Communicative Property

Capitalism at an interdisciplinary crossroads

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This document contains the first chapter of *Communicative Property*. You can access the full book or purchase a print version here:

https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003502371

To Benjamin. We’re lucky to have each other.

Acknowledgements

I have been meaning to write this book ever since I defended my dissertation, in 2012. Fifteen years have passed, during which I've been tinkering with the concepts of property and possession, and trying to figure out their connection to communication and relationality. In that time, I've lived in Paris, in New York City, in Albany, NY, and then back in Montreal. Throughout the years, I have received lots of support and benefited from continued dialogue with many friends and colleagues. My role has mostly consisted in taking many notes and then putting them in order to produce a coherent text, which you now have in your hands (or on your screen). The many encouragements and insights that I received, but also the fact that I've matured as a scholar, have completely transformed the project. It is, of course, impossible to list all those whose contribution is included in this volume, in one way or another. I apologize in advance if I forget to mention your name.

While this book does not directly result from my dissertation, I would like to thank my PhD advisors, François Cooren and Bruno Latour. They allowed me, at the time, to explore a concept that fascinated me and to write a dissertation that was far from the expected format. I am also grateful to the other members of my committee—Brian Massumi, Fabian Muniesa, Dominique Boullier, and Didier Debaise—for having agreed to bestow upon me the title of doctor despite the obvious shortcomings of my work. I regret that Bruno left us before I was able to complete this book—I wrote it while always imagining what he would have thought of each of my paragraphs. François, on his part, deserves extra thanks, since he also acted as my editor, and revised many drafts of my manuscript. In his case, I did not need to imagine his voice, and I enjoyed all our conversations regarding this project.

I must thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, as well as the Fonds de recherche du Québec – Société et Culture, for their financial support throughout the years. This book contains the sum of all the experience and knowledge I've gained through the many projects the two funding agencies made possible. I also appreciate the support I received from Université TÉLUQ, in terms of funding but especially in letting me take a one-year sabbatical that finally gave me the time to do more than daydream and get to writing.

Special gratitude is due to Birte Asmuß, who welcomed me for several weeks at Aarhus BSS' Department of Management in 2024, and gave me not only all the conditions to work on this book, but most importantly her friendship. Many members of the department also provided me with useful feedback when I presented to them chapters of this book.

It goes without saying that this book would not have seen the day of light without the many discussions I've had with my academic community in Montreal and around the world. I am lucky that there are so many of you that I cannot name each one, but you know who you are. I am glad that you are all so kind and generous to each other.

Finally, none of this would have been possible without the continuous cheering of my family. Danuta, Mohammed, Giliane, Jean-Marie, Mireille, Joël, Raphaël, Émilie, Justin, Camille, Hubert and Alicia, you are all beacons in my life. Benjamin, thank you for being so wonderful; you are my most prized possession.

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Chapter 1. Reintroducing Property, the Overlooked Concept

> "[People] live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common."
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> – Dewey (1916, p. 1)

The renowned communication researcher George Gerbner remarked that "if Marx were alive today, his principal work would be entitled *Communications* rather than *Capital*" (Gerbner, 1983, p. 358). Gerbner was writing in the early 1980s and there is no doubt that, today, communication technology and practices occupy an even more central role in our relationships at home and at work, and are crucial to our production and labor processes. We live at a time when some workers do not have human managers but obey, instead, algorithms: that is the case of your driver whenever you hop on an Uber or of your delivery person whenever you order sushi on GrubHub (see for instance Bucher et al., 2021). Authors like the political theorist Jodi Dean (2005) and the communication researcher Dennis Mumby (2018) use the term "communicative capitalism" to refer to the centrality of media and discourse in the way neoliberal capitalism reproduces itself, but also how it can be resisted.

For Dean, the Left, especially in the US, tends to accept a dominant discourse that positions it as defeated and as a victim of politics. For the political theorist, a combination of factors, including a rise in consumerism, individualism and victimization, form the basis for a new communicative capitalism that prevents the articulation of a proper political discourse of resistance. That new form of capitalism is supported by social networks and new technologies that reduce political discourse to the expression of individual opinions, preferences and feelings. In that sense, communicative capitalism replaces reasoned dialogue with an ineffectual expressivity.

Mumby (2018), for his part, argues that in the era of communicative capitalism, the production of value proceeds through symbols and signs, as part of branding processes. He suggests the term "communicative organization of capitalist production" to refer to this new form of organizing labor, where businesses outsource the production of products as such, and specialize instead on producing meanings that consumers inhabit. This has reached the point that agents now define themselves based on their "brand," which is true of for-profit businesses, but also of non-profits and causes, as well as of individuals—think of the career coach encouraging you to summarize your contribution to your potential employer into a slogan, or of the time you spend curating your social media accounts. In his earlier work, Mumby (1998) also highlighted the way capitalism and power insinuate themselves in everyday work relations through interactions and the stories we tell each other, and through which we make sense of organizational reality. He invites us, among other things, to be suspicious of discursive closure and of the naturalizing effects of communication, which may contribute to normalizing unfair social positions, exploitive relations, and specific power distributions. In doing so, Mumby echoes the work of Stanley Deetz (1992), whose research has pointed out that the way our theorizing of communication, by failing to take into account power issues, has prevented us from observing the increasing place corporations have taken in the public sphere and in collective decision making, thus effectively eroding democracy. Deetz notes that democracy and representation should not be of concern only on the occasion of rare political events such as elections, but everyday preoccupations, starting within corporations, where individual differences should be expressed to elicit new forms of representation.

The Austrian communication theoretician Christian Fuchs (2020), for his part, highlights communication's recursive role in constituting society. He writes that, "Through everyday communication, humans (re)produce social structures that (re)produce societal structures that enable, condition, and constrain further communication processes in everyday life" (p. 85). Communication is at once productive in itself—it constitutes relations, structures and systems—and allows the cooperation that makes production possible. In making that distinction between two facets of communication's productivity, Fuchs is echoing the German sociologist Horst Holzer (2018) who, in his 1975 *Theory of Television*, suggested that communication both mediates human beings' relationship to nature (and their ability to dominate the latter) and enables debates among human beings, through which they constitute the relationship through which they build society. For Fuchs, communication's mediating role means that human beings are never in quite direct contact with either nature or each other, and entails that communication, but also capitalistic social relations and production, can continue even if individual workers die or leave; they can simply be replaced, and communication can go on, as an autonomous process.

Yet, despite communication researchers' engagement with capitalism, they tend to leave aside one of the key notions that drive our economic system: property. What is property? That's a good question, which we will answer throughout the book. For the moment, we can hang on to our intuitive sense of it. One useful distinction we can already hint at is the one between possession and property. Most dictionary definitions of possessions are recursive, referring the reader to ownership, which in turn refers them to possession. We can provisionally define it as the ability to use or benefit from something. When I say that I possess—or, more simply, have—an umbrella, what I mean is that I can use it if it starts raining. I have a cat because I benefit from its presence and cuddles. Property, for its part, is defined by some—such as the American philosopher William James (1890)—as the assurance that I will continue being able to use or benefit from what I possess. It ensures that others, especially the authorities, will support me should anyone try to prevent me from doing so. When such assurance by the authorities of continued possession becomes the only legitimate way of possessing anything, then we open the door to letting those in power decide who can have what.

In that sense, Deetz briefly recognizes that private property is a factor in the process of corporate colonization. He remarks that capitalist discourse has normalized the fact that those who own private property can have their interests represented, at the exclusion of others. The author thus extends the invitation to better acknowledge that other people, groups, and interests must also be represented. This is also the case within the corporation, which, through its private ownership, falls outside the province of democracy.

The book that you hold in your hands—or read on your screen—takes up Deetz' invitation and seeks to critically engage with the notion of property, from a genuinely communicative perspective. Property is too important a mechanism of capitalism to be reserved for economists and legal scholars. In fact, the argument I will be making is that property is not only central to capitalism, but to the very way people interact with each other and act together through organizations and through other social institutions. To disentangle property from capitalism, though, we must define it otherwise and stop restricting it to its economic and legal understandings.

In fact, and as the legal scholar Davina Cooper (2007) writes, even when we know who legally has property over something, we routinely disregard such understandings of property and replace them with situated, relational practices. To resituate those practices in a legal framework, we would need a complex "combination of leases and licenses" (p. 634) that have little relevance until so serious a conflict emerges that we might end up in court, which is thankfully rare. Many of my friends have a key to my house and know—through our personal history and through social convention, rather than through legal exegesis—when it is appropriate to use it. I joke with my former roommate that, even though we haven't lived together for over twenty years, I still haven't given her back her Super Nintendo console, which she keeps lending me anew each time. The fact is that, in everyday life, we *do* property relations in many nuanced ways, and we do not continuously get the state involved in those relations. As the American sociologist Amitai Etzioni (1991) remarked, property is at once cultural and very real. In mundane performances of property, a whole gamut of what owning means reveals itself: "… property interests blur into nonpropertied ones, that is, into relations of belonging that may be recognized but not formally protected, protected but scarcely empowered, or where rights and permissions over spaces and things are based on relations of membership rather than prior possession" (Cooper, 2007, p. 637).

Some authors, though, have attempted to restrict what can be meant by property, especially when considering (right-wing) economics. According to thinkers attempting to give a varnish of intellectual legitimacy to neoliberalism, *private* property would be necessary because it is only when people have a secure interest in a given resource that will invest their time in making it flourish. Said otherwise, unless someone owns something, then they will make no effort to tend to it and ensure that it develops. This is the argument that, among others, the Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto, has developed in his book *The Other Path* (1989): poverty in Lima, his country's capital, could be solved, according to him, by giving property deeds to people living in shanty towns. Presenting the results of surveys taken at different stages of an experiment to that effect, he claims that this way, shanty town inhabitants would not need to stay there to protect their houses and would be free to go find employment elsewhere, since the authorities would be on their side should there be anyone claiming it instead of them. They would also be incentivised to take care of their property, which, if properly taken care of, would become an asset that could be, for instance, mortgaged or resold with a profit.

The argument of de Soto makes sense, doesn't it? It does—on the condition that we accept as premises the very conclusions that de Soto and other neoliberal authors pretend to reach with their research and experiments. The political theorist Tim Mitchell (2005, 2008) notes that the Peruvian economist's defense of property rights in fact ignores many possible explanations for the improvement of shanty town inhabitants' quality of life (such as the fact that the Peruvian government in fact had abandoned de Soto's idea and switched to subsidising low-income mortgages, whose impact is not singled out in the economist's findings) and supposes that only the property deeds made a difference. The problem is deeper, though, than just a series of oversights in a study. As Mitchell (2005, p. 304) writes, what's at stake is that the societies we live in were entirely constructed to make de Soto's allegations, and those of his peers, sound true: "It is an establishing of facts carried out in a world that has been organized to make it possible for economic knowledge to be made." In particular, we could ask why the authorities will only defend against squatters those who have legal property deeds or why the latter are the only ones to whom banks will lend mortgages.

What this book will suggest is that it is because, so far, we have been defining property tautologically: the state will back property owners and the banks will lend to them because, exactly, "property" means that the state will defend them and that banks will lend to them (and use their state-backed property as collateral). The legal scholar Carol Rose (2015) acknowledges the tautological nature of property's mainstream definitions, writing that "The truth is that legal definitions of possession largely refer back to legality itself" (p. 60). This means that what de Soto suggested was a form of self-prophetic thinking, a fact that sociologists of economics did not fail to note. A series of crucial academic publications have been pointing out that economic theory is "performative," a term used in this context to refer to the fact that researchers in economic departments and institutes do not describe people's naturally-occurring behavior, as other social scientists do (or allege to be doing, at least), but rather prescribe or even "provoke" the behaviors that people *should* adopt for (neoliberal) economic theory to be true (Callon & Muniesa, 2005; MacKenzie, 2008; Muniesa, 2014). Think of the way economists are invited on television shows to tell you that you should invest when interest rates are high and buy real estate when they are low. Such advice is not necessarily bad, but what is interesting is that many others—from real estate agents to mutual fund managers—are counting on the fact that you will do just what you are being suggested, to make their own predictions and planning come true.

The performativity of economics, including through the tautological definition of property, is thus not entirely accidental. As Jodi Dean notes, the main role of the neoliberal state is "to provide an institutional framework for markets, establishing rights of property and contract" (J. Dean, 2005, p. 51). Coaxing people into behaving according to economic theory is also a way of making sure that those who know how to play the game can benefit from it. As the historian Kenneth Dean and the philosopher Brian Massumi (1992) succinctly put it, "The more the law striates, the smoother things flow." In that sense, Mitchell (2008, p. 13) recognizes that "[a]ssets are held without formal property relations for good reasons, such as a desire to avoid the threat of dispossession." He notes that prior experience in Egypt—a region of which Mitchell is a specialist—with schemes similar to de Soto's, have shown that all they tend to promote real estate speculation, thus benefiting "privileged members of this generation at the expense of the poor of this and future generations."

As we will see in the next chapters of this book, dispossession is possible on the condition that things are made appropriable, meaning that they are formatted in such a way that they fit into the categories of neoliberal property (see Echo-Hawk, 2010; Nichols, 2020). In other words, from the moment you start thinking in terms of the conventional understanding of property, then you lend yourself to having your possessions bought, stolen or otherwise appropriated by others. That is why sociologist David Madden and urban planner Peter Marcuse (2024) write, when discussing the causes of the housing crises that many large cities around the world are experiencing, that "those seeking to turn houses into liquid assets are creating problems for those who merely want to live in them" (p. 50). The solution, for the two authors, is not to print more property deeds, as de Soto had suggested, but to strive "towards decommodification" of housing. Said otherwise, we should stop thinking of some basic resources, such as people's homes, as merely property to be bought and sold—for a profit.

But—economists would object—how can we hope to get people to care for resources that do not belong to them? Without property, and without the promise of (financial) reward that it offers (at the resale of the good or as a collateral for a loan), why would anyone bother making any effort? Such arguments are usually accompanied with anecdotes of negligent tenants devastating apartments and admonitions against freeloader neighbors damaging borrowed tools rather than buying their own. It seems that human beings are too selfish to care for anything else besides their own property, and therefore what economists provide us may be a self-prophetic system, but it is one that we cannot do without. The development of such an argument is not surprising, given the close connection between the history of property as a concept and that of selfhood. That said, it is not the only way of understanding the connection between the two ideas.

1.1. Is property selfish?

How often do we hear someone say that our society is individualistic? The perfunctory lament works for any society—it seems that individualism has seeped every region of the world. "People only think about themselves," the refrain goes. In 2009, American political scientist Elinor Ostrom won a Nobel prize in economics for her work on the so-called "tragedy of the commons." She brought to the forefront the question of why anyone should care about resources that are held in common or that do not belong to anyone at all. This is the case with the natural environment: Why not just throw your old sofa in the nearby woods? Or you waste in the river? Doing so makes sense if you focus on your own house—you can now bring in that new sofa and you're saving on plumbing costs—and since no-one owns the woods or the river, there will be no complaint. It's what economists refer to as *externalities*: you're moving the problem from the inside of your house (or your organization) to the outside. If everyone did the same, though, the situation would quickly become unbearable. You wouldn't want to live next to a dump and open-air sewage. However, if each person cares only about their own property, and there is no-one to care for common property or land that belongs to nobody, then who gets to say what can or cannot be discarded in nature, literally and metaphorically?

For Ostrom, new modes of governance need to be conceived to manage common resources. She uses the example of over-fishing: each individual fishing boat wants to capture as much fish as possible, but if all of them actually did so, then they would deplete the resource. That is what has happened, among other places, in Newfoundland, Canada, where a moratorium on cod fishing had to be instated in 1992, after severe mismanagement of the resource led to its overfishing. The moratorium was only lifted in June 2024. To avoid such situations, different options have been suggested through time, including fishing quotas for each vessel, short fishing seasons, and protected areas (such as those where the fish spawn). Those rules would be implemented either by governments or by non-profit organizations dedicated to managing the resource in question.

Those mechanisms, in effect, allow coordinating between individual action and collective action. Individual action is naturally selfish (or so the argument goes), and therefore reconciling it with a common good requires sophisticated procedures. Such mechanisms, then, are ways of dealing with the assumption that social theory makes—that individuals exist separately from the structures that contain them. As a result, each side of the equation is considered a substance that, for Danish social theorist Elke Weik (2011), "stands for itself, by itself, and has to be (causally) re-linked, which takes a major theoretical effort" (p. 658). A lot of ink has indeed been expended on trying to make the connection between the so-called "micro" and the "macro," and to explain how individual behavior can "scale up" (see Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009). This is not, however, only a "theoretical" effort, but also a practical one. Various systems and contraptions are put in place to align individual goals and collective ones in the case of the management of natural resources, but also when it comes to motivating people to contribute to organizational action. If the same assumption is made about workers—that they only care about themselves—then some trick must be found to reconcile their self-interest with the organization's mission. Among the more recent of those tricks, efforts at gamification suggest creating systems, such as smartphone apps, to enable a person to play a game that brings them immediate gratification, while making them accomplish tasks that benefit the greater whole, namely the company that they do not own. Another solution, favored when it comes to the remuneration of top executives such as CEOs, but also increasingly popular for employees at other ranks, is to downright make them owners of the firm by offering them stock shares as part of their compensation package (see Rosen et al., 2005). The efficiency of those schemes, though, is debatable, with some studies pointing out that while top managers may get wealthier, they do not always do so by working towards their company's interest (Henry, 2010; Ittner et al., 2003).

Arguably, efforts at making employees own stake in their firm's ownership culminate in the worker coop. Studies note that worker retention is greater in coops than in conventional businesses and that coops tend to pursue a diversity of other goals besides short-term monetary gain: for instance, cooperatively owned agricultural land is less likely to be used for cash crops and, instead, to be devoted to a diversity of staple crops (Montero, 2022). However, cooperatives are, in fact, relatively rare, a reality that the economist Michael Kremer (1997) explains by suggesting that coops distribute income in ways that disincentivize individual effort, but that can also be accounted by the difficulty for coops to operate in an economic system made for conventional businesses, forcing them to rely on their own members' contribution for funding (Dickstein, 1991). Coops are interesting attempts to turn capitalism's own concept of property against it: rather than trying to free itself from the grasp of property, it extends it to all its workers, giving them back their means of production through the very device that was intended to dispossess them from them in the first place. However, despite some very remarkable exceptions (see Basque & Langley, 2018), the scarcity of coops tends to demonstrate that trying to play the property game against capitalism, using its own rules, amounts to fighting a losing battle.

The fact that we so often turn to property as a concept to make up for people's selfishness is that, in the history of social thought, the two ideas have developed in parallel. As we will see in more detail in Chapter 2, the British political philosopher John Locke (1689/1821), in discussing the origins of property, made the following reasoning: God created human beings and, in doing so, gave them ownership of their body; then men used their body to exert effort in transforming nature; therefore, whatever good results from that labor should belong to the human being who exerted it. There are both advantages and drawbacks to Locke's reasoning, which I will review in due time, but his theory of property—dubbed the "labor theory" of property—has been very influential, including for Karl Marx, whose idea that capitalistic modes of production alienate workers directly borrows from Locke's notion of self-possession. What is of relevance for our discussion here is that such a myth of property's origin connects the concept with the very advent of selfhood, thus making one's property intimately tied with their individuality.

In a sense, Locke is correct—but perhaps not for the reasons he puts forward. I will be arguing that the connection between property and selfhood must be reverted: property does not result from a prior unproblematic "self," especially not a God-given one; rather, we build ourselves through our property. Such a reversal, though, also means that limiting property to its economic and legal definition of *private* property means that fewer people have access to it and, hence, that fewer people have a chance to construct their selfhood and ensure their very existence. New understandings of property would allow more people to hold a share in our common world.

Another common argument in favor of selfishness is that it makes sense economically. In other words, thinking in selfish terms would make sense because our transactions with others just work better when we do so. For instance, the prominent American economist Gary S. Becker, in his work on selfishness, refers to Smith, who has written, in his seminal *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776/1801), that when buying from our butcher or baker, we do not count on their benevolence, but rather on their pursuit of their self-interest (Becker, 1981). It is because we assume the butcher has an interest in offering fresh, healthy meat, and in being honest in their transactions, that we trust them and return to their shop.

However, the Spanish philosopher Patrici Calvo (2018, p. 1) writes, contrary to Becker's claim, that economics' current-day insistence on self-interest has little to do with Adam Smith, who was in fact "concerned about well-being for oneself and for others" in a framework of reciprocity and justice. Even Becker admits that other forms of relationships exist that are not self-interested. This is the case, for instance, within families, where people are willing to raise the overall well-being of all members, rather than act at the expense of others. As we will see in the next chapter, when we will be discussing transaction cost economics, Becker's argument may be extended to organizations, where employees are expected to work for the benefit of the whole "family" rather than act selfishly against the interests of their colleagues.

Selfishness may be an easy assumption to make about others, but human beings are sophisticated enough in the way they assess each other, when dealing with them, not to need such a shortcut. That is what the psychologist Daniel Kahneman (2003) noted when he reviewed economics research since the 1970s. He observed that, at the time he was writing, the assumption of self-centeredness continued to be prevalent in that discipline, even though growing research had been showing that, in fact, people do not always make rational choices that are their immediate interest. The professor of economics at the University of California, San Diego, Joel Sobel (2007) even suggests that, in fact, it is the market that nudges people into selfish behaviour, rather than the opposite (see also Kirman & Teschl, 2010). For the researcher, people's preferences cannot be reduced to maximizing their own gain: they may include the altruistic preference that others also gain something—in a non-zero-sum game—or even a spiteful preference that they incur some kind of loss.

What if, in fact, our assumptions about selfishness had been wrong from the beginning? What if people do not care only about themselves? I am not suggesting that we embark on soul-searching journey to reflect on our egocentricity. I would not impose anything so uncomfortable to my readers. Rather, by way of revisiting our conception of property, we may discover that we hold many things in common and that such commonality is crucial to our individual existence. Economists are right to believe that property is crucial to human existence. Property matters because it defines what I own, but also what I consider to be part of "me"—what I *am*. Or, in the words of the semiotician A. J. Greimas (1987), "the verbs *to have* (and its parasynonyms) and *to be* as used to express the same logical function" (p. 88). To tell you who I am, I must also tell you about my body, my family, my hometown, my heritage, my ideas... What these few examples show, however, is that some properties may define me precisely because they are not exclusive to me. My body may be a temple, as the expression goes (and yet, as we will see in the next chapters, one's exclusive ownership over one's body is not as obvious as it sounds), but when it comes to my family, my hometown, my heritage, or even my ideas, among many other possible examples, these are only meaningful because I share them with others. I cherish my family because we all *belong* to it—we have each other, quite literally. For the most part of history, the same kind of property applied to wives as it did to land and cattle (see Rose, 1992); things have somewhat improved in that regard, but the fact is that we talk of relationships in terms of possession. In fact, as the anthropologist Paul Kockelman (2007) explains, the very idea of family stems from property: owning things in common creates a social personhood, and it is the very fact that we have children and a home together, among other things, makes us "a family." As a beautiful song by Québec singer Jean-Pierre Ferland goes, "We're lucky to have each other."

Similar arguments could be made with the idea of belonging to a community, whether a hometown or a nation (see e.g., Fortier, 2020). A broader reflection on the interplay between individual and shared property is offered by the philosopher Jacques Derrida (1998), taking the case of the language we speak: if someone spoke an entirely private language, they would not have no language at all; to "have" a language that you are proud to call yours, you must share it with a community, so that it is never quite yours to begin with. For Derrida, this is not just an exceptional situation when it comes to language, but the very condition of property: to "have" something, it must not be mine to begin with; he describes this apparent paradox using the term "exappropriation," a term that combines appropriation and expropriation, and recognizes that one implicates the other (see Derrida, 1994). Exappropriation is particularly clear in the case of an idea: pretending to have an idea but never expressing it in any way or sharing it with anyone would be immaterial; claiming ownership over an idea supposes, in the very act of that claim, articulating that idea.

The supposition of much of current theorizing on property is that human beings are selfish. Property would be the conceptual counterpart of that selfishness and any attempt to reconcile such selfishness with collective interests would have to rely on some property arrangements. However, as we have seen, in fact property may also be understood in a very different manner, as property may suppose sharing and commonality. That way of looking at property may even be the condition for the constitution of individual and collective selves. Now that this has been established, can we hope that everyone will abandon the traditional definition of property, and adopt instead one based on sharing and relationships? Probably not, because the connection between property and selfishness is an ontological one, i.e., one that gets to the root of what property *is*. We have countered with an equally ontological rebuttal, by showing that having and being are equivalent, and that property is fundamentally shared. However, those who cling to conventional definitions of property are not actually interested in ontological and definitional debates. They are interested in tangible consequences, that is to say, in what property allows them to do. So far, through the backing of the law (which, let's remember, tautologically defines property by referring back to itself), they have been promised that property would give them full and exclusive control on the things they own. How can they resist such a promise?

1.2. Does property equal exclusive control?

Economics and legal theory have based their definition of property in two ways, that we can designate as upstream and downstream. The upstream definition goes back to property's sources: it would emerge, according to them, from people's sense of self and, therefore, from their selfishness, as we have just mentioned. The downstream definition, for its part, defined property as offering the right to control something and to exclude others from its use. Said otherwise, to own something is to be able to singlehandedly decide what to do with it and to shoo away trespassers. What comes to mind is the image an excentric but curmudgeon elderly farmer letting weeds invade his land and detritus piling up, all the while keeping potential developers at bay by shouting at them that this is "private property!" More than a mere stereotype, farmers and their land—how they obtain it in the first place, how they tend to it, how they develop it, etc.—are the very model of property in economic theory. If not agriculture, then economists may describe cases of mining or gold digging, but land is more often than not the prototype for property (e.g., Umbeck, 1981).

We can wonder if many of the cases where we say, “This is mine!” can be modeled on land. Unless you are specifically interested in agriculture or land development, there are good chances that the notion of property does not translate, for you, so directly in obvious control and exclusion. For instance, if you are wondering whether the texts you write as part of your work belong to your employer or to you, there is a good chance that the answer is far more nuanced than the one your boss and you could reach by using pellet guns. For instance, readers’ interest in your texts may be inherently related to the fact that, when signing them, your name is followed by that of your employer: “John Doe, McKinsey Consulting” probably has more traction than “John Doe, independent researcher.” This means that the value of your texts, even to you, is all the greater that it is in fact not exclusive, but shared with others—in this case, your employer. The same argument could be made with control: your boss, in turn, probably gains from letting you do your research and write the best text that you can, because you are surely more expert than he is in your field of specialty. If he controlled your work entirely, that work would, in fact, be less valuable, even to them.

Some compromise, both in terms of control and exclusion must therefore be reached. Except for possibly a handful of specific cases, property can never consist in full exclusivity and complete control. The very interest of owning something is, first, that the thing in question is shared with others who contribute value to it. For instance, even something as mundane as a dishwashing machine in fact comprises various elements of intellectual property. The fanciest among us may have bought the model they now have at home precisely because it was drawn by a famous designer or integrates with the ecosystem of their favorite phone manufacturer. I have exclusive control on my dishwasher in the sense that I could rightly be upset if my neighbors came over and loaded it with their dirty plates. However, many other people and companies also own a share of my dishwasher, and therefore I am far from owning it exclusively (among other things, its software may update remotely without my even being aware of it). Second, the very interest in owning something comes from the fact that the thing does something that is beyond the owner’s own capacity, and therefore escapes their control. If I fully controlled my machine’s operations, I would be doing the dishes myself, and the very point of owning a dishwasher would be lost. I want to be able to start it when I want and decide, say, on the kind of cycle it will run, but I cannot pretend that I quite understand, let alone control, how it works, and that is an instance where ignorance truly is bliss. There is therefore a balance to be struck between exclusion and inclusion, and between control and delegation; property only makes sense in that in-between space.

Yet, because the disciplines of economics and law claim, exactly, exclusive control on the concept of property, and have all but expropriated others from it, other social scientists have never felt they could question their way of defining property either in terms of selfishness or in those of exclusion and control. In embracing the concept uncritically, the social sciences have limited their understanding of what it means for someone to "have" or "own" something, despite the crucial role property plays in constituting beings and relationships, as we have seen. As Adam Smith wrote, property "is in reality instituted for the defence of the rich against the poor, or of those who have some property against those who have none at all" (Smith, 1776/1801, p. 167). In adopting the conventional view of property, the social sciences thus also prioritize the values and perspectives of those who are successful in appropriating, accumulating, and securing riches, and disregard those who may have other kinds of relations with their homes (say, because they are renters), their tools, their ideas, but also their peers and their communities. The fact, though, is that those people also *have* many things—just not according to the conventional definition.

1.3. There are other forms of property and possession

Imagine the scene: you are reading a book on a chaise-longue, while keeping an eye on your kids playing in the pool in a few meters from you. Now, how exactly this image forms in your mind may tell a lot about where you stand in Smith's division between the haves and the have-nots, about your conception of property, not to mention about your upbringing. You may imagine the scene taking place in your suburban backyard, or perhaps even your luxurious house, with your own private swimming pool. Or, the scene may take place in your local municipal pool, because you're lucky enough to live in a city that invests in sports and leisure infrastructure. In that case, your kids are playing with other children from the neighborhood. You can't put a fence around it to prevent others to take a dip, but neither can others prevent you from being there. It's *your* pool too, in the same way as you borrow books from *your* library and, in the morning, you catch *your* bus.

Isn't calling *property* both instances of using the possessive pronoun "your" a play on words? Of course it is—that's the whole point of my argument! When it comes to property, all we're doing is playing with words. Typically, lawyers write words on documents that can then be shown to judges who interpret them before producing yet more documents. Property exists through that nexus of words. Some of those words, such as "owner" are stronger than others, such as "tenant," as they provide access to different institutional networks and their resources (such as bank loans). Others are weaker and we may think of them as "just words." Housing is a quintessential case where the haves and the have-nots have conflicting interests depending on their side of property line. Yet, even in the case of housing, there are other ways in which we can play with words besides writing property deeds or leases.

It is while working in the housing sector—more specifically at a community organization fighting for housing rights—that I came to realize that people own things in many ways. They did not have access to property as it is legally defined, and yet the apartments where they lived and the districts where they thrived were, undoubtedly, theirs too. People old and young, with their families and friends, caring for the buildings where they lived while their landlords didn't bother with any maintenance work, tending to little gardens, organizing street fairs with their neighbors, and yet being told, when they were unfortunate enough to end up in front of the housing tribunal, that all caring toil gave them no kind of property right.

The struggle of the tenants of Manoir Lafontaine, a 91-unit apartment building in Montreal, illustrates the different understandings of property at play when it comes to housing. In 2021, Hillpark, a real estate development company owned by Brandon Shiller and Jeremy Kornbluth, purchased Manoir Lafontaine. In April of the same year, they sent eviction notices to the 50 tenants living in the building, giving them until June 30 to vacate the premises. The new landlords evoked the need to renovate the building, even though city inspectors deemed that no repairs were needed that would justify ousting residents. Hillpark promised to reintegrate all tenants afterwards… if they agreed to pay the new, much higher rent at which their renovated apartments would be leased out. Given Montreal developers' recent penchant for "renovictions"—kicking out tenants using alleged renovations, only to replace them with people willing to pay more—Manoir Lafontaine's residents were not overly optimistic as to their chance of returning. Clearly, Mrs. Tifault, 68, who was paying $660 a month, was not going to be able to afford to return to her apartment if Hillpark had it its way. Isabelle Garcia, 17, with her budget as a Cuban foreign student, was also not the kind of people the development company would be looking for. With the help of housing rights organizations, all of the 50 tenants stuck together and refused to leave, forcing Hillpark to take the matter to the housing tribunal.

As Luc Rabouin, the local borough mayor, stated at the time, while asking tenants to leave temporarily for major repairs can happen on occasion, many developers are turning it in a business model: they acquire buildings, claim that it needs majors repairs to get rid of tenants, and then raise the rent using the improvements brought by those same repairs as an excuse. When repeated, this strategy leads to replacing whole populations by wealthier residents. The landlords' legal property was used as a weapon to displace poor people. They also complemented their arsenal with less lawful tactics, such as harassment as well as power and water cuts. Many tenants did not have the courage to continue the fight and, in the end, only 13 of them remained in the premises.

The political context was favorable to Hillpark's project. France-Élaine Durance, the minister of housing of the province of Québec claimed, in an interview to CTV News journalist Kelly Greig, that building owners "need to be able to control what happens in their building." To a different journalist, Étienne Fortin-Gauthier, from Noovo Media, she stated that tenants should "invest in real estate" instead of demanding government support and complaining about their housing conditions. In making these statements, the minister clearly had in mind a legal view of property: for her, dissatisfied tenants were interfering with landlords' right to control their building; if tenants wanted to have a say, they should become owners themselves. No doubt, this was music to the ears of property owners.

We can suppose, though, that Mrs. Giguère was less excited about the minister's opinion. She had lived at Manoir Lafontaine for 40 years and was in no financial position to buy real estate. To her, that was not an issue, though, as she was happy in her home. Her 11th floor apartment was not *hers* as far as property deeds were concerned, but it was her home; she also had a stupefying view of the cross that's at the top of Mount Royal, the hill at the center of the island of Montreal. As she told journalist Kelly Greig while standing on her balcony, "At night, it's beautiful, it's all lit up." Like many of her neighbors, especially older ones, she can come but to one conclusion: "My life is here."

This is also what her neighbor, Mrs. Breault, feels. She was tied to her apartment in many ways, as she explained to CTV News' Sacha Obas, "I've lived here 38 years. I fixed this apartment with my boyfriend, and now he's dead; if I leave, it's like I'm leaving him behind." She invested financially in that apartment to make it suit her needs and tastes, as well as those of her late partner: "I put a lot of money in here, thinking I'll live here until I pass." Asking her to move would not only mean that she would lose that investment and need to start over elsewhere, but also that she would need to build new relationships in a new place, possibly in a different part of town: "I don't have a family except my son; if I move, I'll be completely alone, while here, I have friends. It's like my family." What Hillpark is asking of Giguère and Breault, and other residents of the building, old and young, is to uproot themselves and restart their life elsewhere.

In May 2022, after a protracted series of procedures—each tenant's case had to be assessed separately—the housing tribunal decided in favor of the tenants. It did not reach that decision because it was moved by residents' testimonies. Rather, it deemed that Hillpark's renovations were illegal and contravened the existing leases, because they changed the layout of the apartments to create smaller units, in effect precluding the possibility for tenants to return to their homes, since they would not exist anymore. The judge also found that the notices and promises made to tenants were misleading as to the nature of the works, since Hillpark claimed they would merely put the apartments back in good condition. Later that year, Hillpark, having had enough with the tenants' resistance and the pile up of court cases, tried to sell the building for 28 million dollars, stating in the real estate listing that the new buyer will have the opportunity to "maximise its rental value."

While Hillpark listed Manoir Lafontaine for 28 million dollars, it was eventually purchased by Interloge, a community-based organization, for just short of 19 million, with funding from the City of Montreal, the Quebec government and financial institutions. Interloge would make renovations, but without anyone having to leave, and guaranteeing low rent prices proportional to people's income, for the foreseeable future. What Interloge and its partners manage to do in projects such as that of Manoir Lafontaine is to translate forms of property into each other. They recognize that people like Mrs. Giguère et Mrs. Breault own their homes, too. The two women, like many others like them, have invested money and effort into their apartments—which, following Locke's logic, would make it theirs. They have also established many relations with partners and friends inside and around their homes, that keep them firmly rooted in *their* building: it is, precisely, the building that allows them to tie those relations. Acknowledging this, but also that the economic and political system will not consider such concerns, Interloge thus set out to protect the tenants' fragile forms of property by wrapping them in the institutionally-sanctioned shroud of legal property.

1.4. Property at work

Alternative ways of saying, "this is mine," do not only concern people's attachment to their homes. They happen in all facets of our lives, including our work. Critical scholarship on business and organizations recognizes that they operate in a capitalistic context that has a profound impact on the way they operate and relate with their workers, the most profound being perhaps that the very possibility of alternative ways of organizing becomes difficult to envision (Del Fa, 2017). Capitalism, thus, is more than a production method among others, but also a legitimation process that naturalizes ways of relating with each other in and around the workplace (Kuhn et al., 2017).

Yet, in the workplace like everywhere else, the conventional definition of property has prevailed. Property is mostly dealt with by asking who owns the firm or what the firm owns. The first question—who owns the firm—is asked, for instance, by studies that look at how shareholders influence decisions, for instance through shareholder activism, or at the way family-owned firms differ from other types of organizations (Diaz-Rainey et al., 2024; Hjorth & Dawson, 2016). Earlier, we also saw the case of coops, which also switch the firm's ownership to a different set of people, namely its employees. The second—what does the firm own—preoccupies researchers studying, among other things, the difficulty companies experience in trying to hold on to evanescent intellectual property, or their decision to purchase their providers rather than waste effort trying to contract with them on the market (Barnett, 2010; Williamson, 1981). In all those cases, the underlying assumption is that the legal arrangements through which the organization is owned, and through which it owns things, define its activities and its nature.

Studies of organizational setting that adopt such a conventional view of property, though, omit much of what happens in those setting. Some burgeoning research, indeed, suggests that employees—even though they do not own anything by legal standards—are in fact strongly attached to various aspects of "their" organization. The University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, professor of entrepreneurship Graham Brown has devoted his career to looking at the way employees deal with infringements on what they consider to be theirs, from spaces to tools to roles, responsibilities, and assignments, and to relationships (Brown & Robinson, 2011). Brown refers to those behaviors as "territoriality," but then defines that territoriality as "proprietary attachment," thus recognizing that property is at play. In a similar way, Auburn University, Alabama communication researcher Elizabeth Wilhoit Larson (2020) has studied the way people appropriate their workspace, for instance by putting pictures on "their" desks at work. On the other hand, the organization also appropriates spaces that are not quite "its" premises, for instance by having its logo on a company truck (thus making the company present wherever its driver goes) or by allowing employees to access their email from remote places.

This book aims at celebrating those other ways in which we say that something is "mine" or "yours" or "ours," with special attention to how this happens in and around organizations and in other work contexts. The goal is not to throw the baby with bath water. Property in itself is not bad. On the contrary, it is absolutely necessary for us to exist and to act together. It is also about commonality and sharedness. That is why this book suggests that property is a communicative accomplishment, through which possessive relations are established. Legal property refers only to the particular circumstances when the state intervenes to ensure some people the continued possession of their belongings, against potential usurpation. When it is understood in this way, it reveals to be a crucial element in organizing.

1.5. Chapter overview

It may seem that, in the previous pages, all that could be said about property has already been said. The truth, though, is that I've only scratched the surface. The many facets of property, and the amount of knowledge produced about it, is illustrated by the thickness of the course material for an undergraduate class on property law that I once received through the mail. I had to know what lawyers learn on the topic, so I reached out to a local university's bookstore to buy the exact same material as students registering for that class. I was impressed, although not entirely surprised, to have delivered to my door a package nearly 30 centimeters high—that's about 12 inches—made up of academic articles and textbooks. I am not a lawyer, and I cannot pretend to know even what an undergraduate student learns in a single law class, not to mention all that legal scholars have written on the topic. I cannot claim to cover all aspects of property in this book, and thankfully that is not what this book intends to accomplish.

To trace the origins of the legal-economic definition of property, Chapter 2 will explore the conceptual sources of property, and in particular the Lockean view that I've already mentioned and that considers property as stemming from God granting self-possession to individuals and the extension of that initial gift to the fruits of individuals' labor. In other words, a person's claim to possess something results from her having infused it with her labor, which is an extension of her selfhood. This view of property has become influential, to the point that even critics of private property, including Marx, in fact rely on it. This does not mean that this view has no challengers: we will see, in particular, that the anarchist Robert Nozick has persuasively noted that, while this account often serves to justify existing property relations, in fact there are limited cases where one's labor grants them property over the fruits of their work, at least in part because what results from the work is often ambiguous. We will also formulate a critique of our own, namely that the labor theory of property, being based on God-given self-possession, precludes the possibility of shared possession and supposes a single form of possessive relation, while remaining unclear on the precise nature of that relation. In other words, what exactly do we mean when we say that the worker owns the fruit of his labor? To bring some clarity to these conversations, we will suggest that we need a *pragmatic* view of property, that substitute godly and intrinsic qualities of property with its accomplishment in everyday interactions. Rather than looking for the essence of property, then, we suggest looking at how people *do* it as part of their normal dealings, and we'll derive a definition from these observations.

Chapter 3 will then sketch an approximate picture of the dominant legal and economic views of property. The role of that picture is only to explain that social scientists prioritize private property over other forms of relationships and, in doing so, exclude large proportions of society from their analyses. I will argue that, in organizational studies in particular, research adopting the dominant view tend to focus on the ownership *of* the firm or on ownership *by* the firm of productive resources, for instance using a transaction cost economics perspective. We will criticize this dominant view by questioning what it means to privatize resources, highlighting that there are in fact numerous other arrangements that are at play besides outright privatization, including when it comes to patents and other forms of intangible property. This discussion will lead us, among others, to discuss the way some things—material goods, but also ideas, projects and other abstractions—can become "appropriable," stressing that multiple ways of establishing possessive relations with something may coexist, legal property being only one such case. Indeed, as we will discuss in detail in Chapter 1, the legal-economic dominant view of property defines the notion as the state's enforcement of property, thus tautologically requiring that property pre-exists its own definition (what Nichols refers to as "recursive" nature of property). Chapter 1 will conclude by noting that there is no clear dichotomy between exclusive and shared property, and that when thinking about the social practices surrounding property, the distinction becomes more nuanced, thus challenging the legal-economic definition.

As an alternative to the dominant views of property, I will introduce in Chapter 4 a processual view of property, rooted in communication. This will be the most theoretical chapter of the book, but I hope to have made it pleasant to read even for those less accustomed to reading theory and philosophy. As I will show, traditions that borrow from Locke to justify a labour view of property turn out to have a limited ability to account for contemporary phenomena, besides the typical view of work taking place in the field or in a factory. I will therefore suggest a different philosophical lineage. It will turn to what is referred to as processual philosophy, which included late-19th-century and 20th-century authors such as Alfred North Whitehead, Gabriel Tarde, William James and Gilles Deleuze, to decenter property from human beings (and their God-given selfhood), and consider property as an autonomous process that plays a part in the constitution of beings. In other words, processual philosophy reverts the equation: instead of considering human beings as given and property as resulting from their actions, it views property as a primordial process that distributes action to constitute people and other entities, including organizations. Said otherwise, and as I've touched upon briefly earlier, it is because people (or organizations) have things that they exist and can act. In making that argument, the chapter follows in the footsteps of Belgian philosopher Didier Debaise (2011), who suggested that some aspects of process philosophy can be understood as a "philosophy of possession." Shifting property's philosophical filiation to a processual perspective will allow recognizing its anchoring in communication. Indeed, as some researchers have shown (and as I've shown in some of my previous work; see Bencherki et al., 2024; Bencherki & Iliadis, 2021), processual philosophy's key concept of "becoming," i.e., the way a being strives to pursue its existence, can be understood as a communicative accomplishment.

The chapter will also present some of the writings of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1994) as offering a possible synthesis between the way process philosophy understands property and Karl Marx's view of the concept. The author, we will see, suggests that property always supposes exappropriation. Using this term, he points to the fact that appropriation and expropriation implicate each other. Derrida also connects property with the idea that something is *proper* to someone, something, or of a situation, i.e., that it is one of their defining qualities. Drawing on Derrida's concept of exappropriation, I argue that property is a communicative process that actively constitutes "possessors" and the "possessed" by assigning agency.

Chapter 5 presents this book's theory of *communicative property* the most explicitly. It builds on what I introduce in the previous chapter to put forward the idea that property is relationally and communicatively constituted, with empirical examples drawn from my fieldwork among housing rights organizations. I will also refer to some other studies that put forward a similar argument, even though they do not explicitly tackle the concept of property (e.g., Koschmann & McDonald, 2015; Wilhoit Larson, 2020). In reading Chapter 4, you may have the impression that I am going back on my word, and in fact arguing that the labour definition of property has been somewhat correct. In a sense, yes, but not because I finally come to my senses and admit that God has given humans the ownership of their bodies, which results in individual property. Rather, my argument in that chapter is that when people work together, they enmesh themselves and others into relational networks that lead to a form of common property. From the moment we engage with others, a relation is formed, and the question of property is posed: as the 19th-century French philosopher and sociologist Gabriel Tarde (1893/2012) explains, when I talk to someone, even for a brief moment, that person becomes "my" interlocutor, I become "theirs," and it becomes "our" conversation.

Indeed, when shifting to a relational and communicative perspective, property reveals to be held collectively, although its multifaceted nature allows each “owner” to relate to a different aspect of the possessed thing. We’ve already evoked the example of a house belonging to a family, which becomes a “home,” even though the parents and the children may not play the same role with respect to inhabiting, maintaining, and making decisions over that home (Kockelman, 2007). Far from diminishing the worth of that thing for each person, common property may on the contrary provide it more value, precisely because of its embeddedness in a relational field: that is the case, again, of a home, or of a family heirloom, which have value to its owners because they also belong (or have belonged) to others; it is also the case of a project, an idea, or a victory, which are all the more significant that they are shared with a team of dear colleagues.

The chapter will also develop the notion of “possessive relations,” showing that owning something is establishing a relation—and in fact possession is a facet of most relations. There are arguably as many forms of possessive relations as there are modes of existence—that is, ways in which things exist: a rock does not exist in the same way as a fictional character or as an organization (see Latour, 2013; Souriau, 1943/2015)—including, for instance, religious possession (e.g., Boddy, 1994) and political belonging (e.g., Fortier, 1999). Property is therefore not reducible to a legal deed, which is but an example of a combination of semiotic, material, and organizational possessive relations. It stems from the way we (inter)act, write and talk, and through the many tangible connections we build to each other and to a variety of things. Such an understanding of possessive relations also means that they are not the prerogative of human beings, opening up the possibility that non-human things may be possessors, and humans be possessed. For instance, a person can be possessed by a strong passion for music, or be devoted to their profession; on the other hand, an organization can have its brands, its premises, as well as its employees.

The sixth chapter will discuss property in the context of technology, including digital technology and social media. I will begin by suggesting that technology is not only a tool at home or in the workplace, but that it is constitutive of organizations insofar as it appropriates individual actions, and carries them in other times and other places, thus allowing them to acquire relative autonomy in relation to their authors. These appropriations consist in establishing possessive relations, which can always be contested, reappropriated, and misappropriated (see Akrich, 1992). For the most part technology corresponds to an “architexture” (a play on the words “text” and “architecture” suggested by French researchers Hémont et al., 2017), insofar as it offers the material substrate that delimits the conditions of writing, circulation, consumption and renegotiation of scripts for organizational action, which it "pre-prescribes." Thus, through the "architexts" that it makes possible, technology also participates, without relying solely on human agency, in the capacity of organizations to act and exist through the appropriation of action.

Turning to social media and digital platforms, we will see that possessive relations also blur the line of who or what owns a particular action. This is especially true when it comes to the gig economy, whose workers are typically described as independent entrepreneurs merely "using" the platform as a tool, but in fact feel they are dispossessed of their agency as they work *for* the platform. Such a blurring is quite tangible and results from the details of the platform's interface, at once generating opacity on how the platform appropriates, but also measures and rewards, the workers' activities, while demanding transparency from the worker, and enabling digital surveillance. The chapter will end by noting that recent discussions over transparency, visibility and surveillance by authors such as Mikkel Flyverbom (2019), Oana Albu (2023), Paul Leonardi (2014) and Shoshana Zuboff (2019) become even more urgent when we introduce the notion of property as a conceptual lens.

Up to this point, in the book, we will have examined how property is *done.* We can now turn to what it *does*, i.e., to studying its consequences, which is the object of Chapter 7. A starting point for that investigation consists of asking why people hold on so dearly to their property. As we have seen in Chapter 3, process philosophers, and in particular William James, suggest that property constitutes (human) being by allowing them to act, as it attributes the actions of the possessed to the possessor. Or, in the words of A. J. Greimas, having and being become equivalent in a communicative property perspective.

This is crucial for organizational studies, as it also means that organizations can be constituted through property, confirming the insights of transaction costs economics (cf., Williamson, 1981, 1985), but generalizing them beyond a narrow definition of the concept. Organizations are constituted whenever possessive relations are formed, whether through talk, writing, material artefacts, or in any other way, as long as the organization is given the means to appropriate the actions of others—since, as Tarde points out, any relation is also a possessive relation.

The communicative property perspective, in that sense, extends current research on the role of communication in constituting organisations (Basque et al., 2022; Cooren et al., 2011; Schoeneborn et al., 2019). It provides that literature with a critical apparatus, recognizing that communication constitutes an organization (or any other facet of reality; see Cooren, 2012) *because* it appropriates and attributes action. As Greimas (1987) noted, some things, including action, can be shared without depriving any single author from it (doing things together does not diminish their value for any one of us). However, organizations are replete with examples of usurpation, whenever communication does not share action but rather dissimulates the original author.

This discussion is continued in Chapter 8, which is also the book's conclusion, where I highlight the ways in which communicative property offers a powerful critical lens to organizational studies, and in particular to organizational communication researchers. Communicative property allows studying, in the same terms, how organizations are constituted, and the way some actors may be dispossessed of their agency to the benefit of others. In particular, communicative property highlights that dispossession does not only take the form of outright exclusion, as when people are kicked off their land or goods are stolen (see, on this topic, the fascinating contributions of Butler & Athanasiou, 2013; Nichols, 2018). It may also take more subtle forms—in fact, as many forms as there are ways of establishing relations. One may be usurped from a thing only on some of its facets, as when colleagues keep walking into "your" office, effectively depriving you from the privacy and calm it should offer; or when an overly involved supervisor keeps suggesting ideas for "your" project, taking away some of your freedom to define it according to your own vision. While the office and the project remain yours in other respects, some degree of dispossession—or exappropriation—is also taking place. Such forms of dispossession may appear benign, but they also contribute to covertly eroding work conditions and labour relations.

In connection with communicative capitalism, communicative property allows revealing how practices of dispossession are masquerading under the guise of a discourse of workers' "ownership" of their organization and of their activities (Gill, 2014; Ivanova & von Scheve, 2020). As a final, hopeful thought, I show how communicative property also offers avenues to resist dispossession, as the multiplicity of forms that possessive relations can take also mean that, when they are usurped in one of its modes, people can weave new possessive relations according to a different mode.

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