



Disappearing organization? Reshaping the sociology of organizations

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Abstract

This monograph showcases some recent developments in the sociology of organizations, mapping out the most productive relationships between current social scientific work on organizations and core theoretical and empirical concerns in the discipline of sociology.

Keywords

Algorithms, entryism, formal organization, informal learning, partial organization, organization theory, sociology of organizations, sociological theory, temporary organizing

Whatever happened to the sociology of organizations?

For some time now there has been a sense of depression among sociologists interested in organizations. At the 2014 ASA meeting, it was argued that the sociology of organizations does not engage in substantial theory-building anymore, and it is neither innovative

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nor relevant to audiences within sociology or outside of the discipline. Two years later during the ISA Forum, the conference panel on the future of sociology painted a gloomy future for the sociology of organizations, overtaken – it seems – by the research performance of business schools. Some recent publications come to a similar conclusion and argue that the sociology of organizations has lost its capacity to engage with the ‘big’ social issues of our time (Barley, 2010; Hinings and Greenwood, 2002; King, 2017).

This turn of events is all the more surprising for it was the sociology of organizations that brought about paradigmatic changes in how meso-level structures and agency were conceived. For instance, research in the sociology of organizations introduced analytical strategies to capture the interaction between the formal and informal dimension of society (Selznik, 1949) and disclosed power and authority relationships in everyday life (Etzioni, 1961; Gouldner, 1954). It also developed a substantial critique of the rationality of action by showing that decision-making is always embedded in social relationships, that decision-makers are subject to bounded rationality (Luhmann, 1964; March and Simon, 1993 [1958]) and – more often than not – make decisions by relying on situational and contingent factors (Cohen et al., 1972). Functionalist and institutional accounts unveiled the normative underpinnings of organizations by describing them as inherently social actors and showing how normative constraints at the macro-level find their way into the rationalities of organizing (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Parsons, 1956). In fact, the sociology of organizations positioned itself early on in the institutionalization process of sociology itself, and mobilized substantial intellectual as well as material capacities. But since the late 1980s, at least two things have changed.

For one, the ideas and competencies of organizational sociology have been co-opted and reshaped by management and business studies. With the rise of business schools in the 1990s and their ever-growing number of students, management and business studies drew the best organizational sociologists away from the discipline (Pierides and Clegg, 2019). That’s where the jobs and better conditions were, making it possible to engage with an interdisciplinary epistemic community of economists, political scientists, ethnographers, communication scholars, MBA experts, psychologists and practitioners (Scott, 2004). However broad the epistemic interests of this community may be, they continued to be focused on organizations and enriched organizational thinking considerably (Davis, 2015). The field of organization studies has grown accordingly and now features a dedicated community of researchers, field-specific journals and professional associations (Augier et al., 2005). With regard to content, concepts from a variety of theoretical traditions such as ‘strategy’, ‘organizational design’, ‘discourse’, ‘practices’ or ‘materiality’ have been imported, combined and productively applied to the study of organizations. But the price paid for this has often been, with some exceptions, a silo effect and an uncoupling from core sociological theories as well as sociological concerns such as power, inequality and social justice (Clegg, 2002; Hinings and Greenwood, 2002).

We argue that there is an important organizational dimension to the study of social life. Studies on education, for instance, need to account for the existence of schools or universities. Political sociology is aware that organizations such as parties, public administrations or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) inform current political issues. Phenomena which at first sight appear chaotic and uncoordinated, such as, for example,

migration, are highly organized. Yet it seems that organizations have become taken-for-granted phenomena in sociology: either they are treated as functional analytical units that help the researcher to map social processes occurring at another level (such as the market, educational trajectories or the making of science) or in other arenas, such as culture (Rojek and Turner, 2000), or they are considered a mere formality, a container for social agency. In a great deal of contemporary sociology, the meso-level is no longer comprehended as distinct layer of social life, and there is a poor sense of the analytical significance of the variety of organizations' unique combinations such as formal procedures, timelines, hierarchies and leaderships, organizational sanctions, work practices, cultures and subcultures, internal network structures and control.

Why organizations matter

The goal of this monograph issue of *Current Sociology* is to counter the pessimism regarding the state of organizational sociology by highlighting three core aspects of current research on the tangible and intangible nature of organizational life.

First, organizations are not simply coordination devices. Rather, they remain a critical feature of modern (and postmodern) societies. Within sociology itself, though, the study of management and organization no longer appears to have any specific location. Sociological analyses of organizing and managing continue to proliferate, but they tend to be conducted within the orbit of particular clusters of concern, such as those animating contemporary sociological analyses of globalization (Djelic and Quack, 2010), identity (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), markets, (Knorr-Cetina and Preda, 2005; Lounsbury and Hirsch, 2010), networks (Lazega, 2001), or performativity (McKenzie and Millo, 2003), for example. Moreover, they are attached to theoretical or methodological agendas in interdisciplinary fields, such as New Institutional Theory, Science and Technology Studies, or Cultural Studies (Callon et al., 2007; DiMaggio and Powell, 1991; du Gay and Pryke, 2002; Scott and Meyer, 1994). What appears to have been lost, though, is a singular focus on the organization as a unique sociological entity (du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2016). The proliferation of the languages of networks, processes, fields, logics, discourses, texts, values, assemblages, categories, identities has tended to transmute the organization into an underspecified arena in which various forces play themselves out. Rather than drowning the organization in the bathwater of social explanation, might we do better and ask what makes organization, sociologically speaking, a distinctive and enduring sort of social phenomenon?

Second, organizations continue to permeate all aspects of social life. Formal organizations remain powerful instruments for the coordination of human activity and are, indeed, expanding worldwide (Bromley and Meyer, 2015). While there has been a considerable growth of 'classic' organizations with a bureaucratic structure, such as corporations, administrations but also schools, hospitals or NGOs, organizational forms are changing as well (Padgett and Powell, 2012). New forms of organizing have been featured in organizational research on post-bureaucracy (Heckscher and Donnellon, 1994), 'fluid' (Schreyögg and Sydow, 2010), 'virtual' (Davidow and Malone, 1992), 'temporary' (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995) or network organizations (Miles and Snow, 1986). These studies investigate the workings of think-tanks, consulting firms, IT corporations and

platforms, but also terror organizations and creative projects. Scholars in this line of work argue that formal structures such as hierarchies and rules have lost their social relevance. At the same time, they reassert the importance of well-established concepts of organizational sociology, such as ‘decision-making’, ‘team work’ or ‘organizational culture’, to the study of such organizational forms in our society. More conceptual work is needed to understand the dynamics of new organizational forms, especially with regard to their unique constellation of formal and informal structures, power relations and sources of legitimation and identity (Watkins and Stark, 2018).

Third and relatedly, organizations have a direct impact on society. Although scholars have stressed the importance of organizations for the workings of our modern world (Barley, 2016; Perrow, 1991), we know very little about how they relate to large-scale social problems and change. Indeed, when it comes to explaining the relationship between organizations and societal phenomena, research is primarily preoccupied with how society shapes organizations, not the other way around (Ahrne et al., 2016; Stern and Barley, 1996). It is a matter of fact that ‘big issues’ or ‘grand challenges’ have an organizational dimension: automobile companies and energy suppliers both have a stake in the causing, the framing and the resolution of the climate crisis; terror organizations such as al-Qaeda and Hezbollah shape practices of local and international terrorism; Google and Facebook give rise to a wealth of data that come with new and unknown risks for individuals, collectives and states. Organizations thus cause societal problems and contribute to their solution in equal measure. We have yet to turn a sociological eye on the ambivalent nature of organizations in the making and unmaking of societal dynamics.

Although it is fair to say that organizational sociologists have done a poor job in tackling the big social issues of our time (Barley, 2010), the potential for significant contributions here remains strong, if the organization as an important social phenomenon is once more taken seriously. This requires a fruitful dialogue with other sociological subfields. Sociology of organizations shows that organizations are specific social entities. As we described above, they are embedded in broader societal contexts. In modern society, however, they seem to liberate themselves from their social origins and develop a dynamic of their own. Economic organizations, for instance, tend to emancipate themselves from their founders to become managed by professionals. The number of family-run businesses is steadily declining. Political organizations such as states, political institutions or public administrations are no longer facing strong political control and use these new free spaces for self-design (Åkerstrøm Andersen and Grønbaek Pors, 2016). Organizations have their own distinctive characteristics that impact different societal subfields, from economy to politics, religion, the mass media, and so on. As a consequence, they are powerful instruments for the analysis of social problems arising in these spheres or across them. Phenomena such as terrorism, environmental issues, the financial crises, migration, precarious forms of employment or the spread of big data analytics could be better understood by considering that different organizations are involved in both their development and the attempt to cope with their dangerous consequences.

Future research should concentrate on how the organizational perspective could yield innovative approaches to these global challenges. This is only possible with robust concepts of ‘organizations’ which are able to describe the characteristics of these social entities and their uniqueness. Rather than the ‘organization’ disappearing into the background

of ‘social explanation’, it is more fruitful to ask what makes organizations, sociologically speaking, a distinct and enduring sort of social actor. Only by uncovering the tangible and intangible aspects of organizing social reality are we in a position to make the study of organizations relevant for sociological research and to reclaim a sociological ‘stance’ on the study of organizations (du Gay, 2014).

Contributions to this monograph issue

This monograph showcases some recent developments in the sociology of organizations, mapping out the most productive relationships between current social science work on organizations and core theoretical and empirical concerns in the discipline of sociology. We bring together articles from recognized and young scholars who make a clear theoretical contribution and establish a connection to ‘big’ social issues. The monograph is structured into two parts. The first three contributions are dedicated to a thorough empirical analysis and discussion of the state of the sociology of organizations in the 21st century. This analysis suggests that the sociology of organizations has the potential to make significant contributions to the broader sociological debate if (1) it widens its theoretical scope (Grothe-Hammer and Kohl) and re-engages with sociological classics (Scott) while (2) reaffirming the unique character of organizations as a distinct social actor (du Gay).

The second part of this monograph issue entails important examples of how this programme could be productively realized. The articles investigate both classic and new organizational forms and stress the necessity to deconstruct the interplay between the formal and the informal, the tangible and the intangible, structure and action. Sydow and Windeler argue, for instance, that new forms of organizations (and organizing) combine stable formal structures with temporary arrangements such as projects. Laamanen and colleagues show how organizational coordination is both the result of formal decisions as well as an emergent order. Moreover, the contributions of this monograph focus on the impact of organizations on current crucial challenges: the introduction of algorithms in sensible sectors such as healthcare (Bailey and colleagues), the issue of diversity (Thomson), discrimination and the unequal distribution of privileges as well as the question of how people can learn in organizational settings (Serrano Velarde). All articles use, develop and combine available sociological concepts encompassing role theory, structuration theory, the theory of partial organization, postcolonial theories, theory of practice, and so on.

While this monograph can address only a few organizational effects in the context of some chosen ‘big issues’, it aims to encourage other scholars to improve research on the relevance of organizations in different societal sectors and for society as a whole.

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