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## **Disappearing ‘Formal Organization’: how organization studies dissolved its ‘core object’, and what follows from this**

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'Just as some plants bear fruit only if they don't shoot up too high, so in the practical arts the leaves and flowers of theory must be pruned and the plant kept close to its proper soil - experience.'

- Carl von Clausewitz, (Preface to an unpublished work on war written between 1816-18)

'Metaphysical theories purport to interpret what we already understand to be the case. But to interpret is *to interpret into* something, something granted as already understood.'

- Bas Van Fraassen (2002:3)

### **Abstract**

This article addresses itself to accounting for how and why the situation has arisen whereby much, though by no means all, of what self-identifies as organizational analysis – whether in sociology or organization studies – isn't actually organizational, and to exploring what follows from this. The article argues that the specificity of 'organizational analysis' – which requires its proponents to think (and, indeed, act) 'organizationally' – has been returned to the amorphous world of 'social explanation'. The article therefore attempts to highlight the manner in which the tropes of social explanation deployed within contemporary sociology and organization studies reduce 'formal organization' to the status of a social container. In making this case, the article commends an alternative stance towards organization that precisely eschews 'talking about organizations' epiphenomenally. It does so by seeking to highlight key aspects of the practical disposition towards organization adopted by classic organization theories and other related approaches throughout the history of organization analysis. In approaching organizational matters in this way, it also attempts to upend the reflex accusation of naivety, rationalism and contemporary irrelevance directed towards the 'historical artefacts' of organizational theorizing from the present, and indeed to suggest how classical preoccupations can be applied to pressing matters of contemporary organizational concern without any need to 'update' them.

## **Introduction**

One of the most prominent and lasting disciplinary contributions to the study of organization and management has been sociology. While it is still the case, that sociological theory and method continue to frame or otherwise influence much of the work that takes place in management and organization studies, broadly defined (Adler, du Gay, Morgan and Reed, 2013), within sociology itself, the study of 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 markets, (Knorr Cetina and Preda, 2005; McKenzie & Millo, 2003; Huault and Richard, 2012), for example, and to be attached to theoretical or methodological agendas in interdisciplinary fields, such as Organization Studies, or Science and Technology Studies. What appears to have been lost, though, is a singular focus on formal organization as a distinctive object, or as some have put it, a 'social actor' (King et al, 2010). The proliferation of the languages of networks, processes, fields, logics, discourses, texts, values, assemblages, categories, identities and so on and so forth (the list is potentially endless) has tended to transmute the organization into an underspecified arena in which various forces play themselves out. Meanwhile, formal organization as a durable and distinctive object has been largely dissolved. Clearly it was not always thus. For a significant period, the sociology of organization was not only a distinctive field within the wider discipline but one with a central focus on formal organization as a distinctive object (Adler, 2009; Adler, du Gay, Morgan, and Reed, 2013). Now neither is quite so certain.

This dispersion of the sociology of organization into multiple sociologies of organizing may be represented conceptually and practically as a 'liberating' move, but perhaps it can also be seen as one whose costs have not been fully weighed or appreciated? After all, the idea of formal organization is implicated to a greater or lesser degree in our legal systems, for example. It has not, indeed, cannot, be dispensed with just because it does not happen to comply with certain conditions of contemporary sociological or social theoretical argument. Rather than drowning formal organization in the bathwater of social explanation, might we do better to ask what makes formal organization, sociologically speaking, a distinctive and enduring object (du Gay & Vikkelsø, 2017)? That is the aim of this paper.

## **Disappearing Formal Organization**

Not long ago, a call for essays appeared in the journal *Organization Studies* inviting scholars to focus on 'unexplored areas of inquiry' in the analysis of organizational life (the 'X and Organization Studies' Editorial, 2016). 'X', it was proposed, would likely be something

‘overlooked’, ‘repressed’, or ‘concealed’, something which, in being rescued from its currently marginalized status, could perhaps become redefined as constitutive ‘of how we organize, or are organized’. To judge from the list of possible ‘X’s’, almost anything seemed to be grist for the mill, with the exception of perhaps the most overlooked concept in contemporary Organization Studies (OS): ‘formal organization’ itself. While the focus on ‘X’ was positioned as a new and enriching move, it was in fact one that had been made regularly in a host of disciplines for much of the last three decades. Moreover, it wasn’t a move exclusive to those enamoured of a particular theoretical vernacular. Rather, it constituted what Bas Van Fraasen (2002) terms ‘a stance’ – an approach, attitude, or intellectual comportment – that was shared by advocates or exponents of often highly rivalrous programmes – in the field of organization and management studies, as elsewhere. Its effect within organization studies has been quite uniform: to ‘disappear’ what had once been deemed to be the field’s ‘core object’ – formal organization – by transmuting it into an epiphenomenon constituted and explained by other allegedly more ‘foundational’ phenomena – ‘contracts’, ‘capabilities’, ‘discourses’, ‘processes’, ‘practices’, ‘flows’ and such like (the list is long). This move can be traced in many different theory programmes in organization studies. In embarking on such a shift, however, not only have scholars given themselves permission to focus on studying anything they fancy, they have also managed to strip the term ‘organization’ of substantive meaning. This paper therefore addresses itself to accounting for how and why the situation arose whereby much, though by no means all, of what self-identifies as organizational analysis isn’t actually *organizational*, and to exploring what follows from this. Somewhat in the manner described by Latour (2011), without endorsement, the paper therefore argues that the specificity of ‘organizational analysis’ - which requires its proponents to think and indeed act ‘organizationally’ - has been returned to the amorphous world of ‘social explanation’. Blau and Scott (1963:5) warned against this sort of temptation long ago, when they distinguished between the subject matter of the sociology of organization – ‘formal organization’: specific units, purposively constructed to attain explicitly formulated goals and established with explicit authority structures and roles – and ‘social organization in general’. The present paper therefore attempts to highlight the manner in which the tropes of social explanation deployed within contemporary sociology and organization studies reduce ‘organization’ to the status of a social container, in much the way Blau and Scott predicted. For instance, interactionist work in contemporary OS/OT frequently focuses on relations between people in organizations as if they were somehow disencumbered from formal organizational elements (Monteiro, 2017). But ‘individuals’ do not exist in organizations as some sort of *homo clausus*. To ‘disappear’ formal organization’ in this way is problematic for an *organizational analysis* precisely because, as Bourdieu (1987: 302) argued in his critique of ‘the biographical illusion’, ‘who would dream of describing a journey without an idea of the landscape in which it was made?’ In making this case, the paper commends an alternative stance towards organization that precisely eschews ‘talking about organizations’ epiphenomenally. It does so by seeking to

highlight key aspects of the *practical disposition* towards organization adopted by classic organization theories and other related approaches throughout the history of OT, such as the early work of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (du Gay & Vikkelso, 2017). In approaching matters organizational in this way it also attempts to upend the reflex accusation of naivety, rationalism and contemporary irrelevance directed towards OT's 'historical artefacts' from the present, and indeed to suggest how classical preoccupations can be applied to pressing matters of contemporary organizational concern without any need to 'update' them.

## **Outside Organization**

In *The Empirical Stance*, the philosopher of science, Bas Van Fraassen (2002:3) seeks to answer the question: how has so much work in contemporary philosophy reverted to the once moribund *vieux jeux* of metaphysics? This is not a question that is unique to philosophy; it could be equally applied to work in a number of other academic fields, including contemporary organization studies - popular, mainstream, and 'critical'. The paper seeks to explore the rise of what Van Fraassen terms a 'metaphysical stance' within organization studies; in so doing, the paper also charts the manner in which this metaphysical stance dissolves or renders obsolete the idea of 'formal' organization as a discreet object or entity. As Van Fraassen makes clear, stances can encompass a wide range of theoretical vernaculars, so we should not expect the metaphysical stance in organization studies to be identifiable through a shared language, set of beliefs, or normative commitments, for example. Rather, as the historian of ideas, Ian Hunter (2006; 2007; 2008) has suggested, we might describe such a stance in terms of the shared intellectual comportment and attitude that comes to characterise a range of distinctive and non-reducible positions within a field. At first sight, it seems hard to pinpoint any such shared comportment or attitude within the field of organization studies, broadly defined - a particular disposition somehow encompassing shareholder value or stakeholder theory, for instance, on the one hand, and process theory, critical management studies, or neo-institutional theory, on the other. And yet, as the paper seeks to argue, such a shared comportment or attitude can be discerned if one is predisposed to look for the clues. One such clue lies in the idea, explicitly articulated in the 'X and Organization Studies' call described above, and implicit in much contemporary scholarship in organization studies, that one can get a better purchase on the intelligibility of matters organizational by looking beyond 'organization'; that what was once deemed to lie 'outside organization', as its margins, contingent context, or backdrop, for example, is now deemed central or constitutive to an understanding of what 'organizational life' is all about. It is this focus on the 'outside' or 'extrinsic vantage point' that provides us with some important pointers for revealing a shared intellectual comportment, attitude or stance within contemporary organization studies, one plausibly described as 'metaphysical' in orientation.

### *On the immanent rationality of Organization (Studies)*

Unless a particular academic enterprise is bent on suicide, it will usually present itself, both to its own members and indeed to the ‘outside world’, as uniquely qualified to undertake a particular task. It is this task that gives the enterprise its distinctiveness (furnishing it with a determinate content and its purposeful differences from other enterprises). It is probably no exaggeration to suggest that organization studies is currently perceived by its own membership to possess a less than distinctive identity as an academic enterprise, and this is both a source of celebration for some, as well as the cause of considerable regret for others, among that same membership (Adler, 2009; Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Davis, 2015 ; Lounsbury & Beckman, 2014). Whether organization studies should be considered bent on suicide is, of course, a moot point. What seems evident, though, is that implicit in much contemporary scholarship is the idea that organization studies embodies or should embody some goal that can be specified *apart from* an analysis of organization itself, and which can serve as the benchmark by which matters organizational are to be evaluated and judged. Such an idea is not exclusive to organization studies. It can be found in many different disciplinary domains. If we turn briefly to the field of law, and specifically to an argument made by a legal scholar whose question is not ‘What is organizational analysis as an activity?’, but rather ‘What is the law of torts?’<sup>1</sup>, we can begin to furnish ourselves with some methodological guidelines for grasping what is at stake in this move, and why it might be plausibly designated as ‘metaphysical’<sup>2</sup>.

In his essay, ‘Legal Formalism: on the immanent rationality of law’, Ernest J. Weinrib (1988) voices his concerns about the manner in which so much legal scholarship seeks to approach, analyse, criticise and evaluate the law from a vantage point extrinsic to it. Weinrib takes one branch of the law – Tort –to analyse the effects of this move. He begins his endeavour by stating that

When we seek the intelligibility of something, we want to know what that something is. The search for ‘whatness’ presupposes that something is a this and not a that, that it has, in other words, a determinate content. That content is determinate because it sets the matter apart from other matters... (1988: 958)

It follows from this, Weinrib (1988:358) continues, that ‘nothing is more senseless than to attempt to understand the law from a vantage point extrinsic to it’, on the reasoning that any such attempt is more likely to give rise to an understanding of that ‘extrinsic vantage point’ (whatever it may be) and not of the law. For Weinrib (1988:958), legal understanding is an immanent (internal) affair,

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Tort’ refers to a wrongful act, other than a breach of contract, for which a civil action for damages can be brought

<sup>2</sup> One of the primary reasons for comparing Law and Organization Studies here is to emphasise the similarity of (negative) effect produced by those deploying the social explanation card in both these distinct (and thus different and non-reducible) ‘modes of existence’ (Latour, 2011). At the same time, I also seek to use the concept of legal personality to specifically highlight the manner in which the tropes of social explanation often reduce ‘organization’ to the status of a social container.

and ‘legal phenomena’ will come into view only under the pressure of a legal analysis; otherwise they would not be legal phenomena but something else.

‘Immanent understanding’ as Weinrib describes it, is not to be apprehended by itemising features of the internal landscape, but by grasping the coherent set of *purposes* that confer value and significance and even shape on those features. It is that set of purposes, when they inform an insider’s perception, for instance, that is responsible for her or his sense of what is and what is not ‘intuitively plausible’ in the consideration of any legal problem. As Fish (1995:21), for instance, has argued, when a legal practitioner listens to a client’s story, she listens with legal ears and what she hears is often very different in its emphases from what the client highlights when he offloads his story on to her. The client may stress a moment or an action that appears to him to be defining of his cause only to hear the legal practitioner say that it is not something that can be brought under categories with which and within which the law thinks.

If we are to avoid infinite regress, Weinrib (1988: 956) argues, we have to see the law not so much as an ‘instrument in the service of foreign ideals but as an end in itself, constituting as it were, its own ideal’. He thus describes Tort law as a continuing meditation (by tort law itself) on ‘the relationship between tortfeasor and victim’ (Weinrib, 1988: 969) – that is between someone who wrongfully inflicts an injury and someone who suffers it; the unfolding of that meditation will necessarily induce considerations of fault, causation, duty, foreseeability and proximity. It is of course always possible to view a tort case through the lens of a different complex of concerns - a desire to redistribute wealth as evenly as possible regardless of any finding of fault or demonstration of loss, for example; but if a case were decided in the name of such a foreign ideal, it would be a tort decision in name only.

If, as Weinrib argues, the source of the law’s validity lies within the legal system itself – i.e. it is ‘immanent’ – in the legal norms regulating legislative and judicial decision-making, then the source of ‘legal personality’ or ‘standing’ – what we can term ‘personhood’ - will lie firmly within the legal system too. In other words, the statuses and attributes of legal personality will be seen to be inseparable from the definite yet limited parameters of particular legal systems. Legal personality then cannot usefully be viewed as an expression of human subjectivity in some general sense. It is an artefact too particular and specialised to be counted as ‘the individual’, ‘the subject’, or ‘the person’. The specificity of legal forms of personality and their non-reducibility to a trans-contextual or universalist conception of the individual, subject, or person can be most clearly evidenced by the simple legal truism that not all individuals are legal persons and not all legal persons – corporations, or states, for instance – are human beings. For legal purposes, then, any entity, whether human or not, whom the law regards as capable of bearing rights and duties, is a person. An entity which is not so capable in the law’s eyes, again, whether human or not, is not a person for legal purposes. In

legal terms, persons are nothing but the substances of which rights and duties are the attributes. Only in this respect do persons possess juridical significance. They are not universal modes of 'being human'; they cannot be unproblematically equated with the 'individual', the 'subject' or any other such designation.

This is an important argument, not simply in relation to the problems attendant on approaching 'law' from an extrinsic point of view, but equally in relation to approaching 'organization' in the same way. After all, the distribution of types of 'person' that appear within formal organizations (and which often have juridical and not simply organizational significance, as is the case with corporate 'officers' such as CEOs, or Presidents, for example) are equally irreducible to individuals and their identities, something which dominant theories of the firm fail to appreciate, as do many post-structuralist inspired studies of workplace resistance or identity formation. If we take the former, for instance, we note quite quickly that authors writing about the firm constantly rely upon and deploy legal concepts: contract, property right, and corporation, for instance. The problem, as Jean-Philippe Robé (2011: 7), has pointed out, is that the legal provenance of these terms is occluded in most dominant theories of the firm. Rather, the latter operate with definitions and meanings that derive from other forms of discourse 'outside law', not least economics, and whose deployment in effect creates a parallel universe (a simulacrum, in fact), somewhat removed from the world of formal organization - where entities are developed using legal instruments, among many other devices, and 'in which the terms of all economic exchanges obtain their binding effect via law', and thus 'where the builders of real life firms are bound to take into account the legal characteristics of property rights, contracts or corporations to structure firms. For them, 'law matters' (2011: 7-8). In other words, by deploying their own sectarian meanings of what property rights, contracts or corporations are, or more frequently, should be, and by not recognising the actually existing legal meanings of these terms, theorists of the firm engage in a form of metaphysical transmogrification in which carefully crafted, technically limited, and practically focused (*corporate legal*) concepts are stripped of their precise meanings and turned into natural kinds to be deployed at will and across all areas in the manner of the elixirs sold at country fairs by quack doctors (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Fama, 1980; Fama & Jensen, 1983). As Weinrib (1988:969) put it, this is indeed 'a conceptual monstrosity'.

Like many before them, influential theorists of the firm dismiss the juridical significance of the corporation – its possession of 'legal personality', in particular – as a 'legal fiction', and for similar reasons, not the least of which is that only 'human beings' ('individuals' in their favoured conception) are deemed to be real persons. Of course, as indicated above, all legal concepts are 'fictions' in the sense of being 'artificial' rather than 'natural' kinds, but that does not make them



‘illusions’. Rather the illusion comes in failing to take legal personality seriously, as an important corporate reality device, because it does not happen to comply with certain *a priori* assumptions concerning, for instance, what a person is (always a human), or what an organization is (a nexus of contracts between individuals, for instance). As Jean-Phillippe Robé (2011: 3) has also indicated, precisely because of the *a priori* assumptions they hold, many theorists of the firm are constitutionally incapable of recognizing that ‘firm’ and ‘corporation’, for instance, are not legally and thus not practically synonymous. Corporations possess legal personality while firms do not, and much flows from this. First, contracts only exist between legal persons. If not all organizations are corporations, then they cannot reasonably be represented as if they were first and foremost a nexus of contracts because they possess no legal capacity to contract. This applies equally to the individuals held to be at the centre of this nexus. Individuals have no natural capacity to contract. They are equipped with such agency only by legal means. As Cousins (1987:119) has argued, the distribution of types of agent that appear within the law, and thus within organizations formatted and framed by law, cannot be made reducible to individuals and their identities. Second, and relatedly, property rights, rules, regulations, liabilities and so forth are only allocated and applied to legal persons. The capacity to undertake certain aspects of economic activity, for example, is therefore not a ‘natural’ kind. It is precisely not a capacity that an entity without legal personality can possess. Rather than an illusion or an irrelevance, the possession of legal personality is a crucial element in the capacity of formal organizations to exert economic agency, for instance, – to own property, incur debts, accumulate assets, contract, sue, be sued, have recourse to the courts and so on and so forth. It is problematic then to suggest, as agency theorists have, that

...most organizations are simply legal fictions. This includes firms, and even governmental bodies such as cities, states...The private corporation or firm is simply one form of legal fiction which serves as a nexus for contracting relationships...it makes little or no sense to try to distinguish those things that are ‘inside’ the firm (or any other organization) from those things that are ‘outside’ of it. There is in a very real sense only a multitude of complex relationships (i.e., contracts) between the legal fiction (the firm) and the owners of labor, material and capital inputs and the consumers of output. (...) The firm is (...) a legal fiction which serves as a focus for a complex process in which the conflicting objectives of individuals (...) are brought into equilibrium within a framework of contractual relations. In this sense the “behavior” of the firm is like the behavior of a market, that is, the outcome of a complex equilibrium process (Jensen & Meckling, 1976: 310)

As their elementary failure to distinguish between firm and corporation attests, the sense here is of the authors articulating the ‘true reality’ of ‘the firm’ - as fundamentally a nexus of contracts – that lies beneath, behind, or somehow outside of, what they regard as the (illusory) superstructure of

corporate legal definition and instrumentation. The audacity of this thesis is only an extreme version of the widespread academic tendency to assume that the skills, capacities and concepts attending one's own discipline or practice are basically indispensable to any and all disciplines and practices (Fish, 1995:73). Regardless of how legal instruments actually format and frame organization in practically significant ways, Jensen and Meckling (1976) assume that their own favoured conceptual repertoire, which is represented essentially as a 'natural kind', can dispense with such legal meanings because it is itself cognitive, not least by dint of its capacity to reveal the truth (regardless of surface appearances) of organizational existence, and is thus capable of acceding to knowledge of *all* aspects of that existence. This is evidence indeed of a 'metaphysical stance'. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the practical application of such metaphysical speculation to the world of actually existing organization has been predictably unfortunate (Ghoshal, 2005; Dobbin & Jung, 2010; Davis, 2011; Stout, 2012). To disregard the existence of the corporation as a legal person, for instance, and to insist on treating it as the object of property rights expresses not only an ignorance of the legal constitution of organizational structure and functioning, but also of the importance of such legal mechanisms for the operation of the economy more generally (Thompson, 2012; 2014). And that is not the worst of it; forcefully promoted theories based on such assumptions have assisted precisely in

forcing the concentration of management's efforts on the promotion of the sole shareholders' who are being wrongfully presented as "principals", as owners; 'the whole purpose of modern corporate law was precisely to sever any property right connection between the shareholders and the assets used in the operation of the firm. It is only because agency theory disregards the reality and importance of the legal instruments used to structure large firms-as-they-are that a widespread ideology that "shareholders-own-the-firm-so-management-must-maximise-profits" could develop...A disclaimer should accompany its use for the treatment of real world issues...it has toxic consequences' (Robé, 2011: 63-65).

This brief engagement with discussions concerning the 'immanent rationality' of law provides us with two methodological axioms for charting the emergence and effects of a metaphysical stance in organization studies. First, that organizational understanding, like legal understanding, is an *immanent* affair; organizational phenomena only coming into view under pressure of an *organizational* analysis. This is a point that 'classic' organization theorists, such as Chester Barnard (1968), frequently made, but which seems to have lost its explanatory reach in recent years, not least because what passes for organizational analysis today often appears to have little to do with 'organization' (King, Felin & Whetten, 2010). Second, and relatedly, that attempts to approach organization, like law, from a vantage point extrinsic to it, at best say more about the extrinsic view point than they do about organization, and at worst completely disappear formal organization by

transforming it into something else; this ‘something else’ then serving as the basis by which organization is to be understood and assessed. Such a move, evident in the brief discussion of agency theory above, for example, corresponds precisely to a key element of the ‘metaphysical stance’ outlined by Van Fraassen (2002: 3): that metaphysical theories interpret something granted as already understood into something altogether different, and then specify that we cannot do without it. This metaphysical enterprise subverts or occludes understanding of organization by its development of an often highly elaborate, ornate, and intricate understanding of simulacra that pass under the same basic name. This occlusion of ‘formal organization’ and its simultaneous replacement by theoretical simulacra (such as ‘the nexus of contracts’, but equally, ‘institutional logics’ or ‘action nets’, the list, as ever, is very long) characterizes the metaphysical stance through and through. In so doing, it seems to honour the letter – talking organization – while losing the spirit and significance of the subject entirely. In what follows, then, the task is to try and show it up for what it is, and to bring to light the ways in which its strenuous labours address simulacra of considerably less significance than its advocates believe.

### **A(n endless) series of problematizations**

Some years ago, Raymond Hunt (1976: 99) remarked that for all its self-styled sophistication in relation to earlier, predominantly ‘classical’ organization theory, the ‘open systems’ oriented approaches to organizational analysis that proliferated from the 1960s had been accompanied by something of a decline of concern with the ‘work itself’ (by which he meant a focus on an organization’s tasks, the latter’s properties, and the manner of their co-ordination in relation to the securing of overall organizational purpose). He stressed that whereas F.W. Taylor and other ‘historical figures’ whom March & Simon (1958), for example, somewhat patronisingly termed ‘physiological organization theorists’, had paid considerable attention to ‘the work itself’, contemporary forms of organizational analysis had neglected the organizational role of such work to the point where it had increasingly disappeared from view. This neglect, Hunt (1976:99) continued, was somewhat ironic because if organizations existed for the co-ordinated performance of particular tasks, a not unreasonable assumption, he felt, then it would be plausible to assume that certain ‘basic effects upon their processes and outputs’ would be traceable to ‘variations in the properties of the tasks they were performing’. The avowed sophistication of ‘open systems’ thinking in organizational theory, he contended, had led some organizational analysts of this programmatic persuasion to be ‘disinclined in their thinking’ about the practical, situated determinants of organizational matters such as task properties and performance - ‘the work itself’ - and thus about enhancing ‘organizational effectiveness’ (which Hunt saw as most likely to flow from ‘a better understanding of the essential task based nature of organization’) in favour of more

‘exotic and even self-congratulatory ingredients’(Hunt, 1976: 113 and 116). In its own way, Hunt’s analysis testified to the emergence of a disposition or attitude which, among other things, privileged the ‘outside’ as a key source for understanding organizational matters. As his analysis hints, though, the ‘outside’ can come to displace the very thing it is seemingly designed to more clearly explicate – what makes organization – and instead lead to the development of often highly elaborate simulacra under the same basic name. In so doing, the ‘outside’ seems to honour the letter – understanding organization – while losing the spirit and significance of the subject entirely<sup>3</sup>.

### *Enter ‘the environment’*

One of the first and most significant ‘outsides’ to be brought to the centre of organization via an ‘open systems’ theoretical vernacular was, of course ‘the environment’ (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967; Scott, 1981). Clearly, the term ‘environment’ was not unknown to organizational theorising prior to its enthronement as a key concept for understanding organization as ‘open systems’ thinking was held to trump so called ‘closed system, rational actor’ thinking in the field. Barnard (1968) for instance, is often described as being ahead of his time in organizational theorising precisely because he is deemed to have broken with ‘closed system’ thinking in his major work, *The Functions of the Executive*, referring to organization-environment interactions and viewing ‘organizations as open systems that included investors, suppliers, customers, and others’ (Wren, 2005: 448). “Environment”, though, is not a count noun; while it always denotes something, it does not denote the same thing in every context of use. In each example of the latter it seems that we could take that something to not exhaust all there is but rather to encompass what we might term some relevant class or region. The ‘environment’, then, will come to mean something in relation to a particular context, including a specific domain of discourse. For Barnard (1968), deployment of the term is related to the stance adopted both to organizational analysis and to the conduct of organization itself, as a practical activity. Rather than being an open-systems theorist manqué, Barnard’s use of the term ‘environment’ and his concern with investors, customers and so forth is indicative of his attitude or comportment towards organization as a practical concern. Could you be engaged in conscious and responsible executive work ‘inside organization’, that specialised effort of ‘maintaining the organization in operation’ (Barnard, 1968: 215-16), and not be concerned with such matters (including the corporate legal instruments outlined by Robé above, come to that)? Here the term ‘environment’ resides in a context of executive work and a domain of discourse focused on the practical activity of organization as a way of life.

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<sup>3</sup> A point made precisely by Lopdrup-Hjorth (2013) in relationship to the phenomenon of ‘co-creation’, but having a wider resonance within Organization Studies, as he argues (see esp. pp.109-23).

Such a practical focus also attended the initial development of contingency theory - not least the pioneering work of Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) - that school of thought which did so much to establish the provenance of 'the environment' at the heart of organizational theory. As Greenwood and Miller (2010:86) argue with specific reference to the work of Lawrence and Lorsch, 'contingency theory was birthed not by scholars setting out to invent new theory, but rather in the attempt to solve organizational problems'. Even here, then, 'the environment' points to a context of use and domain of discourse that is resolutely 'inside organization', or 'immanent'; in other words, that is part and parcel of a practical ('classical') organizational stance towards establishing effective organizational design for the 'situation at hand' or the 'work itself' (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967: 209). This particular deployment of the phrase does not position 'the environment' as an 'extrinsic vantage point' that trumps or otherwise transcends a practical focus on 'internal structures and processes'; yet this is precisely what 'the environment' did end up doing.

Without using the term 'metaphysical', Perrow (1986) points to two general trends within post open-systems organizational theorising that resulted in a gradual occlusion of the organization as a unit of analysis, and, relatedly, a significant depreciation in its own practical applicability. On the one hand, he outlines a growing engagement with issues of 'motivation', 'leadership', and 'productivity', for example, 'where the variables are now so numerous and complex' - not least because so many more can be introduced once the organization is opened up to anything and everything - that it is barely possible to talk about organization anymore at all (Perrow, 1986: 95). On the other, he refers to the growing popularity of supra or meta-organizational analysis, where the focus has shifted to over-arching designations such as 'the environment', 'organizational fields', or 'populations' and 'networks', but where the result is the same - the disappearance of organization as an object in and of itself. From the latter perspective, as Scott and Davis (2007: 106) suggest, not without approval, the 'outside' not only comes to be viewed as 'vital to the continuation of the organization', but more significantly 'the source of order itself'<sup>4</sup>. Here we come face to face with an 'extrinsic point of view' in the manner posited by Weinrib (1988) as a 'foreign ideal', or by Van Fraassen (2002) as a 'simulacrum'. To explain: the focus on 'the outside' as constitutive of 'the inside' of organization, and of the 'impossibility' of the latter's 'autonomy' as a discreet object, is in a sense, a classic constructionist move *avant la lettre*; it assumes that once it is recognised that any and every 'organization' is manifestly dependent upon, makes use of, and invokes, materials derived from 'social' ('cultural', 'economic', 'political') locations, spheres, discourses, and so on and so forth 'outside' of itself, its 'autonomy' as a discreet object is compromised<sup>5</sup>. However, the

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<sup>4</sup> In the language of post-structuralism, for instance, we find a similar idiom: 'the constitutive outside' (see, for instance, Laclau, 1990)

<sup>5</sup> As Scott (2014:262) puts it in relation to the institutional theory programme 'the "figure" (organization) is often defocalized to stress the centrality of the "ground" (environment). In many institutional accounts, "the figure is not simply embedded in, but also penetrated and constituted by the ground"'.

reasoning informing such assumptions only holds if organization is deemed to be a once and for all condition of hermetic self-sufficiency, a view that classical organization theory as a ‘closed system’ programme has often been accused of promoting (especially, perhaps, the Scientific Management movement (Witzel, 2012:189)) not least by advocates of ‘open systems’ theory programmes (Scott, 1981). However, if one approaches classical organization theory as a stance, then so-called ‘closed system’ presuppositions begin to take on a rather different character. Again, the idea of ‘immanent intelligibility’ proves a useful starting point.

*‘closed systems’ are not what you think*

One of the key criticisms levelled at classical organization theory concerns what we might term using a contemporary idiom, its ‘self-referentiality’. In ‘the customary history’ of organizational theory, it has frequently been argued that most ‘classical’ organizational theories were based on ‘closed system’ models or assumptions - from Weber’s ‘theory’ of bureaucracy, through Taylor’s principles of scientific management, to Fayol’s administrative axioms, and beyond – where the dominant ‘tropes’ and ‘metaphors’ were more or less mechanistic (Morgan, 1997). Closed system thinking is here deemed ‘self-referential’ and thus constantly in danger of fostering ‘closed minds’ as a result; the focus on internal ordering leading *inter alia* to system-environment misalignment, lack of flexibility, erosion of adaptiveness, loss of purpose and so on and so forth.

As we saw earlier, such (critical) charges of self-referentiality have been regularly pinned on the law too as a ‘closed system’. Weinrib’s (1988: 973-5) point, though, was that in the absence of such self-referentiality, a legal practitioner would have little grasp of what they were doing, or why they were doing it. Tort law’s ‘circularity’, he argued, is precisely its strength, not a fatal weakness.. The same applies to ‘classical organizational theory’ when it is seen as a *practical science*. ‘Classical’ schools of organizational thought, such as Scientific Management, have been the subject of scathing criticisms within organization studies and the wider social sciences, much of this opprobrium focusing on the inhuman effects of the techniques derived from its so-called mechanistic, ‘closed system’ mentality (Braverman, 1974). As Perrow (1979:15) has argued, though, the force of these sorts of criticism quickly peters out when one realizes, for instance, that these were among the first efforts to both analyse and create tools for organizing and managing ‘a new animal that had lumbered onto the industrial...and governmental... landscape and which promised to be an exceedingly large and complex beast indeed’: the ‘formal’ organization. These ‘efforts’ constituted a practical task, based on experience, observation, and trial and error experimentation of and theorizing about organizing, and were not first and foremost objectifying epistemological pursuits or attempts to build ‘totalising’ conceptual edifices in and of themselves. It is hardly surprising then, that Scientific Management was ‘self-referential’. How could it be

otherwise? The work of Frederick Taylor, for example, is regularly represented within contemporary organizational studies and the wider social sciences as simplistic, ‘normative’ not empirical, and narrowly mechanistic, yet for all their presumed sophistication and explanatory power, contemporary academic analyses have rarely managed to achieve the significance and lasting prominence in relation to organizational behaviour and functioning that Taylor’s work has done, not least because of its ‘immanent intelligibility’ in relation to, and hence congruity with, pressing problems of management and organizing (and not just ‘capitalism’) (Perrow, 1979: 16; 1986: 52-53). Taylor’s clear and present focus on task properties as crucial and distinctive features of both performance and modes of organizing, for example, standing in stark contrast to the lack of importance attributed to ‘the work itself’ and its implications for organizational design, in many prominent contemporary organizational theories, such as Neo-Institutionalism, ), for instance (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014).

Because classical organizational theory as a stance is characterised *inter alia* by a focus on organization as a practical activity and upon organizational effectiveness in relation to specific purposes, its rationale is internal and immanent – ‘circular’ or ‘closed’, if you prefer. That does not mean it is static or unresponsive, for organization as a practical activity is necessarily an accomplishment; it is not a once and for all achievement, something that happens one time and then just ‘is’. This is often what ‘closed system’ appears to mean to those committed to an extrinsic point of view, but if ‘closed’ simply (as if it was simple) means having immanent intelligibility, then it is clear that the classical stance in organizational theory is not unconcerned with nor antithetical to the ‘outside’, but will relate to that precisely in terms of its own immanent and internal criteria and purposes. In a sense, this is what Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) showed happening in their classic *Organization and Environment*, for example. Rather, the problem comes when you move from actually undertaking a practical science of organizing, in the manner of ‘classical organization theory’, for instance, to examining, say, the network or relations and forces that underlie, constitute, or otherwise provide the ‘conditions of existence of’ that performance, or of ‘organizing’ itself. Those organizational theories that operate with what we have described as an extrinsic point of view, focus their attention on the latter rather than the former, but still appear to assume they are contributing to the former as well as the latter (Scott, 2014). In this way, they employ the language of ‘organization’ but lose the very spirit and significance – immanent and internal – of the subject entirely. It is, after all, no easy task to be involved in a practice (‘organization’, or what Scott (2014:262) calls the ‘figure’) and at the same time to be self-consciously in touch with the conditions that enable it (what Scott (2014) calls ‘the ‘ground’, which, of course, also happens to constitute ‘the figure’). Despite all its protestations to relevance and practical organizational utility, for instance, the remarkably popular neo-institutional theory, suffers precisely from this confusion (Greenwood et al, 2013; Lounsbury and Beckman, 2014; Thornton, Ocasio & Lounsbury, 2012). It talks the language of ‘organization’, but its inherently extrinsic point of view, a ‘core idea’ of which

is that ‘organizations are deeply embedded in social and political environments’ such that ‘organizational practices and structures are often reflections of or responses to rules, beliefs, and conventions built into the wider environment’ (Powell, 2007), denies it the sort of ‘immanent intelligibility’ in relation to practical matters of organization possessed by the ‘classical stance’ in organizational theory. We could even go so far as to say that neo-institutional theory isn’t actually *organizational*, precisely because organizational theory is an immanent or internal affair, and neo-institutionalism departs from an extrinsic point of view, one which dispenses with ‘organization’ substantively if not as a word, in favour of concepts such as ‘logics’, ‘fields’, ‘rational myths’ and so forth. Indeed, , as institutionalists are keen to emphasise, their focus is on ‘the wider drama, rather than the individual player’ (Scott, 2014: 262). This wider drama is of course the ‘social context’ within which organizations are embedded and through which they are constituted. In other words, institutionalism adopts an extrinsic point of view to matters organizational. Quite why Greenwood and Miller (2010:86), for instance, would therefore position it as a crucial means through which to analyse and perform organization design as a practically relevant activity is not clear. After all, it is not at all easy, perhaps even impossible, to make specific and positive statements concerning the practicalities of organization – to undertake an organizational ‘tool-making job’ (Trist, 1960: 21) - through the medium of supra or meta organizational discourse. The assumption that such an endeavour is possible confuses two very different practices, the organizational and the meta-organizational, by assuming in fact that they are ‘really’ doing the same thing. The concepts developed within institutional theory are predominantly the product of an extrinsic point of view and cannot be put to work in ways that would make them useful for those for whom doing ‘organization’ is a practical activity. They are devoid of operational meaning and have no traction for organization theory when seen as a practical science of organizing. In this sense, institutional theory is not *organizational*.

As Perrow (1986:265) noted, neo-institutionalism can appear to be a modern variant of the old ‘critique and expose’ form of institutional enquiry within organization analysis. Indeed, as some neo-institutionalists attest, viewing the bulk of institutional scholarship over the course of the last fifty years would lead one to believe that organizations are constitutively failing entities, constantly unable to achieve their avowed purposes. What institutional theory itself fails to do, though, is indicate how good organization can be made up and maintained, practically (Kraatz, 2009). Rather neo-institutionalism has been keen to ‘delegitimize power, expose hidden forms of domination, and reveal fragmentation and hypocrisy in the actions of organizations and their elites. It says very little about how to govern, reform, or productively improve any given existing social institution’ (Kraatz, 2009: 85-86). In other words, it says nothing about organization as a practical science. Kraatz goes on to suggest that neo-institutionalists attend more to the work required to design and defend organizational structures, including developing a fine-tuned attention to the crucial importance of ‘mundane administrative systems’ that are deemed to be the bedrock of ‘precarious organizational



values' (Kraatz, Ventrusca, and Deng, 2010: 1521). Sadly, this is not something institutionalists can do, as long as they stay wedded to the institutionalist language game; in other words, while they comport themselves as institutional scholars. Indeed, in engaging with Kraatz's *cri de coeur*, one of the elder statesmen of the field, Scott (2014: 274), indicates precisely why this might be the case. As he puts it, if institutionalism has 'taught us anything, it is that organizations are sub-systems of wider systems. Institutional work is required to not only at micro but macro levels – in sub-groups, organizations, organization fields, and societal systems'. Quite how anyone could hope to act in relation to all of these, and simultaneously, or to imagine that the deployment of 'institutional theory' would enable such a 'radiating effect' (Fish, 1999) is difficult to imagine practically speaking. The ambition remains, though.

For many classical organizational scholars, such as Chester Barnard, and indeed for the early work of Miller and Rice and other members of Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, for instance, 'theory' was not something to aim for in and of itself, or to assist practitioners in reaching a deeper 'Truth' behind the immediately present. Nor was 'Theory' to be 'applied'; rather, it consisted in conceptual approximations, incomplete and often seemingly simple, to a whole that was to be grasped through habitual familiarity with and empirical specification of its 'total arrangement' and its effects and imbalances. Completeness, in this sense, was a condition of accurate description but such completeness was not to be achieved by exhaustiveness per se, but by relevance to the determination of what was to be done: to the 'purpose' or 'primary task' at hand:

It has repeatedly been made evident to me by inquiring students that this subject is the most difficult so far as the approach to concrete situations is concerned, although intellectually it is grasped easily. Probably the reason is that a sense of a situation as a whole can usually only be acquired by intimate and habitual association with it, and involves many elements which either have not been or are not practically susceptible quickly to verbal expression by those who understand them [...]. All of our thinking about organized efforts tends to be fallacious by reason of what A.N. Whitehead calls "misplaced concreteness". Analysis and abstraction we must and do make in everyday conduct of our affairs; but when we mistake the elements for the concrete we destroy the usefulness of the analysis (Barnard, 1968: 239).<sup>6</sup>

The basic conceptual apparatus, the theoretical doctrine and the subset of propositions, are not

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<sup>6</sup> Or, as Conal Condren (2006: 351-2) has put it in another context, 'for theoretical constructs with the virtues of abstraction, elegance, and explanatory suggestiveness, a little detail goes a long way...the elegance of any model screens out material, thereby accentuating a pattern, but once the model is treated as evidence, or embedded beneath it, differing forms of difficulty become apparent. Models as underlying truths become shibboleths and metaphysical principles to be defended and rescued by so much tinkering to accommodate deviant evidence that their virtues are lost in defensive tautology and anachronism'.

treated as the ultimate and pure grasping of a phenomenon. Rather they should be understood as heuristic concepts that exactly because of their ‘empirical character’, i.e. their immediate intelligibility to the participants in the activity that they seek to describe, have the potential to instigate an investigation of or conversation about ‘the situation as a whole’:

One point that needs to be made is that such effectiveness as Rice had as a change agent did not come from applying a general theoretical framework of organization to specific situations. His concept of the primary task...emerged in the course of working with clients to help clarify their problems (Miller, 1976: 10).

Similarly, for the organization theorist, Chief Executive, Minister of State, and University Chancellor, Wilfred Brown (1965;1974;1976), the aim was not to construct a ‘theory’, per se, or to apply one to something, but rather to develop ‘concepts’ as tools in situ which would enable those for whom organization was a way of life or habitus, ‘to think in a straight line about the problems they have to handle’. This would only be achieved, of course, if ‘those concepts are reasonably well aligned to the situations with which we have to deal’<sup>7</sup>. Here, the locus of organization theory as substantive organizational reasoning and judgment still remained the specific case, the concrete problem, the particular set of circumstances.

## **Concluding comments**

‘Formality’ has long been considered a fraud in the social sciences, and by radical political movements of all hues – Left, Right, Un-aligned – with any number of folk therein positioning themselves on the side of ‘substance’ in opposition to ‘formality’. For its opponents, ‘formality’ is often represented as oppressive of liberty, autonomy and so forth – in law, economy, government, and organization, for example (Stinchcombe, 2001). In her influential essay ‘The Tyranny of Structurelessness’, inspired by her experiences in a 1960s women's liberation group, Jo Freeman(1972) explicitly took issue with the denigration of formality on the altar of ‘substance’ and ‘informality’. In particular, she reflected on the experiments of the feminist movement in resisting the idea of formal organization through the significance attributed to the notion of ‘structurelessness’. Freeman argued that there was no such thing as a structureless organization. There was, though, she suggested, an important distinction to be made between a formally structured organization and an informally structured one. The latter, she argued may claim to be structureless, but in reality its apparent lack of structure too often disguised an informal, unacknowledged and unaccountable leadership that was all the more problematic because its very

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<sup>7</sup> According to Simon (1946:62), for instance, ‘administrative’ concepts ‘must be operational, that is, their meanings must correspond to empirically observable...situations’.

existence was denied by the notion of ‘structurelessness’. As a solution to this pernicious situation, Freeman advocated formal organization, including explicit authority and accountability mechanisms, and clear delineation of roles and tasks. As she put it:

[A]s long as the structure of the group is informal, the rules of how decisions are made are known only to a few and awareness of power is limited to those who know the rules. Those who do not know the rules and are not chosen for initiation must remain in confusion, or suffer from paranoid delusions that something is happening of which they are not quite aware... For everyone to have the opportunity to be involved in a given group and to participate in its activities the structure must be explicit, not implicit. The rules of decision-making must be open and available to everyone, and this can happen only if they are formalized(1972:152).

There are lessons here for anyone seeking to achieve a particular purpose – whether gender equality, redistribution of wealth, a circular economy, or whatever. There are also warning signals for those undertaking organizational analysis. Of central import here is a question: If formal maxims approximate to something akin to the ‘law’ of organization, what happens when that law is ignored, occluded, upended or in some way dispensed with, by those ostensibly analysing ‘organization’ (and, indeed, by those actually seeking to ‘do’ organization)? It is striking, as Freeman argued to such effect, that those expressing an a priori antithesis towards formal organization rarely provide detailed descriptions of the (daily) consequences of the organizing practices they implicitly or explicitly commend. Rather, metaphysical speculation, and meta-theoretical argumentation predominate. The present paper has attempted to indicate the less than benign consequences of the rise of a ‘metaphysical stance’ within organization studies, not least by indicating how such a stance dissolves or renders obsolete the idea of ‘formal’ organization as a discreet object or entity by transforming it into something else; this ‘something else’ then serving as the basis by which organization is to be understood and assessed. Historically, organizational theorising was articulated with organizational practice in a different way, so that changes in organization theory were introduced with the translational possibilities – to draw an idiom from medicine – of their impact on organization. As indicated in the paper, organization theory emerged as a practical science characterized, inter alia, by a pragmatic call to experience, an antithetical attitude to high or transcendental theorizing, an admiration for scientific forms of enquiry (in the Weberian sense of the “disciplined pursuit of knowledge”(1989), and as such not reducible to the laboratory sciences, nor to the content of the sciences per se), a dissatisfaction and devaluation of explanation by postulate, and, not least, a practical focus on organizational effectiveness, for instance, born of a close connection to the work itself or ‘the situation at hand’. It is this stance towards its core object – formal organization – that is increasingly absent from much contemporary

work in organization studies, and why in effect organizational analysis has been increasingly returned to the amorphous world of open-ended social theorising.

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