

## BOOK REVIEW EDITORIAL FOR *ORGANIZATION STUDIES*:

### WHY BOOKS?

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Why should we write books? Why should we even bother reading them? And why on earth should anyone ‘waste’ their time reviewing books? These questions converge on a much larger question; what value do we, as social scientists, as well as those institutions within and outside academia that ‘evaluate’ our work, attach to books (see also Suddaby and Trank, 2013)? From an instrumental perspective, books seem to matter comparatively little in many countries and disciplines across the globe, because academic career progression is close to inconceivable in the absence of journal publications in so-called A\* or 4\* journals. As Gabriel notes, publishing academic articles “is now a game in which high performance forges careers and sustains departmental reputations hyped up on the back of publication and citation “hits”” (Gabriel, 2017b). Socialization of academics, especially PhD students and early career researchers, follows (often) perverse incentives (Edwards and Roy, 2016) that influence publication strategies and choices in favor of articles rather than books.

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\* The second and third author contributed equally to this editorial.

However, as book review editors and as authors ourselves, our view is that books occupy a significant intellectual space in the social sciences<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, this has been recognized by EGOS when they introduced the EGOS Book Awards in 2017 “to celebrate the linguistic diversity of scholarship in the field of organization studies performed with the depth and richness of detail afforded by a monograph” as stated on the EGOS website. As a medium to pursue knowledge and truth, books intrinsically matter because they provide vital space to develop theoretical, empirical and practical insights in depth and scopes that standard and often formulaic 40-page journal articles are less able to cater for. In times when the speed of life ceaselessly appears to accelerate, when the interactions between the social, natural, and technological environments become more complex (Helbing et al., 2017; Barrat, 2013; Savory, 1999), we underscore the potential of books to allow and encourage the development of ‘grander’ ideas to respond to ‘grander’ challenges that we face in organizations and wider society. In addition, books proffer an alternative publication avenue when there is concern that the peer review process of top-tier journals (with all its benefits) may eventually eliminate an idea’s creative and unorthodox potential to challenge existing debates, perhaps rekindle them, or open up new theoretical debates. The book may then constitute a living attempt in ‘daring to know’, or “the attitude or spirit by which enquiry [is] being undertaken” as opposed to the mere content of knowledge claims (Holt and den Hond, 2013: 1587). While we know that for some scholars reading academic books can amount to a luxury indulgence given the time pressure many of us face, for us it has often been the case that we publish not *despite* of reading books, but *because* of it.

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<sup>1</sup> True, there are some fascinating articles out there, and they do fulfill important roles in advancing and disseminating knowledge. Yet, not everything worth-reading can be squeezed into an average of ten thousand words. Likewise, what is worth-reading is increasingly difficult to filter from the sheer volume of “scientific” articles. There are currently more than 50 million “scientific” articles in circulation, increasing by around 2.5 million – each year (Boon, 2016)!

### **Possible criteria for reviewing books in *Organization Studies***

But why is it necessary to articulate the potential ‘value’ of books in our editorial? It is necessary because insightful book reviews can help render the value of books more visible. More specifically, we suggest that this may be accomplished if we turned to a set of relevant criteria, which are not widely discussed in our field. To build on the vibrant tradition of book reviews in *Organization Studies*<sup>2</sup>, and to advance the book review section to the next stage of development, our first aim in this editorial is to introduce such a set of criteria. In particular, we propose that future book reviews in this journal might benefit from a closer engagement with George Orwell’s motives for writing, as encapsulated in his short essay *Why I write* (1946/2004). To be sure, Orwell simply states the motives that prompted him to write, yet they also lend themselves excellently - if accidentally – to be construed as criteria to assess the value of a book. Please note that we maintain Orwell’s reference to ‘motives’ in subsequent sections, but what we mean henceforth in most cases is the idea of a set of criteria.

What is worth pointing out, before we proceed, is that Orwell initiates the reader into how early life experiences shaped his character and facility with words. He justifies the provision of that background information because he does not “think one can assess a writer’s motives without knowing something about his [or her] early development” (p. 4). This is no vain observation; the significance of Erich Fromm and Stanley Milgram’s work (both with Jewish background) can be much better grasped with the cognizance that their interest in studying (blind) obedience to authority was

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<sup>2</sup> The publisher Sage provided Altmetric data on 21 September 2017. The data show that book reviews are widely read. Examining the book reviews that have been published in the past three years alone (i.e., from start of Vol. 36 in 2015 to Vol. 38 (up to Issue 9) in 2017 when the data were retrieved), the total number of downloads amounts to 2435 across 33 book reviews, indicating an average of nearly 74 reads per review. Notable outliers here are the reviews by Mena (2016: with 163 downloads), Wasserman (2017: with 131 downloads), and Taylor (2017: with 129 downloads). Note that Altmetric data is only available from 1 December 2016, so that for any book reviews published prior to that data, the download numbers can potentially be higher.

influenced by Hitler's rise to power, and the subsequent atrocities that resulted from that during the Second World War. So if there is information in the public domain that tells a 'story' about how 'the story of the book' came into genesis, we believe paying attention to it could strengthen the appeal of a book review.

Excluding the need to earn a living, Orwell identifies four motives that exist, he claims, in varying degree in writers, and that the influence of one motive can become more (or less) prominent over time too depending on the 'atmosphere' (e.g. social, historical or political context) in which writers live. These are (i) sheer egoism, (ii) aesthetic enthusiasm, (iii) historical impulse, and (iv) political purpose. Below we offer an abridged summary of the four motives, and indicate their relevance for readers of *Organization Studies* and beyond.

#### *Sheer egoism*

For Orwell, pretending that this is not a motive, and a strong one, amounts to little more than "humbug". He includes here various desires, such as "being talked about, wanting to appear "clever", being remembered after one's death, and also to get even with those who "snubbed [him] in childhood" (p. 4). Although the relevance of this criteria may not be immediately visible to scholars of organizations, there are cases when it may be insightful for readers of book reviews to learn more about it. For instance, has the author an 'axe to grind' with intellectual adversaries based upon past disagreements? The relevance of this criteria kicks in the moment the 'get even' message becomes a distraction from developing an argument that helps advance the field of organization studies in constructive ways. In cases where the work is driven by a thirst for ego revenge, chances are that the intended audience will be alienated and not persuaded. And finally, scholars of organizations have lamented before about

“impenetrable” writing in our field; “writing that seems driven by desires to demonstrate one’s cleverness” (Grey and Sinclair, 2006: 443).

### *Aesthetic enthusiasm*

The perception of beauty in words and their correct arrangement, as well as the “firmness of good prose or the rhythm of a good story” (p. 5) are important considerations for Orwell. Most of us will have experienced the pleasure of reading a book that literally consumed our fascination and interest because of the prose used and the choices of words within it. As authors, we do more than simply stating facts; instead, we “craft arguments intended to persuade readers that we have something new to offer relative to extant literature” (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 2007: 4). Appeals to rationality and persuasion through facts alone can fail to lead to desired outcomes (see e.g., Reed, 2017). So when a book review suggests that the book under review provides – in the eye of the reviewer – a “somewhat bloodless and emotionless account” (Reed, 2017: 713), or on the contrary, a “passionate” account “grown out of the author’s different experiences of organizational injustices and oppressions” (Gabriel, 2017a: 1), then these are perceptions of books we would like readers to read about in a book review. At the same time, the aesthetic aspiration may sometimes be exercised excessively in our field, leading to “pompous” writings (Grey and Sinclair, 2006: 443). If our task as social scientists also includes the persuasion of stakeholders and the general public based upon the research we undertake, it is clear that prose which informs and enthuses ‘enough’ is more likely to succeed in reaching our audience instead of alienating it.

### *Historical impulse*

In an era when society and its institutions grapple with the notion of ‘post-truth politics’, the significance of this motive cannot be overestimated. In Orwell’s view, it entails a desire to “see things as they are, to find out true facts and store them up for the use of posterity” (p. 5). For scholars of organizations, this is quite a central point to dwell on. Without ascertaining facts and making them available for future use, how would it be possible to organize groups or institutions around particular purposes (be they political, economical, cultural or otherwise in nature)? It would be difficult because decisions are said (i.e., the most fundamental element of organisation, see Ahrne and Brunsson, 2010) to represent conscious choices (based on available evidence) around issues such as membership, hierarchies, rules, monitoring, and sanctions (Geddes and Callister, 2007; Ahrne and Brunsson, 2010; Lindebaum and Courpasson, 2017) and, as an amalgamation of these issues, organizational control. Translated into the context of future book reviews, this implies attention to the claims offered in a book, and the quality of the evidence presented to support these claims. Books reviews can then offer commentary on whether the book under review succeeded or not in persuading readers about the value and argumentative rigor of the book.

### *Political purpose*

Orwell attaches broad meaning to the word ‘political’, including the “desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other peoples’ idea of the kind of society that they should strive after” (p. 5)<sup>3</sup>. For him, it is undoubtedly the case that “no book is

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<sup>3</sup> Such desires are not ‘new’ for scholars of organization studies, and have been offered previously along the lines of ‘passionate scholarship’ (Courpasson, 2013).

genuinely free from political bias” (p. 5). Therefore, the view that certain aspects of our daily lives, like art or religion, are not related to politics *is* as such a political statement. The term ‘politics’ or ‘political’ frequently appears in the titles of articles published this journal (see e.g., Kern et al., 2017; Grey, 2010), but it can evoke different meanings for different readers. To clarify how Orwell’s criterion on political purpose can be applied in the process of reviewing a book, and to render the word ‘political’ more tangible, we turn to the work of Carl Rogers (1977). He observed that:

“Politics, in the present-day psychological and social usage, has to do with *power and control*: with the extent to which persons desire, attempt to obtain, possess, share, or surrender power and control over others and/or themselves. It has to do with . . . *the strategies and tactics* . . . by which such power and control over one’s own life and others’ lives is sought and gained – or shared or relinquished. It has to do with the *locus of decision-making power*: who makes the decisions which . . . control the thoughts, feelings, or behavior of others or oneself. It has to do with the *effects of these decisions and these strategies*, whether proceeding from an individual or a group, whether aimed at gaining or relinquishing control upon the person himself, upon others, and upon the various systems of society and its institutions (pp. 4-5, italics in original).

The conceptual clarity afforded by Rogers then helps ask what, if any, political purposes shine through in the book that is being reviewed? Does the book help individuals or groups ‘see through’ power relations (Connerton, 1976), and might this ‘seeing through’ change the way we organize ourselves, to what purposes, and to whose benefit (Lindebaum, 2017; Holt and den Hond, 2013)? Because power is typically seen as access to resources (Scott, 1992), it is worth keeping in mind that ‘resources’ come in many shapes and forms, such as production resources, financial resources, human resources, information resources, even cognitive and emotional ones. In other words, does the book being reviewed, like the essay format, feature any signs that it represents an intervention on social or political debates (Gabriel, 2016)?

We maintain that these are highly pertinent questions for organization studies scholars, who have long entertained, for instance, a keen interest in how power struggles and resistance emerge in response to corporate hegemonies (de Bakker et al., 2017; Reed, 2012).

### **Further considerations**

It would be mistaken, however, to assume that we offer these criteria in the strict prescriptive sense, for otherwise they might just morph into the formulaic straightjacket that books can - and should - help shed. Thus, depending on the aim and scope of a book being reviewed, they may not apply in isolation or collectively. In addition, they are not a wholesale substitute for also offering a descriptive outline of the book's contents. What they afford, however, is a move from mere description to book reviews that are more 'evaluative' and 'analytical' in kind. In so doing, we do believe that they help both reviewers and readers in our discipline to better understand a book's merit in accomplishing what it set out to accomplish. To this end, a book review should offer an indication of (i) the reviewer's understanding of the book's purpose, (ii) how well the reviewer believes the book's purpose has been accomplished, and (iii) the support to underpin the reviewer's verdict of the book's achievement. Sensitivity to these questions lowers the possibility that a book review fails to connect to the original intention of the author(s), and worse still, seeks to impose its own ontological, epistemological, and intellectual preferences upon it.

*Outsch!* Further to this, what potential controversies or questions can emanate from the book that can fruitfully inform future debates on a given topic? Other interesting questions to touch upon, where applicable, is to explain the reviewer's interest in the book: What made *you* pick that book? Beyond using one's 'academic hat' when

reviewing the book, does the book offer any personally meaningful insights for you as a reviewer, an author, a scholar? Taken together, we want the book review to tell a good story in itself. That is a central consideration, and it does not matter then whether it is written by an experienced or a junior researcher.

There are a few more details worth sharing at this stage. We are keen to publish book reviews on monographs and edited volumes. This desire comes with two further contemplations. First, we are interested in having books reviewed that touch on the fundamental phenomena of organizations and organizing (de Bakker et al., 2017), but that must not, of necessity, imply that the books being reviewed are explicitly writing on these phenomena. Rather, we are also interested in learning what insights books published in other disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, technology, computer science, even life sciences) have to offer to scholars of organizations. As an initial set of topics, we seek to explore topics such as artificial intelligence, big data, the role of technology and (re)shaping human experience at work, biologically-driven views on organizations and management, new/alternative forms of economic/political organization, destructive activities of organizations (in the widest sense possible), forced labor and slavery. We will be actively reaching out to both publishers and potential reviewers, but we also welcome expressions of interest to perform a book review from prospective book reviewers. In exceptional cases, we may also invite extended essay-style (longer) reviews (cf. Gherardi, 1999), or invite two or three reviews on the same book if there are compelling theoretical and practical justifications for it. And finally, we explicitly invite book reviews on books written in languages other than English (although, of course, the review itself must be written in English). Being part of a community of

scholars, we believe that there is an opportunity to give a ‘voice’ to scholarly works not readily accessible to English-speaking readerships.

## Conclusion

We feel both honored and excited to have inherited the book review section in *Organization Studies*, a section with a long tradition of publishing through-provocative and engaging book reviews. Claudia Gabbioneta, Mukti Khaire, Kyoung-Hee Yu, the outgoing book review editors, deserve full recognition for having ensured a steady supply of high-quality book reviews.

Above we have outlined important technical clarifications as we embark upon the next stage of developing this section. We hope, however, that our editorial also accomplishes something else, namely, to trigger greater appetite for, and intellectual excitement about, reading, writing, and true to the spirit of this section, reviewing books. These activities are not unrelated: as the recently deceased German author *Peter Hürtling* pointed out in a broadcast obituary, a precondition for writing books was reading loads of them. In his words, “reading means learning a language, learning to think, learning [to use] words, to engage with your own imagination”.<sup>4</sup> And to an extent, for those who have already written a book, it probably makes the act of reviewing a book a much more humbling exercise. That does not imply shying away from justified criticisms, but a little more appreciation for others who probably experienced at least some anxiety and writer’s block from conception of a book idea to completion of the book.

‘*Why books?*’ we asked in the title of this editorial. Asking this question was designed to underline the value of books in our profession generally. Our view is that

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<sup>4</sup> The obituary was broadcast by the German TV station ARD on the 10<sup>th</sup> of July 2017. It can be retrieved by following this link: <http://www.tagesschau.de/multimedia/sendung/ts-20697.html> , accessed on the 15<sup>th</sup> of September 2017.

the acts of writing, reading, and reviewing books can help create an intellectual edifice that may be home to the “new theories of organization” (Suddaby et al., 2011: 236) - instead of asking where they are.

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### **Author Biographies**

Dirk Lindebaum is Professor in Organisation and Management at Cardiff Business School. He has developed a wider curiosity for diverse notions, constructs, methods and controversies in recent years. This appetite for learning and searching led him to pursue a significant body of research around emotion at work, the latest culmination of which is his book *Emancipation Through Emotion Regulation at Work* (published by Edward Elgar in 2017). In addition, his interest in emancipation has also led him to engage with the field of organizational neuroscience, where emancipation refers to the liberation from repressive scientific discourses and technologies which have potentially dehumanizing consequences for individuals in and around work. Read more about his work at [dirklindebaum.EU](http://dirklindebaum.EU).

Mar Pérezts is an Associate Professor of Management and Social Sciences at emlyon business school, where she is also a member of OCE Research Center. Originally from Mexico, she graduated from the Ecole Normale Supérieure d'Ulm in philosophy before earning her PhD in Business Ethics at ESCP Europe in Paris. Her research is transversal, and seeks to link managerial and organizational questions with philosophical and sociological approaches, and qualitative methodologies. She is particularly interested in processual and critical approaches on how meanings materialize over time, are stabilized and contested. Her work has been published in various leading journals, as well as in several books and book chapters.

Lynne Andersson received her PhD in organizational behavior/social issues in management from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is currently an Associate Professor at Temple University's Fox School of Business. Her research focuses on the dark side of business organizations. In particular, she has been

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