

Feminist theorizing in organization studies: A way forward with Marta Calás and Linda Smircich

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Abstract

The founders of *Organization* include Marta Calás and Linda Smircich who are among the most influential feminist theorists in organization studies. We take inspiration from their work to outline ideas for feminist and other critical scholars studying organizations and organizing. We draw especially on their consistent interest in transnational feminism, engagement with feminist new materialisms, and emphasis on epistemological and ontological questions about (feminist) organization studies. We highlight key theoretical points and show how feminism(s) can remain socially, societally, and globally meaningful. Our aim is to continue to create feminist organization theorizing that, as Calás and Smircich's scholarship does, remains critical and vigilant about who its knowers are, what kind of knowledge it produces, and what this knowledge is for.

Keywords

Feminist, feminist new materialism, knowledge production, theorizing, transnational feminism

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Introduction

“[W]e don’t believe anything we write today will ‘withstand the test of time’ or perhaps even endure until the next handbook of organization studies. After all, we don’t believe in ahistorical, acultural, universals. But from where we do stand today we want to underscore that we consider feminist approaches to organization studies one of the few spaces left for reflecting upon and criticizing the excesses and violence of contemporary global capitalism, as it impacts many people all over the world” (Calás and Smircich, 2006: 327).

In the second edition of *The Sage Handbook of Organization Studies*, Calás and Smircich (2006) published an updated version of their chapter from 10 years earlier, detailing a range of different strands of feminist theory in our field. The words above were part of the concluding section in their original chapter in 1996. Ten years later, further arguing for transnational feminist organization studies, Calás and Smircich were “even more convinced they were the right words.” While they have been consistent in their feminist project, the emphasis in Calás and Smircich’s work has changed over the years. We argue that their call for organization studies to engage with feminist theory is as timely and relevant today as it ever was.

Feminist theorizing is vibrant, but it continues to have a relatively limited impact in organization studies journals (Bell et al., 2020). Feminism seems to be an eternal challenge for organization theorists, mainstream and critical alike. We find this problematic because feminism in its different forms remains an important space for criticizing and offering alternatives to global capitalism. Feminists ask questions of gender *and* race, ethnicity, and social class and their intersectionalities that others often fail to ask. Many of these questions are uncomfortable for the powers that be and thus are well suited for the pages of *Organization* as a distinctly critical journal (cf., Calás and Smircich, 2013).

Marta Calás and Linda Smircich were co-founders of this journal in 1994. They advocate boundary-crossing feminist theorizing that is socially, societally, and globally meaningful. They emphasize synergies between feminist and other critical perspectives, and call attention to “scrutiny of the politics of knowledge” (Calás and Smircich, 2006: 286). Their academic project, then, is fundamentally an epistemological and, especially in recent years an ontological, or specifically, onto-epistemological one. Feminist studies in its multiple forms are approaches to knowing, and Calás and Smircich aim to foster feminist theories as conceptual lenses to enact a more meaningful organization studies and to challenge its conventions of knowledge production to be more inclusive, and fair for all.

We write as critical scholars who have been involved in feminist inquiry for some time. When we became academics, Calás and Smircich and their critique of “ahistorical, acultural, universals” impacted our thinking formed in societal conditions different from theirs in the USA. We continue to be influenced by their work. We appreciate the heritage of *Organization* as a space for debating bold critical work and want to see feminist theorizing in its pages in the future, too. As feminist scholars we know that this is not a given, but something that must be worked for every day.

In this essay, we take inspiration from Calás and Smircich’s work to outline ideas for feminist and other critical scholars studying organizations and organizing, drawing especially on their consistent interest in transnational feminism, engagement with feminist new materialisms, and emphasis on epistemological and ontological questions about (feminist) organization studies. Transnational feminism is concerned with how globalization and capitalism affect people differently across the world. Calás and Smircich’s work has developed from a focus on inequalities between people to a shift away from ontological human-centeredness and toward understanding intersections between discourse and the materiality of human bodies, and “entangled relational happenings including

humans (our-selves included) and everything else” (Calás and Smircich, 2023: 3). Engaging with feminist new materialist studies, they articulate an increasing concern for challenging boundaries between disciplinary fields and argue for an “expansive way of knowing” to address the “contemporary harms in the world.”

Our thoughts revolve around three questions that are pertinent to Calás and Smircich’s work. Who are the (feminist) knowers? What knowledge is produced as feminist? What feminist organization theory is for?

Ideas for feminist theorizing in organization studies

What does it mean to articulate ideas by singling out the work of Marta Calás and Linda Smircich, whose scholarship is so invested in shaking the foundations of organization studies? We must acknowledge there is a tension in wanting to praise work that has steadfastly argued against canonizing certain scholars and theoretical approaches.

Who are the (feminist) knowers?

In the early stages of Calás and Smircich’s joint work the critical bent was aimed at the masculinist tenor of mainstream organization scholarship (e.g. Calás and Smircich, 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1993). It has been a key feature of their work that they value those under-represented and marginalized voices who have not conventionally been considered authoritative within organization studies. This remains an important principle as we continue to study organizations and organizing because although we read more work by postcolonial and transnational feminist scholars, there is still a relatively narrow body of feminist scholars who are cited in organization studies.

Ideas and concepts that do appear to open the episteme, such as intersectional feminist theory, are quickly locked back down into a grid of familiar power/knowledge relations (Riad and Jones, 2023). Calás and Smircich have always been critical of such politics of knowledge production where the original context, rationale, and meanings of ideas and concepts are not respected as scholars use them for their own purposes. The concept of intersectionality, for example, has traveled a long way from its origins in Black American feminism, pointing to race, gender, and social class as intersecting systems of oppression, domination, and discrimination impacting the lives of women of color (Crenshaw, 1991; Holvino, 2010).

As Calás and Smircich’s consistent attention to the politics of knowledge production demonstrates, the capacity of feminist theory itself to become the object of canonization and disciplinary absorption is always disturbingly present. Neoliberalism, and in particular the neoliberal academy, has readily domesticated some forms of liberal feminist thought and organizing (Mohanty, 2013). Calás and Smircich (1999), in opposition to the Western apparatus of knowledge production, have always paid attention to the ways in which Western scholarship creates categories of analysis (such as gender, race, and class) that, “even at their most critical, are blind to their own ethnocentrism” (p. 661) by assuming an unproblematic universalism. Under such circumstances, it becomes vital work to continue to pay attention to what histories of feminist thought we construct, which feminist scholars we pay attention to, cite, reproduce, and perhaps even canonize, and which we persistently leave out of the community of knowers.

There is one more twist in singling out Calás and Smircich’s work since we do so within the pages of *Organization* for a special issue celebrating its 30th year. Here, we can do no better than point back to their own gesture in the 20th anniversary issue where they draw attention to what becomes latent in every revolution of a critical project. They observed that the idea of building on multiplicity and fragmentation to create a disciplinary space “located nowhere but being

everywhere,” which *Organization* was intended to embody (Burrell et al., 1994: 9), fell by the wayside, perhaps because the journal had become its own settled landmark of criticality (Calás and Smircich, 2013). Nevertheless, as their work reminds us, nothing must be allowed to fall beyond the realm of epistemological and ontological critique. It is incumbent upon us to continue their project and address the questions they posed such as “What prevents change? Who keeps the gates closed? Whose knowledge is allowed? What kind of politics are the politics of knowledge in our field?” (Calás and Smircich, 2006: 328).

What knowledge is produced as feminist?

It follows that discussing who are considered the authorities, the “knowers” of feminist organization theorizing, places a spotlight on the matter of what they know: what *is* feminist (organization) theory? Theory easily functions as a border around an epistemology that is as reified and aggressively defended as any other imperial boundary. Critique is the process that denaturalizes the power-effect of that border. From Calás and Smircich’s work, we take especially seriously their guiding principle that feminist theorizing is not just a question of adding women to social theories of modernity and postmodernity, but as Brewis (2005) notes about “surfacing the gendered dimensions of theory” (p. 82).

In other words, the work of feminist theory is to foreground how theory-making—what counts as theory, and which theories become indispensable—are processes through which knowledge itself is gendered and racialized. The significance of this has traditionally been understood in the fact that feminist theory is in organization studies often an addition or context that is only deemed relevant when women are under discussion. Theorizing on race has been in a similar position when experiences of racialized people are only considered germane to topics that appear to be connected to race such as diversity or cross-cultural encounters (Greedharry et al., 2020; Nkomo, 1992). Calás and Smircich have never been preoccupied with single categories such as gender but extended their thinking and action to intersectionalities and, increasingly, to the more-than-human.

The other side of the same coin is the common assertion that feminist scholars read gender into contexts and conditions where it is not objectively found; in other words, the idea that one can take feminist theory “too far.” Calás and Smircich have been accused of reading gender into problematics and locations where it is allegedly not present (see Brewis, 2005, for a summary). Whichever side of the coin we look at, the point is that feminist theory is acceptable only to the degree that feminist scholars, tacitly, observe the boundary of the epistemology even as they work to expand those boundaries. As we think about the future of feminist theory in organization studies, it seems important to continue to affirm Calás and Smircich’s stance that feminist theorizing is not merely an account or explanation of the categories of women or gender, but a process of critiquing the power relations that produce such knowledge.

The underlying commitment to epistemological and ontological critique in Calás and Smircich’s work speaks to their interest in troubling theory, but their turn to feminist new materialisms is particularly relevant to the task of denaturalizing the borders around disciplines, epistemologies, and ontologies. They argue that feminist new materialisms help “open the door to asking many questions about the liberal humanism that continues to pervade and undergird our organization theories” (Calás and Smircich, 2014: 44). As such, post-humanist perspectives “ask us to reassess much of what we take for granted in our theories once we realize that they are built around a figure, a subject, who no longer exists. The question is not only if we are ready to face this challenge; more importantly, who benefits from doing/not doing so? Can we ignore these questions any longer?” (Calás and Smircich, 2014: 44).

In their recent work, Calás and Smircich (2023) continue to foster “more expansive understandings” and “ways of knowing,” and they are increasingly vocal about the need for us to leave behind our “conventional disciplinary spaces” (p. 2). We humans are “becoming with the world,” and we must challenge ourselves as the primary “knowers” in the ongoing planetary crises. These commitments lead to collapsing ontology and epistemology and open new forms of onto-epistemological critique of organization studies and of the Western scientific apparatus more generally. Feminist new materialisms explore what Barad (2007) has described as the entanglements that constitute matter; the multiple ways in which bodies, machines, nature, culture, and environments are in dynamic and constitutive relations with each other. For new materialists nothing could be further from the notion that some types of bodies and ideas are only “relevant” in certain contexts since they work to dissolve the boundaries that preserve “existing epistemologies of being” (Huang, 2017).

This return to matter, however, is not a rejection of poststructuralist concerns with the social construction of bodies and things, but an elaboration of that concern; an attempt to articulate “*how* the discursive is emphatically material” (Huang, 2017, emphasis in original). In other words, it takes the idea that women and gender (and race, ethnicity, etc.) *matter* everywhere, at all times, in all contexts, to its next iteration. Feminist new materialisms are not content with critical theorizing alone but offer alternative ways of being in the world and of imagining different futures. We anticipate that there will no longer be a need to have this discussion about whether feminist theorizing is “relevant,” or if feminist readings go “too far.”

What is feminist organization theory for?

Up to this point, our discussion has been concerned with the people who produce feminist organization theory and what forms of knowledge they produce. As the development of onto-epistemology points toward, the knowers and their knowledge are inseparable and as we understand their co-constitution, we also become more attentive to the ethics of producing knowledge. The third, and final, tension we want to work through is the question of what is feminist knowledge *for*. Here, the tension between feminist theory and organization studies becomes genuinely instructive. In 2013, Chandra Talpade Mohanty asked:

What would it mean to be attentive to the politics of activist feminist communities in different sites in the global South and North as they imagine and create cross-border feminist solidarities anchored in struggles on the ground? How would academic feminist projects be changed if we were accountable to activist/academic communities? (p. 987).

Mohanty’s questions still resonate. Feminist organization theorizing could stand to be more directly connected to feminist organizations and projects. As Calás and Smircich (2014) note, while some feminist modes of organizing have been absorbed into mainstream organizations, “alternative organizations and institutions created by radical feminists, (e.g. bookshops, women’s health centers, banks, battered women’s shelters, rape crisis centers, auto repair and carpentry shops, women’s festivals) are rarely the subjects of analysis within organization studies” (p. 16). All this implies, though it does not prescribe, the importance of pivoting away from commitments to other feminist organization scholars, and toward feminist organizers. At the same time, academia too might be organized differently if feminist organization studies oriented itself toward the activist-academics. Calás and Smircich have been vocal about the need to remain willing to disconcert. *Organization* was created to be a space for those who refuse to play the academic “game” by the rules set by the establishment. The idea was (and is) to “*Disconcert* those concerted actions that squash critique” in organization studies (Calás and Smircich, 2013: 15, italics in original).

We do not propose, and neither do we think any feminist scholar proposes, to completely abandon the academic projects that frame our work for pure activism, supposing such a thing were possible. In their own work, Calás and Smircich have led by example, in their willingness to disconcert the space of organization studies itself. We read their work through their feminist commitments. Against the backdrop of their development as *feminist* organization studies scholars, their contributions attain specific meanings. Rubbing Henry Mintzberg, the prominent strategy scholar, the wrong way and making him craft an angry reply, was for us evidence of their tactic at work in the early 1990s. We read it as a feminist intervention in the politics of knowledge production and a provocation that was (is) part of a movement to shake up the status quo in our field and beyond. In times of planetary crises today, this important project continues with a focus on feminist new materialisms and its attentiveness to how we as scholars within fields such as organization studies are entangled with all life on the planet—and how the way we do research matters.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, we have drawn on Marta Calás and Linda Smircich's work to envision where feminism in organization studies is heading. We have offered glimpses of their work to highlight key theoretical points and shown the value of epistemological, ontological, and onto-epistemological critique for feminist theorizing to remain socially, societally, and globally meaningful. As we think about the future, we want to continue to create feminist organization theorizing that, as Calás and Smircich's scholarship does, remains critical and vigilant about who its knowers are; what kind of knowledge it produces as feminist; and what this feminist knowledge is for. If feminist theorizing is most effective when it remains accountable to communities of feminist knowers, and organization studies is at its most critical when it renounces its desire to be simply another grand theory of post/modernity, then the future of feminist organization theorizing lies in its continuing potential to co-create knowledge with those, human and more-than-human, who have been excluded from that post/modernity, not in order to offer them a place within it, but to learn to leave behind our attachment to that onto-epistemology.

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