Post-script: Queer endings/queer beginnings

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There are many challenges and ironies associated with using ideas from queer theory to mount a critique of organizational life. One of the most significant is the difficulty attached to thinking through what it might mean to take a queer 'position', especially if queer is arguably something that one does rather than is. The contributors of this special issue have all emphasized this performativity, and their processes of revealing queering as performativity have common features. If queer is anything, it is a form of immanent critique, an attitude of unceasing disruptiveness, and a taking apart of the taken-for-granted assumptions surrounding knowledge, power and identity. If nothing else, queer performs a rejection rather than a reification of categorical thinking, making it particularly hard to know where to begin to try to articulate what it can 'tell us', and what 'it' has informed us about debates surrounding gender, work and organization. Andrew King emphasizes this in his paper (in this issue) in which he 'queers' research categories such as 'older LGB adults' through a process of 'questioning the approach taken in much of the organizational literature'. The questioning that King engages is not limited to older LGB people's lived experiences of work organizations, but goes much further than that. Indeed, by invoking queer the central categories and meanings associated with organizations and organizing are troubled and become unstuck, as does the very idea of reliable categories themselves. In this sense, we end this special issue with possibly a less clear, less defined understanding of queer than when we began. But perhaps this is a sign of a good special issue, particularly a queer one, if, as Halperin (1995: 62) has put it that queer is by definition 'whatever is at odds with the norm'. The papers that make up this special issue, and we as its guest editors, deliberately and consciously offer further questions rather than answers. This involves a constant deferral of meaning, and a refusal to be sexually, politically, theoretically or semantically 'fixed'. Of course, this can be frustrating, but frustration can be productive and we hope that this openness will prompt future queer debates.

Another note of caution which we highlighted during our opening editorial is that queer theorists have thus far not had much to say about organizations, and with a few notable exceptions, organizational scholars have had little to say about queer theory and politics. Despite this, insights from queer theory have much resonance with critical analyses of work, organization and indeed the social process of gender. With this in mind we end this issue with questions and new beginnings: What does it mean now and in the future to 'queer' gender, work and organizational life? How does queering expose the ways organizations reproduce heteronormativity? Through what means do they do so? How, and why, do normative gender performativities reproduce particular versions of organizations, perpetuating narrowly prescriptive ways of being

and doing? How does asking these questions help us to understand about the workings of organizational power and gender ideology?

To reach these questions, the various contributions to this special issue have drawn on and developed insights from queer theory and politics, acknowledging many analytical and ethical conundrums along the way. They have also considered, in different ways, what queering gender and organizational life, and queering organization studies, might involve. This has traversed issues facing LGBT academics (Rumens), trans employees, professionals, managers and activists (Muhr and Sullivan), and 'old' LGB employees (King), as well as more generally how difference matters at work (McDonald). Conflicting arguments have also emerged. For Martin Parker queer opens up an unsettling of complacencies, whereas for Nancy Harding queer remains relatively limited in its capacity to provide a language through which to articulate wider experiences of shame, abjection and alienation by its connections to sex and sexuality.

These contributions reflect our earlier intimation that there is little consensus about what constitutes 'queer' as a distinct perspective or position. That said, throughout the various papers in the issue there is some common ground which understands queer theory and politics as a performative ontology such that gender (and organization) are the outcomes, rather than the basis, of social interaction. Here, subjectivity is framed as an act, a 'corporeal style' as Judith Butler has put it in one of her more oft-quoted lines (Butler, 1990: 177), so that repetition and constant recitation of particular norms is not performed by a subject, but rather is what 'enables a subject' (Butler, 1993: 95). These mundane performative acts, if sustained in accordance with dominant social norms and expectations such as those associated with heteronormativity, result in the attribution of viable subjectivity. This could be done, for instance, through the 'situated transgressions' discussed by Sara Louise Muhr and Katie Sullivan in this issue. The subject is therefore understood as the outcome of a process of recognition, rather than the basis of it. While due to this bifurcation of agency and subjectivity queer theorists have been charged with reducing the subject to a discursive effect (see Butler, 1993), it remains crucial to understanding the organization of subjectivity within queer theory, particularly as it is 'compelled by regulatory practices' (Butler, 1990: 24).

Queer theory's largely phenomenological interest in subjective becoming is buttressed by a concern to understand the *organization* of the desire for recognition. Of particular salience are the conditions upon which the conferral of recognition depends, and the consequences of its denial for those who cannot or choose not to conform to the norms governing subjective viability. It is precisely this compulsion to perform seemingly coherent narratives of self that queer theorists seek to critically and reflexively understand, and often to parody. The risk in relation to the latter is that, as Parker has emphasized (2002), queer becomes just another buzzword, a marketing slogan or a shorthand for critique.

In steering us towards reflecting on and rejecting the norms upon which subjective recognition within social and organizational life depends, queer theory leads us to focus on how, and why, we might end up making these kinds of compromises; whether marketing or organizing, we conflate the complexities of our lived experiences in the presentation and performance of coherent versions of ourselves.

This might be the 'cleaned up' professional image we portray in a job interview, the simplified account of our personal life that we relay to colleagues who inquire about what we did at the weekend, the polished version of corporate life that is displayed in the annual report, or the policies and practices upon which particular individual or institutional 'badges' of endorsement or affiliation rely.

This sanitization, or conflation, as the process of organization upon which the conferral of recognition depends is what Butler (2004) describes as a process of 'undoing'; a corporate or rather organizational undoing. It is through this process that the subject 'produces its coherence at the cost of its own complexity' (Butler, 1993: 115). But what are the compromises of this demand? What and for whom are the costs? Rather than rendering queer an already outmoded buzzword, this leads us to continually ask ourselves fundamental questions about organizational life that might otherwise be dismissed as no longer interesting or relevant.

Queer theory emphasizes that we can – and ought – to destabilize and to 'make trouble' (Butler, 1990) with organization as a process and its regulatory effects. Moreover, this can be done performatively by turning to more self-consciously parodic or reflexive undoings that bring the enactment of seemingly stable subjectivities to the fore. By laying bare the performativity of subjectivity its precarity is revealed. In contrast to organizational undoing, this more critical, reflexive or parodic undoing is designed to bring the complexity of lived experience to the fore, revealing the conditions, costs and concessions on which seemingly coherent organizational life depends. From this achievement it also highlights the political potential for doing otherwise.

As we have said the parameters of queer theory are deliberately open and attempting to 'fix' queer not only risks violating it, but also (more instrumentally) destroys it. Once queer becomes a marketing tool, an advertising slogan, an organizational resource, or even a political strategy it arguably ceases to be queer. We need to ask: how can queer move from being disruptive to transformative, from rupturing to rethinking, and if it does so, does it then also stop being queer? Or, if we fully embody queering's radical potential, should we be striving for being 'queer enough' rather than queer because to accomplish queer renders queer complete? To suggest that queering remains open, unfinished requires in part to live where success in on the horizon but never reached.

Queer is politically difficult to navigate. Should we remain respectful of queer theory's emergence from within LGBT circles and communities, as Nancy Harding (this issue) and others suggest? Does its mobilization as yet another analytical 'tool' or political gimmick dematerialize queer's radical possibilities, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) warned us? Or is queer about more than sexuality – including also the social (and corporate) organization of who and what we are? Is queer a theory of sexual or ontological desire, or both? If queer concerns ontological desire, can it add another layer to our much-needed critique of corporate greed and desire? Doesn't the elevation of queer theory to a critical-methodological attitude of querying imply a straight and reductionist co-optation whereby it is desexualized, disembodied, depoliticized, and diluted of its immanent force and potential? Shouldn't we recognize that a queer politics has involved, and may continue to involve, a break with key sentiments of queer theory, and a movement beyond queer theory?

When posing these questions and navigating through them perhaps we ought to remember that queer theory was developed within a 'postmodern' zeitgeist, where continuous questioning and querying and the deconstructive deferral of meaning occurred in what often seemed to be an apolitical vacuum. Perhaps it is not such an oxymoron after all that much of the queer politics and activism that followed has undermined the deconstructive logic of queer theory. And this points us to the limits of queer theory. Our sense having reflected on the various contributions to this special issue is that the theoretical, political and ethical questions raised by queer will continue to entice and fascinate. The new beginnings we end with offer an invitation to those concerned with developing reflexive undoings of gender and of organizational life. This is an invitation to 'undo the undoings' perpetuated by organizations and the heteronormativity on which they depend. This means not shying away from queer as either too precious or passé to pick up, but rather to keep asking questions about where a queer organization theory and politics might take us. This does mean taking queer at face value, but means continuing to interrogate it, experimenting with what it can do, confronting it with conflicting theory, recreating its concepts, and posing new problems. And it means doing these things without ignoring queer's limitations or being afraid of finding out what it cannot do.

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