

Call for papers

Management Studies: An ontological turn?

**Critical Management Studies beyond the Academy? 30th June – 2nd July
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Convenors:

Stephanie Daher, King's Business School.

Damian O'Doherty, University of Liverpool

James Scott Vandeventer, Manchester Metropolitan University

Rowland Curtis, Queen Mary, University of London

Sideeq Mohammed, University of Kent.

Serious theoretical and empirical enquiry in management studies invariably uncovers questions of an epistemological and ontological import and typically recycles debates and typologies that reference Burrell and Morgan (1979) and the controversies which followed this seminal publication (see Clegg, 1982; Donaldson, 1985; Reed, 1985; Jackson & Carter, 1991; Willmott, 1993; Lewis and Grimes, 1999; Hassard & Wolfram Cox, 2013). Only the most myopic and defensive, unreflexive theory and methodology can avoid this encounter, and despite recent efforts to debunk the idea of a 'mainstream' and 'critical' (Ramoglou & Holt, 2026), there can be little doubt that a *mainstreaming* of management studies has taken hold of our discipline in recent years restricting our access to ontological questions and preoccupations. This is reflected in an increasing normalization of theory and method(s) in which ontology and epistemology are policed and excluded from serious attention, or their problematics translated and deferred into practical and efficient methods of (so-called) knowledge production (Lounsbury & Gehman, 2024). The dominant and increasingly obligatory point-of-passage for publication in the entitled 'top tier' journals has become institutional theory treated as a 'normal science' in Kuhn's terms (1962), and supported by ready-made off the shelf methodologies, dominated in qualitative research by the so-called 'Gioia method' (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013).

We might liken these forces to a 'scientific management' of research and knowledge production equivalent to that which took hold of industry following F W Taylor's late 19th century experiments and work studies at the Midvale and Bethlehem steel works. In many ways, this means the labour process of research and scholarship is now equivalent to that of

a Fordist car-worker in which you can have any journal article you want, so long as it is black (institutional theory + Gioia). This homogenization of production and output that accompanies the rise of formal modern management science, whether in car factories or universities, is as much an attempt to foreclose ontological enquiry and imagination as it is a deskilling of labour. Our interest in this stream is to explore the way ontological questions invariably return to displace and or variously challenge this normalization of management studies (Daher, 2026). Studies of the attempts to move from craft to the mass-production of management knowledge in higher education for example have found a similar set of reactions that beset the first wave of Taylorism – the degradation of work, boredom, cynicism, various resistances, contradictions and unintended consequences (Jary & Parker, 1998; Parker, 2018; Fleming, 2019). Out of homogenization and the ambitions for the universal comes dispersal and the multi-verse. All these actions, reactions and counter-offensives associated with modern management and its ‘servants of power’ (Baritz, 1960) bring with them ontologizing forces promising alternatives and counter-narratives to those deemed realist or naturalist.

We are fascinated by the inhibitions and frustrations this ontological foreclosure has on our appreciation of what management is, what management and organization can become, and what ontologies are possible and impossible in modern western business practice. We want to raise and contextualise (or translate) what is otherwise rendered mundane management into questions of an ontological import. We want to know more about the confrontation of different ontologies in business and management, how those differences might stimulate war or generate diplomatic mediation (Latour, 2013). We follow a fledgling ontological turn in management and organization studies advanced by a number of authors (Bell & Vachhani, 2020; Calás & Smircich, 2023; Cooren & Malbois, 2019; Daher et al, 2026; de Vaujany, 2015; Ehrnström-Fuentes & Böhm, 2023, O’Doherty, 2017) and draw inspiration from a number of sources. Some of the most fascinating work we can study that allows us to extend our imagination of ontological possibility comes of course from comparative studies of ‘the west’ and ‘the east’ or the ‘global south’, across colonizing centres and peripheries, or settler colonialism versus indigeneity, discourses of control versus discourses of liberty or emancipation. In exploring these issues and questions, we have found inspiration in a body of literature identified as marking an ‘ontological turn’ in western knowledge practices (Holbraad & Pederson, 2017), achieved principally through the work of Roy Wagner (1981), Marilyn Strathern (1988), and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1992) within the discipline of anthropology. However, we are not restricted to the ontological turn promised in this literature. We find similar creativity in a whole range of post-colonial and decolonial theory, ‘cosmopolitics’ (Stengers, 2010), the pluriverse of ontological multiplicity promoted by

scholars including Marisol de la Cadena (2015), Arturo Escobar (2018) and Mario Blaser (2018; see also de la Cadena and Blaser, 2018). We also invite contributions from feminist social science in management and organization studies who try to 'stay with the trouble' in Haraway's (2020) terms, from science and technology studies working on multiple modes of ordering (Mol, 2002), or from those studying 'modes of existence' following the post-ANT work of Latour (2013).

We want to know what this all entails for our understanding of the possibility or impossibility of 'critical' ontologies in management studies? What is or what can be 'critical' today? Are we moving into a 'post-critical' era, especially if it is true as some have speculated that 'critique has run out of steam' (Latour, 2004) or as Chris Grey (2018) has argued in the UK context that CMS will now be seen as part of an elitist establishment whose discourse has been subsumed or sublimated into populist right-wing ideologies. Has our ontological condition become something that is not an *onto-logy* (the logos of Being) at all, overtaken by unreliability, simulation and simulacra long predicted by people like Jean Baudrillard (1993, 1995). What is our ontological condition today, and how can a preoccupation with ontological questions advance the emancipatory agenda of a critical management studies? How can higher education be developed in ways that encourage serious research into these questions and what changes need to be made to current academic practices so that we can retrieve the influence of ontology in struggles for freedom and emancipation?

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Convenors bio:

Stephanie Daher is Lecturer in Business Ethics and a member of the Centre for Sustainable Business at King's Business School. Her research lies at the intersection of organisational studies, sustainability, and business ethics, with a particular focus on non-Western perspectives and contexts.

Damian O'Doherty is Professor of Management and Organization at the University of Liverpool where he is director of the Centre for Organizational and Employee Well-Being. He is currently writing on fascist pigs.

James Scott Vandeventer is a Reader in Sustainability at Manchester Metropolitan University (UK) and leads the research platform on Transformative Sustainable Futures. He co-organises the Socioecological Leadership, Organisation, and Work (SLOW) and Management Educators Navigating Degrowth (MEND) collectives. His research asks what socioecological change means for organization.

Rowland Curtis is a Lecturer in Organisation Studies at Queen Mary, University of London, UK. His teaching and research explore intersections between power, knowledge, subjectivity and critique in work, management and organisation.

Sideeq Mohammed is a Senior Lecturer in HRM/Organizational Behaviour at the University of Kent. His work is located within the discipline of Organization Studies and is concerned with issues surrounding the moral defensibility and ecological sustainability of the dominant paradigms of business and management practice.

*Submissions should be sent to [**stephanie.daher@kcl.ac.uk**](mailto:stephanie.daher@kcl.ac.uk) with the subject "ICMS2027_SUBMISSION_LAST NAME".