

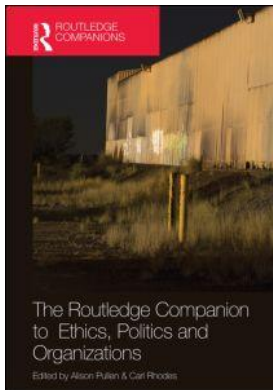
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# Towards a queer politics and ethics within organization studies

*Nick Rumens and Melissa Tyler*

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Since the early 1990s, queer theory's entrance into academic discourse has triggered a wave of queer-inspired scholarship that has surged far beyond its origins in the humanities, with queer theory finally reaching the outer edges of organization studies in the early 2000s. Fournier and Grey (2000) were one of the first to cite queer theory as one of the more important yet underdeveloped theoretical contributors to critical management studies in their much-cited paper mapping out the central tenets and concerns of the latter. Yet despite some notable contributions to the organization studies literature on queer theory considered throughout this chapter (Parker, 2001, 2002a; Harding et al., 2011; Hodgson, 2005; Rumens, 2011, 2012; Tyler and Cohen, 2008), sustained engagements with queer theory within organization studies have, to date, been relatively few and far between. Equally, while arguably a critique of the organizing imperatives of heteronormativity, especially in and through the reproduction of sexual (heterosexual/homosexual) and gender (masculine/feminine) binaries and their constraining effects, queer theory itself has yet to give any serious and sustained consideration to processes and practices of organization. This failed rendezvous represents a missed opportunity for organization studies scholars and queer theorists alike to challenge what is taken-for-granted within organizations or, as queer theorist David Halperin (2003: 343) puts it, to 'help us think what has not yet been thought'.

Indeed, queer theory holds obvious attractions for those organization studies scholars who are unhappy with the dominance of particular paradigms for understanding organizational phenomena such as 'management' and 'leadership' (see Parker, 2001, 2002a; and Harding et al., 2011 for notable examples). Likewise, organization studies represents a fertile territory for queer theorists to nurture queer projects focused on disrupting the 'normal' business and practice of organization, not least because organizations are intensely heteronormative settings for social relations, privileging narrowly prescriptive ways of being (Rumens, 2013). With this in mind, our aim in this chapter is to introduce some of the more prominent ideas associated with queer theory to organizational scholars who have yet to consider its offerings, and to consider, for readers already familiar with its characteristic ideas and more widely cited writings, what a queer ethics, politics and analytics might offer to organization studies. With regard to the latter, the chapter draws on important aspects of queer theory that remain underdeveloped within

organizational studies such as its ethic of openness to the Other and its orientation towards ‘undoing’ heteronormative binaries, in order to open up opportunities for ethical and political alternatives.

The chapter begins by problematizing the very idea of queer theory as an easily discernible body of ideas, embedding this critique in the origins and etymology of queer and its colloquial, political and philosophical meanings (Halperin, 1995, 2003; Hall, 2002; Jagose, 1996; Edelman, 2004). It then considers the context of queer ethics and politics, noting the variation in academic writing on how these topics have been understood and put into practice in everyday life. We then consider how queer theory has permeated organization studies, reviewing some of the latest contributions made by organizational scholars to a growing body of queer-inspired scholarship. Highlighting the shortage of queer theory-based research on politics and ethics in organization studies, we move to a consideration of how we might queer ethics within organization studies and, in doing so, politicize an ethic of openness to the Other premised upon a recognition of mutual inter-corporeal vulnerability, a theme to which we return below.

### Understanding queer theory

Many proponents of queer theory have been understandably reticent about describing what it is. Halperin (1995: 62) argues that queer is ‘by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*’ (emphasis in original). With similar vagueness, Jagose (1996: 96) remarks: ‘Queer itself can have neither a fundamental logic, nor a consistent set of characteristics’. Later, Hall (2002) suggests there is no singular queer theory, just a cacophony of competing and sometimes contradictory voices and perspectives that articulate queer. Edelman, adding his own inflection to this debate, reflects how ‘queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one’ (2004: 17). In short, a concern that anything other than a constant deferral of meaning may result in constraining queer’s radical potential by closing off potential future significations of the term appears to underpin this reluctance among many queer theorists to ‘name’ queer, an approach that is very much in keeping with the origins and intentions of queer thinking. Indeed, this understanding of queer theory as a form of immanent critique is also hinted at in Parker’s (2002a: 158) queer-inspired, performative critique of management in which he describes queer theory as ‘an attitude of unceasing disruptiveness’. While scholarly efforts invested into holding queer open so it may foster an ongoing sense of unknowability have been subject to sharp criticism, not least for circulating queer as a freewheeling empty signifier (McKee, 1999), a clearer picture emerges about what queer *does* rather than what queer *is*, an approach that arguably holds more political potential for queer interjections into critical management and organization studies; hence, Parker’s (2002a) focus on ‘queering management’ rather than developing a queer theory of management.

We can begin to gain some insights into how this works when the term ‘queer’ is considered in the following ways: (i) *a noun* [to describe someone as queer, to refer to queerness]; (ii) *an adjective* [describing ‘politics’ as queer], or (iii) *a verb* [to queer, engaging in a process of queering]. Viewing queer in these different ways we can gain some insight into how queer itself has become ‘queered’ [twisted, ruptured, reformulated] not least by its reconfiguration as a theory, among other things (Hall, 2002). But what emerges centrally from some of these statements is a formulation of queer theory as a mode of *doing* rather than *being* (i.e. a fixed queer identity or position). Halperin (2003: 343), as noted previously, argues that queer theory impels us to ‘think what has not yet been thought’, reaffirming its antagonistic relationship with whatever is ‘normal’ (Warner, 1993, 1999), be it subjectively, politically or theoretically. Despite the apparent lack of consensus among commentators over the last few decades or so about what queer theory is,

many queer theorists concede that there are particular practices and ways of thinking that are somehow discernibly ‘queer’. Thought of in this way, queer itself can be understood as a form of theoretical ‘undoing’ (Butler, 2004a), whereby the complex ideas associated particular ethical, political or analytical positions become conflated under the term ‘queer’ and are hence undone by what amounts to a form of identity thinking. At the same time, queer thinking itself perpetuates the potential for a constant undoing of such processes, be they ethical, political or analytical, so that as a mode of doing rather than being, queer always also contains the capacity to undo itself through its own inherent ‘unceasing disruptiveness’, as Parker (2001: 38) puts it.

Focusing in particular on this latter aspect of queer thinking, namely its critical, disruptive potential, Stein and Plummer (1994: 181–182) suggest four ‘hallmarks’ of queer. First, a conceptualization of sexuality wherein sexual power runs through everyday life, ‘expressed discursively and enforced through boundaries and binary divides’. Specifically, queer theory casts into doubt the assumption that sexuality is a fixed and ‘natural’ property of the individual. It encourages us to understand sexuality and also gender as constructed and performatively constituted through acts of repetition and recitation. As such, gender becomes ritualized, the effects of which make it appear natural, illustrated vividly in Butler’s (1990) *Gender Trouble*. Butler, like other pioneering feminist theorists such as Sedgwick (1990) and Fuss (1991) who have been labelled ‘queer theorists’, questions the essentialist nature of sexual categories such as ‘heterosexual’ and ‘homosexual’, how these are configured in hierarchical binaries and the consequences for those subjects who cannot or will not fit into these categories. Second, queer theory is concerned with problematizing sexual and gender categories, and of identities, sometimes advocating the elimination of fixed identity categories altogether. Linking to the idea that sexual and gendered identities are performative, queer theorists have delved into how these identities are also historically patterned, exposing the variation in how they are constructed and ascribed meaning at any moment in time, and in particular social settings. Third, queer theory is characterized by what Stein and Plummer (1994: 181–182) describe as ‘a rejection of civil rights strategies in favour of a politics of carnival, transgression, and parody’, which may engender deconstruction, decentring and anti-assimilationist politics. In this sense, queer theorists have raised ethical questions regarding the limits of heteronormative identity politics, such as: can ‘heterosexual’ and ‘homosexual’ identities adequately account for the diversity in erotic expression that many people feel as they explore their sexuality and gender over a lifetime? Fourth, by taking an interest in how constructions of normality govern the possibilities for individuals to create meaningful identities and selves, queer theory’s line of analysis extends beyond the terrain of sexuality and gender. At this juncture, it is important to contextualize queer politics and ethics against a wider landscape of sexual politics.

### Contextualizing queer politics and ethics

Queer theory appeared in academic discourse when it was adopted by feminist Teresa de Lauretis in the introduction to the published proceedings of a 1990 conference, ‘Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities’, convened in the USA at the University of California. Here, in this ‘beginning’ of an academic discourse of queer, the term was used to ‘theorize lesbian and gay sexualities’ (de Lauretis, 1991: iii), focusing on how lesbian and gay identities were discursively constructed through and within the confines of heteronormative discourse. There was good reason for queer theory to be interested in the discursive limits of gay and lesbian identity categories, not least being the particularly pejorative associations these identities evoked at that point in time (e.g. death, waste, excess, disease), and the violence done to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people through upholding a rigid and restrictive binary gender and sexual order (Sullivan, 2003). Taking

advantage of the groundwork established by third-wave feminists such as Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, themselves inspired by the poststructuralism of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, among others, queer theory served up a disruptive and transformative politics to rupture an American political context in the 1980s blighted by sexual prejudice towards LGBT people. Queer groups such as OutRage, ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and Queer Nation assembled around this time, standing shoulder to shoulder to counter sexual prejudice amplified aggressively during the AIDS crisis which had gathered force during the 1980s (Watney, 1994). Such groups helped to create the conditions of possibility for queer theory to emerge within academic institutions, meshing together theory and politics in a mutually influencing dynamic. Indeed, queer theorists such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick participated in forms of queer activism against a political context that was characterized by, in her words: 'prurient schemes for testing, classifying, rounding up, tattooing, quarantining, and otherwise demeaning and killing men and women with AIDS' (Sedgwick, 1990: 297). The call to action to improve the material circumstances of gay and lesbian people's lives in relation to the AIDS crisis and sexual prejudice more generally took many forms, ranging from public demonstrations and protests to leaflet distributions and 'kiss-ins' and other exhibitions of same-sex desire in public places such as shopping malls.

At the same time, lesbian and gay movements themselves came under closer political scrutiny for the ways in which they (un)intentionally marginalized or excluded altogether other sexual minorities. Political differences between gay men and lesbians which had erupted during the 1970s, largely as a result of acknowledging gay men's stake in patriarchal privilege, propelled some lesbians into autonomous forms of organizing (Phelan, 1989). Mindful of this and other tensions within the LGBT acronym, early manifestations of queer promulgated a move away from what came to be regarded as a homogenizing, categorical form of identity politics towards a 'politics of difference'. The latter claimed to be sensitive towards sexual and gender diversity, and while some commentators still doubt queer theory's inclusivity in that respect (Penney, 2014), a queer politics formed that questioned the capacity of terms such as 'gay', 'lesbian' and 'heterosexual' to account for the complexities and variations in lived experiences of sexual and gender diversity. In parallel with these political developments, feminists such as bell hooks began to question the 'hierarchies of difference' emerging within feminist thinking and lesbian politics, criticizing the marginalization of race and ethnicity within the feminist movement and problematizing the assumption that a unified subject position underpins feminism as an emancipatory social movement.

Against this political backdrop, queer emerged as an anti-identity politics that challenged the idea of a unified subject, viewing it as a constraining and normalizing regime. It is important to note in this respect that queer politics does not serve exclusively the needs of one specific group within the LGBT acronym. Heterosexuals too may be the beneficiaries of a queer politics that seeks to destabilize the term 'heterosexual' and disturb heteronormativity, not least because heterosexuals may also endure forms of life that are impoverished by the dictates of heteronormativity (Thomas, 2000). Still, while queer politics and theory has been criticized for catering predominately to gay men's issues and needs (Jeffreys, 2003), scholars have mobilized and problematized queer theory to create spaces for bi and trans people to gain political visibility, although how successful these efforts have been remains disputed (Namaste, 2000; Noble, 2006; Monro, 2005; Thanem, 2011). As such, queer politics has been subject to interrogation through a queer lens, examining how queer can reproduce divisions and hierarchies, demonstrating complicity with the very heteronormative social structures it seeks to undermine.

Crucially, whatever form queer theory takes, and wherever its analytical gaze is directed, queer politics displays a commitment to rupturing normalized binaries, and demanding more

liveable options for those subjects who do not meet the normative standards gender and sexual binaries establish and endorse (Butler, 2004a). In this vein, queer politics is often constructed, sometimes caricatured, as a rebel force that seeks to transform heteronormative social structures and institutions rather than securing accommodation within them (Sullivan, 2003). We acknowledge and attach credit to queer theory's suspicion of assimilationist politics that endorses a 'wanting in' to the mainstream, but we are reluctant to indulge in a caricaturing of queer politics as being 'against' everyone and everything. Queer politics is far more diverse and multi-branched than such crude caricatures give credit for. Equally, this diversity is reflected in the types of ethical engagements queer politics has engendered and, as indicated above, one of the imperatives and achievements of queer in recent decades has been the development of an ethically informed politics, one which precedes from the recognition that because our subjectivities and the rights and responsibilities attached to them are always embedded within normalizing power relations, ethics are always political and vice versa.

This means that just as forms of queer politics have proliferated, attracting more scholarly attention about their purpose, articulations and omissions (Penney, 2014; Yekani et al., 2013), queer theorists and activists have also turned their attention towards the matter of ethics. Hall (2002: 145), for example, underlines the ethical dimension to a queer politics that aims to challenge the 'norm' and 'confront its advocates' when he asks: 'are we led inevitably to wholesale chaos, murder and mayhem?' While the answer is likely to be 'no' in many contexts, much depends on what might be at stake for LGBT people living under circumstances in which they are subject to social or physical violence. What Hall (2002) specifically refers to is a discourse that perpetuates the idea that queer politics betrays a self-indulgence among LGBT and 'queer' people towards patterning a world for themselves, after ripping up the fabric of society as it is currently fashioned. This argument overlooks at least two issues. First, queer politics, in whatever form it expresses itself, is neither monolithic nor hidebound to LGBT people as a minority group. As Yekani et al. (2013: 7) assert, queer politics derives its force from 'undermining any constellation that congeals into a stable structure', destabilizing heteronormativity and processes of normalization that affect not just LGBT people, but rather all subject positions (Thomas, 2000). Second, queer politics can incite an ethics of living that casts a suspicious glance at what is 'normal' with a view to unpicking power/knowledge regimes that sustain normalcy, at the same time as exploring alternative ways of living intimately and erotically that avoid becoming ensnared by heteronormativity (Blasius, 1994). In other words, queer politics is often framed as a future-oriented set of practices that encourages us to consider alternatives beyond the limits of what is political, and to explore how notions about what constitutes a life worth living are often immured within heteronormativity (Butler, 2004a). Seen in this way, a mutually informing queer ethics and politics engenders a series of ethical engagements with the future, focusing particularly on the question of how individuals become 'subjects'. This is where queer theorists point us in different directions of travel, two of which we outline briefly below.

One of the most controversial developments within queer thinking in recent years has been the idea that a queer ethics involves resisting the doctrine of building better futures for our children that constitutes certain discourses as 'political'. Steeped in Lacanian psychoanalysis, Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) has been pivotal for ushering in a negative political logic that aims to expose how the political is shaped by 'reproductive futurism'. With this term, Edelman refers to the ideology underpinning political goals that strive towards making the world a better place for future generations. While many of us might find such a notion of futurity noble and worth striving for, Edelman asserts that reproductive futurism restricts how we might conceive politics because the fantasy image of the Child remains

the ‘perpetuate horizon of every acknowledged politics’ (2004: 3), thereby preserving the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by ‘rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations’ (2004: 2). Evocative of but departing from a queer politics conceived by the likes of Warner (1999), who also takes issue with an equal-rights informed assimilationist political agenda that sustains heteronormativity, Edelman (2004) spearheads an anti-social turn in queer theory by suggesting that queers must ‘fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized’ (2004: 29). In this vision, queer politics, in which queer or ‘queerness’ names those who are ‘not fighting for the children’, attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it accepts its ‘figural status as resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure’ (2004: 3).

It is not altogether surprising that those queer theorists for whom Edelman offers ‘no future, no ethics, no justice, no compassion, and certainly no hope’ (Jones, 2013: 10) have vehemently criticized his particular brand of queer politics and ethics. Put differently, Edelman (2004) fosters a nihilistic account of queer politics, ethics and of the future that appears to leave no room for developing a practical politics to offer solutions to everyday inequalities experienced by LGBT people. Yet this radical conception of queerness retains its disruptive sense of negativity, derived from its position as the Other, crucial perhaps at a time when more and more LGBT people appear to embrace a normalizing politics that places emphasis on folding into rather than rupturing heteronormativity (Bersani, 1995; Seidman, 2002). For Edelman (2004), this is most conspicuous through the articulation of rights-based claims made by LGBT people to obtain equal access to child rearing and marriage within existing heteronormative social structures. In so doing they turn their back on the subversive potential of queer(ness) to take a stand outside heteronormativity and starve it of the sustenance it draws from reproductive futurism. While Edelman has almost single-handedly orchestrated a turn away from the future within queer theory, others have (re)asserted a queer politics and ethics that reaffirms its associations with the future in terms of hope, transgression and its generative potential for thinking the unthinkable (Muñoz, 2009; Ahmed, 2006, 2010; Jones, 2013).

Muñoz (2009, 2013), for instance, argues that queerness is always about futurity because it is an ideality, something that does not yet exist or, as he puts it, a ‘*sense of the incalculable*’ (2013: 104, emphasis in original). One might use this assertion as a point of departure for contemplating a queer ethics that is generative in the sense of enabling subjects to explore new ways of relating and becoming. Becoming a viable subject is a process marked by vicarity and inventiveness that involves, as Giffney (2009: 6) puts it, ‘the shedding of the chimera of stability and certainty wrought through our attachments to objects towards an awareness and acceptance of the unrelenting dynamism that underpins the act of living itself’. Pursuing this, some queer theorists have sought inspiration from the poststructuralism of Michel Foucault for thinking through a concept of ethics that is framed as ‘care of the self’ that comprises, in part, a set of practices that are ‘exercised by the self on the self . . . by which one takes responsibility for oneself and by which one changes, purifies, transforms, and transfigures oneself’ (Foucault, 2005: 11). Put simply, Foucault’s care of the self is accompanied by a notion of ethics that, although it involves thinking about how we relate to others, is individualistic in the way it encourages the subject to experiment by fashioning alternative modes of life that benefit the self driven by a largely aesthetic ‘if it feels good, do it’ ethic, thereby reducing ethics simply to a transformation of the self.

Some queer theorists have been enchanted by Foucault’s conceptualization of ethics as a set of practices and techniques subjects perform on themselves because Foucault highlights and problematizes the limits dominant codes and norms impose on the discursive processes by which individuals become ‘subjects’. However, this conceptualization of queer ethics refuses to provide

transcendent notions of what is ‘right’ and ‘good’ in regard to how the self might transcend the limits to becoming enforced by dominant discourse. Instead, the subject is encouraged to think the unthinkable in terms of what they might become, fuelled by a speculative energy that nourishes an ethics for creating new, multiple alternative senses of self, identity and relations. Compared to Edelman (2004), this notion of queer ethics is imbued with hope, articulated nicely by Elisabeth Daumer for whom ‘a queer ethics . . . would support and nurture the queer in all of us – both by questioning all notions of fixed, immutable identities and by articulating a plurality of differences among us in the hope of forging new bonds and allegiances’ (1992: 103).

This necessarily brief discussion of queer politics and ethics cannot convey the nuances of scholarly debates in these areas, but it does underline the fluid, relational and mutually influencing dynamic between queer politics and ethics. Considered in the context of a long history of sexual politics, queer theory’s engagements with ethics exposes the heterosexual/homosexual binary as a restrictive and harmful organizing principle through which heterosexuality is set as a default norm against which all ‘Others’ are variously constructed. Intriguing then is how queer politics and ethics might inform organization studies, a discipline that has lagged far behind the humanities in flirting with queer theory.

### Queer theory meets organization studies

Over the last decade or so a small but emergent body of organizational literature has started to engage with queer thinking. Queer theory has been advocated as an approach to organization studies in two broad and often overlapping ways. The first approach has tended to adopt queer theory to expose a ‘queer’ presence inside and outside of normality, with organization studies scholars seeking to reveal signs of ‘queerness’ where we least expect to find it. Put differently, much of this research engages in a process of queering, whereby queer existences and possibilities are exposed, with a view to disrupting, denaturalizing and transgressing what is considered ‘normal’ about organization and management (Parker, 2001, 2002a; Harding et al., 2011; Tyler and Cohen, 2008). Parker (2001, 2002a), for instance, was one of the first to articulate queer theory’s capacity to denaturalize what we take for granted about management as an occupation, as an organizational role performed by an individual, as an organizational practice and, finally, as an academic discipline. Seeking inspiration from Butler (1990) and Sedgwick (1990), Parker (2002b) reasons that if management can be shown to be a social construction, historically patterned, it follows that we may wish to explore how we can ‘do’ management in ways that do not engender ‘considerable cruelty and inequality’, currently stifled ‘through the generalized application of managerialism as the one best way’ (2002b: 184). In that regard, Parker uses queer theory to question the common (business) sense that reasons managerialism is a ‘good’ thing, and reminds us that it is merely one way of organizing among many. As such, queer theory could reinvigorate debates about management and human organizing by drawing attention to the idea that ‘doing manager’ is performative in the Butlerian (1990) sense, revealing management as something that is constructed through a continuous and reiterative enactment of particular norms.

Other scholars have followed in a similar vein. Harding et al. (2011) use queer theory to rupture the binaries that limit extant knowledge about how leadership is studied and practised. The authors argue that, from a perspective informed by queer theory, leadership may be opened up to alternative meanings and modes of ‘doing’ that transcend forms of organizing structured through domination. Somewhat similarly, Muhr and Sullivan (2013) employ Butler’s notion of performativity and the heterosexual matrix to examine the relationship between the body and leadership in the case of a transgender leader. Like Harding et al. (2011), they invite organization



studies scholars to queer leadership by understanding that ‘all managers perform leadership according to certain scripts set by the expectations generated by their gendered bodies, which produces limitations to the way leadership is seen as natural/unnatural for a specific leader’s body’ (Muhr and Sullivan, 2013: 418). Elsewhere, Gibson-Graham (1996, 1999, 2006) provide queer readings of globalization and capitalism. In so doing they seek to illuminate ‘the great variety of non-capitalist practices’ (2006: xxxii) such as markets in ethical ‘fair trade’ products, bartering and local trading systems, in order to contribute to an ‘anti-capitalist politics of economic invention’ (1996: xi).

The second approach casts a queer lens on LGBT people’s lived experiences within organizational settings, expanding knowledge about the habitual (re)production of heteronormativity within and through organization, and its effects on employees who identify as or are presumed to be LGBT (Lee et al., 2008; Ward and Winstanley, 2003; Rumens, 2010, 2012; Tindall and Waters, 2012; Williams et al., 2009; Williams and Giuffre, 2011). For example, Ward and Winstanley (2003) reveal how LGBT employees can be silenced by heteronormative discourses in the workplace and subjected to forms of homophobia and discrimination. Bendl et al. (2008, 2009) take a different approach to examining heteronormativity in the workplace by interrogating organizational diversity management discourse to understand what conceptions of identity are discursively produced, and how they sustain heteronormativity. In this example, queer theory is employed as a deconstructive strategy to destabilize categories of knowledge and identities that are taken for granted, considered ‘natural’ and beyond contestation. Operating in this mode, queer theory is less a device for explaining how LGBT people are repressed, although this is crucially important, and more a strategy for analysing the heterosexual/homosexual binary as a power–knowledge regime that shapes and orders everyday life (Seidman, 1996). This is also illustrated in research on workplace friendships which mobilizes queer theory to expose how the homosexual/heterosexual binary is destabilized when friendships (such as those between gay men and heterosexual women and men) run against the grain of heteronormative discourses that stipulate how they should be configured (Rumens, 2011, 2012). In other words, this branch of organizational research uses queer theory to explore an ethics of fashioning an individual life based on self-fulfilment that transcends the stifling confines of gender and sexual binaries that sustain heteronormativity.

Indeed, queer theory’s arrival at the outer limits of organization studies is apposite at a time when new possibilities for living sexual and gender diversity are being documented in many western nations (Seidman, 2002; Weeks, 2007). Yet the politics and ethics of how the sexual organization of the social is undergoing change, and how this is currently felt by LGBT people in the workplace, is seldom considered by organization studies scholars, even those familiar with queer theory. US-based research by Williams et al. (2009) is striking in that respect, drawing on queer theory to problematize the restrictions associated with disclosing and sustaining identities within workplaces that have been shaped by a wider social trend towards the ‘normalization’ of gay and lesbian sexualities. Williams et al. (2009) underscore the discursive closure levied on gay and lesbian employees by prevailing heteronormative expectations about how ‘normal’ gay men and lesbians should dress and behave, without attracting unnecessary attention to their sexuality. The authors found that performing ‘normal’ gay and lesbian identities at work is contingent on maintaining a state of ‘invisibility’, in that becoming ‘normal’ means many gay men and lesbians must emphasize their similarities with normative constructions of heterosexuality. This brings some gay men and lesbians much closer to heteronormativity with the advantages this confers (e.g. being recognised as ‘productive’ organizational citizens worthy of inclusion). But, as queer theorist David Halperin (2011: 443) puts it, in their determination to integrate themselves into

all facets of society, and to demonstrate their essential normality, gay men and lesbians are ‘rushing to embrace heterosexual forms of life, including heterosexual norms’. Put differently, they accept the terms in which heterosexual dominance is expressed as the keynote of assimilationist politics, squashing opportunities for queer to disrupt and destabilize.

In summary, despite its short tenure within organization studies, queer theory has made some substantial inroads into challenging aspects of organization studies that has long been taken for granted and considered ‘normal’. Some of this scholarship invokes a queer politics that is transformative, articulated in a desire to rupture a dichotomous sexual order that has become deeply entrenched in many places of work. At the same time, some research has used queer theory to generate an ethics of self-fulfilment directed at the future, towards exploring alternative modes of becoming and relating, that counters the narrow ethics of human flourishing within heteronormativity. Nonetheless, these debates are nascent and much remains open both empirically and theoretically.

In light of this we outline below, in the penultimate section of our discussion, how queer theory’s orientation towards ‘undoing’ heteronormative binaries can help organization studies scholars open up opportunities for ethical and political alternatives to organizations and organizing. With regard to the latter, we draw in particular on important aspects of queer theory that remain underdeveloped within organizational studies such as its ethic of openness to the Other, considering what this ethos might offer to the already more familiar tenets within queer theory such as the critical orientation towards ‘undoing’ heteronormative binaries considered thus far.

### **Towards a queer ethico-politics of openness**

Read more widely as a poststructuralist thinker, it is perhaps Judith Butler’s writing on subjectivity, politics and ethics that helps us to explore what form an ethics of openness to the Other might take, and to reconsider the potential merits for organizational scholars of engaging with the more phenomenological aspects of her writing, as these are manifest in an integrated queer politics and ethics. This is our aim in this part of our discussion, namely to develop the inroads outlined above in the direction of a consideration of the ethical and political potential of queer theory for studying how we ‘do’ organizations and, in doing so, how we might ‘undo’ them so as to do them differently. This is not to reduce queer theory to a toolkit as it were, but rather to extend the critical capacity of queering organizations, in order to analyse the ethical and political potential associated with doing so.

Through Butler’s writing in particular, queer can be discerned not as a political or even ethical position but rather an ontological premise based upon a recognition of our mutual corporeal vulnerability. This approach to queer is articulated most fully in Butler’s (2004b) essay on ‘Violence, Mourning and Politics’ in *Precarious Life*, in which she argues that

Each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies – as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of publicity at once assertive and exposed. Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure.

(Butler, 2004b: 20)

This ethics of relationality is grounded in queer theory’s concern with vulnerability and violence, framed theoretically in terms of the risk attached to exposing oneself to the Other,

manifest in the homophobia shaping the political content of the AIDS crisis discussed above. This risk is also apparent in the constant vigilance attached to fears around enforced ‘outing’ that shapes the everyday lives of LGBT people. In Butler’s hands, these risks are grounded in the phenomenological preoccupation with the desire for recognition of oneself as a viable subject. That our bodies are sites of publicity, ‘at once assertive and exposed’ means that in seeking recognition of ourselves as viable subjects, we are perpetually at risk of being subject to the violence brought about by misrecognition. As Butler herself puts it, emphasizing the mutual vulnerability engendered by our need for recognition, we stake a claim to recognition but simultaneously run the risk of misrecognition. Yet without taking this risk we cannot live a bearable life, one shaped by the sociality attached to mutual recognition and all that it promises. Or, to coin Butler’s words (2004b: 23), ‘we’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something.’

Here Butler invites us to think through the challenges for queer ethics and politics posed by a theoretical recognition of our mutual inter-dependency and the need for us to develop an openness to the Other based on a reflexive understanding of the constraints governing the conferral of recognition, and the consequences of its denial. By opening ourselves up to the Other, she reminds us that we both reaffirm our existence, and render ourselves vulnerable, yet our embodied way of being in the world means that we can simply do no other. Butler submits that, as she puts it, from our very beginning ‘we are given over to the Other’ rendering us vulnerable to the eradication of our being at one extreme, and the unfaltering physical support for our lives at the other. This basic inter-corporeal premise, the recognition that we are ‘given over’ to the Other constitutes what Butler (2004b: 31) describes as ‘the condition of primary vulnerability’ as the basis for ethics and politics; one that, we would argue, has considerable potential for thinking through an alternative queer ethico-politics of organizations.

In her own development of this position on inter-corporeal vulnerability into a distinctively queer ethics, Butler (2004b: 24) goes on to emphasize how it connects to her performative ontology of gender subjectivity: ‘as a mode of relation, neither gender nor sexuality is precisely a possession, but, rather, is a mode of being dispossessed, a way of being *for* another or another or *by virtue* of another’. However, Butler’s concern to develop an ethics of openness to the Other leads her to question the term ‘relationality’ as the basis for an integrated queer ethics and politics; for Butler, ‘we may need other language to approach the issue that concerns us, a way of thinking about how we are not only constituted by our relations but also dispossessed by them as well’ (Butler, 2004b: 24). With this in mind, the notion of a distinctively queer ethics, an ‘ec-static’ ethic, can be discerned in Butler’s concern to understand how our ethical compulsions and political impetus derive from being ‘beside oneself’, a way of being that follows from our embodied existence, one characterized by vulnerability and exposure to the Other.

Yet, as Butler herself also acknowledges, at the same time as recognizing this ec-static ethic, a queer politics must also proceed on the basis of a claim to bodily integrity and self-determination. In apparent contradiction to the ethical position outlined above therefore, is a parallel queer politics premised on the recognition that, as Butler (2004b: 25) articulates, ‘it is important to claim that our bodies are in a sense *our own* and that we are entitled to claim rights of autonomy over our bodies’. Reflecting on the consequences of this for a queer politics proceeding from a performative ontology of the subject and an Other-oriented ethos of openness, Butler (2004b: 25) concedes how ‘it is difficult, if not impossible, to make these claims without recourse to autonomy’. This political-ethical dilemma arguably characterizes queer theory, or indeed the normative aspirations of any social movement that seeks protection and freedom. Butler’s response is to reiterate how, in addition to autonomy, there exists ‘another normative aspiration that we

must also seek to articulate and to defend . . . a sense of ourselves as “in community”, impressed upon by others, impinging upon them as well’ (Butler, 2004b: 26–27).

This inter-corporeal ethics of openness to the Other, and its political implications for embedded autonomy enables Butler to reclaim an ethics–politics of relationality as a fundamental ontological–normative premise:

This way of imagining community affirms relationality not only as a descriptive or historical fact of our formation, but also as an ongoing normative dimension of our social and political lives, one in which we are compelled to take stock of our interdependence.

(Butler, 2004b: 27)

This basic vulnerability means that violence is always a risk, as is exploitation of this primary connection, one imposed upon us by the materiality of our existence; that we are physically dependent upon each other means that we are simultaneously physically vulnerable to one another. But Butler’s phenomenological ethics means that this is also the case ontologically: ‘we are, as bodies, outside ourselves and for one another’ (Butler, 2004b: 27). A queer political ethic therefore proceeds from recognition of ‘the fundamental sociality of embodied life’ (Butler, 2004b: 28), an ethical awareness of the ways in which we are ‘from the start and by virtue of being a bodily being, already given over, *beyond ourselves*, implicated in lives that are not our own’ (Butler, 2004b: 28). Recognition of this shared dispossession potentially leads to a normative reorientation of politics for Butler based on inter-corporeal vulnerability. However, as Butler emphasizes throughout her essays in *Precarious Life*, some of us are more vulnerable than others, precisely because we are all ‘implicated in lives that are not our own’ existing within social relations in which our collective responsibility for others becomes occluded. The constant foreclosure of a collective recognition of the mutual vulnerability engendered by our inter-corporeal dependency eradicates what for Butler is one of the most important resources from which we must take our bearings and find our way in the world. As such, a consideration of the vulnerability of others, and hence of ourselves, represents the means by which ‘we might critically evaluate and oppose the conditions under which certain human lives are more vulnerable than others’ (Butler, 2004b: 30).

Driving this queer ethic forwards is a concern to ask: at what cost do we establish the normative? Reconciling the mobilization of both autonomy and sociality referred to above therefore represents a considerable challenge, as queer demands a social world in which our vulnerability is protected without being eradicated, recognized without being co-opted, and forms the basis of what Butler (2004b: 151) describes, albeit rather idealistically, as a ‘sensible democracy’. Queer in this respect steers us away from an ethic of tolerance (putting up with the Other), as well as an ethic of generosity (giving oneself to the Other), ever mindful of the risks of appropriation, exploitation and normalization (Warner, 1999) associated with both strategies, towards an ethic of openness to the Other (being given over to the Other), premised upon a recognition of the artifice of ethical boundaries between oneself and others, and of the political consequences of those boundaries.

In this respect, the performative ontology and corresponding emphasis on a perpetual undoing considered above connects to the development of a queer ethics and politics. In Butler’s hands, this takes the form of a ‘petition’. That is, ‘when we ask for recognition for ourselves, we are not asking for an Other to see us as we are’ but rather our aim is ‘to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other’ (Butler, 2004b: 44). This version of ethics represents arguably a queer-infused Hegelian dialectic, a departure emphasizing not the sameness of the Other but, rather, our common vulnerability and collective

responsibility given that ‘we are outside ourselves, constituted in cultural norms that precede and exceed us, given over to a set of cultural norms and a field of power that condition us fundamentally’ (Butler, 2004b: 45). In practice, this implies a way of proceeding, of organizing ourselves and others, based upon this complex yet commonsensically appealing ethico-political imperative.

We illustrate this in Figure 28.1 in a photograph taken in a toilet situated in a bar on Manchester’s Canal Street in the UK (also known as the Village), adjacent to the Whitworth Memorial Gardens. The latter contain not only the Alan Turing memorial statue, but also the Beacon of Hope, a commemorative sculpture dedicated to those who have died as a result of HIV/AIDS-related illnesses, and the site of an annual candlelit vigil on World AIDS Day. The gardens also contain the world’s first memorial dedicated to those who have lost their lives as a result of transphobia. Alongside one edge of the gardens are a series of bars, clubs and restaurants along Canal Street where the message in the photograph was written on a toilet-roll holder.

Of course, encoded in this rather simple message might be an incitement towards the pursuit of shared sexual pleasure; its focus might be on maintaining a vigilant approach to sexual health, implicitly recommending the practising of so-called ‘safe sex’, or it might simply mean ‘take care of each other’. Whatever the thematic orientation of the message, its underlying ethico-political premise seems to be a recognition of mutual, inter-corporeal vulnerability within which we are each an other. This is suggested not simply by the meaning encoded into the message itself, but also in its materiality (its form, site and setting – on a toilet-roll holder, in a non-gender specific toilet, in a bar, in the gay village in a major city, next to a unique memorial



Figure 28.1 Toilet-roll holder graffiti

garden inviting contemplation, connection and, above all, community). Examples such as these emphasize to us how queer critique encourages an integrated ethics and politics that mobilizes opposition to oppression within organizational settings and, more fundamentally, with organization as an oppressive social process, one that rather than ‘looking after each other’ objectifies and exploits the Other.

## Concluding thoughts

As indicated at the outset of this chapter, its inherently critical orientation makes it not only difficult, but undesirable, to capture or categorize what it means to be or even do ‘queer’, with queer being associated variously with a cacophony of ideas at odds with whatever is deemed ‘normal’, the aim of which is to continually disrupt and disturb (Edelman, 2004; Hall, 2002; Halperin, 1995; Jagose, 1996). If it is anything fixed or fixable, queer represents a challenge to normatively prescriptive ways of being and doing characterized by a politics of parodic critique and an analytical orientation towards a perpetual process of ‘undoing’ (Butler, 2004a). This challenge to normativity is underpinned by a concern with destabilizing the ontological–epistemic schema that organizes the relationship between sexual and ontological desire heteronormatively, what Butler (1990) described as the ‘heterosexual matrix’ in her earlier writing. In this respect, queer’s recurring preoccupation is with disrupting how our need for pleasure, intimacy and connection is shaped by and shapes our corresponding need for recognition of ourselves as culturally intelligible and socially viable, beginning with understanding how one becomes an impediment to the other, and exploring the conditions of possibility that might enable this relationship to be ‘done’ differently. This critical imperative, combined with its opposition to categorical thinking means that queer problematizes a conventional separation of ethics and politics arguing instead for a mutually informed ethico–politics, not just a queer ethics but a queering of ethics, characterized by what Parker (2002a: 158) describes as an ‘attitude of unceasing disruptiveness and an openness to the other premised upon a mutual recognition of inter-corporeal vulnerability. While space has not allowed us to even begin to think through what this might mean for organizational life, for us this queering of ethics opens up the possibilities for us to explore how we might organize ourselves differently if we simply began to recognize that we are all each others.

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