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Book review

Michela Cozza, Silvia Gherardi (eds), *The Posthumanist Epistemology of Practice Theory: Re-imagining Method in Organization Studies and Beyond*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023

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I write this review during the first few days of my summer holiday, as I could not manage to complete it earlier as I had to prepare for and attend a conference while wrapping up departmental activities. It is almost 40 degrees Celsius in Sardinia and I need to find the will to write. My daughter just revealed to me that yesterday at the beach, while I was reading the final chapter of this edited text by Cozza and Gherardi, she took a picture of the front cover and shared it with her university friends' group chat with the message 'my mum's light beach reading'. You may be wondering if this is a text to read under the umbrella while hearing the sound of the sea and the chit-chats happening around you. I would say, definitely not if you enjoy losing yourself in the pages of a love story or an action-based adventure. Definitely yes if you are one of those who on holiday ponders on what is next for practice-based studies in management. Definitely maybe if you ponder on this but do not ponder on epistemology while you are applying sun cream to your skin and wiping the sand off your feet.

The Posthumanist Epistemology of Practice Theory, while not a light reading, is a much-awaited text that explicitly and effectively advances practice theory in a more-than-human direction. Furthermore, while it engages with somehow difficult philosophical concerns, it does so by employing several empirical examples that bring to life the possibilities of studying how the more-than-human affects the research process (including the methodology) and its outcomes (including the written piece). It challenges the humanist perspectives of practice-based studies (including critical theorists or second wave practice theorists) to bring to the fore how practice and materiality are entwined and how the texture of practice becomes performative when agency is viewed as residing not only on human subjects. The book brings together contributions from European researchers (predominantly north European) that theoretically and empirically explore work practices conceived as "a collective knowledgeable doing, whereby "the collective" is made up of entanglements of human and nonhumans [...] working together" (p.11). The seven chapters (excluding the introduction) included in the book are individual essays that can stand as solo contributions. They all offer new empirical and/or theoretical material to support the doing of practice-based research from a posthumanist perspective; they are all well-written and engaging.

The book opens with an introductory chapter written by the co-editors: Michela Cozza and Silvia Gherardi, who ably demonstrate how humanist practice-based studies, that view agency as residing on humans, can be further developed when researchers explore the relational and

process-based (of becoming rather than being) aspects of social phenomena. While reminding us of the study of practice in organisations and of the foundations of relational materiality, Cozza and Gherardi bring these two perspectives together and advance the theorisation of practice by constructing it as *agencement*. This French term used by Deleuze and Guattari is commonly translated in English as assemblage, however Cozza and Gherardi challenge this translation arguing that its synonym is ‘arrangement’ or ‘fixing’ and that its English translation has changed the original meaning of ‘in connection with’. They remind us that the term assemblage refers to a final state, while *agencement* refers to the process of connecting and its evocation of agency and dynamics. Studying situated practice as *agencement* means to “discern the situated logic of the *agencement* [...] to prefigure the performance of the practice as an on-going accomplishment” (p.13). Following a posthumanist perspective, the exploration of practice as affective and on-going spaces blurs the boundaries of theory and method through an immanent process of becoming – i.e. making and unmaking – whereby traditional notions of agency and subjectivity, and concepts such as data and authorship, are questioned and, together with the researcher and their epistemic practices, only exist as part of the entanglement.

The text is divided into two parts. The three chapters included in the first part explore how *concepts* can be rethought of and used *as/instead of method*. In posthumanism, theory is onto-epistemological and thus theorising is both an epistemological undertaking and a practice that produces knowledge. Concepts emerge from the intra-action of the researcher and the elements that constitute the assemblage and guide thinking as the research unfolds without method (p.19). The inseparability between theory and method is a philosophical concern of posthumanism and new materialism, which, like other dualisms such as subject/object, discourse/matter, nature/culture, human/machine are challenged and dismantled to re-imagine research as free from method and able to encompass the multi-level complexity of entanglements (Benozzo, Distinto and Priola, 2024). In this first part, the three chapters bring to work different concepts such as the two epistemic artefacts of *traces* and *ingredients* (chapter 2), the metaphor of *shadow organising* (chapter 3) and the concept of *becoming together* (chapter 4) in order to understand specific practices. These are, respectively: archaeological investigation reporting; research practices and the enactment of data and knowledge; affective practices in research centres where the divides between human/animal and human/technological devices are questioned.

The second part of the book invites researchers to be more creative and independent of method, to use art to think differently about organisational phenomena, to become *nomadic* subjects, open to different ideas and modes of being that help to re-imagine methods, “wonder about how life could be different and, eventually, to explore how we might do social science differently” (p.21). This second part includes four chapters, that employ dance (chapter 5), theatre (chapter 6), nomadic inquiry (chapter 7) and a critical analysis of datafication (chapter 8) to challenge mainstream processes/methods of knowledge production. What I mostly enjoyed about this second part is its political dimension. In particular, chapter 5 recalls an event of feminist, environmental activism in which an alternative educational workshop uses dance to explore floods and more sustainable engineering solutions. Chapter 6 reflects on a one-year-long theatre workshop involving twenty Accident and Emergency doctors who re-elaborated the affective intensities and bodily involvements of their work experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic. The final chapter is a critique of the data-centric approaches used in military security. It demonstrates their limits and the limits of the knowledge grounded on

data operations to argue that practice-based investigations can sustain a better understanding of more complex events.

I enjoyed reading the book and feel that it has given me a further push to be more experimental, not only with concepts and methods, but also with my positionality, encouraging me to come out of the shell/role I co-constructed during my research career of more than twenty years. I also think the book will be an important reading for junior researchers who are exploring epistemologies and methodologies and attempting to recognise their stances. They will find inspiration in the various empirical examples presented in the different chapters that effectively show the many possibilities to producing and retelling knowledge. However, I also have to admit that I expected the book to engage in greater depth with the urgencies of posthumanism beyond the practice of research. In fact, while the second part has a political dimension, I still find that it is at the political juncture that the book is found most wanting. Overall, the book remains detached from the activism that characterises posthuman pioneers such as Karen Barad and Donna Haraway and makes little account of the changes and challenges of current times, including wide-ranging inequalities (i.e. technological, environmental, wealth, health, racial, gender, class and so on), ethics and colonialism. As the field of management and organisation studies is often late in engaging with the changes of our times, I expected this book to look more forward and around than it actually did.

In the final part of the introduction, Cozza and Gherardi, remind us that posthumanism, like all ontologies and epistemologies we learn as part of the education system in the Global North (and often in the Global South too) draw on western philosophers and are shaped by colonial knowledge and what is considered valid and legitimate in the research sphere. However, while the authors highlight that Indigenous and many global south philosophies view humans as inseparable from other creatures and nature, I would have liked to see some of these perspectives being brought in the subsequent chapters. Instead, this initial premise does not materialise. Cozza and Gherardi do argue that decolonising methodology involves the development of new narratives, vocabularies and grammars that increase those voices speaking from different cultures and traditions of knowing (p.23), however they do not include these voices in the book, neither they make the next logical step of explaining how posthumanism can sustain the decolonising agenda. That will hopefully be another book!

References

- Benozzo, A., Distinto, M. and Priola, V. (2024) Matter and Method: The Quest for a New-Materialist Methodology in Management Studies. *British Journal of Management*, 35(1), 86–98.