



## **Guest Editorial: Cultural Analysis as Intervention**

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## Guest Editorial: Cultural Analysis as Intervention

*Astrid Pernille Jespersen, Morten Krogh Petersen, Carina Ren and Marie Sandberg*

*Increasingly, that world [of soft capitalism] is being constructed by business, and furthermore by a business that uses theory as an instrumental method, as a source of expertise and as an affective register to inform an everyday life that is increasingly built from that theory. Yet, still, too few social theorists seem willing to recognize that fact, or to consider what it might mean for the practice of social theory.*  
(Thrift, 2006: 301-2)

Recently, cultural analyses – especially ethnographic descriptions of everyday-life practices – seem to have found new audiences situated within what Nigel Thrift has termed ‘soft capitalism.’ As argued by Thrift (2006), soft capitalism (Thrift, 1997) is characterised by three features: a mobilisation of *affective knowledge* in order to create new encounters with increasingly empathetic commodities; an increased focus on *co-creation*, hereby bringing the consumer closer to these empathetic commodities; and the creation of *new active spaces* for thinking, relating, inventing and consuming. In this context, cultural analysis may be perceived as yet another instrumental method that is increasingly utilised to affect and engage consumers and encourage them to commit. Traditional and textual ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz, 1973) may remain interesting to only a limited academic audience, but private companies, public institutions and researchers

from disciplines that are far away from the producers of such ethnographic descriptions are voicing an interest in compressed, to-the-point depictions of everyday life (Cefkin, 2009; Vikkelsø, 2007). Why is that? How should we respond to this new interest? Are we to explain it through the framework of soft capitalism, or does cultural analysis perform a more critical role as a watchdog for cultural practices? And, in any case, how do encounters with new stakeholders, new demands and the connections within cultural analysis impact our understanding of what counts as a desired outcome of cultural-analytical work? By posing these questions, we address Thrift’s diagnosis and his appeal to practitioners of social theory to recognise our impact – or lack thereof – in the world of soft capitalism. We do so by bringing forth some of the more promising answers found in recent developments within social theory and cultural analysis.

Ethnography is increasingly perceived by businesses, organisations and industry as a key to producing surplus value due to its ability to gain access to the world of customers, users and citizens; for instance, by uncovering user demands (cf. Cefkin, 2009) that may often be unacknowledged (cf. Damsholt, 2011; see also von Hippel, 2005). Although the concept of applied anthropology is not new (Cefkin, 2009; O’Dell, 2011; Van Willigen, 2002), the growing appreciation of ethnography

and cultural analysis in the business and public sectors impacts how disciplines like anthropology and ethnology may perceive and promote themselves as experts and practitioners of cultural analysis. This begs the question of what cultural analysis can and ought to do – beyond the scope of acting as a witness for truth and delivering facts to a whole new genre of business empiricism – and how to avoid reducing ethnographically-based cultural analysis to a simple matter of methods. What does it entail if we are to more strategically engage with compressed, to-the-point depictions of everyday life while simultaneously appreciating it “as an activity interlinking a multiplicity of practices, theoretical perspectives, analytical movements, emotional processes, and representational forms” (O’Dell & Willim, 2011: 36)?

We find Thrift’s diagnosis accurate and thought-provoking; and with this special issue of *Science Studies*, our ambition is to address his call for a stronger engagement with soft capitalism and to probe the growing appetite for ethnographically-produced insights into intricate dimensions of everyday life, which we see as intertwined. To discuss the products and effects of cultural analysis, we introduce the concept of ‘intervention.’ By applying this concept, we first wish to draw upon and hopefully contribute to related discussions that are occurring within the field of STS (e.g. Zuiderent-Jerak & Jensen, 2007; Woolgar et al., 2009). A common denominator between STS and cultural analysis is the way in which both fields seek to handle a range of implications regarding recent transformations in “the fabric of capitalism” (Thrift, 2006: 279), and how they formulate and achieve desired outcomes. Therefore, we also use ‘intervention’ as a way to bridge discussions about entanglements with new actors, entities and agendas and to promote

a systematic cross-fertilisation between the fields of STS and cultural analysis.

The contributors to this special issue engage with the idea of intervention, not only by discussing it but also by operationalising pivotal aspects of intervention via ethnographically-informed studies. In the first article, Torben Elgaard Jensen discusses how new configurations of research positions and power relations emerge when social scientists and humanities researchers become involved as core participants in collaborative research and development projects. In the second article Brit Ross Winthereik and Helen Verran ask how ethnographic data can be utilised to strategically alter preconceptions about the phenomenon being studied. Finally, Anders Kristian Munk and Sebastian Abrahamsson investigate how the practicalities of research – such as defining which questions to ask and to whom – are entangled with and defined by the desired interventions and outcomes.

In the following sections of this introduction, we first depict broader changes in scientific governance and then describe the experiences gained by utilising cultural analysis to deal with these changes. An important insight here is that the cultural-analytical practice is not only about investigating complex matters by splitting them into smaller and ‘simpler’ parts; it is also about attempting to enact wholes into being – a point echoed in the three contributions. And if this is so, then we must make a decision about the kinds of wholes in which we as social researchers should engage. Drawing upon the work of Karen Barad (2007; 2003), we propose the idea of intra-vention as a way to capture this situation of performativity from within, and the composition of common worlds as the contributors’ response to employing cultural analysis within soft capitalism.

### **New Scientific Governance – New Bedfellows for Social- scientific Research**

Over the past few decades, political and administrative stakeholders have formulated a range of policies that attempt to more closely link science and society in order to foster a “mood for dialogue” (Elam & Bertilsson, 2003: 234) between scientists and a wide range of societal actors. These attempts may be seen as a reaction to the transformations in the capitalist mode of production as diagnosed by Thrift. If nations are to prosper, they need to engage with innovation, and one of the ways to arrive at this is by constructing closer links between science and society.

In formulating policies to achieve this goal, a central source of inspiration is the Mode 2 thesis put forth by Helga Nowotny, Michael Gibbons and their colleagues. In *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies* (Gibbons, Limoges et al., 1994), the authors argue that the traditional and discipline-based mode of knowledge production, Mode 1 – which takes place within homogeneous, academic communities – is unable to address the problems found in the modern world. The authors outline a Mode 2 form of knowledge production, wherein, by contrast, knowledge is “generated within its context of application” (Nowotny, Scott et al., 2003: 186). This multiplication of the sites and actors involved in the production of knowledge implies that “knowledge is being produced through a process of continuous negotiation of needs, interests and specifications of all the involved actors” (Jacob, 1997: 38; see also Barry & Born, 2010). Proponents of the Mode 2 thesis argue that the resulting products of knowledge are socially robust, meaning that they are not only achieved but also

recognised and considered useful by a broad and heterogeneous set of societal actors (Gibbons, 1999; Jacob, 1997: 37). Hence, this kind of knowledge production serves as a public good (Jacob, 1997: 37).

The impact of the Mode 2 thesis is widely debated. Some researchers, for instance, claim that an important discursive move towards Mode 2 is already apparent in policies of scientific governance, but that a dramatic, concrete influence on scientific practices has yet to be seen (e.g., Irwin, 2006). However, our concern here is that, with these attempts to establish means for the production of socially robust knowledge, an increased interest in understanding the relations between science and society must follow. What kinds of challenges does society expect science to handle? Or, in a more direct sense: what does a given corporation or public-sector organisation need from the social sciences in order to prosper? Such questions are often bandied about at political, corporate and administrative levels, and answers have been sought via the implementation of political programmes. In a Danish context, the Danish Council for Strategic Research “seeks to ensure that strategic research in Denmark is organised to meet the challenges facing Danish society”<sup>1</sup>. It does so by encouraging public-private collaboration and demanding that research projects focus on how to do things better. Another Danish programme, User-Driven Innovation<sup>2</sup>, also encourages collaboration between research institutions, public-sector organisations and private corporations to explore how user studies and involvement can promote industrial growth. Finally, by providing financial support, the Danish Industrial PhD Programme<sup>3</sup> attempts to create a mutually beneficial dialogue between doctoral researchers, universities and companies, and to produce researchers who possess skills and competencies that

are valuable both within and outside of academia.

What these programmes do, first of all, is broaden the arenas for knowledge production, including its context of application and its accountability. Second, they engage social scientists and humanities researchers in the collaborative research projects promoted by such programmes. As a consequence, these researchers have found new bedfellows, including researchers from the natural sciences, business owners, designers and civil servants. These broader developments have necessitated practitioners of cultural analysis to explicitly convey what they do and what their contributions are. Such an explanation is also attempted in the next section, where we suggest that cultural-analytical work is not only about breaking down components into separate parts, as in the traditional understanding of analysis; this work is also about enacting new entities and realities into being, which is further reflected in the three contributions.

### **Cultural-analytical Effects**

One implication of performing cultural analysis in the context of soft capitalism has been an increased awareness of the effects of cultural analyses and their sites of implementation. The notion of 'double' cultural analysis that has surfaced within ethnology is a good example of this, due to its specific ability to reflect on and engage with applied and collaborative cultural analysis. The concept implies that "attention is directed towards not only the field and the everyday life upon which the cultural analysis seeks to gain insight, but also towards the circumstances and the contexts [of sites and stakeholders] in which these insights are supposed to be implemented" (Damsholt, 2011: 58; translated by the authors). Similarly,

Holmes and Douglas (2006) suggest the term 'para-ethnography', which indicates that "the traditional subjects of study have developed something like an ethnography of both their own predicaments and those who have encroached on them" (quoted from Cefkin, 2009: 9).

Para-ethnography and double cultural analysis are attempts to do ethnographies both for and of the involved corporations, businesses and public and governmental organisations. They highlight that, in analysing the effects and implications of implementing innovations, it is not enough to focus on the everyday life of the users. In order to render the cultural-analytical insights sustainable, one must also reflect upon the practices and rationales of the stakeholders and organisations involved (Damsholt, 2011: 57). But how do the strategies of double cultural analysis and para-ethnography refrain from merely adding more descriptions to the world? As suggested by Cefkin (2009), cultural analysis can be regarded as being able to flexibly interpret or otherwise span different spheres of public and corporate life, thus mediating between academia and society. Following Law and Singleton (2005), one might also see cultural-analytical practices as being comprised of ontological tools that act things into being. In the following, we elaborate on this thought by proposing analysis as the practices that compose or bring forth new (and better?) worlds.

The usual understanding of the term 'analysis' is the resolution or deconstruction of something complex into its basic elements. We wish to highlight another aspect of its etymological origin; namely, analysis as a loosening or releasing<sup>4</sup>. We may compare this loosening or releasing to a ship being unmoored or an airplane taking off - although it should not be mistaken as a form of 'free floating' or any kind of non-material condition. Cultural-analytical

work is performed through a very material and meticulous organisation and ordering of heterogeneous (ethnographic) entities (Law, 2002). What becomes loosened however, is the researcher's usual gaze – the familiar and well-known terrain and ingrown practices by which we approach our field of study. This loosening constitutes an attempt to enact new realities into being. In the following, we present three separate takes: using the *kitchen entrance* of culture; *handling complexity*; and *tilting*. These three takes depict what we find illustrative to demonstrate the performativity of cultural-analytical research practices.

The idea of using the 'kitchen entrance' of culture for new sense-making was introduced by ethnologists Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren (2006). This approach entails paying attention to the seemingly insignificant trivialities of everyday life, such as our morning routines, our ways of daydreaming and the things we do while waiting in line (Ehn & Löfgren, 2010). To pay attention to the seemingly insignificant implies an acknowledgement of the micro-processes of everyday life as they involve larger issues. Everyday routines are analysed as a cultural battleground where categories such as class, ethnicity, age and gender are contested. Importantly, the kitchen-entrance strategy has no interest in the psychological individual; rather, it searches for cultural patterns in everyday practices. Perhaps it is because of the perceived ability of the cultural analyst to use this cultural kitchen entrance – and to construct specific applied knowledge within this context – that s/he is invited to work more and more with private and public-sector organisations to help them “understand how the answers to their problems can be found in culture” (O'Dell & Willim, 2011: 70; Cefkin, 2009; Metcalfe, 2001). This interest in finding answers in the culture of everyday life and routines is further elaborated on

in Elgaard Jensen's contribution. There, he is concerned with how such 'kitchen entrance' knowledge is utilised in user-driven innovation processes.

The second analytical take is a non-reductionist handling of the complexity inherent in the empirical phenomena under scrutiny. In the introduction to *Complexities*, John Law and Annemarie Mol propose that complexity should be studied in practice (Law & Mol, 2002). This implies that we must pay attention to the messiness, the entanglements and the 'said and done' without reducing them to simple models or adding even more complexity. The ambition is to go beyond a dichotomous understanding of the 'simple' and the 'complex'. According to Law and Mol, simplicity and complexity are not opposites but each other's prerequisites. Therefore, the challenge for cultural analysis is to recognise and describe complexity without rejecting the possibility of generalisations and analytical abstractions. The contribution by Munk and Abrahamsson elaborates on how this particular pursuit enables a cultural analysis that produces abstractions of a different order. Accomplishing this task requires a strategic reflexivity and an engagement to make the ethnographic descriptions “do a more abstract job than 'merely' accounting for specificities” (Munk and Abrahamsson in this issue).

The third analytical take that attempts to loosen and become engaged in enacting new realities into being is done by changing vantage points to see things in new ways. This take may be extrapolated from Winthereik and Verran's contribution in which they describe cultural analysis as a bodily experience of *tilting over*. The authors make use of Bruno Latour's (2001) analysis of the painting *The Ambassadors* (1533) in which a peculiar brown-coloured object forces the viewer to lean over in order to make sense of it. Through a holographic trick, a

skull is revealed and the whole painting is thus reconfigured. Winthereik and Verran suggest that the physical move from one vantage point to another encourages new insights. The cultural analysis exemplifies 'tilting' as a way to strategically look for and analyse 'skull-like elements' in our field of study and our empirical material. By turning well-known territory upside down, new realities can be enacted into being.

### **Intervention – or Intra-vention**

In a special issue of *Science as Culture* about the interventions of social research, Zuiderent-Jerak and Jensen (2007) suggest a strategy of 'unpacking' the idea of intervention by empirically scrutinising the ways in which social research engages with concrete practices of different sorts, such as the practices of authorities or policymakers. By this unpacking through detailed empirical scrutiny, they seek to overcome the dichotomy between descriptive and normative research enterprises that has greatly informed the debate on the interventions and usefulness of social research (cf. Markussen, 1996). Zuiderent-Jerak and Jensen introduce the notion of 'ethics of specificity' by which they point to their "hopes for enhancing sensitivity to the ways in which research strategies and practices interact and mutate in the field, and enabling researchers to take seriously the theoretical, practical and political consequences of such ongoing transformations" (Zuiderent-Jerak & Jensen, 2007: 232). While we are sympathetic towards such an ethics of specificity, we also wish to push ethical issues of locatedness and situatedness in a more operational direction. We suggest that certain patterns are discernible as research strategies and practices interact and mutate in the field as stated above.

In order to identify and grasp such patterns, we take analytical inspiration from the concepts of 'apparatus' and 'agential cuts' developed by Karen Barad (2003; 2007). In accordance with the term 'ethics of specificity', agential cuts are situated and made from within, which means that there is no outside position where agential cuts exist or from where they can be made (cf. Haraway, 1991; Latour, 2004; Law, 2004). Furthermore – and central to our purpose here – agential cuts depend upon apparatuses as the material-discursive conditions of possibility for how cuts can be made. Apparatuses should be understood broadly: they can be experimental laboratory set-ups, but also a coral reef, a barrier island or, as we propose here, cultural analysis. Barad draws upon physicist Niels Bohr's principle of complementarity, which states that light can be measured as either a particle or a wave, but never simultaneously and never via the same laboratory set-up; Barad uses this idea to argue that specific apparatuses perform specific cuts, and also that "[c]uts cut 'things' together and apart" (Barad, 2007: 179). In a similar way, Barad's notion of intra-vention stresses that there is no outside position from which to intervene. Additionally, specific apparatuses are comprised of specific cuts that are mutually exclusive. Furthermore, these apparatuses not only cut things apart but also perform new realities in patterned ways.

If cultural analysis and other knowledge practices are viewed as different apparatuses – that is, as material-discursive practices effecting agential cuts – and if our goal is to come to grips with the inevitable intra-acting nature of research, then it becomes crucial to describe the characteristics of such contemporary apparatuses. What kinds of agential cuts are enabled? What, if any, are the patterns of these apparatuses? Are some apparatuses promoted at the expense of others, and with what implications? By

looking at the contemporary apparatuses of cultural analysis and the related knowledge practices that are discerned and described in the three articles here, we notice that they all call for apparatuses that can participate in the composition of common worlds. We elaborate on this point in the following introduction to the three articles.

### Introduction to the Articles

For the past few decades, a concern about not being heard has often been voiced within STS and its related social-scientific fields. In his contribution, 'Intervention by Invitation: New Concerns and New Versions of the User in STS', Torben Elgaard Jensen takes another point of departure; namely, that a growing number of STS researchers are being invited to join collaborative research and development projects. He argues that the relevant questions to ask in light of this change are: how do STS researchers contribute when they agree to participate in collaborative research and development projects? And what kind of results do these contributions produce? With reference to Latour's 'Compositionist Manifesto' (Latour, 2010), Elgaard Jensen develops the concept of 'compositionist effects' in order to capture the results of such collaborations.

Elgaard Jensen's empirical case is a sizable Danish policy programme titled *The Program for User-Driven Innovation*. The purpose of the programme is to turn user-driven innovation into a core, national competency by providing financial support to multidisciplinary and multi-sector projects that attempt to involve users in the development of new products and/or solutions. The assumption is that this will give Denmark a competitive advantage in the global economy. Elgaard Jensen analyses three concrete projects undertaken within the framework of this programme, focusing

on how the programme's ideas about the user combine with the researchers' notions about the user as developed in the field of STS. By examining how this mixing and matching of ideas about the user happens in the concrete practices of these projects, Elgaard Jensen concludes that the STS researchers in these projects act as a middle-managers, mediating between users and companies. This is the new and novel intervention at stake in these projects. Elgaard Jensen ends his article by proposing the concept of 'intervention-as-composition' as a way to capture and further explore the results of such collaborative projects.

In their article, 'Ethnographic Stories as Generalizations that Intervene', Brit Ross Winthereik and Helen Verran explore the interventionist potential of ethnographic stories. In doing so, they concretise and operationalise a central point in Donna Haraway's 'Cyborg Manifesto'; namely, that the cyborg world is simultaneously about final abstraction and lived social and bodily realities. The cyborg world – and the ethnographic stories it is capable of producing – is about (at least) two different logics of generalisation: "[a] *one-many* form that enables abstracting, and a *whole-parts* generalization that brings with it a situating moment" (Winthereik and Verran in this issue). The authors' goal is to make ethnographers of science and technology aware of these two logics of generalisation, and to enable a more active and strategic engagement with them. Through a specific fieldwork note about the production of accountability in an environmental NGO, Winthereik and Verran show how we as ethnographers can make sense of our empirical material differently when we utilise logics of generalisation. As a result, hopefully, we can tell stories that surprise and which, through this surprising effect,



could work as generative stories for both academic and non-academic audiences.

What are the desirable outcomes of a given study within the field of STS? What is a desirable intervention? And how can it be achieved in the practicalities of research? In their article 'Empiricist Interventions: Strategy and Tactics on the Ontopolitical Battlefield', Anders Kristian Munk and Sebastian Abrahamsson delineate and discuss two different views on these questions as formulated in recent papers by Bruno Latour and John Law (Law, 2009; Latour, 2010). Utilising military lingo and crystallising the positions outlined in these papers, Munk and Abrahamsson argue that an empirical scholar who treats analysis as intervention needs to make a choice between "unit[ing] under the compositionist banner, or join[ing] the guerrilla of ontological interferences" (Munk and Abrahamsson in this issue). Drawing upon the authors' respective doctoral research projects, the article demonstrates how a choice between these two positions has implications for which questions a researcher asks, what investigative techniques are utilised and, finally, how the researcher handles the descriptive accounts that are produced. The article calls for a greater awareness of how questions are kept open with a specific goal in mind, how a 'good' description is always 'good' in relation to a specific interventionist imperative, and how abstraction of specificities is a prerequisite if we want our descriptions to have an effect. Consequently, this contribution urges us towards a greater strategic reflexivity with regard to the question about the overall purpose and effect of our research endeavours, and in terms of how we as researchers can partake in crafting a more liveable common world.

In conclusion, these three contributions all suggest that – in order to recognise and consider what social theory and research

practices are and what they can do when situated within soft capitalism, as Thrift urges us to do – we must get involved in creating different compositions of common worlds. Such common worlds can be described as the patterned effect that the contributions to this special issue attempt to achieve.

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## Notes

- 1 <http://en.fi.dk/councils-commissions/the-danish-council-for-strategic-research>; accessed 25.01.2012.
- 2 [www.brugerdreveninnovation.dk](http://www.brugerdreveninnovation.dk); accessed 25.01.2012.
- 3 [www.erhvervsphd.dk](http://www.erhvervsphd.dk); accessed 25.01.2012.
- 4 <http://www.etymonline.com>; accessed 25.01.2012.