

The problem with performativity: comments on the contributions

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Abstract This article provides a critical assessment of the contributions to this special issue. As these articles show, it is only once we take theatrical metaphors seriously that what can start to understand international politics. The world really is a stage, on which states are the players. Yet the theoretical prejudices displayed in these articles obscure this fact rather than highlighting it. Poststructuralism, Butlerian theories of performativity, and actor-network theory are constitutionally incapable of discussing the theater. The reason is that real, theatrical, performances are events that audience members interpret by means of their bodies and their imagination.

Keywords Performance theory · Performativity · Actor-network theory · Social constructivism · Embodiment · Political imagination · Judith Butler · Bruno Latour

As long ago as in 1959, the American political scientist Arnold Wolfers discussed the nature and role of the actors of international politics. Who is it, he asked, “who properly can be said to perform on the international stage”? (Wolfers 1965, p. 3). The traditional view was that only states could be considered international actors, but, Wolfers said that view had begun to change already between the world wars. Today “[e]ven the identity of the ‘actors’... is a matter of dispute which raises not unimportant problems for the analyst, for the practitioner of foreign policy and for the public.” Wolfers was keen to add new names to the traditional cast—individual human beings, domestic bureaucracies, international organizations, corporations, and NGOs—and, in the time since he wrote these, have indeed come to be widely

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accepted. Yet the contributors to this special issue want to expand the cast list even further. Thus, Bueger writes about pirates—both in the Indian Ocean and in popular imagination; Abrahamsson and Dányi about paperless immigrants on hunger strike in Brussels; Noyes about Polish plumbers; and Wille about how the previously unknown state of Kosovo came into being at a castle outside of Paris in 1999.

In contrast to Wolfers, the contributors to this special issue want not only to expand the cast of characters but also to problematize the notion of agency and subjectivity itself, and in so doing, they are concerned with issues which Wolfers would have been happy to leave to metaphysicians. More specifically, they are all writing in the wake of what has been referred to as the “performative turn” in the social sciences as represented, *inter alia*, if in different ways, by the works of Judith Butler and Bruno Latour (Wille 2017; Bueger 2017; Abrahamsson and Dányi 2018). Performativity, we are informed, is not the same thing as a performance and it is not something that takes place in the theater. Instead, performativity concerns, according to Butler, the way discourse is reiterated, and, according to Latour, the way networks are created and maintained. Reiteration and networking, it turns out, are the respective ways in which agency, and thereby subjectivity, are constituted in social life. In briefly commenting on the contributions to this special issue, it is this claim we will discuss.

Performances and performativities

Consider to begin with the pervasive role which theatrical metaphors play in analyses of international politics (Beer and de Landtsheer 2004). Originally a way to talk—with Shakespeare and other early modern authors—about the vanity of human ambition, it was also the way the European system of sovereign states first came to be imagined. States are “actors” on a “world stage” “acting” in front of a “world audience,” and so on. This is also the language which Wolfers, entirely unselfreflectively, invokes. And yet, poststructuralists argue, the theater metaphor is problematic at best. The traditional notion of a performance, Judith Butler points out, presupposes an unacceptable theory of representation (Butler 1993, pp. 12–13, 1988, pp. 519–520; Ringmar 2016a, pp. 101–125). Most obviously, it requires the existence of exogenously formed subjects—selves that precede and authorize the actions which they carry out. Yet underneath a person’s “characteristics” and “experiences,” there is no exogenously formed subject ready to be unearthed (Derrida 1982, pp. 11, 16). There can be no “freedom” and no “authenticity” since “the ascription of interiority is itself a publicly regulated and sanctioned form of essence fabrication.” (Butler 1993, p. 195).

Instead, subjects come to exist as they are performatively enacted. Invoking an argument introduced by John Austin and developed by John Searle, theorists of performativity insist that words not only mean things, but also do things in the world (Austin 1962; Searle 1983, 1989). Language has “perlocutionary force.” It is when a symbolic structure is performatively enacted—when it is cited and cited again—that the illusion of an abiding subject comes into being. “The subject is inscribed in language, is a ‘function’ of language, becomes a speaking subject only by making



its speech conform ... to the system of the rules of language as a system of differences.” (Derrida 1982, p. 15). Compare actor-network theory (Latour 1988; Callon et al. 2007; Mol 2010). What an actor might be, ANT theorists suggest, should not be determined a priori—they can be individual human beings but also collectivities, material objects, or even concepts. What matters is instead the interactions that take place between the actors. In networks, connections are made and information circulated, and it is this interaction which comes to constitute the actors as such. This is how scholars of international relations have come to insist that “sovereign nation-states are not pre-given subjects but in process and that all subjects in process (be they individual or collective) are the ontological effects of practices which are performatively enacted.” (Weber 1998, p. 78) “Diplomatic performances,” says Wille, “do not merely represent given international actors but, on the contrary, first give rise to the agency of these actors.” (Wille 2017). “Agency,” says Bueger, “depends upon, and is the effect of, webs of relations set up in and through practice.” (Bueger 2017; Abrahamsson and Dányi 2018).

This argument may remind us of Ervin Goffman’s thesis regarding “the presentation of self in everyday life.” (Goffman 1973). As Goffman stressed, we present ourselves to others by means of the conventions that exist in our societies. We draw on the various ways of being a “woman” in order to become a woman; “father” in order to become a father, and so on. Yet as far as Goffman was concerned, such self-presentations have no ontological implications. To him, a social role is something that we perform and he is not speculating regarding the existence, or otherwise, of the performer. Our contributors, however, are not as cautious. Emboldened by poststructuralism and by ANT, they want to study not only what actors do and how their actions can be explained, but what actors *are*. Yet there is nothing in speech-act theory which allows us to draw any such conclusions. The perlocutionary force of a statement tells us nothing about the status of the subject. Indeed, reducing the subject to a citational practice, or to a function of the interaction in a network, makes him or her or it quite unrecognizable. Most obviously, the subjects created in this way have no bodies; they are bleak, two-dimensional, characters entirely determined by forces beyond their control; they are puppets on structuralist strings, formed by language, by power, and by language-as-power (Bordo 1992, pp. 76–92; Ringmar 2016a, p. 107).

For this reason, it is never going to be enough to simply focus on practices and networks. Seeing someone act in a certain fashion tells us nothing in the end, no matter how often the action is repeated. First we must make sense of what the person does, and we do this, as Searle points out, by drawing on our knowledge of “the background”—the set of abilities, capacities, tendencies, and dispositions that humans have as a result of being members of a certain society (Searle 1983). A key mechanism here is that of the imagination. Performativities need to be imagined before they can make sense. We are not only looking at what a person does, but imagining what the person might be up to, and we have made sense of the action once we have settled upon one of these alternatives. Subjectivity may indeed be a metaphysical illusion, but so are all conceptual categories. “Phonemes and verbs are real,” as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson put it, in the sense that they are entities of language, but no one regards them as physical entities (Lakoff and Johnson 1999,



pp. 109–110). “We take them as real because they are required if we are to make sense of the nature of language. Any explanatorily adequate theory of language will have to posit them. That is, they are real relative to an understanding, in this case, a scientific understanding of language.”

The question of the ontological status of the state illustrates this nicely (Ringmar 1996, pp. 439–466). The state is not a body, it is not an actor, not on a stage, and so on, but this is nevertheless how we have come to think of it. The state is not real, but imagined; or rather, it is imagined as real. States are not persons but persons are not persons either. If we look for ourselves inside our heads, we will not find ourselves; all we will find is a lot of gooey gray matter. Instead subjects are imagined into existence, and this is how they become real. Whatever an actor does—practices, citations, the “enactment of structures,” and all that—follows from this act of the imagination. We understand what something is not by determining what it really is, but by comparing it to something else which we know that it is not but which it resembles in certain respects. We think metaphorically (Lakoff and Johnson 2003).

How actors are imagined

Let us look more closely at how the imagination works. In February 1999, as Wille tells the story, a small ragtag band of dissidents, intellectuals, and resistance fighters boarded a plane in the Kosovar capital of Pristina which took them to an international conference held at the Rambouillet castle just southwest of Paris (Wille 2017). They had no official status, it was unclear who they represented, and they were highly prone to disagree between themselves. “The group who arrived at Rambouillet was far from being a unified delegation which could speak with one voice,” as Wille puts it (Wille 2017). Their inexperience regarding matters diplomatic was at times acutely embarrassing, such as when they addressed the British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook as “Mr. Ambassador.” (Wille 2017). Once sequestered within the walls of the Rambouillet castle, however, they were forced to define their position, to agree with one another, and to express themselves in the language of international diplomacy and law. They would have to fake it ‘til they made it.’ If not, Wille explains, “the Kosovars would literally be reduced from being a fragile international actor to being a hopelessly divided secessionist movement.” (Wille 2017). Before the conference began, there was no fully constituted international subject by the name of Kosovo, but after the conference, there was—although independence was not declared until February 2008 and universal recognition is yet to be achieved. It follows, says Wille, that Kosovo’s “appearance at Rambouillet could only have been an effect of the diplomatic performance itself.” (Wille 2017). This “is a particularly clear case of a diplomatic performance creating international agency.” (Wille 2017). “It is only through diplomatic performances that collectives gain the capacity to act in international politics.” (Wille 2017).

In Wille’s account, there is no discussion of the role of the imagination, and this is an omission. After all, as Benedict Anderson famously explained, nations are real only as they are imagined (Anderson 2006). On Anderson’s telling, they were imagined first through the books and newspapers produced as a result of the appearance



of print capitalism. By following the events reported in the pages of the press, people came to see their state as acting and interacting with other states—taking part in negotiations, signing agreements, and so on—and it was by imagining themselves as members of a community formed around this entity that the nation came to exist. The constitution of Kosovo at Rambouillet in 1999 would have served Anderson well as an illustration of his thesis. It was in Paris in February 1999 that a stage first was imagined on which Kosovo was one of the actors, and it was when these negotiations were reported in media back in Kosovo itself that Kosovars at large began to see themselves as a members of a sovereign state. The diplomatic machinery which Wille describes was a means to this end to be sure, but it was through an act of the imagination that Kosovo came to be constituted as an international actor.

As Anderson went on to explain, there is a ritual aspect to this work—or, with a concession to poststructuralism and ANT, we might call it a “performative” aspect (Sweetser 2000, pp. 312–319). This was particularly evident in colonies in Latin America and East Asia where talented young natives were dispatched to educational centers by the colonial authorities in order to acquire the basics of a European education. These educational journeys, says Anderson, resembled pilgrimages in that they took members of the fledgling local elite far away from their homes and forced them to interact with others, in the same situation as themselves, who they never previously had encountered. Pilgrimages, for a religion, are important ritual means by which a community of believers is imagined and, says Anderson, “this is how nations were imagined as well” (Anderson 2006; Turner 1975). The example of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Muhammad Ali Jinnah making the educational journey to Europe at the turn of the twentieth century comes to mind. It was in London that they became nationalists. The ragtag band of Kosovars at Rambouillet had made a similar journey, we could argue. Uprooted and on foreign soil, they were forced to interact with their ostensible compatriots and to think about their place in the world. It was this ritual process which allowed them to imagine Kosovo as a sovereign subject. That is, the ritual—the “performativity” or “practice”—mattered, but only as a means by which the imagination could be set to work.

The work of the imagination is even more obvious in the case of Bueger’s pirates, although he too says nothing about it (Bueger 2017). Instead he insists that his argument is derived from actor-network theory. “My modest intent,” as he puts it, “is to show how [Somali pirate Abduwali] Muse, his friends and other actors described as pirates are subjected to different agencements which provide them with different forms of agency” (Bueger 2017, *Agencement* is an “arrangement” or “layout.” See <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/agencement>). It is through this network of things and practices that our understanding of pirates is constituted, and Bueger enumerates some of the objects—movies, graphs, formulas, games, Xboxes, policy documents, legal texts—of which the network consists. “In these objects, things and technology,” he says, “agency is also inscribed.” (Bueger 2017, *Agencement* is an “arrangement” or “layout.” See <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/agencement>). “These various objects, practices, and actors make up the heterogeneous elements of the agencements that produce pirate agency.” (Bueger 2017, *Agencement* is an “arrangement” or “layout.” See <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/agencement>). Yet this is surely an



overstatement. Our understanding of pirates and piracy are *not* the result of physical objects or the networked connections between them. “Pirates” do *not* come into existence as a result of what people do, but as a result of what we imagine to exist. Movies, graphs, games, Xboxes, and so on are only the vehicles of the imagination—they are not the imagination itself. It is only when we call upon the books we have read, the movies we have seen, and the games we have played that pirates take on meaning. References to “*agencements*” add little to an argument which at best is incomplete.

Noyes, to her credit, is uninterested in metaphysical matters. Instead, she talks about the way images of self and other are established and reproduced (Noyes 2018). The Polish Plumber is a case in point. As it turns out, he has little to do with pipe-fitters of East European origin and instead much to do with figments of a public, mainly French, imagination. Launched as *le plombier polonais* by Philippe de Villier, a right-wing French politician, he initially featured in the rhetoric which preceded the referendum on a European constitution in 2005. An EU constitution, de Villiers insisted, would result in a France overrun by Polish plumbers, Estonian architects, and other Europeans prepared to work for a pittance. French workers would not be able to compete, and the French welfare state would crumble. While the Estonian architect disappeared never to be heard from again, the Polish Plumber went on to have a long and successful career—as a specter of neoliberalism, as a hardworking entrepreneur, a fellow proletarian, a generic foreigner, a substitute Muslim, and so on. Once imagined, Noyes explains, the *plombier polonais* helped give voice and agency to a number of unexpected actors—including the Polish Tourism Board and the actual plumbers of Maubeuge, a small French town in which Dutch EU commissioner Frits Bolkestein has a summer-house. But the Polish Plumber also helped silence voices and restrict agency—notably those of the traditional, unionized, working class. What Noyes shows us is the imagination at work. Clearly, her credentials as a folklorist makes her well equipped to understand actors and agency, including the actors and agency of international politics.

How bodies are performed

Consider next the actors discussed by Abrahamsson and Dányi (2018). These actors are not imagined but real. Or, rather, they are properly embodied. It was their bodies after all that the paperless immigrants in Brussels starved. And crucially, the performances in which these bodies engaged are performances in the sense we know from the theater—they are staged and performed in front of audiences to whom they are intended to convey a message. The fact that this is street theater rather than Shakespeare makes no difference in this regard. Without the presence of the body, the performance would clearly not work. As neuroscientists can explain, the bodies of the people in the audience react viscerally and largely precognitively to the distressed bodies of the people on the stage (Damasio 1994, pp. 180–191; Gallese 2009; Rokitnitz 2008). Our bodies understand before our minds interpret and this is what lends the theater its visceral force. This fact proves Judith Butler and the post-structuralists wrong. Performativities have no visceral force since they are mediated



through the symbolic structures of language. Language arrives too late on the scene as it were, once meaning already has happened.

The performance of the hunger strikers in Brussels is both gruesome and sad. In 2012, some 23 illegal immigrants, mainly from North Africa and the Middle East, embarked on what was to become a 102-day-long hunger strike in protest against Belgian immigration policies and their own lack of political rights. After 56 days, one of the hunger strikers—Jamal Jaoudi—stitched his lips together which made it impossible for him to talk or to drink. The image of Jaoudi's face, as we might imagine, spread quickly in Belgian media. Yet the authorities refused to budge, making references to democratic principles. The protesters, said Maggie de Block, member of the Flemish liberal party and Secretary of State for Asylum, Immigration and Social Integration, “demand more rights than other people. In a democracy everyone has equal rights. To start a hunger strike is a way to apply pressure that we cannot tolerate.” (Damasio 1994, pp. 180–191; Gallese 2009; Rokotnitz 2008). As Abrahamsson and Dányi point out, de Block makes the mistake of thinking that people without rights can make an appeal through the political system, yet as far as the power of the theater is concerned, she is obviously correct. Someone who engages in a successful theatrical performance can claim rights which others are denied. The politically powerless have always known this and often used performances in order to enhance their power. Yet democracy does not only presuppose an equal right to vote but also a public space which we can all enter, even if we are *sans papiers*, and some will necessarily be better performers than others. There is no way around this inequality since democracy requires a public sphere. Given the level of attention the hunger protesters attracted, they were quite successful as performers even if none of their political goals ultimately were attained.

Abrahamsson and Dányi seem surprised that the silent can speak and the passive can act, and they invite us to be surprised too. Yet this is surprising only since they rely on inadequate theoretical tools. There is no theatricality in networks constituted by the interrelationship of objects and this is why ANT cannot be used to give an account of what is going on here. Once we think of the hunger strike as a theatrical performance, however, we are not at all surprised. There are after all an endless number of plays in which voices are given to the silenced and agency to the powerless—to outcasts and misfits, to orphaned children, unwed mothers, and mid-life losers stuck in loveless marriages and meaningless jobs. Or think of mime artists who make a career out of being silent or of Harold Pinter who was more famous for his pauses than his dialog. The power of the hunger strikers, such as it was, was derived from the power of their performance, not from the network in which they were embedded.

Conclusion

The contributions to this special issue seek to explore the status of the actors of international politics and the nature of their agency and to achieve this by means of the intellectual tools provided by poststructuralist theories of performativity. Yet poststructuralism fails to deliver on its promises. Performativity is too much in the



head and not enough in the body; performativities are discussed while performances are ignored (Austin 1962, pp. 21–22). The problem is not that issues of ontology are raised, but instead the ontology which performativity presupposes. We can, and should, do better. In these brief comments, we suggested an alternative way of thinking about actors and agency. Actors are imagined first of all. We come to see them as actors of a certain kind by means of metaphors which compare them to things we know they are not but which they nevertheless resemble. Actors are real only as they are imagined. Practices of various kinds—newspaper reading, educational pilgrimages—play a role here but only as vehicles of the imagination. In addition, actors are embodied, and their bodies place them in the world rather than in the structures of language. As embodied, we make sense of our world by means of our interaction with it. This is a visceral, precognitive process which precedes explicit interpretation.

The distinction between the imagined and the embodied might remind us of the discredited Cartesian dichotomy between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* according to which the imagined cannot be embodied and the embodied not imagined. Yet there are not two things going on here, only one, and imagination is not precluded by embodiment but, on the contrary, possible only because of it. How we imagine agency and subjectivity depends ultimately on how our bodies interact with the world. Meaning is something felt, something perceived, it grows out of our ability to manipulate things, move our bodies in space, and evaluate our situation (Johnson 2008, p. 11). To perceive and to conceive are closely related activities and explicit interpretations become possible only because of this embodied interaction.

Theatrical performances are one way in which we do this (Rokotnitz 2010; Cook 2007; Ringmar 2012, pp. 1–25). In theatrical performances, the imagined and the embodied come together as one. We enter an imaginary world which is all make-believe, but the imaginary world is real. It is not a figment of the imagination; there really are bodies on stage which we interpret directly by means of our own bodies. They find themselves in a certain mood, and so do we, the members of the audience (Ringmar 2016b). The actors are sweating, crying, hugging; liquids are being slurped and zippers opened; and none of this has to be interpreted in order to be understood. Instead, since we too are human, we just understand it. This is consequently not, as poststructuralists argue, a question of representation. It is not that the theater presupposes the off-stage existence of the already formed subjects which the stage proceeds to represent. Rather, the theater is about ‘presencing’—making present, making real—by means of bodies and by means of the imagination. The contributions to this special issue illustrate very nicely, despite themselves, how this happens.

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