

Materialist Approaches to Organisation and the Natural Environment

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Project description:

Despite significant interest in corporate sustainability and organisational responses to climate change, the ecological materiality of the world is often taken for granted in organisation studies (c.f. Whiteman & Cooper, 2011). Consequently, corporations and managers are portrayed 'as if they were free-floating entities, separate from the natural and social landscapes they occupy' (Guthey, Whiteman & Elmes, 2014: 254).

The Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated the crucial role of the ecological and material systems that organisations and humans rely on, such as unpolluted air, food and medical supplies. This challenges us to rethink relations between organisations and the material/natural environment. It prompts a questioning of our understanding of the positionality of embodied humans in the material world, and the flows and affects that arise between humans and other living and non-living things in organisations. It also raises questions about how to organise work and consumption in ways that enable more intelligent, sustainable engagements with the matter that continually flows around us (Bennett, 2010).

To address these questions requires us to rethink our relationships with non-human, including animal others and move beyond anthropocentric perspectives. This is linked to a posthumanist philosophy which conceptualises 'an embodied humanity enveloped in nature, rather than as external to inert stuff it dominates' (Coole, 2010: 112-3). Empirically, we are interested in proposals that engage with any aspect of material organisation, including human interactions with other animals and non-human matter. We are particularly interested in proposals that use new materialist (Fox & Aldred, 2017), posthumanist (Braidotti, 2019), sociomateriality or actor network theory to address these issues. Proposals may explore, but are not confined to, any of the following themes:

- Relations between humans and other embodied beings in organisations, e.g. humans and animals in contexts of food production/consumption (the recent pandemic highlights the role of animal markets, for example);
- Developments in biomedical science, genetics and technology, including computer science, that are changing the nature of human work and organisational relations;
- Emphasis on materiality in production and consumption, for example through craft making as an alternative to globalisation (c.f. Bell & Vachhani, 2020);
- Management of the disposal of matter, e.g. waste management, and its implications for sustainable futures (c.f. Bennett, 2010);

- Erosion of binaries that constrain our ability to develop new ways of thinking about materiality and organisation, e.g. work/non-work; human/animal; natural/manufactured.

Methodologically, we welcome applications that use ethnographic, interview and visual methods, including online and participant-led methods such as video-diaries and Skype interviewing. We also encourage proposals that use material methods (Woodward, 2020).

About the supervisors:

Professor Emma Bell has an interest in exploring materiality in organizations using the new materialist and feminist posthumanist work of Jane Bennett and Rosi Braidotti. Recently she carried out a qualitative research study of the organisation of craft work using qualitative, visual methods of inquiry (Bell and Vachhani, 2020).

Dr Wenjin Dai's research interests are in the areas of organisation studies, corporate sustainability, leadership and the implications of Chinese classical philosophies. She is particularly interested in exploring the materiality of organisation and the natural environment using new materialist approaches.

References:

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