regular email and phone contact with the three Chairs and finance co-ordinator (for an overview see Table 1, available online as

The following discussion and analysis is based on these meetings, interviews and our reflections.

We structure the following discussion of our interventions within WE around the three key principles of combining democratically orientated Critical Performativity with Participatory Action Research we identified above, namely 1) participant led research topics; 2) treating social processes as an end in themselves; 3) democratic and collaborative knowledge production. Here we trace how we engaged with the participants to undertake the research, seeking to embody democratic participation in our own research practices as well as introducing a more democratic form of management to World Education. In the Discussion we review our case through the concept of the democratic aporia to examine why the intervention can be considered as a performative failure.

Vignette 1: Producing participant led research topics

 'We want to make World Education a non-hierarchical organisation, can you help us?'

Paul, the Chair of the small education charity looks excitedly towards [Author 1] and Finance co-ordinator, Steve. World Education (WE), he explains, have been through a crisis. Run hierarchically, staff felt that the organization had drifted away from its founding values, and morale had suffered. 'The thing is', he goes on to explain, 'we want to run things as democratically, participatory and non-hierarchically as possible …. We would like you, as a Business School academic, to run a couple of sessions explaining that such ways of organising are not only possible, but can also be effective. That way we might be able to convince them [sceptical Trustees] that this is the way forward. Would that be OK?' As the conversation progresses we discuss the

types of interventions that could be offered and the challenges of overcoming scepticism about an approach people are not used to. 'The question is', [Author 1] concludes, 'how do we introduce democracy democratically to people who are not sure they want it?'

This research project began as a response to a request from members of World Education to support them in becoming a more democratically run organization. It seemed the perfect context for a Critical Performative intervention. WE were an organization with a history of anarchist organizing, recent negative experiences of hierarchical managerialism, and wanted to return to a more democratic organizational form. We thought this an ideal opportunity to produce an affirmative, pragmatic intervention, working with potentialities (Spicer et al., 2016) and internal activists (such as the Chair and finance co-ordinator) (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015), to improve the working lives of participants (McTaggart, 1997) as proponents of Critical Performativity and PAR call for.

The goal of the project was to help WE become more democratic and participatory, in a manner that fitted their Freirean pedagogy and achieve a 'sort of consistency with what we are talking about in terms of our programmes' and their own organizing (Steve). As Paul, the first Chair, put it, 'it seems ironic, paradoxical, hypocritical, contradictory, that the way in which [WE] organised itself [hierarchically] replicates a lot of the problems that exist, within a world that is trying to move away from.' Our research goal was to move WE 'away from having somebody who's actually top of the tree' (Abby – staff member) by embedding non-hierarchical principles in the way that WE worked. Despite an apparent consensus at the start of the project, however, as the research progressed it became more apparent that not everyone had the same understanding of what non-hierarchical meant, or even whether it was desirable.

As Claire, a Trustee, answered when asked why WE were moving in this direction, 'Not sure why… it's obviously something [the staff] wanted'.

Based on the principles of democratic consensus-based decision-making (Rothschild and Stephenson, 2009), and PAR (Kindon et al., 2007), we sought to include all members in defining the research objectives. Our first intervention was an organization-wide consultation to see what the trustees, staff and volunteers wanted. This was intended to include everyone but whilst all the staff attended, only three volunteers and two Trustees did. Significantly those Trustees who were the most skeptical of democratic management, did not participate. We therefore came to our first dilemma, who counts (who are the people or *demos*) within the research process, and how can we engage members who are unable, or unwilling, to participate? Unlike PAR, which assumes that participants have shared interests, in our project it was clear from our initial meeting that those Trustees who were most sceptical about a non-hierarchical approach to organization had chosen to express this scepticism by non-participation. However, from those that did attend this meeting, a consensus (albeit weak) to work non-hierarchically did emerge.

Vignette 2: Treating social processes as ends in themselves

 'So can we change the policy on recruitment then to make it more non-hierarchical?' [Author 1] asks. We are in the third meeting of the non-hierarchical working group, a group established to explore in more detail how a non-hierarchical way of working could happen in practice. The group had been set up by Mark, the new Chair of WE after Paul's term had finished, to seek to embed the principles of non-hierarchical organizing so WE was not just 'not just reliant on the personalities of the people here' but on more formal processes (Paul).

'We could in practice', states Steve, the most knowledgeable of WE's constitution. 'But the question is would that be that democratic?' asks Trustee Claire. A discussion ensues about the remit and power that the working group should have.

The non-hierarchical working group was established by the second Chair, Mark, to embed non-hierarchical principles in WE's working practices. In our initial meeting (see vignette 1) the central problem that WE faced was a contradiction between their expressed values and internal practices. As Mark explained, 'we should model the type of world we want to create, not just perpetuate the organization'. The non-hierarchical working group met eight times to translate non-hierarchical principles into working practices. Despite robust debates over recruitment and selection, appraisals, and performance management, the group was unclear about its remit and authority. The problem was that non-hierarchy required 'people taking an active role in being involved in the decisions that affect them, and taking responsibility for decision that are made as part of the organization' (Mark) but only a few members were involved in the group. As Claire told us, 'there was a concern [among some trustees] that [the non-hierarchical working group] wasn't that non-hierarchical'. Moreover it also quickly became apparent that the two most committed advocates of a non-hierarchy within WE were also the two individuals at the top of the organization in its current form (the first two Chairs). The idea of imposing democracy onto a more ambivalent group was contradictory to the change that they wanted to see. Therefore we came to our second dilemma: what is the power (*cracy*) that will establish and secure democratic rule? Could we as external consultants, backed by the Chair of the board of trustees, impose democracy? Or would this work against the prefigurative and non-hierarchical ethos that we were seeking to support?

Vignette 3: Democratic and collaborative knowledge production

    'I just feel really upset', declares Rose as we stand in the corridor. 'This is not the
way that I thought WE should be going'. We were about to leave, having run our 4th
intervention - an away day designed to be an open and honest conversation about how
WE was operating - when Rose started telling us about her recent experiences with
WE. She explains her concerns about sexism and bullying by a staff member, and
difficulties with the way her project was being managed. We are shocked.
We had thought the session had gone well. Using image-association techniques to
unpack how members felt about WE and examine values, principles, and practices, a
facilitated discussion on the principles behind alternative organizational practices, and
a discussion articulating a positive vision of how they wanted to manage and organize
themselves. Rose had been in the session all day, but was strangely quiet. Yet the
conversation we had just had revealed to us how little we really knew about what was
really going on.

PAR seeks to unveil suppressed power-structures (Johansson and Lindhult, 2008), to
facilitate opportunities for people to improve their own practices (McTaggart, 1997) where
participants are co-investigators working collaboratively (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010) and
we downplay our position as 'experts' (McTaggart, 1997). Yet we constantly were unable to
achieve such democratic ideals. In the workshop which above vignette describes, we actively
sought to create a 'safe place' for participants to share their thoughts and experiences in a
way that would collectively work through them. Our aim was to develop a collective
consensus by creating shared understandings through processes like community art, mapping
and diagramming by all participants. We thought that we would come to a collective, and

common understanding of the current and future direction of World Education. Yet it was only after the event that wider and more deep-rooted issues emerged, including accusations of sexism and racism.

Such experiences are hardly unique to our project. Whilst Critical Performativity and PAR aspire to high levels of participation as Pain and Francis observe 'despite our best efforts we found, like others, that the ideal of participation is seldom achieved, and that fulfilling the key premise of participatory research – effecting change with participants – is fraught with difficulties' (2003:51; also see Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010). Our third dilemma therefore was how to achieve the goals (a democratic organization) to correspond to the practices (collaborative and democratically produced knowledge).

Discussion

Vignette 4: A performative failure?

> We gather upstairs in the offices of WE with all the staff to facilitate a discussion about what structures WE should adopt. We had been working with WE for some three years on and off and had developed some good relationships, but we had never had a clear and definitive decision from WE that they wanted to run non-hierarchically. We felt it was time for them to make a choice. We started by presenting our analysis of WE's history and changing organizational structure and facilitated a discussion of possible ways forward. We then put for three possibilities for how they could organize themselves, 1) adopt a classic hierarchical organization, in which one person is appointed as general manager; 2) to develop robust, consensus-based participatory decision-making structures, and use these to clarify rules, procedures, and strictly delimited areas of authority

and responsibility, to be exercised collectively; 3) a hybrid organizational

structure where individuals are given roles but are held for a limited term of

office then rotated.

We left the meeting saying that if they want to adopt option 2 or 3 then they

should get in touch and we would help … we have not heard back since. Had we

failed? It certainly felt like it.

From a PAR perspective our research interventions can be seen as a success. WE staff, and

some volunteers and Trustees, collectively explored the issues of working democratically and

non-hierarchically and, collectively and democratically, came to the conclusion that working

democratically demanded significant levels of responsibility, commitment, time and energy.

The process of developing democratic ways of working was demanding for everyone

involved with many meetings and few decisions made (Polletta, 2002; Reedy et al., 2016;

Zoller, 2000). Moreover whilst the staff attended meetings, few Trustees or volunteers did.

The outcome of this was that 'people are getting a little fed up' with the process (Steve). For

people working part-time in a charity, it was too much. Their choice can be seen as a sensible

reaction to the possibilities of intensifying work (cf. Eccles, 1981; Malleson, 2014; Ryfe,

2005).

Yet, particularly given our Critical Performativity commitments, we felt our

intervention had been a failure. In some respects, our 'failure' is similar to the performative

failures discussed by Fleming and Banerjee (2016), in that any performative act requires an

institutional context that is receptive to it being realised. Whilst initially the situation

appeared felicitous, over the course of the project we discovered external institutional

challenges to democratisation (Ashcraft, 2001), as when other organizations expected a

named individual to be in charge and accountable, as well as divergent subjective desires and

expectations of members. In working against the grain of institutionalised ideas about work and organization, establishing effective democratic practices is difficult (Polletta, 2002). This challenges the somewhat naïve image of interventions propagated within the critical performativity literature (e.g. Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Spicer et al., 2009; 2016; Wickert and Schaefer, 2015). As our case demonstrates, even when the context is felicitous, researchers will encounter multiple resistances and tensions when trying to support democratic processes. This also says something deeper about the challenges of bringing about democratic organizing. It is our assertion that some of these challenges arise from the nature of democracy and organization, and tensions around who counts and can participate democratically (see vignette 1), and the source and legitimacy of their power (vignette 2). It is to these questions that we now turn.

Participation, power and subjectivity

At the heart of this project was a desire to work with an organization to overcome, or at least ameliorate, the negative effects of hierarchical power relations by developing more explicitly democratic and participative organizational practices. Following PAR principles, we sought to be as inclusive, participative, and democratic as possible in our own practices of working with WE. In so doing we faced two questions that any attempt at democratisation must address: who counts (who are the people or *demos*?), and what is the power (*cracy*) that will establish and secure the will of the people? Working with WE, the question of who counted was a complicated one as our main interventions focussed on the paid employees. There was little participation by volunteers, clients, funders or other stakeholders, including the Trustees. Time was a factor. In common with many radical organizations we privileged participatory, egalitarian processes over instrumental effectiveness (Polletta, 2002; Reedy et al., 2016). Such processes can be time consuming and conflictual and those without a

background in radical organizing can see such activities as 'talking' that impedes action (Zoller, 2000). In contrast with conventional, hierarchical organizations, which symbolize 'efficiency, conformity, and legitimacy', alternatives can appear ineffective and illegitimate (Polletta, 2002:216). Participatory processes absorb energy that could otherwise be focussed on the organization's external goals, a particular issue for Trustees who mostly had full-time jobs, and thus limited time. Thus whilst they were invited to all key events, and actively encouraged to participate in the change process, only the Chairs and one other member of the board really participated in the project.

Even within the restricted category of 'employee' there was a second question of who counts and how they count. Drawing upon ideas from the consensus decision-making cooperative Seeds for Change and our own experiences with organizing in social movements, we sought consensus in all decisions concerning the organization. Along with the Chair of the Board of Trustees, we felt uncomfortable with ideas that did not have full agreement from *all* members, as they would be the ones having to live with the consequences of these decisions. This consensus model went well beyond a simple 'majority vote' version of democracy, and informed both our participatory research processes and the kind of practices we suggested developing as an alternative to hierarchical management. As other studies of democratic organizing have highlighted, this made the consultation process very slow and dependent on a collective commitment to working together towards a shared agreement (Polletta, 2002; Zoller, 2000). With these demands on time, and a high burden of proof for approval, it is not surprising that democratic processes were not embraced.

In the conduct of the project, one prominent issue was that two members were not really interested in working democratically, and resisted, albeit passively resisted, the ways of working democratically. Both members referred to needing someone to make decisions and were clearly reluctant to take on such responsibility. Again such concerns are echoed

elsewhere. Tony Eccles' case study of a workers' take over in a manufacturing plant demonstrates the difficulties workers and union representatives had to become self-managing (1981). Similarly Ryfe argues that people fear taking on too much responsibility (2005:51), and Malleson claim that people often see self-management as too much work (2014:47). For part-time employees, fitting work around other commitments, democratic self-management just seemed too much effort.

The person that members turned to for leadership was the finance coordinator: a long-serving, degree educated, white, able-bodied, heterosexual, CIS, middle-aged male. By writing grant applications he was also a central influence in determining which projects WE could take on and how they were resourced. This gave him a significant power base within the organization. He was reluctant, however, to take on formal leadership authority, even when it was expected of him. As Ashcraft notes in her study of a hybrid feminist organization, 'many members looked to the supervisors for leadership, deferring to their direction even in settings in which the supervisors had no formal leading duties' even when they 'appeared tentative' in taking on such a role (2001:1310).

The tension here is about who actually *participates* in a democratic organizational process. In keeping with principles of workplace democracy 'all those who would be affected by a decision have a right to be invited to take part in making it' (Rothschild and Stephenson, 2009:801). Following PAR principles, we sought to engage organizational members as equals and as knowledgeable, active subjects (PAR principles 1, 2 and 3), rather than research objects. Yet as subjects, they had been shaped by a lifetime of socialization to expect, and even desire, certain forms of organizational arrangement and authority (see Polletta, 2002:216-217 for a discussion). So when we asked them 'what kind of organization do you want', their preference was sometimes, understandably, for a conventional organizational form with some hierarchy. Even when people want democracy and equality,

actually performing according to such norms will require often-uncomfortable challenges to members' identities and values. As Ashcraft (2001); Freeman (1972); Kleinman (1996); and Lagalisse (2010) have all demonstrated, even in groups with an explicit commitment to radical democracy, the recurring dynamics of inequality and domination in everyday practice can undermine such ambitions. For example, effective equal and democratic organizing may require men to challenge and change their everyday performative identities by not dominating debate or by taking on more care responsibilities. Lagalisse's study of a radical housing cooperative found that the organization reproduced forms of privilege anchored in the wider social context as 'those who consistently dominated house meetings were white, middle class men and/or one middle class man of colour' (2010:23) and women ended up doing the bulk of the care work and cleaning, despite the coops formal commitment to equality. Similar processes are visible in Kleinman's ethnographic account of a holistic health centre which, despite radical egalitarian ideals, reproduced many of the inequalities, particularly gender, it officially opposed (1996). Democratic organizations therefore face tensions resulting from their location within a wider social context and set of institutions structured by the very forms of inequality they seek to overcome. Simply introducing a formally flat, non-hierarchical structure will not remove inequality and domination from an organization, and may even prevent its being checked by bureaucratic safeguards such as equal opportunities policies.

Significant organizational change will therefore require changes to how we *perform* identities in everyday life, challenge our sense of who we are as identities are grounded embodied norms we have learned since childhood (e.g. Butler, 1988; Borgerson, 2005). The tension is that *as* organizational subjects, we need to overcome ourselves, not to emancipate a pre-given self, as Foucault well recognised (McWhorter, 1999). Whilst a collective, emancipatory investigation fitted well with PAR and the kind of Freirean practice that WE themselves used, it would have required a more intensive approach to working collectively

with WE to really work through the issues they faced and find a way of collectively analysing, and overcoming, their situation. This would have required a collaborative process that would not be structured as a collaboration between fixed subjects negotiating from stable subject positions, but one that enabled resubjectivization through the development of collective management processes. In using the term 'resubjectivization' here we are indicating that the changes required to develop an equal, open, and democratic process of organization and self-management require our 'selves' to change. Such selves – or subjectivities – are performative and so challenges to the norms shaping such performances will be felt as a challenge to our selves. In effect, a deeper engagement with democratic organizing would require changes to the mundane, everyday forms of domination that are grounded in performative gender, ethnicity, class and other identities. In our interventions we focused on tools and techniques of participation, but did not really unpack the kinds of everyday forms of inequality and privilege that are undemocratic, but grounded in the on-going, everyday performance of members' identities. In order to participate as equals in a democratic process, members may need to challenge and change their own performativities, impacting on members' sense of self. As organizational theorists, approaching the question of democracy mostly from CMS and political theory, we were not well equipped to support a process of collaborative resubjectivisation. Without such, however, the deeply entrenched problems at WE, with accusations of sexism and racism bubbling below the surface, and erupting in private conversations, would always place concrete limits on what we might achieve. What was required was perhaps akin to the kind of process described by Félix Guattari in his work on transversality and subject-groups (2015), but even if this could have been achieved, there is another, conceptual challenge to realising democratisation at work.

Democracy and aporia

Our final line of analysis takes us to the concept of democracy itself, understood through Jacques Derrida's work. Writing in the context of the war in Iraq, and reflecting upon how the designation 'rogue nation' emerged as a justification for military interventions supported by the United Nations, Derrida's specific concerns are with the operation of two parallel but distinct principles in international law: democracy and sovereignty. The first is embedded in the UN's General Assembly, which takes the form of a democratic parliament comprised of 'member states that are each sovereign at home' (Derrida, 2005:98). The General Assembly makes decisions on the basis of a majority vote following deliberation and debate. These decisions, however, carry no force. As Derrida explains:

> … the democratic sovereignty of the United Nations General Assembly is powerless, since it has at its disposal no executive and coercive force of its own, and thus no effective or even juridical sovereignty (for, as Kant would say, there is no right without force). (2005:98)

The power to enforce the will of the General Assembly is provided by the Security Council, who can collectively enact, or individually veto, the decisions of the General Assembly. The Security Council is dominated in turn by its five permanent members, the USA, UK, Russia, China and France, who all possess nuclear weapons and sit alongside the 15 elected members, who rotate after a period of two years. The effect of this institutional split between democracy and sovereignty is that the seemingly democratic General Assembly is literally powerless without the Security Council. The latter, however, and particularly the permanent members, can act individually to veto the democratic decisions of the larger collective body, represented in the General Assembly.

In our reading of Derrida, this tension suggests a more general aporia at the heart of democracy. Quoting Derrida again:

'For democracy to be effective, for it to give rise to a system of law that can carry the day, which is to say, for it to give rise to an effective power, the *cracy* of the *dēmos*… is required. What is required is thus a sovereignty, a force that is stronger than all the other forces in the world. But if the constitution of this force is, in principle, supposed to represent and protect this world democracy, it in fact betrays and threatens it from the very outset, in an autoimmune fashion…' (2005:100)

Whilst it is clearly a rather large jump to compare the sovereign power of the Security Council, imposing democracy through military invasion, with a PAR consulting project in a small education charity, the underlying issues of power and institutionalisation are homologous. To be effective, the democratic ideal needs to take concrete form: to give rise to a 'system of law,' or organizational authority, that curtails and constrains the sovereign power of members. For WE, this was precisely the context in which we first came to them. From an informal, relatively unstructured organization, a Director had seized control, taking power with support from a key actor on the Board of Trustees, and imposing sovereign authority over the organization. To prevent this happening again, they needed a 'system of law' that formalised democratic procedures and accountability. Despite a desire for democratic organization on the part of both Chairs and most other members, there was not a clear consensus that all could subscribe to. Some other power was required to impose democracy and institute a system of law to prevent it sliding into constant struggle and contestation. In this, the situation is very similar to that describe by Karen Ashcraft when she refers to 'the irony that some individuals can exercise power over others to promote equality'

(2001: 1304). In very practical terms, this created a problem for WE with enforcing collectively agreed rules and mediating disagreements over appropriate behaviour. The example referred to above that led to accusations of racism and sexism escalated, in part, because there was no authority to appeal to when one member deemed another member to be 'out of line'. Although there was a constitution in place prohibiting discrimination and other forms of misconduct, someone still needed to enforce that if an individual broke the rules, and needed to mediate when there was a disagreement over whether a collectively agreed rule had been broken. To be democratic, this authority had to be accountable to the collective for their actions, and to be effective, it needed sovereign authority. In other words, a collective form of sovereignty was needed, and one that could be enforced over the sovereignty of individual members, but not everyone wanted to sign up to that.

In some respects, as external academics we should have been in a good position to exercise some form of authority and to announce the arrival of democratic rule. Our authority was not sovereign, but qualified by our business school positions, extensive research and consulting experience, and the fact that we have both run small, cooperative businesses ourselves. We also had the support of the first two Chair's, but shared their concerns with ensuring a collective consensus and were wary of imposing our ideas. Yet, as Huzzard and Johansson argue a 'danger [of PAR] is that such a heavy emphasis on consensus … might actually reinforce dominant structures rather than undermine them' (2014:85). The result was that our intervention was 'liberal', in the sense that we treated individual members as fixed subjects, and asked them what they wanted. A more critical intervention would have actively challenged these subjective preferences, thereby seeking to change how they saw the world and performed their identities, but this would have required a different kind of power to be exercised.

Conclusions

In one reading, this paper has described a critical performative failure (Fleming and Banerjee, 2016). In seeking to develop the idea of critical performativity into a form of organizational consulting, using a methodology derived from PAR and committed to formal equality within the project, we sought to democratically (re)introduce democracy to WE. We interpreted members' commitments to anarchism and direct democracy as an ideal case context for such an intervention, but in so doing we underestimated the power of the wider institutional context on the subjectivity and desires of organizational members. We also overlooked the large literature that reminds us of the practical and conceptual challenges facing workplace democracy (Ashcraft, 2001; Kleinman, 1996). Employees who worked for WE because it fitted around their personal commitments were not interested in having more responsibility for running the organization (Dahl, 1970:134) or were concerned that it would mean more work (Malleson, 2014:47). Ultimately, as Ashcraft found, they preferred 'hierarchy to egalitarian structure and so, freely choose to follow leaders' (2001:1314). Furthermore in retrospect, we should have paid more attention to J-K Gibson-Graham, when they reflect on their own commitments to equality in research, writing that:

> …we began to see the 'inequality' between academic and community researchers as constitutive of our work, rather than as a hindrance or detraction. The relationship between academic and community member is eroticized by inequality, by the way 'they' invest our peculiar status and formal knowledge with power, and that is in part what made our conversations work… We realized that, far from attempting to achieve a pristine interaction untainted by power, we needed to mobilize and direct power, and to make sure that it was used to foster rather than kill what we hoped to elicit – passionate participation in our project (Gibson-Graham, 2006:30)

What Gibson-Graham hit upon here is the power relation inherent to any encounter between academics and practitioners. Whilst we attempted to challenge these power-relations through PAR, ours was still a liberal notion of power. Even with a more carefully nuanced approach to consulting, our analysis of the democratic aporia of non-hierarchical organization, using Derrida, suggests that there is an intractable tension between sovereignty and democracy within organizations, and that critical performativity needs to be much clearer in its underpinning normative commitments and value, and to not shy away from a more direct promotion of such. This will require more intensive work with organizations, picking up on their own anxieties and group relations, as well as the practical, institutional realities that may militate against more democratic organizing. Most crucially, the power to enact the will of the collective, whether a majority decision or some version of consensus, needs to be codified in a collectively agreed rule of law, with power to enforce this will invested in a particular role, individual, or committee. As paradoxical as this may sound, without such, the *demos* will have no *cracy* and the organization will have to settle all disagreements directly, without reference to established rules.

We would not like, however, our case to be interpreted as a call to withdraw from engagement with practice or an outright rejection of the notion of workplace democracy. Our work with World Education has demonstrated challenges of democratically seeking to introduce workplace democracy and produce the organization to come, but this should not mean giving up. The *organization to come* is one that is never complete, finished, perfect or settled. For us workplace democracy is a process, requiring continual work, experiment and reflection on ourselves, our social relations and the wider structural conditions that shape how we act and behave. The reliance on tools and techniques, such as consensus-based decision-making, alternative organizational structures or radical intervention practices such as PAR

cannot be seen in and of themselves, as procedures through which, if we implement them correctly, we can solve the problems that we face. Rather, we suggest that they provide the starting-point for experiments and reflections on new ways of being to produce the possibilities for embodying the normative commitments that CMS supports.

Funding

Notes

[1] All names are pseudonyms. Due to the small size of World Education we have generally removed any identifying features from participants, including their role in order to retain anonymity and therefore in general have for the most part discussed the interviewees' views collectively rather than as individuals.

[2] It is worth acknowledging that we probably set the benchmark for 'democracy' a little high in seeking full consensus. This does not necessitate everyone actively embracing a decision, but it does require no-one blocking it. In our interventions we sought to use consensus based decision making, but this was not always fully understood by all participants and this ability to facilitate effective consensus, and train participants, is a key skill for Critical Performativity/CMS researchers interested in such work to develop.

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Many thanks]

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