
Metaphors, organizations and water: Generating new images for environmental sustainability

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Abstract

Research across the social sciences and related fields has made it clear that metaphors underwrite both scientific and everyday thinking. Gareth Morgan's work in this area, most vividly developed in his classic book *Images of Organization*, illustrates how metaphors underwrite thinking about organizations and the important role they can play in generating new thinking. In this study, we use and extend Morgan's (2006) thesis of 'organizations as instruments of domination' (IoD) to reflect on critical issues in organizational studies related to water and the broader natural environment. We find extending the IoD image to be helpful: (i) in deriving and elaborating a metaphor that reflects a risky trend ('organizations as water exploiters'); and (ii) in generating and developing a new metaphor that is explicitly normative and nature-centered ('organizations as water keepers'). The water keeper image brings needed attention to water problems and invites further research on activist organizations (businesses and others) seeking to change thinking and practice related to environmental sustainability. We illustrate the water keeper metaphor (and the significant move away from the paradigmatic assumptions of hard anthropocentrism) with examples from environmental champion Patagonia, Inc. We then take up Morgan's challenge to move beyond the IoD metaphor to envision non-dominating forms of organization. We revisit classic nature-inclusive metaphors and the under-explored paradigm of ecocentrism to evoke

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and reflect on broader notions of agency, interdependence, connectedness and social relations in transformed organizations.

Keywords

activism and social change, anthropocentrism, greening organizations, instruments of domination, IoD, land ethic, sustainable business, patagonia

Introduction: Metaphors and the environmental sustainability imperative

Research on metaphor continues to flourish across the social sciences and related fields. This research is providing ever deeper understanding of the ways metaphors come into existence and affect fundamental aspects of human thought and behavior (see Landau et al., 2014). It also sheds light on the underpinnings of scientific theorizing and related problem solving activities. All scientific work, no matter how rigorous it is, requires conceptual frames that are, at their root, metaphorical (cf. Lakoff and Johnson, 1999; McCloskey, 1985; Scharf, 2013). In this sense, even scientific researchers adopt and build on metaphorical images and conform to Goffman's classic thesis that humans '... can hardly glance at anything without applying a primary framework' (Goffman, 1974: 38).

The value of metaphor to contemporary researchers studying organizations is reflected in an authoritative statement made by Cornelissen et al. (2005: 1545): 'The issue ... is not whether metaphors exist and play a part in organizational theorizing – as this is now widely accepted – but to draw out how metaphors are actually used and are of conceptual value' In this article, we illustrate how Gareth Morgan's (2006) domination thesis – as reflected in his image of organizations as instruments of domination (IoD) and other groundbreaking books and articles (e.g. Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Morgan 1980) – can actually be used to re-examine the current research on organizations and the environment. Through reconsideration and extension of Morgan's IoD image and through experimenting with alternative images, we address water issues and, by implication, other significant environmental sustainability problems facing organizations and society.

The main purpose of this article is to use metaphors to facilitate deeper reflection on the role of water in and around organizations and to support broader thinking about human–nature relations – even possibly to the degree where the social is extended to non-human living beings and the abiotic. As shown in Table 1, there are several comparisons and contrasts that can be made in elaborating, extending and going beyond the IoD metaphor. We view this exercise in making distinctions across a range of metaphors (and related social and philosophical criteria) as a useful methodology for highlighting taken-for-granted thinking and imagining alternatives.

The article has four main sections. First, we revisit Morgan's metaphors in *Images of Organization* (hereafter *Images*) to reflect on which ones have been relied upon most heavily by scholars and to what effect. After noting research on the entrenchment of the machine and living organism images, we discuss the danger of overreliance on these metaphors, laying groundwork for placing emphasis on alternatives. Second, we discuss a vital alternative, the IoD root metaphor, and extend it to the domination of

Table 1. Framework of organizations and human–water relations (based on and extending the root metaphor, ‘organizations as instruments of domination’).

Root metaphors	Organizations as instruments of domination	Organizations as instruments of domination	Beyond domination: organizations as spheres of conviviality
Sub-metaphors	Organizations as systems of totalitarian control	Organizations as battlegrounds	Organizations as land ethic communities
Second-order or extended metaphors	Organizations as water exploiters	Organizations as water keepers	Organizations as true partnerships
Concept of water	Commodity	Resource	Force of life with recognized agency
Type of rationality	Instrumental	Modified instrumental	Moral–political
Organizational form	Machine bureaucracy	Contested terrain	Ecological collective
Human–nature relationship	Human mastery of nature	Human conservation and restoration of nature (Stewardship)	Holistic balance
Underlying paradigm	Hard anthropocentrism	Soft anthropocentrism	Ecocentrism

nature – an important but understated theme in Morgan’s discussion of the image. We note that, despite warnings from scientists about rampant, unprecedented environmental change and increasingly urgent calls from across disciplines to engage an environmental sustainability imperative (e.g. Carroll and Buchholtz, 2015; Lubin and Esty, 2010; Marcus and Fremeth, 2009; Steiner et al., 2013; Wood, 2012), the natural environment is still not a fully integrated topic in organizational studies. Third, we address this limitation by turning our attention to developing nature-inclusive metaphors that help frame organizational studies on the water crisis – a central aspect of environmental degradation. We extend the IoD metaphor with two second-order metaphors (organizations as water exploiters and organizations as water keepers) and illustrate the water keeper metaphor with examples from environmental champion Patagonia, Inc. Fourth, we take up Morgan’s (2006) challenge to move beyond the IoD metaphor and envision non-dominating forms of organization, which we explore through metaphors derived from ecocentrism – a philosophy we believe offers valuable insights despite seemingly fading from research on organizations since it was discussed in earnest in the 1990s (e.g. Purser et al., 1995; Shrivastava, 1995).

By approaching the field of organizational studies and environmental problems simultaneously from the level of metaphors, we demonstrate how metaphorical thinking can be useful for generating new insights about organizations negotiating the environmental sustainability imperative. By exploring three different concepts of human–water relations (see Table 1), we illustrate how extended notions of social relations can provide new ways of thinking about major social and environmental problems.

Metaphorical underpinnings of research on organizations

Morgan (2006) makes it clear in *Images* that two metaphors, 'organizations as machines' and 'organizations as organisms', pervade everyday and theoretical thinking about organizations. He begins the book by presenting these images and by explaining the vast influence each has had on classical and modern approaches to organizational theory. He makes a strong case for the machine metaphor as the foundation of 'many popular theories and taken-for-granted ideas about organizations' (Morgan, 2006: 13), and points out that this image is so 'ingrained in our way of thinking about organization' that it is often seen as 'almost second nature' to organize following this approach (Morgan, 2006: 26). He also identifies the living organism metaphor as a major perspective and as the foundation of 'some of the central ideas of modern organization' (Morgan, 2006: 65). He highlights the potency of these two root metaphors by noting their ideological force (e.g. links to social Darwinism in the case of the living organism image), and cautions against implicitly accepting them simply because of their pervasiveness and familiarity.

In the only empirical study we are aware of that addresses the metaphorical roots of organizational theory and research, Cornelissen et al. (2005) searched 23 high-impact 'management journals' identified in the *Social Sciences Citation Index* for the period 1993–2003. Based on this representative sample of scholarship in organizational studies (broadly construed), they observed that the categories labeled as 'machine' and 'animate being' (a classification that includes comparisons with aspects of humans and other living organisms) clearly dominated frequency counts of root metaphors. Other scholars agree with Morgan about the metaphorical underpinnings of research on organizations, management, and leadership, and suggest broader frameworks (e.g. Alvesson and Spicer, 2011; Bolman and Deal, 2013; Putnam and Boys, 2006). Recently, a number of organizational studies scholars have noted similar limitations and called for more attention to metaphors and other forms of analogical reasoning to stimulate innovative theory and methods (e.g. Boxenbaum and Rouleau, 2011; Cornelissen, 2006; Oswick et al., 2011).

While a complete assessment of the root images that underlie organizational studies is beyond the scope of our study, the above sources we reviewed suggest that the literature continues to be marked with strong tendencies to build on mechanistic and organismic imagery. There are advantages to working with these familiar images but, as Morgan makes clear, ['we] have to accept that any theory or perspective ... we bring to the study of organization and management, while capable of creating valuable insights, is also incomplete, biased, and potentially misleading' (Morgan, 2006: 5).

The general point is that once a dominant root metaphor becomes deeply ingrained in our everyday ways of thinking it can become dangerous, no longer being viewed as a metaphor but as truth, thus closing off alternative ways of seeing. As Morgan (2006: 67) puts it: 'a way of seeing is a way of not seeing.' Meisner (1995) provides an excellent example of this in his description of the way Rene Descartes and Isaac Newton became victims of the metaphor of a clockwork universe because, as the metaphor ceased being apparent to them, they lost their ability to see it as merely one perspective among many possible perspectives.

Although we recognize that the field's dominant metaphors have been highly influential, our concern is that their level of taken-for-grantedness, through naturalization and

through concretizing and tying down the details – which is typical of relatively mature metaphors (see Jermier and Forbes, 2011; Morgan, 2011) – tends to impede fresh and inclusive thinking. This is a long-standing concern among some organizational studies scholars conducting research on the natural environment. In a provocative statement that has become something of a landmark, Shrivastava (1994) observed that despite devastating damage to the environment from organizational activities, researchers predominantly advanced images in which organizations were framed as *severed from nature* (the metaphor of a ‘castrated environment’). According to Shrivastava, these images prevented scholars from engaging seriously with the environment as an area of inquiry. He called for a fundamental reconceptualization of organizations, one that embraced a more nature-centered approach to the field and one that paid genuine attention to organization–nature relationships. To address this concern, we next re-examine the IoD image (which so vitally depicts the domination of people) and explore its implications for developing broader nature-inclusive imagery.

The metaphor of organizations as instruments of domination

Key ideas

Is the Great Pyramid at Giza to be admired for the incredible ingenuity and skill of the early Egyptians or is it a metaphor of *exploitation* symbolizing the enslavement and mistreatment of thousands of people to serve and glorify privileged elites? Through the lens of the IoD metaphor, enslavement, mistreatment and other dimensions of the ‘Ugly Face’ of organization are exposed and emphasized. The perspective generated by the domination metaphor forces us to consider what may be found behind the veil: systematic disadvantage; widespread damage and destruction; and pervasive pain and suffering – the uncensored story of organization told from the standpoint of the exploited. With the IoD metaphor, Morgan depicts the exploitation of humans using concepts of wage-slavery, surplus value extraction and exposure to work hazards, and he extends the image to the conduct of multinational corporations that take advantage of people, communities and the environment – only to later discard them because higher returns on capital are possible elsewhere.

Domination is the second key idea developed in this perspective. It is used as a general concept to refer to the exercise of robust and thorough-going hierarchical control. What is dominated? Through this lens and Morgan’s illustrations, domination of people and the environment can be seen. Part of the purpose of developing the IoD image, however, is to liberate thinking from total domination by articulating the perspectives of the subjugated. IoD imagery invites consideration of, for example, the circumstances of workers in secondary labor markets suffering employment insecurity and toxic exposure, women experiencing sex discrimination and gender inequality, and post-colonial subjects (including children) undergoing wage-slavery. Importantly for our purpose it also directs attention to the commodification of nature and broader environmental degradation through pollution, depletion and appropriation of resources, and destruction of habitats and ecosystems. Indeed, the first pages of the chapter detail serious threats from corporate pollution:

Every day, industrial organizations spew millions of tons of toxic waste into our waterways and the atmosphere or bury them in leaky containers underground. The economics of waste disposal is such that many organizations feel that they have no choice but to continue in these damaging practices so long as they remain legal. As a result, it is now estimated that as many as 2,000 toxins pollute the Great Lakes, and there are thousands of dangerous toxic-waste sites adding pollution to the groundwater ... The fish have cancer, and in areas of concentrated pollution such as the infamous Love Canal near the Niagara River, concern about pollution-related diseases has reached crisis proportions. As in the case of food and tobacco production, human health is adversely affected by corporate practices that place profits before human welfare. (Morgan, 2006: 301–302)

Following Weber, Morgan is especially interested in conveying how domination in modern bureaucracies and capitalist organizations is intertwined with the proliferation of *instrumental rationality* – a narrow and degraded form of reason that fetishizes the refinement of means, calculative logic and mechanized efficiency. Substantive end goals that require moral and aesthetic reflection for justification are eclipsed with the false certainty of technological solutions, refined processes and quantitative language. The modern emphasis on instrumental rationality leads to domination as ‘impersonal principles and the quest for efficiency tend to become our new slave drivers’ (Morgan, 2006: 296).

Gouldner’s (1970) discussion of poison gas weapons provides a dramatic illustration of how dominating technologies can arise and be maintained by restricted reasoning. He points out that evaluating the gas solely in terms of the mathematical elegance of its formula (or in terms of other strictly technical criteria) or construing its elements as purely neutral bits of information (useful for the furtherance of any and all social values) obscures more fundamental ethical questions about the technology. Judgments about poison gas limited solely to “‘autonomous’ technical criteria,’ in effect not only allow but require people to be ‘moral cretins in their technical roles’ (Gouldner, 1970: 13). This illustration can serve as an object lesson and be applied to widely used synthetic pesticides (many of which are based on poison gas technology – see Pollan, 2006) and also may be applicable to hydraulic fracturing and many other technologies in use that are claimed to be benign.

Viewed from the perspective of the domination metaphor, *systems of totalitarian control* can arise in which elites aspire to formally administer all aspects of nature and social relations. These systems resemble total institutions that use instrumentally rational processes to subdue all opposition in and around organizations. Alternatively, this metaphor enables a view of organizations as deeply divided and politicized along class, occupation, race, ethnicity, gender, environment and other lines: *battlegrounds*, rife with conflict and with resistance to dominating and exploitative practices. As a counterweight to traditional organizational studies that sometimes evoke Panglossian thoughts of unified teams or happy families, the battlegrounds image frames organization as *contested terrain* in which entrenched struggles can arise from antagonisms among people with fundamentally different views of issues and problems.

Usefulness

We understand the value of assessing the holistic usefulness of all eight *Images* metaphors at once. The approach we take, however, is more focused. For two main reasons, we work

primarily with the IoD metaphor. First, it has potential to generate more critical thinking about organizations and nature – thinking compatible with the environmental sustainability imperative. As argued by Worster (1994: 378, cited in Philippon, 2004): ‘[m]etaphors imply worldviews,’ and it is in those worldviews that we find fundamental strengths and limitations of a perspective.¹ In our view, it is important to revisit discussions of the assumptions of the anthropocentric paradigm (entrenched worldview that casts humans as separate from and superior to the rest of nature) in order to examine the roots of current environmental problems and to meaningfully explore alternatives. We are concerned that the organizational studies field has lost an edge as critiques of anthropocentric bias have faded and debates tend to be staged more around normal science topics and shades of light green (reformist) politics (cf. Dobson, 2009; Ezzamel and Willmott, 2014). Second, the IoD metaphor remains in the margins of the field despite the fact that it counterbalances limitations of the two most powerful conventional metaphors in use. When Gareth Morgan was asked to reflect on which metaphors offer strong insight for research on organizations and the natural environment, he emphasized the IoD image, pointing to the role it plays in highlighting the ‘exploitative and destructive aspects of organizations’ and the ‘hidden downsides of some of the conventional organizational metaphors, most notably those of machine and organism’ (see Morgan, 2011: 472).

We hold that further elaboration of the IoD metaphor, as well as reflecting on how to move beyond its limitations, remain critical for organizational studies and for generating nature-inclusive research. In the next section, we use insights from the IoD metaphor to guide development of new images related to organizations, sustainability and the water crisis.

The domination thesis and new metaphors for human–water relations

Profligate water use today will imperil future generations, the same as the profligate use of oil, destruction of forests, and other environmental tipping points will. But water is much more important to our future than oil. That’s because there are no alternatives to it, no new substitute for life’s essential ingredient... (Barnett, 2011: 5)

As we noted, environmental problems have led scholars across disciplines to assert the imperative of environmental sustainability. Prominent among these problems is water, the ‘life-creating, life-supporting, life enhancing’ element that has no replacement, making adaptation to its scarcity ‘onerous’ (Chellany, 2013: xi). Both the World Economic Forum and the US State Department have recently listed water scarcity and quality as critical global issues (Hoekstra, 2014; Richter, 2014). Similarly, the United Nations Environment Programme’s Global *Environmental Outlook-5 for Business* (2013) report identified myriad problems and opportunities that business is or will be facing in relation to water across the globe. These problems include: constraints on growth due to water scarcity; operational and supply chain disruptions; conflict with other stakeholders over limited supply; rising water costs; stricter water quality regulations; product use restrictions or phase-outs; regulatory or market-driven reduction in demand for some chemical products; risk of reputational damage and potential loss of social license to major water users; costs associated with required erosion, sediment and pollution control measures;

discharge monitoring and sampling; new markets for water-efficient products; and increased need for water purification products.

Thus, it is becoming increasingly apparent that water is of immense strategic importance for organizations and society (Hoekstra, 2014). Does organizational studies research reflect the urgency of water problems and the significance of this topic? Some scholars have noted the dearth of organizational studies research on water problems and urged new studies aimed at understanding and improving human–water relations (e.g. Kurland and Zell, 2010; Lambooy, 2011; Martinez, 2015; Money, 2014). But, why is there such a dearth of research in organizational studies on this topic? Some suggest that for too long and in too many places, water, this crucial element of life, has been taken for granted, priced below its value, and assumed to exist in abundance (Barnett, 2011). To these points, we add the idea that too little attention has been paid to examining how favored metaphors and, relatedly, the hubris of anthropocentrism have led to restricted thinking when it comes to water sustainability issues.

Using normative metaphors to think about organizations and water

The main purpose of thinking metaphorically is to generate new understanding of an abstract concept by compactly and vividly expressing what can otherwise be said only circuitously (Ortony, 1975). When metaphor is used, features of the abstract concept that previously were not present nor considered salient may be advanced (see Cornelissen, 2005). Each metaphor highlights aspects of the concept while implicitly hiding other aspects (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980).

In specifically relating the abstract concept organization to ‘water’ – a palpable, familiar substance directly experienced every day – we invite engagement with the broader domain of water but recognize that the initial conceptual blending of organization and water might emerge from the more tangible features of the comparison (e.g. organizations as hydrologic cycles, organizations as drinking fountains, or organizations as people who are physically constituted by water). This type of vividness is an advantage of metaphor so long as the meaning developed is not too restricted by the literal.

As shown in Table 1, we propose several abstract, non-literal pairings that use the word ‘as’ to link organization with source domains.² We elaborate the IoD *root metaphor* with two *sub-metaphors* (organizations as *systems of totalitarian control* and *organizations as battlegrounds*) and then extend it by deriving two *second-order metaphors*: *organizations as water exploiters* and *organizations as water keepers*. We also experiment with metaphors designed to serve as catalysts for thinking beyond domination. Sub-metaphors enable more specific mapping and nuanced elaboration (Kovecses, 2000), whereas second-order metaphors extend a comparison throughout a major part of a work (cf. Alvesson, 1993; Fludernik, 2011).

Metaphors may be assessed using criteria such as compactness, vividness, forcefulness and aptness (see Ortony, 1975). However, given the power of metaphor to transform thinking, some scholars have suggested that metaphors should also be compatible with progressive social change and theory development that has an emancipatory intent. For example, Larson (2011) places high priority on developing *prescriptive* metaphors to better bridge society and nature, and suggests that the pivotal question is whether the

metaphors we choose will help us on the path to sustainability or lead us further astray. Following this method, some of the metaphors we develop (see Table 1, Columns 3 and 4) are explicitly *normative* and are special cases of Oswick et al.'s (2004) *premeditated metaphors*. The latter are consciously and prescriptively imposed as images of organization to help generate new theory and solve organizational problems.

Organizations as water exploiters

The water exploiter metaphor (see Table 1) is derived from the IoD's emphasis on *systems of totalitarian control*, and represents organization-based domination of water through privatization, hoarding, commodification, contamination, wasteful use and other activities that undermine the viability of aquatic systems. From the perspective of organizations as water exploiters, picturing organizations as 'bloated' can effectively signify routine profligate water use and in many respects depicts present day business as usual. Related concepts from some areas of ecological research, particularly agriculture and international trade (e.g. water footprint, virtual water, embodied water, or embedded water) help elaborate this perspective. These concepts emphasize the insight that there is *hidden water* (often immense) in everything we encounter (Allan, 2003). For example, to produce a single hamburger for sale it takes an average of 2400 liters of water. The embedded water in a hamburger can symbolize the scope of the problem as rising population and affluence create exponential demand for water. We advance the water exploiter lens to enhance reflection on dominating organizations that create severe ecosystem stress by using water in risky and unsustainable ways. An artistic illustration of this point may be found in the highly acclaimed, dystopian science fiction film "*Pumzi*," which depicts a parched and barren, underground city in totalitarian East Africa, following World War III—the apocalyptic war over water. In this future world, citizens are permitted one small container of water per day. The container, which appears in nearly every scene, strongly resembles today's sports drink bottles. It might bait critique of multinational water warrior Coca-Cola and its "Powerade" line (or, ironically, as one web commentator suggested, its product line, "Sprite," and its lifeblood slogans "Obey your thirst" and "For the thirsty"). "*Pumzi*" shocks viewers into reflecting on exploitative human-water relations in ways even well-accepted metaphors of the day ("thirsty planet," "thirsty cities," "thirsty organizations) probably do not. Equally importantly, its surprise ending presents a memorable example of what is arguably altruistic ecocentrism under the harshest of circumstances.

At a more macro level, there is perhaps no greater symbol of *humanity's efforts to master nature* or to develop mechanized instruments of domination than the world's mega-dams. Control of river watersheds through mega-dams has provided some substantive benefits and has often been a source of competitive pride among politicians, business leaders, technicians and citizens. Scientists have cautioned for some time, however, against placing too much faith in these controversial systems given that they have been linked to large-scale species extinction and biodiversity loss, flooded forests and farmlands, and displaced people (see www.internationalrivers.org/problems-with-big-dams). Remarkably, these concerns have not prevented the proliferation of dam projects, even in earthquake prone regions such as the Himalayan Mountains (see Mukerjee, 2015).

In this line of thought, what is the root cause of human efforts to appropriate, control and use water in unsustainable ways? Some scholars working with the IoD metaphor would link privatization and profligate use or pollution of water to capital accumulation exigencies, patriarchal forces and other forms of domination. The connection we emphasize between the anthropocentric worldview and unbridled domination of water complements critiques of capitalism, patriarchy and other critical perspectives but resonates best with scholars who argue that the highest priority must be to reveal and challenge anthropocentric bias. Anthropocentrism manifests, though, in different forms. It can range from more traditional western religious and other beliefs that humans have the right to exploit nature at will – what we refer to as *hard anthropocentrism* – to softer notions underwritten by reformist philosophies emphasizing conservation of natural resources, restoration of natural environments, or preservation of wilderness to profit humans (see Wellock, 2007). Within the hard anthropocentrism worldview, water and the rest of non-human nature are construed as dead, passive, inert – lacking agency and other properties humans readily appreciate (Merchant, 1980). Accordingly, processes that over-exploit water are unreflectively set in motion as water is viewed only as a tool for human use, a means to taken-for-granted ends, and a substance lacking intrinsic worth. In this view, an unchallenged belief prevails that the true value of water may be quantified and accurately assessed through market mechanisms.

Processes of water exploitation are also underwritten by *instrumental rationality*. The quest for better, faster processes can become an end in itself, displacing reflection about bigger questions such as those related to aquifer depletion, water contamination, or water equity. It follows that those who operate in such systems often do not think there are rational alternatives to human sovereignty and exploitation in interfacing with water.

At the essence of totalitarian control is an organizational form designed to limit or eliminate spontaneity, and a system of management that does not recognize the agency of the dominated (see Arendt, 1951/1979). This corresponds well with the classic, ideal type *machine bureaucracy* (an organization directed by technological imperatives, well-ingrained regulations, standardized work processes and hierarchical command language). The engineer-technocrat symbolizes the ascendant humanism driving this organizational form (see Horkheimer, 1947/1974),³ in which a high priority is placed on quantifying and *commodifying nature* (e.g. a forest as board feet of timber or an artesian well as gallons of extractable water for bottling per day). Water exploitation in a machine bureaucracy rests on instrumentally rational and objectifying language and processes. This type of reason best serves the taken-for-granted ends of economic growth and profit.

The multi-national corporation, Nestlé, does not fall completely in line with an ideal type exploiter of water, but it appears that no amount of public disapproval will deter this firm from extracting, bottling and commodifying water in drought-stricken California. CEO Tim Brown recently asserted his company's legal rights and defended their claim to over 700 million gallons of water per year, stating: 'If I stop bottling water tomorrow, people would buy a different brand of bottled water. We see this everyday ... In fact, if I could increase [bottling], I would' (Lockie, 2015). Within the constraints of the hard anthropocentric paradigm, there appears to Mr Brown to be no rational alternative to bottling water in California. Ironically, according to the US Forest Service, Nestlé's permit to transport water across the San Bernardino National Forest for bottling has been expired since 1988 (Schlanger, 2015).

Organizations as water keepers

Dominating and instrumentalist images of organizations and water have their place in organizational studies, especially given the role organizations play in instigating and intensifying water crises (Barnett, 2011; Martinez, 2015). It is important, however, to visualize less one-sided forms of human–water relations that can generate new thinking about the importance of water and that can support greater responsibility and reform. The water keeper metaphor we discuss below and delineate in column 3 of Table 1 is derived from the treatment of the ‘radicalized organization’ in the IoD chapter and the image of *organizations as battlegrounds*. It is explicitly normative and is aimed at promoting environmental sustainability.

The root word ‘keep’ in the water keeper metaphor has multiple meanings. Therefore, based on semantic distinctions, it may be used to provoke a number of derivative metaphors. One possible distinction – those who seek to retain possession of (or hoard) water – has been discussed above as an aspect of water exploitation. But, the word more evocatively refers to caretaking or to those who provide care – in this case, care of water. This connotation suggests that water keepers would assume the role of water stewards or trustees and would support restoration of bodies of water. For our purposes, the way the term ‘keep’ is used by WaterKeepers®Alliance (a global activist organization dedicated to strong advocacy of water and the protection of waterways) is also useful, leading us to think of potentially vigilant protectors and restorers of water engaged in struggle with forces exploiting water. Through this lens, we can visualize water keeping organizations battling in diverse ways to correct extreme imbalances in the human–water relationship.

Similar to the image of the water exploiter, this metaphor is underwritten by anthropocentric assumptions of human superiority. However, because it emphasizes *stewardship* (concern for efficient use, conservation of resources and environmental protection and restoration) and trusteeship (concern for the quality of the environment for the well-being of future generations), we refer to the paradigm underlying this metaphor as *soft anthropocentrism*, implying movement away from totalizing forms of domination. Indeed, this perspective is marked by dissenting thought and ongoing resistance to domination and separation from the hard anthropocentric worldview.

Using this image and situating it within the IoD sub-metaphor, ‘organizations as battlegrounds,’ scholars can attribute to water keepers insight into the limitations of reasoning instrumentally. Augmenting the critique of hard anthropocentric hubris with *modified instrumental rationality*, water keepers can challenge domination in another fundamental way: by rejecting the exclusivity of the language of degraded reason and its limiting technicist vocabulary. Horkheimer and Adorno (1944/1972: xiv) wisely cautioned reformers not to catch this ‘sickness’:

It is characteristic of the sickness that even the best-intentioned reformer who uses an impoverished and debased language to recommend renewal, by his adoption of the insidious mode of categorization and the bad philosophy it conceals, strengthens the very power of the established order he is trying to break.

White (2007: 20) is also suspicious of using techno-scientific language and quantitative reasoning as the 'primary weapon' lest activists unwittingly slip into a comfort zone with techniques such as 'cost-benefit logic figured in songbirds.' Through this lens, we see water keepers developing and using a wide range of vocabularies in struggles against water privatization, commodification, and other forms of exploitation – succeeding to some degree when water is elevated to the status of a *valued resource* worth protecting through struggle.

To conceptualize macro battleground dynamics and organizational forms that are emerging to address water problems, we adopt the phrase *contested terrain*, recognizing that disagreements about even the most basic water issues are typical once business as usual is threatened. Arguably, the challenge facing water keepers seeking to change organizations is immense. The vast majority of organizations lack basic methods of protecting water and tend not to take responsibility for its care (Barnett, 2011; Martinez, 2015).

Yet, through the water keeper lens, we can visualize organizations operating individually and in innovative coalitions, struggling in contested terrains to shape businesses, NGOs, government agencies, and other organizations that will step out ahead and drive change. Some of these organizations can be considered activist organizations that bring water keepers together, such as environmental champion Patagonia, discussed in the next section. Others are better described as pragmatic change agents responding to increasing awareness of water problems, such as the Alliance for Water Stewardship that comprises nearly 30 large corporations seeking to develop a global standard defining water stewardship (Clancy, 2014).

We can also visualize classic struggles in and around organizations along traditional class lines and between corporate interests and environmental groups. For example, Obach (2004) richly illustrated ways organized labor and environmental groups found common ground on water and other environmental issues to successfully challenge corporate pollution. The contested terrain in and around Coca-Cola also provides a vivid illustration of dynamics directing new forms of organization emerging to address water problems. Long embattled with environmental activists and government agencies over its extraction and pollution of ground water, as recently as July 2014 Coca-Cola was forced to shut down bottling plants in India following local protests (Chilkoti, 2014). The company's overall approach to negotiating the contested terrain includes combative strategies. Its predominant strategy seems more collaborative, however, as it aspires to be recognized as a leading corporate citizen and frontline water keeper in itself (see Elmore, 2014). Indeed, Coca-Cola's approach, as documented in its most recent water stewardship report, appears far-reaching. The steps it is taking include implementation of technical controls to improve water efficiency of its manufacturing operations, support for water conservation efforts in vital locations, and a conspicuous collaboration with the World Wildlife Fund.

Questions about greenwashing have been raised by some concerning Coca-Cola's reformist style, which has been linked to the industry's priority of maintaining access to water as a commodity and shaping global water policy (Pearce, 2015). Further research is needed on Coca-Cola and other aspiring water keeping organizations to determine if reform capitalism can succeed on broad environmental criteria and what meaning to attribute to underlying motives. It is likely that Coca-Cola is merely responding to regulatory pressures and community groups, but it does seem clear to us that interfaces with

water in this terrain are being restructured and that debates are not limited to tacit endorsements of instrumentally rational techniques.

Although Coca-Cola provides a highly visible object lesson helpful in picturing some progression away from images of water exploitation, their strategies and tactics may not be typical of even more progressive water keeping organizations. For example, a critical role that water keepers could play involves fundamentally challenging the current rules of the game – rules that permit near total domination, especially by corporate owners and their allies (e.g. Barlow and Clarke, 2002; Subramaniam and Williford, 2012). From this angle, we can imagine a counterpoint arising in future water keeper organizations related to private ownership and control of water – one asserting that access to safe water should be a basic human right and that all humanity owns the water.

More generally, as advocates from diverse sectors facing a variety of dominating forces, we can see water keeper organizations employing a range of tactics: litigation; boycott; direct action and ecotage; social media campaigns; symbolic protests; vigorous debate; informed discussion; inspirational dialogue; educating for sustainability; implementing green technology and formal systems; and building transformational cultures. Consistent with the battlegrounds metaphor, some confrontation and harsh conflict can be expected. Although difficult, we can see these steps, in some instances, leading to real dialogues that move beyond limited vocabularies reducing nature to instrumental considerations. At this stage, mediated communication would also be required – human actors speaking to other human actors on behalf of nature. It should be recognized that human attempts to speak for nature – as legitimate representatives (O'Neill, 2001), as deputized 'nature advocates' (Eckersley, 2011), and even more so as environmental stakeholders (cf. Waddock, 2011) – can be difficult. For example, cooptation of the advocates could impede progress. Moreover, even with the best intentions, water keepers can slide toward possessiveness in their efforts to enforce the maxim that all of humanity owns the water. Nevertheless, we think the water keeper metaphor provides important groundwork for thinking about redressing human privilege, negotiating on behalf of nature in contested terrains, and designing unique, less-dominating forms of organization (see Morgan, 2006: 333).

In the next section, we further elaborate this metaphor through an illustration of an exemplary activist organization, Patagonia, Inc. We see strong elements of the water keeper in Patagonia and also some movement consistent with ecocentric ideals.

Patagonia as water keeper

Patagonia is one of the most widely celebrated companies in the business and academic press (Delmas and Burbano, 2011; Hamm, 2006). Because of its commitment to social and environmental leadership, it has been labeled a leading 'CSR entrepreneur' (Vallaster et al., 2012), 'conscious capitalist' organization (O'Toole and Vogel, 2011), and 'sustainability leader' (Lampikoski et al., 2014).

In this era of corporate greenwashing, however, sophisticated consumer-sensitive firms like Patagonia are fully aware of the potential impact of their public disclosures, and some certainly take liberties in managing their reputations by knowingly stretching the truth and otherwise misrepresenting their environmental performance (Delmas and Burbano, 2011; Forbes and Jermier, 2012). In our research, we did not find any allegations of greenwashing by Patagonia. Indeed they seem more careful than their admirers

when describing the current position and trajectory of the company. For example, Patagonia's website modestly characterizes the firm by stating:

We can't pose Patagonia as the model of a responsible company. We don't do everything a responsible company can do, nor does anyone else we know. But we can tell you how we came to realize our environmental and social responsibilities, and then began to act on them.

In a recent interview, Vincent Stanley (Patagonia Director and co-author of the book, *The Responsible Company*) noted that their journey started out slowly and that it took 20 years before Patagonia even examined the environmental impacts of their supply chain (Cofino, 2013).

For many reasons, Patagonia has received and deserves close study by academic researchers and journalists. Despite this scrutiny, it is difficult to know *in toto* what to make of Patagonia's strong reputation. One of our reviewers, for example, raised a concern about the prices of Patagonia's products, perhaps echoing the common perception that the firm serves an elite niche market, also reflected in its nickname, easily found on the internet: 'Patagucci.' We are not apologists for Patagonia's pricing and marketing strategies, but it should be noted that when it comes to pricing, Patagonia is to Gucci as municipal tap water is to Fiji bottled water or, at the extreme, Beverly Hills 90H20 designer water. Our study leads us to the impression that the company's approach has been to manufacture, sell and stand behind high quality, durable products (see Table 2 for repair and replacement policies) that are priced for sustainable consumption, not mass markets or haute couture. Moreover, as with any business concern operating in the world of 'green capitalism' and 'green management' (see Banerjee, 2012; Clark and York, 2005; Ferguson, 2015), we have reservations about Patagonia's undertakings and ultimately about what is needed socially and environmentally relative to what capitalist organizations can actually deliver.

Accordingly, in presenting and depicting Patagonia as an exemplar of a water keeping organization, we do not want to raise it on a pedestal. We selected Patagonia because it draws attention to and champions a variety of healthy water solutions, but also because it has a broader reputation as an environmental activist organization and because it is highly influential in business networks. As shown in Table 2, we take a descriptive approach (based on available research and the firm's disclosures) and provide a list of Patagonia's programs and initiatives that correspond with the water keeper image.

Patagonia's water keeping stance began with Yvon Chouinard, its activist founder and self-described 'reluctant businessman':

I'm a dambuster. We've been working for years to take this dam out [Matilija Dam on the Ventura River]. The reservoir behind it is only four feet deep. The water behind it gets real warm. It kills a lot of the life in the river. When you take out a dam, that's a real victory. I mean a concrete victory so to speak ... To do good, you actually have to do something.⁴

Of the many environmental battlegrounds on which Patagonia is engaged, the movement to take down deadbeat dams – those that are no longer useful – may be the most surprising to organizational studies scholars, and least well known to date. It is an excellent example, however, of Patagonia's environmental strategy we refer to as 'Promoting healthy water and ecosystem restoration' (see Table 2).

Table 2a. Patagonia as water keeper.

Strategy 1: Promoting healthy water and ecosystem restoration

Tactics:

- Full-length feature documentary on dam issues, *DamNation* (2014)
 - Essays on water protection, restoration and dam removal advocacy
 - Our Common Waters Initiative
 - bluesign®system
-

Strategy 2: Advocating change for existing businesses and supporting new environmental activist businesses

Tactics:

- 100% organic cotton in product line and agreements with other apparel companies to purchase organic cotton
 - Walmart and the Sustainable Apparel Coalition
 - Footprint Chronicles®
 - Environmental education
 - 20 Million and Change
-

Strategy 3: Supporting grassroots environmental organizations

Tactics:

- Direct grants
 - 1% for the Planet
 - Conservation Alliance
 - Environmental internships for Patagonia employees
 - Tools for Activists conferences
-

Table 2b. Patagonia: Beyond water keeping.

Strategy 4: Encouraging active citizenship and a low consumption society

Tactics:

- Benefit-Corporation
 - Vote the Environment campaigns
 - Voice Your Choice campaign
 - Don't Buy This Jacket advertising campaign
 - Common Threads Initiative and recycling programs (e.g. Worn Wear)
 - Responsible Economy campaign
-

This table provides an overview of the types of programs and initiatives Patagonia participates in or collaborates with other organizations. The list is not exhaustive. The categorization by strategy is the authors' design based on a review of academic and business sources (e.g. Delmas and Burbano, 2011; Hamm, 2006; Lampikoski et al., 2014; MacKinnon, 2015; O'Toole and Vogel, 2011; Vallaster et al., 2012) and Patagonia's extensive public access resources on their website and publications (e.g. www.patagonia.com, Environmental and Social Initiatives, 2014).

To raise awareness of these issues, Patagonia produced an award-winning film, *DamNation* (2014). This film documents an incipient paradigm shift from viewing big dams as inspiring conquests of nature and engineering marvels to endorsing efforts to

remove dams and restore river ecosystems and landscapes. This major undertaking is supported by extensive educational resources on dams and other environmental issues posted on Patagonia's website, including influential essays on dam removal (e.g. 'The Dawn of Dam Removal' by Bruce Babbitt, Former US Secretary of the Interior). Additionally, a recent multi-phase campaign called 'Our Common Waters' focuses attention on numerous water issues, including freshwater scarcity, water exploitation and threats to biodiversity, dam removal and new dam construction, as well as pollution in the textile industry – second only to agriculture in polluting water. Actions taken during this campaign include: employee demonstrations protesting new dam construction; disseminating information on water problems in print, online and video; and an internal program focused on Patagonia's water use that measures the embedded water of products and that requires use of bluesign® system approved materials in Patagonia products. These materials reduce water and other resources as well as toxic chemicals from the supply chain.

In keeping with Patagonia's mission of using 'business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis,'²⁵ the tactics listed under the second strategy we identify in Table 2 ('Advocating change ...') are examples of firm-level activities and inter-organizational collaborations that support healthy water and provide solutions to related environmental problems. For example, Patagonia's commitment in the mid-1990s to using only 100% organic cotton was an important milestone that changed not only Patagonia's understanding of their own supply chain and its effects, but that also helped move others in the apparel industry in this direction. Conventionally grown cotton is extremely water and chemical intensive and has toxic effects on water, soil and air (Chouinard, 2006). In contrast, organic cotton often relies on rainwater, not irrigation, and is raised without toxic chemicals or fertilizers. This bold shift led to changes in their product line, but supplies of organic cotton were limited at that time so Patagonia shared information with other apparel manufacturers (e.g. Nike) and enlisted them to begin purchasing organic cotton. This expanded and stabilized a new market (Lee and Jay, 2015). In 2009, Patagonia and Walmart invited business leaders to a conference about creating an index to measure the environmental impact of apparel products. This led to the formation of the Sustainable Apparel Coalition that now includes over 30 apparel and footwear brands and over 100 affiliated organizations. One of the key priorities of the Coalition is 'water use and quality.'

While thousands of companies now engage in some form of sustainability reporting, Patagonia is developing a new approach to increase transparency concerning their supply chain and product lines. *The Footprint Chronicles*® on Patagonia's website is a third party audited database that maps Patagonia's factories, textile mills and farms across the globe. It provides social and environmental information, including some detailed statements relevant to water use and broader ecosystem health. Along with *The Footprint Chronicles*®, their website and catalogs are designed to promote environmental literacy. They provide books about Patagonia's philosophies (e.g. Chouinard, 2006) and about the steps the company took to become progressively more responsible (Chouinard and Stanley, 2012). They also publish lists of environmental activist speakers and 'Field Reports,' which are documents written by external and internal authors that deal with current struggles (e.g. battles to protect Chilean coastal waters, and restoration of the Snake River in the US Pacific Northwest). In addition to these examples of the ways Patagonia seeks to encourage other organizations to become more sustainable, they

launched a new venture capital arm, '20 Million and Change,' which funds 'like-minded' start-up companies (e.g. CO2 Nexus, a company developing a solution for textile processing that replaces water with CO2).

The third strategy we illustrate, 'Supporting grass roots environmental organizations' (Table 2), has been a primary focus because, according to the Patagonia website, these activists are 'on the frontlines of the environmental crisis.' Patagonia provides grants to 'activists who take radical and strategic steps to protect habitat, oceans and waterways, wilderness and biodiversity.' In addition to providing direct grants, many of which benefit water issues' groups (e.g. Frasier Riverkeeper, West Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada; Friends of the Ventura River, California, USA), Patagonia has been instrumental in recruiting businesses willing to provide financial support to environmental groups. '1% for the Planet' is an organization of 1191 member companies giving 1% of sales to over 3400 environmental NGOs (e.g. Freshwater Future – US and Canada; Blue Planet Network). Similarly, The Conservation Alliance is made up of businesses in the outdoor industry that fund grassroots environmental groups working on, for example, conservation of river ecosystems and dam removal. Two of Patagonia's more unique tactics include paid sabbaticals for employees so that they can work for up to two months with progressive environmental groups (e.g. International Rivers) and sponsoring conferences that teach tools for environmental activism.

While we use Patagonia to illustrate water keeping, we also see elements in recent programs that indicate movement toward ecocentrism – a shift we describe as nascent ecocentrism. In our view, the items listed in Table 2 under the heading 'Encouraging active citizenship and a low consumption society' represent new ways to think about the role of business and enrich discussions of social and environmental responsibility. These discussions may be enlivened by the increasing number of legally designated Benefit Corporations. Patagonia was the first company in California to register as a Benefit Corporation under the new designation. Legally permitting organizations to pursue a triple bottom line approach to corporate citizenship and provide public benefits will have limited appeal across industries, but the enactment of these laws establishes a potential basis for new material and symbolic imagery to impact marketplaces.

In promoting progressive ideas and practices, Patagonia also encourages the public and their customers to help garner political support for the environment. They have run several 'Vote the Environment' campaigns, encouraging voter registration and support of environmentally-minded candidates. And, they have created campaigns to involve customers in decisions about charitable funding for environmental groups. In the 'Voice Your Choice' campaign, customers can influence the distribution of grant funding by recommending from a list of activist environmental groups.

Even more fundamentally, Patagonia encourages their customers and the public to question high-consumption lifestyles. For example, running counter to usual holiday shopping messages, Patagonia ran a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* on Black Friday, 2011, with the heading, 'Don't buy this jacket' (a Patagonia jacket was pictured). The ad encouraged customers to buy only based on their needs and then to ask if a used jacket would suffice (see Renner, 2012). This ad was intended to be educational, asking readers to understand and reduce their environmental footprint and to draw attention to Patagonia's 'Common Threads Initiative' and recycling programs (also see the most recent campaign, 'Worn Wear'). Through these programs, the

company takes back worn clothing and has it recycled or repurposed. If the clothing can be repaired, they will help customers find new owners for it. Patagonia has also increased efforts to introduce ideas that are in some ways compatible with the degrowth movement (see LaTouche, 2010). For example, in a 2013 article in *The Guardian*, Chouinard argued for lower rates of consumption, calling for an economy that is not fueled by insatiable consumerism. He challenged all corporations to act by creating simpler, longer-lasting products that are not endlessly duplicated and that are less likely to be tossed away. Patagonia's recent 'Responsible Economy' campaign is intended to provoke a broad conversation within industry and with consumers about the largely unquestioned pursuit of economic growth (see Patagonia's 'Environmental and Social Initiatives' report, 2014). 'Responsible Economy' ranks among their most controversial campaigns because it was launched at a time when the company was growing steadily. Moreover, it was launched when memories of the 'Don't buy this jacket' advertisement were still fresh – an ad that many journalists suggested had actually increased Patagonia's sales substantially. Despite the paradox – a growing private enterprise waging an anti-materialist, anti-growth campaign – the Patagonia story is noteworthy because concrete discussions about unsustainable economic growth are urgently needed and difficult to stage. On this point, MacKinnon (2015) observed that it has been difficult to spur interest in the degrowth movement even with support from Bill McKibben, Naomi Klein, Robert Costanza, and other influential figures.

We have not covered the full extent of Patagonia's water keeping efforts and nascent ecocentrism, but even the sample we presented makes it clear that this small organization has made an impact for change. This impact may be in the outer range of what a capitalist organization can achieve as an activist force leveraging and inspiring its larger collaborators. Taking into account the complexity of meaningful change, we believe Patagonia's ability to provoke thinking that belies the conventional wisdom warrants further consideration. Importantly, some of the change they produce begins at the level of the individual. For example, textile laminator Rob Koepfel's experiences show how thinking and identity can be transformed during interactions staged by a water keeping organization. He made a classic statement following a supplier conference sponsored by Patagonia at which he learned about the environmental impacts of conventionally grown cotton: 'I came as a representative of business; I left a citizen of the earth' (Rowledge et al., 1999: 103).

Summary of the domination thesis

We have argued that water problems pose a prodigious challenge for environmental sustainability and need more attention from organizational studies scholars. Domination and over-exploitation of water in and around organizations elevate risk to humanity and other species, and threaten to further destabilize ecosystems in unprecedented ways. As shown in columns two and three of Table 1 and through the Patagonia illustration, we think beliefs and assumptions about what is an appropriate balance in human–water relations can change and that premeditated, normative metaphors (e.g. organizations as water keepers) can help generate changes in thinking.

Although we see the water keeper image as a useful and necessary step in addressing these problems, we do not believe it can take us all the way in visualizing organizational forms that parallel ecocentric ideals and that represent radical change. It is limited by the language of ‘keeping’ and the assumptions of soft anthropocentrism that still cast humanity in a separate and superior role. Accordingly, we can envision the metaphor of organizations as water keepers eventually giving way to thinking that fosters ideas about even more egalitarian and nature-inclusive social relationships in and around organizations.

Metaphors beyond domination: Reclaiming ecocentrism and extending the social

Morgan’s (2006) challenge to go beyond themes of the IoD and imagine non-dominating forms of organization begins, in this article, with metaphors that resonate with ecocentric philosophy (see column 4, Table 1). *Ecocentrism* has a long history and is a complex concept, but what characterizes all ecocentric perspectives is a picture of reality that presents the world as ‘... an intrinsically dynamic, interrelated web of relations [with] no absolutely discrete entities and no absolute dividing lines between the living and the nonliving, the animate and the inanimate, or the human and the nonhuman’ (Eckersley, 1992: 49). That is, ecocentrism emphasizes *holistic balance* and the experience of harmonious relations with others and the natural world around. When combined with the pivotal beliefs that all elements of nature are interconnected and that non-human nature should be respected because it also has intrinsic value, ecocentric philosophy has been appealing to many, albeit difficult to apply. Nevertheless, the ecocentric worldview has intermittently been proposed as a viable foundation for sustainable futures (e.g. Ezzamel and Willmott, 2014; Purser et al., 1995; Zimmerman, 2004) and should be beneficial to organizational studies scholars interested in broadening debate about human–water relations.

The root metaphor we build on is based on Ivan Illich’s (1973) classic book, *Tools for Conviviality*. In this book, Illich argues that tools (technologies, organizations, institutions) have a deep structure that is intrinsic to social relations. He proposes that conviviality (‘autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment’ [Illich, 1973: 11]) and by implication, *spheres of conviviality*, arise from inverting the present deep structure so that people and nature are not dominated by the tools of industrial productivity and consumerism. According to Illich, radical reconstruction for convivial effectiveness is possible and begins with leadership that goes beyond the limitations of technical fixes and green consumerism:

All our leaders now call themselves environmentalists. But their brand of environmentalism poses very few challenges to the present system. Instead they propose to spruce up the planet with a few technical fixes or individual lifestyle changes: scrubbers on coal plants, eating ‘all natural’ cereals, and so on. (Ivan Illich, 30 May, 2001, personal correspondence)

In specifying sub-metaphors for environmental sustainability, it is useful to remember that there are many shades of green among environmental thinkers. Some are not compatible

with the underpinnings of ecocentrism and convivial effectiveness, both of which entail transformational thinking leading in the direction of radical structural change. As shown in Table 1, we think Aldo Leopold's (1949) image of the *land ethic community* (often regarded as the preeminent ideal type when it comes to the ecocentric value system) lays important groundwork for our purposes. To illustrate, in a well-known passage, Leopold states:

All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts ... [the] land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land. (Leopold, 1949: 239)

Achieving a sense of wider community ultimately means building partnerships based in equality and in mutual respect for the agency of the partners – *true partnerships* (see Merchant, 2000). This is relatively familiar when the partners are human actors. A different perspective is required to appreciate the debate in social theory on the agency of non-human entities (see Demeritt, 1994). If water is conceptualized as a *lively actor* (even though much of its force tends to be embedded and not readily observable through a conventional lens), it is more likely to be seen as an integral part of the community and treated as a true partner. Within this perspective, water is seen to have a social life similar to that of machines, granite rock formations and other entities often labeled inanimate (see Appadurai, 1986). It is easy to visualize the potential agency of water in socio-ecological fields at the extremes (e.g. Niagara Falls) and more difficult to detect it in everyday organizational life. Without venerating water, thinking of it as an active agent can help scholars sharpen debate on ecocentrism and imagine new forms of partnership that must be forged in and around organizations to begin to realize and mitigate water problems.

Extending the concept of the social in this way from the human to the non-human and even to the abiotic requires radical rethinking of both agency and rationality. This transition depends to some degree on the ability of human actors to question the ascent of instrumental rationality and benefit from critical observations such as Horkheimer's (1947/1974: 21): 'Reason has become completely harnessed to the social process. Its operational value, its role in the domination of men and nature, has been made its sole criterion.' In settings where blind devotion to the refinement of means is replaced with more abstract reasoning that involves challenges to technology and formal process as well as *moral reflection and discourse*, it is more likely the intrinsic value of each element of the community will be recognized. When it comes to water, instead of accepting exploitative futures and instead of being guided by 'Reason [that] has liquidated itself as an agency of ethical, moral and religious insight' (Horkheimer, 1947/1974: 18), the rational community develops deeper appreciation of how water enriches an ecosystem. It learns how water can solidify true partnerships, cultivates the compassion necessary to extend water rights universally to each partner without compromising ecological balance, and develops appreciation for the properties of water that are intrinsic to the social fabric of the land ethic community.

Moving beyond the water keeper image in the direction of the land ethic and other ecocentric ideals may seem extreme, yet it is compatible with research exploring new

forms of organization that manifest in fundamentally broader notions of interdependence and connectedness (see Pavlovich and Corner, 2009) and that blend strong ecological concern with radical egalitarianism – the *ecological collective* (see Vadde, 2009). For over three decades, organizational studies scholars have been developing concepts of the collectivist organization (Rothschild and Whitt, 1986), exploring new forms and documenting how authority, rules and social relations differ from machine bureaucracy and other non-utopian structures. The ecological collective can be envisioned as an egalitarian social space where connections among humans are mediated and enriched by social bonds among all elements of the land ethic community, including rivers, lakes, streams, wetlands, watersheds and other bodies of water.

These explorations are promising, but utopian organizations and holistic approaches to greening often generate valid concerns. The concerns center around the ways espoused ideals of strong culture can become moral imperatives, promoting tendencies towards blind loyalty and programmed conduct – hardly the formula for non-dominating organization. Although it is beyond the scope of our study to resolve all the tensions that could exist within a compelling land ethic, true partnership or other ecocentric culture, we think organizational studies scholars interested in this perspective will articulate mechanisms antithetical to creeping ecofascism (see Zimmerman, 2004).

Conclusion and future research

As interest in the metaphorical underpinnings of the field's research grows among organizational studies scholars (Cornelissen et al., 2005), renewed attention is being paid to Gareth Morgan's (2006) important work in this area. We found that Morgan's IoD metaphor was pivotal in our efforts to conceptualize the organizational basis of water problems. As a critical theory resource, it helped us articulate how anthropocentric bias can lead to the devaluation of water, reducing it to an exploitable commodity or resource. It also helped us generate and elaborate two extended (second-order) metaphors: one that reflects a risky, unsustainable path ('organizations as water exploiters') and one that envisions a path for needed change ('organizations as water keepers'). Moreover, boundaries of the IoD image provoked us to revisit ecocentric philosophy and consider alternative concepts of water and forms of organization – forms that manifest in radically different metaphors and human–nature relationships. Through the lens of the land ethic community, extended in the metaphor of organizations as true partnerships, we are able to appreciate more fully the interdependence and connectedness of the ecological collective.

In closing, we also want to sketch some ways the metaphors we explored could generate different research on organizations. (i) As a baseline consideration, the new water metaphors extending the IoD image could underwrite a broad range of critical studies on the topic. Research on embedded water in ecology (agribusiness, international trade), for example, could serve as models for examining dynamics of embedded (hidden) water in organizations. (ii) Further study of the links between the water metaphors and soft and post-anthropocentrism could reinvigorate a return to paradigmatic research in organizational studies and reflection on radical change toward ecocentric ideals. This could be important for scholars interested in de-masking greenwashing. And, it could be important for imagining wide-scale transformation or ecological revolution

underwritten by the land ethic (see Callicott, 2014). Relatedly, organizational studies research that sharpens debates on ownership and control of water and human rights concerning water could surface from this perspective. (iii) Research has established metaphor as integral to the theory building process and the construction of ideal types as one important aspect of theory building. Development of a typology of activist business and other organizations in the age of emerging water crises could be useful in enriching theory as well as focusing attention on water problems. (iv) A formidable challenge for organizational studies scholars involves conceptualizing less dominating forms of organization and true egalitarian partnerships. We suggested nature-inclusive images that extend concepts of social relations and that underscore the ways in which water and other elements of nature are intrinsic to social relations. Future research that integrates and reconciles insights about new forms of social relations in and around organizations based in ecocentric philosophy, socialist-feminist theories and other critical perspectives would be valuable.

Noted environmental scholar Richard Norgaard, in a critique of the often used metaphors of 'limits' and 'carrying capacity,' observed that we had not yet found a metaphor to 'survive by' (Norgaard, 1995: 129). We doubt any single metaphor could underwrite the new forms of theoretical thinking and innovative problem solving necessary to meet the challenges of genuine environmental sustainability. Methodological technique remains important for theory building and problem solving, but without developing greater awareness of metaphorical analysis as a central part of method, it seems our research on organizations will be unnecessarily limited.

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Notes

- 1 We want to avoid conflating metaphors and paradigms while understanding how the former concept is nested within the latter. Morgan (2011: 461) aptly summarizes the connection: 'In implicitly or explicitly selecting a metaphor as a basis for theorizing one would also be implicitly locking into the assumptions on which the metaphor was based. Hence, in using a particular metaphor, consciously or unconsciously, one could also end up adopting the assumptions of an underlying ... paradigm.'
- 2 Technically, we are proposing analogies. Morgan (2006), like most other organizational studies scholars, refers to these types of statements as metaphors. In our view, because metaphorical thinking is based on the same mental processes as analogical cognition (Holyoak and Thagard, 1996: 235), it seems reasonable to follow the convention in the

field.

- 3 In extending Morgan's IoD metaphor, we found the domination thesis developed by early critical theorists of the Frankfurt School insightful. Their thesis explicitly includes effects of structures of control on non-human nature as well as on human beings. Moreover, they systematically linked the domination of nature to the domination of human beings (Leiss, 1974). For example, consider Horkheimer's (1947/1974: 105) classic statement of the domination thesis: '... the history of man's efforts to subjugate nature is also the history of man's subjugation by man.'
- 4 Part of the text from an American Express Members' Project Television Spot.
- 5 Part of Patagonia's Mission Statement: 'Build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis.'

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