Chapter 2
Theorizing Sociomaterial Practices:
Gilbert Simondon’s Theory of Individuation

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ABSTRACT

The recent interest in sociomaterial practices and forms of imbrication of social and material resources in, for example, studies of the use of information technology and information systems in organizations, has called for new theoretical developments to enact and fully understand materiality. This chapter examines the work of French philosopher Gilbert Simondon as an important, yet to date little explored resource in organization studies. Following Orlikowski’s call for a relational ontology apprehending the enfolding of materiality and social resources, Simondon’s analytical framework, which includes key concepts such as individual-tion, transduction, and relations, is presented. The chapter contributes to the recent debates regarding how to theorize and examine material resources such as information and communication technologies used in organizations.

INTRODUCTION

It seems that ‘constructivism’ is passé, the linguistic turn has reached a dead end and a rhetoric of materiality is almost obligatory. -Nikolas Rose (2013: 4)

This article aims to introduce the work of Gilbert Simondon as an important and still to date largely unexplored resource in the recent interest for materiality and

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its relations in organization studies. The works of Simondon are only translated in parts into English, and the secondary literature is dispersed, but Simondon offers a genuinely original theoretical framework for the understanding of both technological artifacts and biological organisms. Simondon’s contribution to a materialist theory would be useful for organization researchers being concerned about the role of e.g., information technology and information systems.

The study of information technology and information systems has from the very outset been based on an understanding of the distinction between the artifact, the hardware (Orlikowski and Iacono, 2001), and abstract, intangible resources such as data (Frandsen, 2009; Thacker, 2003), information (Kallinikos, 2006; Ciborra, 2002), code (Galloway, 2006; Ullman, 1997), and protocols (Galloway, 2004; Galloway and Thacker, 2007), and how the two resources constitute and mutually stabilize one another. In addition, Kallinikos, Aaltonen, and Marton (2013: 358) suggest that what they refer to as “digital artifacts” such as homepages, computer games, mp3-files, etc. are “ontologically ambivalent” inasmuch as they are (1) editable, i.e., they are “pliable” and always possible, at least in principle, “to modify and update continuously and systematically,” (2) interactive, providing “alternative pathways along which human agents can activate functions embedded in the object, or explore the arrangement of underlying information forms” (Kallinikos, Aaltonen, and Marton, 2013: 358), (3) accessible through the means of other digital objects, and (4) distributed and are thus “seldom contained within a single source or institution.” (Kallinikos, Aaltonen, and Marton, 2013: 360). Under normal conditions, the composite nature of IT/IS is concealed for the user as the technologies serve the role of what Star (1999) calls infrastructures (see e.g., Halavais, 2009; Galloway and Thacker, 2007), that is, as long as they work as intended, the technological systems are “invisible to the user” (Ribes and Bowker, 2009: 204).

In order to understand this “ontological ambivalence” of information technology, scholars need to abandon social constructivist and constructivist theories, Kallinikos (2006) suggests, echoing Rose’s (2013) recent claim that constructionism is becoming unfashionable. Such theories deliver, in Kallinikos (2006: 144) formulation, “a rather trivial message.” This rejection of constructivist framework does however not imply that anything that can be treated as being “social” in nature should be abandoned. Instead, Kallinikos (2006: 144) suggests, “social agents are not disembodied sprits; instead, they are complex ensembles of skills, proclivities, and roles, some of which are brought into being by technology itself.” In addition, the technology these social agents employ is not just an “[e]xterior force that encroaches upon local, technologically ‘unspoiled’ contexts”; instead, most of the time, “technology partakes in the constitution of local contexts and agents,” Kallinikos (2006: 144) says (see also Kallinikos, 2009; Cousins and Robey, 2005). Elsewhere, Kallinikos
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