

## **(Re-)Vitalizing the Concept of Organization: Inspirations from Recent Social Theory**

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### **Abstract**

In this essay, we introduce recent debates on both concepts of organization and organization's future. Since Max Weber's ideas gained acceptance, there has been a strong link between social theory (rationalized modernity) and a concept of organization (bureaucracy) in organization theory as well as organizational sociology. Today, organizational scholarship challenges, but at the same time defends, this classical link. We argue that both positions can be substantiated empirically. This situation motivates a debate on updating and revitalizing the link between organizational concepts and social theories that we aim to put forward with this special issue of *Critical Sociology*. We discuss the assembled contributions in relation to this fundamental conceptual debate of organization research and conclude that the richness of social theories can still serve as an inspiration to explain recent organizational phenomena.

Keywords: Organization, Organizing, Social Theory, New Organizational Forms, Theory of Society

## **The future of organizing and the organization**

In a well-regarded essay, Stewart Clegg stated that foundational figures of organization theory like Max Weber and Michel Foucault never intended to be genuine organizational researchers. In part, this is why they coined fundamental pathways. We agree with this observation and we could extend this list easily. Clegg provides us with reasons for that and argues that “an adequate organizational analysis is always [...] an analysis of value and values” (Clegg, 1994: 150). Here, we might add patterns of power and control, linked communications or (in-)attention and legitimation, or other social processes. The argument is timely. We cannot understand and explain organizational life and how organizations shape recent societies without an encompassing understanding of societal dynamics, and therefore we need a conversation between organizational and social theories. We think there is a need for a continuous update and debate.

Weber and Foucault had large administrative complexes in mind that were able to discipline modern individuals and still do so in impressive ways. Gibson Burrell recently pointed out that after World War II and the impressive functioning of the bureaucratic Nazi-machinery and experiences with a strong welfare state, organizational influence was largely taken for granted in the expanding management profession, and consequently organizational sociology went to the core of both interdisciplinary organization theory and sociology. This picture is eroding today. Due to manifold societal dynamics within and beyond academia, e.g., the neo-liberal transformation of the welfare state, he concludes: “Today, very troublingly, we have to ask the question ‘has the concept of “organization” even got a future?’” (Burrell, 2022: 4). We think this is an important question as it provides organizational scholars with an impulse to reflect upon the core conceptual foundations of their work.

We observe two trends in this respect. On the one hand, there is a decreasing interest in social theory and theories of society in organizational research. On the other hand, there is generally a decreasing interest in the concept of organization – both in social theory and, strangely enough, in organization studies itself. Hence, we see a lack of both abstract social theorizations of organizations and their relation to society.

## **The neglect of organization in social sciences**

Today, scholars in organization studies call for reflecting on the concept of organization, because some organizational forms, e.g., projects, networks, agile workflows, or platforms, do not match the old concepts anymore but gain in relevance empirically (Altman and Tushman, 2017; Anheier and Kendall, 2002; Kirchner and Schüßler, 2019; Lundin and Söderholm, 1998;

Manning and Sydow, 2007; Metcalfe, 2010; Monahan, 2005; Perrow, 2009; Pierides and Woodman, 2012; Powell, 1990; Romanelli, 1991). Critically engaged scholars point to civil society or community-based organizations that explicitly question bureaucracies and provide practically relevant alternatives (Eisenberg, 2004; Jensen, 2018; Seekings, 1996; Sullivan, 2010).

Although these scholars provide essential insights into updating the recent organization-theoretical landscape, several conceptual problems appear. Today's organizational research seems severely stuck in a constant chain of small-scaled propositional theorizing preventing the field from achieving any larger theoretical progress (Davis, 2015; Grothe-Hammer and Kohl, 2020). Scholars seem to merely reproduce existing ethno-theories of organization, thereby updating these in patches (Bort and Schiller-Merkens, 2011). However, none of these theory "patches" (e.g., as post-bureaucratic, unconventional, or new) provide a genuine and positive concept of organization today.

Max Weber's work in this regard is still the classical example of a conceptualization of organization that is fruitfully embedded into a general social theory. He still provides scholars with relevant narratives of specific sociological reflection (Baehr, 2002) within the social sciences, which often function as allegories (Kemple, 2014: 4). His fundamental writings provide specific complexes of interrelated basic concepts, associated comprehensive offers of interpretation, and classical forms of performing sociological analysis (Kemple, 2014: 4-7). Weber embedded his abstract concepts of hierarchical organization [Verband] and bureaucracy in his broader sociology of ruling relations (Weber, 1968 [1922]), as well as his theory of rationalized modernity (Albrow, 2020; Weber, 1979 [1920]). These Weberian tools were prominently updated within critical theory (Adorno, 1972 [1953]; Gouldner, 1954), rational choice (Coleman, 1982, 1990), and institutional theorizing (Bromley and Meyer, 2015; Brunsson, 2024; Hallett and Ventresca, 2006; Meyer et al., 1987; Meyer and Jepperson, 2000; Strang and Meyer, 1993), whereas the general focus on hierarchical, formalized organization and its relation to rationalized modernity remained.

However, this view of organization has faced many critics over the years and the analytical gaze has shifted towards post-bureaucratic organizational forms and post-modernist social theories (Chia, 1995; Lee and Hassard, 1999; Parker, 1995; Pierides and Woodman, 2012), organization-as-process views (Heath et al., 2000; Heath et al., 2002; Hernes, 2014; Innes, 2002) and social network perspectives (e.g., Brass and Burkhardt, 1992; Diani and Bison, 2004; for an early study, see Blau, 1955; Swedberg, 2023). Nowadays, bureaucracies seem to have fallen

out of favor with social scientists (du Gay, 1999). Instead, there seems to be a fear of the formal (du Gay and Lopdrup-Hjorth, 2016, 2024), and even a neglect of organization as a concept itself (Lopdrup-Hjorth, 2015). Many social scientists do not seem to see the need for a concept of organization anymore so that – strangely enough – even organization studies have been losing their interest in theorizing about organization itself (Ahrne et al., 2016). “Organization” has become a concept that is seen as something that needs “resurrecting” (Ahrne et al., 2016; Apelt et al., 2017).

### **The neglect of theories of society in organization studies**

Organization studies show much concern for society, its state, and its changes. The social responsibility of corporations has been a constantly recurring research topic in recent decades (Windsor, 2006), and especially in recent years, organizational scholars have pointed to large societal problems and conceptualized them as “grand challenges” (Ferraro et al., 2015; Gümüşay et al., 2022) and “wicked problems” (Pradilla et al., 2022). A wealth of organizational research has emerged discussing how these large issues might be resolved through organizational changes and interventions. As a consequence, organizational researchers are keen on tackling these challenges – such as social inequality (Amis et al., 2020) or the “looming planetary emergency” (Gümüşay and Reinecke, 2024). They wish to achieve “scholarly, practical, societal, policy, and educational” impact (Wickert et al., 2021) through developing “impactful theories” (Reinecke et al., 2022) and “imagining desirable futures” (Gümüşay and Reinecke, 2024).

These are certainly all very desirable research goals, but strikingly, virtually all such references remain strangely detached from the existing theories of recent societies, and are only loosely coupled to broader social theory, if at all. Indeed, some ceremonial citations to the grand theorists of sociology are commonplace – but their theories of society have become unacknowledged. Max Weber is a standard point of reference in organization studies but his concept of macro-level value spheres (Friedland, 2014; Weber, 1946) is broadly neglected. Famous institutionalists like John W. Meyer, Walter W. Powell, and W. Richard Scott are ritualistically cited by organizational scholars but their macro-level frameworks of “societal sectors” (Boli and Thomas, 1997; Scott and Meyer, 1983) and “domains of activity” (Padgett and Powell, 2012) are widely ignored. The celebrated institutional logics perspective started as a macro-level framework aimed at “bringing society back in” (Friedland and Alford, 1991), but has nowadays revolved into a meso-level perspective with little to no interest in larger societal dynamics. And Latour (2013) is a well-liked reference as long as his “modes of existence” need

not be taken into account. As Clegg et al. (forthcoming) conclude in a recent assessment of the field:

“Studies might be interested in inequality or the effects of certain societal domains like politics on organizations; they might even mention terms like “class” and “stratification” (e.g., Amis et al., 2020). Yet, they fall short of leveraging society-level theories of domain-specific differentiation (e.g., Luhmann, 1977; Abrutyn and Turner, 2011; Padgett and Powell, 2012), class distinction and stratification (Bourdieu, 1986; Savage, 2000), or center-periphery dynamics (Knudsen, 2018; Vik et al., 2022) to this end. “Flat ontologies” (Mountford and Cai, 2023; Seidl and Whittington, 2014) are celebrated but the macro-level of society is little more than context (cf. Apelt et al., 2017; Sales et al., 2022; Sydow and Windeler, 2020).”

Indeed, this picture is an oversimplification, since there are works that, for example, adopt a tripartite view of society, as in polity, economy, and civil society, when discussing new organizational forms (Bátora, 2023), or use the concept of the functional differentiation of society to outline new organizational models (Roth et al., 2018). However, more often than not it seems that the views of society employed by organizational researchers – if any – are either everyday conceptions or undercomplex depictions of society. Organizational scholars then identify “inequalities” as “pernicious threats to our society” (Amis et al., 2021), although the production of inequality is a necessary condition for modern society to function (Luhmann, 2022). These scholars often take national societies for granted and look at supposed differences between national cultures, even though from a sociological perspective the concept of national cultures and societies is a contested one at best (Beck and Sznaider, 2006; McSweeney, 2002). Moreover, many works in this field describe modern society as a “VUCA world” (a volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous world) without much substantiation or noteworthy reference to actual theories of society (Baran and Woznyj, 2021; Bennett and Lemoine, 2014).

Critical management studies are often pointed to as taking social theory more seriously. After all, Foucault and Marx appear to be among their most prominent icons. However, as critical reviews have found, the field tends to be filled with jargon-ridden philosophy (Tourish, 2019) that produces “pseudo-contributions” (Spicer and Alvesson, 2024) selling existing knowledge as new by the means of incomprehensible language and French philosophy (see also Tourish, 2019).

These observations are not surprising, considering that the rift between organization studies and sociology has been known for quite some time (Adler et al., 2014; Besio et al., 2020; Clegg,

2002; Grothe-Hammer and Kohl, 2020; King, 2017; Powell and DiMaggio, 2023; Ringel, forthcoming). The discourse lacks a comparative debate between organizational forms, social theories, and theories of society (Romanelli, 1991). As pointed out earlier, organization studies seek to produce insights into – and changes in – society. But how can it be possible to achieve this without relating to social theory and theories of society?

In his famous objectivity essay, Weber (1973) claimed that reflecting on the fundamental conceptual bases of the social sciences needs to be a continuous effort, for society itself continuously changes. In our view, organizational research needs this reflection. The research field needs to re-establish a debate with broader social theory and theories of society, otherwise it cannot legitimately claim to offer any meaningful insights into the workings of our world when these supposed insights are derived from a narrow gaze on the workings of organizations alone and some undercomplex imaginations of what society is and can be.

### **Recent developments towards bringing organization and social theory back together**

This raw sketch of developments in organizational research makes it possible to specify Burrell's fundamental questions: How can we theorize about organizations in their relation to recent societies without neglecting the prevailing relevance of formal-hierarchical organizational forms and with a positive characterization of societal transformations in mind? How can we do diagnostics of present forms of organizing by neither observing history as a decline of formal bureaucracy nor as a celebration of new flexible forms? How do we study the linkages between society and organizations neither giving privilege to society nor organization? How can we simultaneously observe the history of organization as well as of society without turning one into a context of the other?

Addressing such questions is just in its beginnings (Adler et al., 2014; Andersen, 2011; Besio et al., 2020; Clegg and Cunha, 2019). Several scholars refer to Anthony Giddens' concept of organization as reflexive structuration. Organizations become organizations because agents coordinate their activities according to a typical mode, namely via a "high degree of reflexive coordination of the conditions of system reproduction" (Giddens, 1990: 303). Organization studies scholars referring to this concept present a gradual understanding of the "systemness" involved in such coordination being open to more or less formalized and hierarchical ways of achieving it (Haslett, 2013; McPhee and Zaug, 2001; Ortmann et al., 2023[1997]; Sydow and Windeler, 2020).

Another set of recent theorizing in organization studies has recurred at the Carnegie School, as well as in Niklas Luhmann's concept of organization. Recent works especially pick up the notion of recursively self-organized systems (Grothe-Hammer, 2019) and Luhmann's theory of modern society (Åkerstrøm Andersen and Stenner, 2020; Apelt et al., 2017). This development is probably the least surprising, considering that Niklas Luhmann was perhaps the only one among the grand sociological theorists who not only thoroughly theorized organizations (Seidl and Mormann, 2014) but also consistently emphasized their enormous relevance for almost all areas of society – integrating organizations into his theories of risk, power, politics, the differentiation of society, and social class, amongst others. This intertwined approach has been continued by many scholars throughout recent decades (Knudsen, 2021; Roth and Valentinov, 2023; Sales et al., 2022; Schirmer, forthcoming).

Related to this debate, the concept of “partial organization” has revolved around the classic question of the nature of social order, aiming at analyzing degrees of “decided order” within and beyond formal organizations (Andersen 2020; Ahrne, 2017; Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011, 2019; Aspers et al., 2020; Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer, 2022; Jutterström, 2023; Laamanen et al., 2020). A related issue is how public hierarchies simultaneously are loosened up and confirmed when the power superior communicates to lower levels: Do as we say - behave as an autonomous organization. Public institutions within a hierarchy become partial organizations striving to become what they can never be (Andersen and Pors, 2017; Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson, 2000).

An outcome of these debates is the concept of organizationality, in which Dobusch and Schoeneborn (2015) combine insights of the Carnegie School, Luhmann's social systems theory, and partial organization theory. Their notion of “organizationality” breaks with the common understanding of organization as a binary variable, and instead establishes the view that social collectives can be organizational to varying degrees, depending on the degrees of interconnected decision-making, attributed collective actorhood, and collective identity they exhibit. This concept has then been gladly picked up by partial organization as well as Luhmannian scholars, who have then reconnected it with their concepts in order to push the debate further (Ahrne et al., 2016; Berkowitz and Bor, 2023; Grothe-Hammer et al., 2022).

Another set of studies analyzes organizations as fields of social forces, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's field concept (Dobbin, 2008; Emirbayer and Johnson, 2008; Fligstein, 1990; Fligstein and McAdam, 2012; Racko, 2008; Vaughan, 2008; Zhao and Ge, 2023). The most consequential definition in this line perceives an organization rather broadly as a “space of struggle for

organizational power [...], where what is at stake is nothing less than the capacity to determine which of the various species of capital extant within the organization will be the most influential in defining its activities” (Emirbayer and Johnson, 2008: 25).

All of these more abstract conceptualizations provide tools to analyze changing forms of organization and their societal embeddedness with recent social theory in mind. Until now, scholars have only used several resources of these theoretical traditions. Often, especially the interplay of these conceptions within certain theories of recent societies or the relation towards other abstract concepts remains under-reflected. More than that, a systematic comparison between these and other approaches is not part of the debate yet. Finally, there are many sources in social theory that have not so far been debated.

### **New contributions to challenging concepts of organization**

We especially want to discuss alternative inspirations for conceptualizing organizations in general social theory and theories of recent societies, as well as their combination provided by recent theorists. Consequently, we have compiled a special issue, which debates pathways beyond, beside, or complementary to both the classical, Weberian focus on formal-hierarchical organizations and the postmodern reaction.

The works presented in our collection take on different ways of arguing for a revised relation between organizational research, concepts of organization, and social theories. Sociologists often start from the social phenomena itself and then derive their novel theoretical insights from there (King, forthcoming). Consequently, the *first five* papers of our special issue *start with specific empirical phenomena*, such as flexible work arrangements, waste, the Australian “Robodebt” Affair, or the growing relevance of digital platforms to reflect upon an adequate concept of organization today.

*Stewart Clegg* introduces a previously unpublished manuscript of *Zygmunt Bauman* (2023) entitled “Organization for Liquid-Modern Times?” that we discovered and edited in *Critical Sociology* in Issue 6 last year as a teaser for this collection. In his essay on Bauman’s manuscript, Clegg highlights the relevance of embedding *flexible work arrangements* in an overarching theory of liquid modernity for both understanding the emergence of projects and other flexible forms of organization as well as their consequences on individual lives. He argues that Bauman’s “sense of reflexivity about the trends of the moment” lies at the very heart of the unbroken relevance of his theorizing on work organization, management, and beyond.



*Nadine Arnold and Christopher Dorn* start with a rather important but often neglected phenomenon to study organizations: *waste*. The well-established distinction between *organizations as rational, open, and natural systems* guides their analysis. They conclude that analysts need a combination of all three perspectives to explain how organizations generate waste, but that even such a combination does not equip us well. In conceptualizing *organizations as valorizing contexts*, they show that organization research needs to understand that organizations construct waste by disvaluing certain entities. To this end, they suggest including *Luhmann's observation theory* in organizational scholarship on this important topic.

*Robert van Krieken* reinterprets the *Australian "Robodebt" Affair* to show that (in echoing *Luhmann and Alvesson*) we need to understand *ignorance as a distinct and inherent feature of organizations*. This important conceptual lesson, in combination with the insight that the "*Robodebt*" *Affair* about tax automation could not be stopped easily, explains on the one hand that administrative organizations are designed as contexts of institutionalized ignoring to avoid being made responsible and to escape legal and ethical accusations, and that this is a consequence of an organizational reflection on the link between knowledge and responsibility in recent society. He argues that processes of willful ignorance can be found in manifold administrative organizations and beyond, as they are potential ways to maneuver through a hatch of legal and ethical accountability.

*David Seibt* focuses on the phenomenon of a *growing platformization* to differentiate between types of such contested processes, to look beyond successful platforms only, and as an entry to reflect on platform organizations therein. In his analytical framework, he combines a *platform architecture view with the theory of strategic action fields* and suggests conceptualizing *organizations as entities involved in skillful positioning*. It is important to highlight such a powerful positioning of organizations not just to explain platform development, failure, or success, but also to illustrate enforced pathways of our digitalized economy.

## **Underexplored social theories and concepts of organization**

The second set of four papers discusses sources from social theory to reflect upon an adequate concept of organization today. They discuss rarely used sources or offer a distinct interpretation of well-established theories.

*Cristina Besio and Veronika Tacke* offer a fresh reading of *Niklas Luhmann's* systems theoretical works on organizations. They argue that it is suitable for analyzing both bureaucratic and new organizational forms and their role in current transformations and crises. This is due to a

unique combination of a concept of *organizations as self-referential networks of decisions* that implies a “substitutability of structures”, allowing the inclusion of new forms and an encompassing theory of a *functionally differentiated society*. Taking self-referentially closed organizations seriously allows us to show that in recent transformations, organizations do not simply adopt societal expectations, but translate, respecify, and recombine them. Moreover, the link to a theory of society makes it possible to qualify the heterogeneity of such expectations that organizations recombine.

Similarly, *Arnold Windeler and Robert Jungmann* combine two sources present in *Anthony Giddens'* writings: his theory of *radicalized modernity* driven by a reflexivity imperative and his concept of *organizations as distinct social systems* to understand the interplay of bureaucratic and new organizational forms. The authors argue for a concept of reflexive organization and a revision of the organization-society nexus. As both organizations and societies transform, the authors argue for updating the question of why organizations remain central driving forces of recent societies. New potentials for *coordinating practical activities in time and space* combining bureaucratic with other organizational forms lie at the heart of their answer. Moreover, they call for taking reflexive organizations seriously in order to elaborate the theory of radicalized modernity.

The two final contributions argue even more fundamentally. *Thiago Duarte-Pimentel* introduces *critical realism* and *Frederic Vandenberghe's* works on *collective subjectivities* in order to work out a processual and gradual model of collective action. He distinguishes between taxonomic collectives, interactive groups, associations, and organizations in a continuum between lower and higher degrees of the structuration of collective action. He elaborates on specific conditions necessary for each of these types of collective action to emerge. The author argues not to conflate, but to separate different “objects of reality” analytically, with the organization being one. This makes it possible to account for its distinct role and causal power in – and for – explaining societal dynamics.

*Michael Grothe-Hammer and Héloïse Berkowitz* address the issue of social order. They point out that many of the works that try to offer a comprehensive theorization of social order tend to distinguish between two forms of social order, i.e., spontaneous social order and organized social order. They argue that such a single binary is insufficient to adequately grasp the broad variety of social phenomena. Drawing on *decisional organization theory* – specifically the theory of social order as devised by *Ahrne and Brunsson*, social systems theory as outlined by *Niklas Luhmann*, and the concept of social relationships by *Max Weber* – they develop a multi-

*dimensional conception of social order* that expands the existing binary. They ultimately present four properties of social order: ontology (system or structure), determination (decided or non-decided), changeability (decidable or non-decidable), and acceptance (accepted or contested). Organization can then be captured in terms of a system that has been determined by decisions (an organization), but also in terms of decided structures (an organized state), as well as in terms of potential organizability, which they understand as possible decidability.

## **Conclusion**

With this essay and the special issue in *Critical Sociology*, we put forward the current critical reflections on the relationship between organization and society by providing texts that explicitly work out alternative perspectives on organization and hereby provide rich sociological explanations on recent forms of organizing. In assembling such a collection, we especially initiate a debate bridging critical theorizing on basic social science concepts (such as organization) in general and theorizing recent organizations in particular, and extend existing debates in *Critical Sociology* (see also Eisenberg, 2004; Kutay, 2024; Maher and Aquanno, 2022; Munro and O’Kane, 2022; Whitt, 1980; Wysong and Perrucci, 2007) and beyond. Moreover, we demonstrate that social theories have much to offer in terms of analyzing recent organizations, and we have sketched alternative pathways to do so. The authors collected here discuss the fundamental works of younger classics (e.g., Margaret Archer, Zygmunt Bauman, Anthony Giddens and Niklas Luhmann) and recent theorists (e.g., Göran Ahrne, Mats Alvesson, Nils Brunsson, Neil Fligstein, Doug McAdam, or Frederic Vandenberghe) and interpret their potential for organizational research. We hope this collection will serve as a motivation to extend this list further in the future. Possible ways beyond the debates presented here would be to refer to post-colonial theorizing (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2023), translations of existing organizational forms (Zhou, 2021), or even a rediscovery of sources present in the classics (Jakobs, 2023; Jungmann, 2024).

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