Theory and organization studies: the need for contestation

Abstract

In this piece of provocation we focus on the words of people who we view as increasingly powerful institutional actors in the field of organization theory and what they signify about 'what needs to be done' and 'how it needs to be done' in order to rectify the many failings they identify. We suggest that their actions reflect a desire for an integrated, general theory of organizations and the conception of organization studies as a nomothetic science to which they (and perforce we) are philosophically and ideologically committed. These are seen to be intellectual and ideological forces at work on both sides of the Atlantic. We provide a critique of this emerging orthodoxy within contemporary organization theory, briefly drawing on Swift's metaphor of Lilliputian 'big enders' and 'little enders' but also offer contemplation of the architectural metaphors of 'cathedral', 'mystery house' and 'the tower of babel' (conceived of as ruination) to consider the alternative imaginary edifices that may influence the structure of our studies. Finally, we specify an alternative research agenda for organization theory which focuses upon 'the organization of destruction' rather than 'the organization of production' or 'the organization of consumption'. Rather than seeing any contestation of intellectual traditions, analytical frameworks and methodological strategies as mental manacles and shackles which we need to 'throw off' to rediscover our true vocation as organization scientists, we contend that organization theory needs to reignite a fierce dialogue over 'organization' and its relation to order and disorder that has stretched over, at least, two millennia and still speaks to our lives today and tomorrow.

Keywords

Organization Theory, nomothetic science, cathedral, mystery house, tower of babel, destruction, ruination

Introduction

This article sits within the 'X and Organization Studies' section as a contentious piece of provocation designed to comfort and discomfort those who read it, though not in equal measure. We are expressing our own ideas, and have 'road tested' variants of the paper in one Irish and six British universities, generally to pleasing receptions. But the deep pleasure that we seek from professing our discipline - which we have undertaken for a combined 90 years - comes not only from supportive comments and helpful critique in the confines of a meeting room. It also emanates from the sight of disgruntled members of the audience muttering and swearing as they leave the seminar. This is not perverse, for blandness, meekness and quietism are ruinous of a discipline's vitality and should be avoided. Time, however, moves on and soon we must vacate the field. So this 'Theory and Organization Studies' piece is designed to unsettle the head long rush to a shared worship of polite mono-theoretical uniformity. Be prepared then for some serious elbowing out of the way as we seek one last Hurrah in opposing the oncoming crowd. And please remember, disgruntlement is good - it means you care.

Organization Theory in Crisis?

Recently, a number of leading academics who occupy powerful institutional positions and perform influential networking roles within organization studies have forcefully expressed their concerns over the current condition of and future prospects for the field (Lounsbury and Beckman 2015; Davis 2010, 2015; Barley 2015). These authors suggest that contemporary organization theory has completely lost its way as an administrative science which once aspired to provide the kind of knowledge that would inform the deliberations of powerful decision-takers and give us a prominent role in directly influencing the making and implementing of 'high policy'. Instead, organization theory has allowed itself to disintegrate into a cacophony of warring philosophical and theoretical tribes who have little or no interest in speaking to the concerns of policy makers and are content to spend their time and energy engaged in 'academic navel gazing' rather than 'asking questions worth answering'(Davis 2015:314-8) While there are echoes here of the kind of complaints that were being made by Donaldson (1996) and Pfeffer (1993), these institutional leaders look not towards economics or physics as a source of inspiration and legitimation but more towards the life sciences as the high profile disciplines which organization theorists must emulate if they are to enter the 'promised land' of scientific rectitude and policy relevance.

We believe that these leaders, although clothing their prophesies of imminent demise in the language and rhetoric of science, are more than prepared to resort to quasi-religious metaphors and symbols in order to secure widespread acceptance of their view that organization studies is in such a state of general intellectual disrepair that it can only be saved by the academic community's conversion to an alternative 'post-positivist paradigm'. In this version of a 'crisis' within the discipline, it is the modern life sciences, based upon bio-chemistry and epidemiology, which are offered a major lead role, even though the grasp of advanced natural science by social scientists perforce must be very limited. Only via this

mimicry can organization studies be transformed from a 'fragmented adhocracy' (Whitley 1984) into a true 'integrated science' through standardization, replication and codification of the discipline's knowledge base. Indeed, the underlying ideological and intellectual drive to establish organization studies as 'a quasi-discipline, with its own community, its own institutions, its own standards, and its own language' (Augier et al., 2005:93, quoted in Strang and Siler 2017:3) has always been the dominant strategic motivation for successive generations of elite academic groups and networks within our field. The constant search for disciplinary control is now re-emerging as a project to convert organization studies' academic community into a hegemon-controlled discipline via profound ideological and intellectual closure around the field's focus, agenda and form. We suggest that if they have their way in 'celebrating Organization Theory' (Lounsbury and Beckman 2015; Davis 2015), our current institutional thought leaders will witness the conversion of organization studies into something resembling a post-positivistic biosocial science that will provide an essential intellectual aide to policy elites attempting to develop solutions to '(super) wicked problems' (Conklin 2005; Ferlie et al., 2013).

We believe that institutional theory has provided an 'intellectual Trojan horse' for this conversion process insofar as it promotes and legitimates a now mainstream conception of organization studies as an interdisciplinary social scientific field united around a common focus on generic 'institutional logics/strategic fields' and integrated through the search for general theories applicable at multiple levels of analysis and across a potentially infinite range of domains (Thorton, Ocasio and Lounsbury 2012; Fligstein and McAdam 2012). While originating as a counter-cultural movement to the then dominance of positivism and functionalism within organization studies (Powell and DiMaggio 1991), 'new institutional theory' has transmogrified into a new intellectual orthodoxy. At our attendance of the recent annual meetings of the Academy of Management (AoM) we experienced the dominant intellectual positioning of institutional theory and its followers as they came to 'corner the market' in the Organization, Management and Theory division of the former, while expanding their profile and impact within the European Group of Organization Studies (EGOS) annual colloquium

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For us, institutional theory is now **the** major 'intellectual carrier' of the ideological and institutional drive towards 'normal science' within organization studies because of what it has to offer, not just intellectually but also politically, to those in core disciplinary locations. Indeed, we see that it may bear all the intellectual and institutional hallmarks of a 'degenerative' rather than a 'progressive' research programme (Lakatos 1970) in that it is simply linguistically re-describing and conceptually re-interpreting whatever knowledge of 'organization and organizing' it has already generated, and not discovering, elucidating and explaining anything new, novel or unknown. Yet, the significant role of institutional theory in providing the intellectual carapace within which, *inter alia,* a form of socio-biological determinism that effectively removes – both ontologically and epistemologically – human agency from the purview of contemporary organization theorists should not be underestimated. For example, Powell's ambition to provide 'a general theory of organizational development that operates at multiple levels and has different rules,

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specification, and selection at those different levels' (Powell 2015:24) resonates in large measure with the generalizing, integrating and codifying thrust of contemporary institutional theory.

It will be argued here that this diagnosis, prognosis and treatment for contemporary organization theory's putative maladies are not only misplaced but also seem disingenuous to us. There is no disciplinary crisis. The hand-wringing tone and deeply pessimistic prognoses with which these institutional thought leaders proffer their 'state of the nation' examination of our field's continuing intellectual decline is ostensibly presented in a spirit of reconciliation and recovery. Yet we believe that their underlying mission is one which often accompanies perceived self-weakness; it is to impose order on chaos, systematization on diversity and universalism on pluralism. We see there is a threat of taking organization studies in a direction which denies our field engagement with the philosophy and history of science/social science, *pace* Davis (2015: 318). We also see that they are denying social science any role of significance in developing a more nuanced and sensitive understanding of what kind of knowledge is possible within our field and how that knowledge may relate to the choices humans, individually and collectively, make about the ways in which they wish, and are able, to live their lives. Such an approach would rob us of any meaningful engagement with the 'the politics of human agency' which Wolin (2004), for example, sees as being of fundamental importance for any understanding of the 'idea of organization' as a recurring intellectual motif in the history of social, and thereby, organization theory.

As Perrow (1986:13, emphasis added) recognized some time ago, the network-theory based approach to the study of organizations 'removes much of the power, conflict, disruption, and social class variables from the analysis of social processes. It neglects the fact that our world is made in large part by particular men and women with particular interests. *Instead, it searches for ecological laws that transcend the hubbub that sociology should attend to*'. In this paper, we argue for an organization theory which attends to the 'sociology of the hubbub' and rejects the search for ecological laws, nomothetic science, and disciplinary closure. The nature of social life is often close packed, multi-dimensional, vibrant, mysterious, inexplicable and apparently random, and this hubbub is forcibly ejected all too often from hegemonic thought. Not only this, but meta-theoretical controversy and debate is the vital prerequisite for an intellectually vibrant and innovative organization theory rather than an obstacle to, or at least a wasteful distraction from, the development of a 'normal science' through which disciplinary control can be realized.

As institutional theory appears, perhaps, to mimic various forms of socio-biological/ecological determinism in the quest for a 'unified theory of organization', it is incumbent on us to do that which John Van Maanan (2011: 232) says cannot be done: to do better than 'to do the best we can, to selectively pursue and cultivate an ever-diminishing proportion of the relevant work that comes our way and assume an attitude of benign neglect towards the rest'. Organizational Analysis must improve upon this low-set bar and meaningfully engage with that which we don't like and don't understand. Only in this way might we avoid the call to 'securitise' our research activity in the face of this identified crisis,

utilising strategic isolation and closure to yet again encourage the homogenizing of Organization Studies through scientization.

We begin with our critique of the prospectus that leading institutional theorists have offered us. This leads to a closer analysis of our protagonists' narrative by lightly drawing on Jonathan Swift's satire upon 'big enders and little enders' to illustrate the simultaneous banality and danger of the move towards 'organization science' which they promote. Then we focus on the metaphorical underpinnings of this narrative by drawing on the architectural metaphors of 'cathedral', 'mystery house', 'tower of babel' and 'ruination' to consider the imaginary edifices that contemporary organization theorists may draw upon, and ask what might be the consequences of valorising each of these. This takes us on to a more detailed consideration of institutional theory's status and role as the established intellectual orthodoxy within organization studies and how it is mutating in a number of ways into a form of sociobiological determinism. In the penultimate section of this paper we consider the need for contemporary organization theory to move away from its obsession with the 'organization of production and consumption' and refocus its attention on the 'organization of destruction'. We conclude that such a refocusing would preserve, protect and reinvigorate the philosophical and theoretical contestation so essential to the valorisation of an organization studies focussed on the hubbub of the organizational lives lived by ordinary women and men that remains at the core of quotidian social life.

Organization Theory in the hands of the Lilliputians

In order to understand the current state of Organization Theory, we are going to examine the language of some disciplinary protagonists in a little detail. We look to the words of leaders of the field, for this is all we have at present, and it would be foolish indeed to deny the institutional power vested upon these people by their placement at the summit of the disciplinary apparatus. Their speeches and pronouncements may not be the most riveting pieces of rhetoric you'll ever see but they are seemingly meant to persuade and cajole from a strong 'position of enunciation' (Foucault 1969) placed above our field of discourse. Our prime example is drawn from the *Journal of Management Studies* which contained, in 2015, a 'Point Counterpoint' debate between North Americans, encouraged and defended by the non-American Editors who introduced the 'debate' thus,

'In this Point-Counterpoint, three past chairpersons of the Organization and Management Theory (OMT) Division of the Academy of Management contribute to this debate. Their privileged vantage point gave them a unique insight into what is being studied and how by management scholars across the world' (The Editors, 'Celebrating Organization Theory', JMS, Point/Counterpoint, 52:2, March 2015:285).

What was identified as theoretically important in the JMS debate were on one hand 'contingency theory, transaction cost economics, agency theory, resource dependence, population ecology, and new institutional theory' (Davis 2010 and repeated in 2015), and on the other 'institutional logics, categorization, networks, behavioural theory and practice theories' (Lounsbury and Beckman 2015). The set-up of this debate is to suggest fundamental

differences exist in two distinctive positions. To the outsider there are a number of things to note. First of all, there is nothing offered by these authors on either side of the debate by way of integration of differing theoretical perspectives or even a suggestion of how these might be fitted together. These theoretical frameworks are pulled off the shelf and offered to the reader without any contextualization. But there are more items of concern than this. What we shall seek to do next is reflect upon these 'new developments' and try to place them into some sort of meta-theoretical context.

We begin this task by turning, not to natural science, but to the lives and times of the Lilliputians in '*Gulliver's Travels'* by Jonathan Swift. Our critique of the emerging orthodoxy within contemporary organisation theory draws upon Swift's metaphor of 'big enders' and 'little enders' in order to illustrate the banality and futility of a revivified conception of organisation studies as an intellectual practice that is driven by the methodological imperatives of nomothetic science. For, once this pathway is assumed and **enforced**, debates take on a banality and become mired in triviality.

The 'debate' between Davis on one hand and Lounsbury and Beckman on the other shows an agreement of a remarkable kind between them. What is important theory is agreed upon. Their focus of debate is not upon the development of theory and objectives for the discipline but upon method and whether the way forward is through induction or deduction. Their concentration upon this one issue allows all others to be largely overlooked. So, if we return to Lilliput we see a similar situation where its politics are described to Gulliver (1726:1995) thus,

'Which two mighty powers have, as I was going to tell you, been engaged in a most obstinate war for six-and-thirty moons past (…) the primitive way of breaking eggs, before we eat them, was upon the larger end; … the emperor his father published an edict, commanding all his subjects, upon great penalties, to break the smaller end of their eggs'.

It is easy to see why, in the face of controversy, these debaters should make an issue out of methods of analysis rather than meta-theoretical concerns relating to ontology and epistemology. That way, the leaders of our discipline can issue edicts to focus on normal disciplinary problems rather than pay attention to the hubbub within the field. Their choice between method and meta-theory has been made in favour of the former. The injunction is to engage only in methodical problem solving, with 'truth as its outcome', rather than a call to see where the significant, scary and mesmerizing issues are bubbling up. But there is more contained in the *JMS* debate than a trivial controversy between Big Enders and Little Enders over eggs, cooked by induction or deduction.

The Architecture of Organization Theory

The debate within 'Point-Counterpoint' is built upon by Davis who turns to the importance of architectural metaphor, which in itself is an interesting move for someone determined to embrace natural science as the way forward. He says, 'As ASQ approaches its 60th year, we

hope to reconsider who the core constituencies of organizational research are and how our field should be structured so that we are more like a cathedral and less like a mystery house' (Davis 2015:186). Earlier, there is an elaboration of this point when he claims 'we often reward novelty over truth. As a result, we may look more like a mystery house rather than a cathedral [ie. a sprawling structure, a costly ornamental building with no practical purpose rather than a cathedral which has a plan that may take decades to realize, with adjustments on the way, guided by a shared vision for what its realization will be]' (Davis 2015:179-80).

Here, then, there is the articulation of a preferred architecture of the cathedral (Figure 1) over that of the mystery house (Figure 2) and the former is the design that Organization Theory should aspire to. For us, however, the supposed superiority of the Cathedral as a basic design plan for the discipline to mimic is surely not without its own problems. For example, the term, *ex cathedra* means from 'the teacher's chair. The novelist William Golding wrote of building cathedrals in *'The Spire'* (1964) wherein he shows his readership that cathedrals (including Salisbury upon which the novel is loosely based) are always everywhere contested structures and do not reflect "a shared vision for what its realization will be". Nor are Cathedrals completed projects for all to admire and comprehend as fixed and finished. Famously, Gaudi's unfinished Cathedral in Barcelona is still many years off completion having begun construction in 1883 (Dempsey 2004:38). Typically, cathedrals are constantly restructured and reimagined. Finally, Davis appears to have in mind only one form of architectural design for a cathedral - the Gothic. This is a style befitting feudalism, hierarchy and a belief in religious symbolism through verticality (Hill 2007; Eco 1997:188-9). Once we consider the weaknesses in his portrayal of the cathedral as the monolithic edifice of choice, what might we make of his denigration of the 'mystery house'?

A Mystery House appears to be associated with Sarah Winchester's house in San Jose, California (Figure 2). Winchester's husband was the owner of the gun company and repeating rifle which bore his name and from which he made millions of dollars. It was 'renowned for its size, its architectural curiosities and its lack of any building plan'. It was the very opposite of something that is demonstrably well organised and well drilled. Interestingly, it is said to be haunted by all the victims of shootings by the Winchester carbine, who are regular perambulators of its meandering corridors. Mrs Winchester slept in a different bedroom every night in an effort to escape the carbine's victims, with many of its 160 rooms being decoys to lure ghosts elsewhere (Ignoffo 2010). Thus, using the metaphor of a mystery house, Organization Theory is problematized as an edifice that is large but of questionable functionality, full of curious features, built to no overarching plan and inhabited by the ghosts of the past.

From our point of view, however, these are key features of the structures we inhabit which precisely **do** make them interesting. We agree with Van Maanan (2011:232) when he argues the 'scholarly world' should take note of writing that is "a bit of a mess and a mystery, but mesmerizing". The functionality of our home discipline is only questionable if one believes that pragmatism and utility, seen through a managerial lens, are the measure of all things. Curious features within the hubbub are precisely that – objects of curiosity amongst the familiar which require investigation and tenacious uncovering. The absence of an overarching

plan creates polyarchy and a plurality of perspectives and ways of understanding a world which is clearly not monolithic and authoritarian. And the ghosts of the past, especially in our area, are surely to be studied and celebrated for their contribution. For us, our history is about providing the modern scholar with welcome resources, not producing inconvenient wraiths of which to be scared (Godfrey et al 2016).

Put simply, we believe that the offer of two architectural models such as these demonstrates that the putative crisis in organization studies is **an entirely manufactured and spurious 'crisis'**, serving to legitimate the status of institutional theory as a unitary paradigm through which normal science can proceed hierarchically upwards, unencumbered by philosophical doubt or theoretical controversy. It puts institutional theorists in a prime position to impose upon the field 'epistemic rent seeking' (Fuller 2016) by extending, across both time and space, their intellectual and institutional control over collegial research agenda. The creation of this crisis can also succeed in crowding out alternative approaches and the distinctive sort of questions that others address and the manner in which opponents strive to answer them. By normalizing the epistemic status of institutional theory as a unitary paradigm facilitating normal science, Gothic and imperialistic ambitions are revealed, while coating them with a veneer of liberal accommodation and permissive tolerance.

The exchange in the *Journal of Management Studies* resembles for us a profound narrowness, wilful ignorance of both the 'other' areas of intellectual endeavour and of theorising which originates in Europe, the shutting down of debate even where it is on woefully unequal terms, the neglect of history, and the notion of a myopic practicality where pragmatic reason governs almost all. The view is one that firmly agrees on what is important, namely that the balance between 'theory' and 'empirics' is somewhat contestable. Does induction offer more than deduction or vice versa? Does one start at the big end or the little end of one's egg? But if this response to a manufactured 'crisis' is it, we are against the current state of Organization Theory across much of the northern hemisphere. And so we turn to contemporary threads in Institutional Theory.

Institutional Theory as Normal Science

Kuhn famously tells us that normal science is 'just working away at a few puzzles that are left open in a current field of knowledge….Research problems do not aim to produce real novelty' (Hacking 2012:xv-xvi). It is about puzzle-solving within a paradigmatic framework of philosophical and theoretical principles driven by the desire of the 'normal scientists' working within the latter to confirm 'that which is already known'. As Hacking (2012: xxvi) reminds us "normal science does not aim at novelty but at clearing up the status quo. It tends to discover what it expects to discover". Institutional theory now presents itself as the normal science of organization studies. In 2012, three books were published by prominent academic figures that had played leadership roles in advancing the cause of institutional theory as the 'new normal science' in organization studies from the early 1980s onwards. First, Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury's *'The Institutional Logics Perspective: A New Approach to Culture, Structure and Process'*, second Fligstein and McAdam's '*A Theory of Fields'*, and thirdly, Padgett and Powell's 'The *Emergence of Organizations and Markets'*. Although each of

these books promotes a rather different 'theoretical take' – respectively, 'logics theory', 'field theory' and 'complexity theory' – on how organization theory is to be most appropriately developed in the future, all three books have their intellectual roots in the 'new institutionalism' which emerged in the early 1980s as a direct challenge to the intellectual dominance of positivism and functionalism. Together, they are representative of a particular politico-theoretical move.

For each of these books sets out a very clear intellectual prospectus and research agenda for the field in terms that legitimate their status as 'treatise' – that is, they formally and systematically lay down the philosophical, theoretical and methodological terms on which organization theory is to be developed as a unified, general science grounded in a universal social ontology and a rejection of the ideological biases which have bedevilled the field from its beginnings in the nineteenth/early twentieth century socio-political theory of Comte, Saint-Simon, Durkheim and Weber. Thus, Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury (2012: 11) justify their case for 'logics theory' in terms of a search for 'causal ordering and operative mechanisms ….for a theory of how culture shapes action'. They advocate analytically separating out an 'institutional logic' from an 'ideology' and developing a philosophical approach to studying the former which 'emphasizes the interpenetration of the symbolic and material aspects of institutions' (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury 2012:5).

In a similar vein, Fligstein and McAdam (2012: 23) advance their field theory as 'a general theory of social order' which builds on institutional theory while correcting the theoretical imbalances inherent in the latter – that is, its unremitting focus on conformity and its neglect of agency, power and conflict – by providing 'a deeper structural account of the kinds of ruptures that typically catalyse entrepreneurial action' (2012:28). These 'deeper structural accounts' focus on 'episodes of contention' between collective social actors over the rules and power relations governing strategic fields in which state actors play a central role but not the dominant role assigned to them by Weber. It is in terms of 'advancing a general theory of social order' that Fligstein and McAdam reconstruct and redevelop institutional theory as a 'theory of strategic fields' that can counteract the philosophical divisions and theoretical fragmentation besetting organization theory today.

Padgett and Powell's (2012) book is the most significant of the three 'treatises on institutional theory' because it legitimates a conception of organization theory as a post-positivistic biosocial science driven by the intellectual imperative of developing and validating a general theory of sociobiological order that will irrevocably establish the status of organization theory as nomothetic science. While building on some of the key theoretical contributors to the development of institutional theory, Padgett and Powell offer a generic theory of 'organizational and market emergence' that is primarily driven by a conceptual synthesis of biochemistry, systems biology and historical topology. At the core of this conceptual synthesis lies the notion of 'the dynamic motor of autocatalysis' and the key role which it plays in generating, reproducing and transposing the emergence of novelty, innovation, transformation and change within and between self-organizing sociobiological systems. Thus, 'living network systems are never designs: they are organic transformations, often turbulent

and unintended, of older network systems that have tipped into the new' (Padgett and Powell 2012: 272). Autocatalysis, a core concept imported from biochemistry, is defined as 'a set of nodes and transformations in which all nodes are reconstructed through transformations among nodes in the set'. It is based on the ontological presupposition that 'we [human beings] are not the coherently bounded objects we think we are but a chemical process that renews itself for a while. From the chemical perspective, life itself can be defined as an interacting ensemble of chemicals that reproduces itself, in the face of turnover of its parts. Organizational actors are no different' (Padgett and Powell 2012:7-8).

Politics – that is, the struggle for power and control – is 'everywhere' and 'nowhere' in Padgett and Powell's treatise; 'everywhere' in the sense that it's treated as a ubiquitous feature of all socio-biological life but 'nowhere' in that it's ontologically and epistemologically subsumed within a universal evolutionary process in which it becomes *sui generis* – that is, transformed into an generic adaptive mechanism through which emergence and development are generated and directed. However, this 'depoliticized conception of politics' sometimes slips the grasp of its parent theory as in the analysis of 'the politics of communist reform' (presented in chapter 9). Here again, 'the politics of human agency' proves to be of pivotal explanatory concern to our understanding of organizational change and cannot simply be subsumed within those biochemical and biosocial theories of natural evolution which putatively legitimate a 'metaphysics of teleological development' denuded of any reference to the 'hubbub of socio-organizational living and life'.

Thus, Padgett and Powell strive to construct and legitimate a post-positivistic socio-biology of organizational emergence and evolution that provides the explanatory key to unlocking the laws of organizational life. Yet, their theory cannot expunge the hubbub of organizational life in all its variety, complexity and contingency – the latter simply infuses itself in every nook and cranny of our organizational existence and refuses to be swept away in a conceptual tsunami of biochemical reductionism and sociobiological determinism which has little or no time for the vagaries of individual or collective choice and the specificities of socio-historical context. We see that the 'hubbub' which lies at the core of our organizational existence is filtered out by subsuming it within a set of evolutionary forces and processes over which human agents have no influence, much less control.

Whilst this may be by no means the only front upon which institutional theory is advancing, it is important to grasp that the contemporary bio-chemical metaphors through which some institutionalists promote their normal science version of organization studies have become ideologically powerful and discursively evocative. This is because they legitimate the scientization of organization theory as a discipline dedicated to the codification and formalization of its knowledge base via treatises. By refracting their reconstruction of organization theory through these metaphorical lenses, such an argument constructs an 'ontology of organization' which defines the latter as a naturally self-reproducing and self-renewing entity conforming to pre-ordained developmental logics.

Institutional theorists may be posited then as the true 'cathedral builders' of contemporary organization theory. Like every treatise that purports to provide a definitive view of how

organization theory in the face of crisis needs to save itself from itself by (re)discovering itself in new sources of intellectual convergence, integration and systematization, these three books appropriate a particular conception of what 'science' is, how it should be done and why it will help organization theorists to save ourselves from ourselves. In Padgett and Powell's hands, the road from perdition to salvation can only be travelled by those who have truly 'seen the light' within the model 'we', as post-positivist organizational scientists, should follow (see Table 1 below). Only through the construction and promulgation of a shared vision of organization theory as a place of order, as a cathedral of scientific endeavour dedicated to accumulating and disseminating scientific knowledge relevant to the generation and validation of evidence-based policy and practice, can organization theory reclaim its identity and mission as a unified science of organization (Davis 2015).

However, as we know only too well from even the most cursory understanding of our field's history, this shared vision of organization theory as a unified, general science is highly controversial, hotly contested, and prone to ignore the socio-political realities which shape the practice of scientific research and the use made of the knowledge that it generates. We suggest that institutional theory increasingly looks more like a 'degenerative' research programme – protecting its 'hard core' of theoretical precepts rather than driven by the need to discover new phenomena and the challenging theoretical innovations which they will inevitably require (Lakatos 1970:132-196). Thus, the intellectual price to be paid for our salvation from 'crisis' will be prohibitive, to say the least, if we see the problem to be philosophical controversy, theoretical debate and analytical contestation acting as manacles and shackles preventing us from realizing our true vocation as aspiring organizational scientists.

The community may have reached a time in organization theory's history when the role of foundation makers, order builders and integration facilitators may need to be questioned as never before. The search for unification and order has been the dominant motif in organization theory's history since its intellectual beginnings in mid/late nineteenth socio-political theory (Wolin 1960, 2004). But this focus on order, and its corresponding fascination with the 'organization of production/consumption', has been paralleled by a subordinate, but nonetheless intellectually powerful and appealing, theme of control and the sustained interest that it generates in the 'organization of destruction' (Dawe 1974). We wish to suggest that there is a pressing need to revisit and revitalize interest in the 'organization of destruction' at a time when the socio-historical context in which organizational studies is practiced and promulgated is more threatening and uncertain than at any time since the emergence of the social democratic settlement and welfare state in the post-Second World War period of the late 1940s/early 1950s.

Organization Studies blossomed within a Post-War environment. Our view is that the discipline now requires a Pre-War orientation, *with attention being paid to the coming conflagration*. What we mean by the 'organization of destruction' (Bloomfield et al 2017) then, is a more direct engagement of our discipline with *contemporary* forms of organized destruction such as 'war', 'terror' or 'insurgency' and with the apparatuses through which

they are enacted. The links between organization and destruction employed by agencies of organized destruction whether these are military, terrorist, political or other, and the role these agencies play within contemporary democracies would be a key focus. The organization of destruction involves new technologies so the part played by particular state and corporate actors in facilitating or impeding such technological developments would also be a concern, as would be the ethics of organized destruction. This area (or perhaps arena) of deliberate ruination of existing structures, both social and architectural, has been much ignored by Organization Studies. So, today, crises of escalating ecological, political, economic and military tension within the globe seem to lie largely outside our field of interest. How then do we develop an organizational sociology of the hubbub and the strategic role that it plays in generating, diffusing, curtailing and exacerbating crises? Instead of looking at construction and forms of building within both organization theory and the organized society it is supposed, in some quarters, to reflect, perhaps we need to consider the destruction and ruination of contemporary belief systems, social structures and processes? Perhaps now is the time to analyse the architecture of crisis and the anatomy of collapse in our contemporary organizational forms and practices?

The Architecture of Crisis and the Anatomy of Collapse

Within Organization Theory, there has been some very limited use of the notion of the Tower of Babel (Green and Ruhleder 1995) to describe our discipline, wherein the fear and potency of a confusion of all the tongues is represented (Demers 2015). For our purposes, Gustav Dore's picture of the confusion of tongues produced in 1865 (Figure 3) is what we take from the Biblical narrative of crisis. In Genesis 11: 1-9 we are told that "Now the entire earth was of one language and uniform words" (Genesis 11:1) but that in seeking to rival God, conflict between the designers and the workers develops and they begin to speak many languages of mutual non-understanding. Its cessation as a project will result in the production of many languages by which we babble to each other. In other words [sic], the metaphor of the Tower of Babel is essentially **a story of ruination and collapse** rather than construction. This is what lies hidden in the towering ambition of those system builders who seek to construct (male) monuments to the monolithic (Martin 2000). Thus, the coming crisis will be of their creation. Cathedrals rob the stone from all around, weakening communal structures in the pursuit of verticality. Cathedrals bring local ruination, and sacrificial death to their builders (Golding 1964).

What we are dealing with here is the erasure of social and political architecture, its ruination, the destruction of structure. As organisation theorists, we have a relationship with structure that is ambiguous. Yes, the human habitat is 'structured' and ordered as we might wish: it is "an island of regularity in a sea of randomness" (Bauman 1989:213). Moreover, capitalism does not only break down unwanted facilities and buildings deliberately, but happily recycles them for further profit. As Henry Ford (1931:29) put it 'We frequently scrap whole divisions of our business… and as a routine affair'. But, on the other hand, sometimes the de-totalisation of structures is desired in the form of the complete ruination of political monuments and architectural edifices expressing existing power relations. 'Ruination' is such a powerful concept because it suggests de-structuration, the end of structure, even escape.

Therefore, ruins may be the death of any social architecture in the sense of being the antithesis of the impulse to create and build. They are the discomforting reminder that all organisation is futile, that a law of thermodynamics states that all moves inexorably towards entropy. Thus, the fascination with ruins lies in their liminal status between organisation and disorganisation, between architecture and dust, between human and nature. They materialise tensions in temporality and spatiality, survival and decay. This theme is a sentiment found in Shelley's poem of 1818, 'Ozymandias', and in Anselm Kiefer's work discussed in 'Over your Cities Grass will Grow' (Fiennes 2010) whence the line 'everything will be destroyed and grass will grow over your cities' is derived. Every construction is a ruin in waiting and perhaps every ruin is a construction in waiting (Dale and Burrell 2011). For the leadership of Organization Studies, it is by us listening to their instruction that disciplinary ruination will be avoided and the projected cathedral built. For the congregation, then, ruination may await us if we do **not** follow their ex-cathedra Papal Bulls. But the story of the Tower of Babel suggests ruination awaits us if we **do** continue the current course.

Real crises and the presentness of disaster

If we fail to consider the simple point that the intellectual diversity and fragmentation defining the state of organization studies today may be a reflection of our contemporary organizational and societal condition. By rushing to impose order on chaos, control on controversy and teleology on contingency, we ignore the reality of escalating ecological, military, political, economic and cultural crises that confront us and which threaten to overwhelm our, individual and collective, capacity for constructing a sustainable organizational architecture. The pervasiveness of disjunctive change (Unger 1975, 1987) and the transformations that it's generating in the established social structures upon which we normally depend, threaten to overwhelm contemporary understandings. But it is all too easy to slip into regular usage of the term 'crisis' without understanding its ancient medical origins in identifying that specific human moment in the progress of a disease where life and death are equally possible. Thus, change is not crisis and nor is particular change as new as is sometimes proffered. For example, Davis (2015: 315-8) suggests that jobs, supply chains and new technologies are **the** major issues of the day but whilst these are important, their centrality has been recognised for at least 200 years (Jones and Zeitlin 2009). Yet, there are crises today where life and death issues **are** at stake.

Guillen (2015:1) has recently voiced his concern that 'we may be going through a period of systemic vulnerability and danger that is unprecedented in recent history', as well as being intellectually dependent on established modes of theorising – world systems theory, neo-institutionalism and business systems theory – ill-equipped to comprehend, much less explain, the magnitude and severity of the cumulative crises which the global institutional architecture, constructed since 1945, is now facing. But he provides a somewhat shallow analysis of the underlying power relations and dynamics that are indelibly shaping the 'architecture of chaos' emerging from the deep-seated structural and cultural crises now afflicting the global system and the organizational architecture upon which we have relied to maintain some sort of order and stability for more than seven decades. Developing an

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analytical focus upon the 'organization of destruction' will call for a plurality of intellectual traditions, theoretical frameworks and methodological strategies that share a common concern with understanding and explaining 'the revolution that is continuously transforming the conditions, forms, and prospects for human life [which] is, overwhelmingly, a revolution from above. The permanent revolution instigated and perpetuated by elites is represented in……the hybrid of the corporate state. Its crucial element is the steady drive towards totality, a drive that is never fully consummated because it is periodically interrupted by the dislocations that accompany it' (Wolin 2004: 605).

In the penultimate section of this paper, we offer a small number of illustrative examples of the kind of work on the different forms of crises and dislocations – ecological, political, military, economic and cultural – which draw on a range of theoretical traditions and perspectives (neo-functionalist, neo-Weberian and post-structuralist, amongst others). This is intended to illustrate the intellectual diversity, richness and potential of a revitalized organization studies. We begin with a brief discussion of societal/organizational collapse, societal/organizational stasis and societal/organizational ruination as represented in the works of, respectively, Tainter (2015), Streeck (2016) and De Cock and O'Doherty (2017). Each of these draw on very different intellectual traditions – historical archaeology, political economy, and organizational history – *and* theoretical inspirations – but they share a common analytical focus on the conditions, mechanisms and processes under and through which 'the organization of destruction' is played out within and across a wide range of temporal and spatial domains. There is an 'edginess' about these analyses, for these authors tend to see humanity as dangerously poised on the precipice of some abyssal cliff.

Tainter (2015) provides a relatively conventional, neo-functionalist analysis of why and how complex societies, and the organizational structures and systems on which they depend, collapse. He emphasizes the critical importance of developments such as the breakdown of central authority and control, legal protection and stability, extensive infrastructure re-use, abandonment of central storage/distribution centres and extended market exchange, and rapid reductions in population size and identity. This process of decline, he argues, is generated by a complex interaction between underlying dislocations in material conditions and normative orders that cannot be contained by the various stabilizing mechanisms on which complex societies depend to sustain themselves through disjunctive change. However, he also makes the very important point that societal/organizational collapse is recurrent throughout human history and should not be regarded as infrequent, abnormal or pathological. Collapse, he maintains, occurs regularly when social units become 'smaller, simpler, less stratified, and less socially differentiated' (Tainter 2015:193).

Rather than offering an analysis of collapse, Streeck (2016) present us with a neo-Weberian analysis of societal/organizational stasis in the form of the 'long neoliberal interregnum' that has characterized western corporate capitalism for more than four decades and seems likely to persist for some time to come. He argues that western capitalism is facing a lengthy period of 'system disintegration' in which social structures become unstable and unreliable, and therefor uninstructive for those living in them (a classic case of the Gramscian

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adage of 'the old is dying but the new cannot yet be borne'). Organizational life under these conditions demands constant improvisation, forcing people to substitute strategy for structure, as well as offering rich opportunities to elites to impose insecurity and uncertainty on others. In this sense, the 'long neoliberal interregnum' consists of a prolonged and indecisive transition, an era of cumulating crises as 'the new normal' in which 'crisis is neither transformative or adaptive….deep changes will occur, rapidly and continuously, but they will be unpredictable and in any case ungovernable…..capitalism can neither be reborn or replaced' (Streeck 2016:37). This leads to a refocusing our intellectual attention on 'resilience' *as the master concept that is currently being imported into social science and policy from bacteriology and other life sciences*. This is particularly the case in contemporary organization studies and general management discourse where a new consensus is crystallizing around 'organizational resilience' as an intellectual and practical response to the decreasing lifespan of organizations as they collapse increasingly rapidly and in increasing numbers under the combined pressure of recurring and unresolvable system disintegration. Hence, Streeck argues, the centre of intellectual attention in these fields moves away from 'conflict' and 'resistance' and 'power' to 'adaptive adjustment' and 'transformative leadership' under conditions of hyper-competition and hyper-individualism characteristic of Durkheim's analysis of social disintegration and anomie. Consequently, 'the de-socialized capitalism of the [neoliberal] interregnum hinges on the improvised performances of structurally self-centred, socially disorganized and politically disempowered individuals' (Streeck 2016:41) who are cut adrift from the institutional structures and organizational regimes that once provided them with material support and cultural identity.

De Cock and O'Doherty's (2017) analysis of societal/organizational ruination suggests this is something that is consistently overlooked in organizational studies where processes of production and consumption are valorised at the expense of 'processes of destruction [that] are all around us and are intensifying' (De Cock and O'Doherty 2017: 135). In stark contrast to mainstream analyses focussed on the organization of production and consumption, they highlight the vital importance of refocusing analytical attention on 'ruin and ruination' as a way of breaking through our contemporary intellectual paralysis and making 'present, past and future once again open up in the full transparency of their distances' (De Cock and O'Doherty 2017:140). By emphasizing the relational qualities of organizational ruin and ruination, they force us to reconsider the wider set of social relations within which 'organization' has to be understood as socio-historically contingent and always 'riven by lines of tension and trigger-points that remain volatile and largely unpredictable' (De Cock and O'Doherty 2017: 142). Thus, their 'ruin optic' retains philosophical and theoretical plurality by making us more aware 'of the disjointed and neglected materialities and narratives buried beneath the surface of organization-studies-as-usual, while all the while pointing to the excessive presentness of disaster' (De Cock and O'Doherty 2017: 146).

Conclusions

We have sought to reveal the outline of what constitutes Organization Theory as we see it is presently conducted, and of what it might look like in the future. It is not in crisis but it is

poor at understanding crises. Our assumptions are based upon the fact that humans across the globe have theorized how, in myriad ways, they might organize themselves over a period of at least 10,000 years (Mills and Mills 2013). We believe this view of the way forward is narrow, myopic, imperialistic and profoundly lacking in any awareness of, or sensitivity to, the hubbub – as understood in two ways. First, is the hubbub of the **innate intellectual conflict and contestation that has defined the development of the field and the practice over more than two millennia.** And, second, is the hubbub reflected in the activities of everyday human beings seeking to eke out existences across the planet. With regard to the first, our argument is not simply one of pleading for the preservation of intellectual diversity within the field of organization studies. It goes beyond this to agitate for a renewal of the field around the leitmotifs that have defined it and given it its enduring intellectual identity as a vital partner in a wider social and political theory which speaks to the challenges of our times and times past. Instead of succumbing to voices calling for intellectual closure and control around a new orthodoxy, we contend that studies of organization and organizing should be able to draw on as wide a range of analytical, theoretical and methodological resources as possible in order to comprehend the defence and destruction of inherently complex phenomena across multiple sites of investigation.

As for the second understanding of the 'hubbub', our version of Organization Studies abjures a pre-allocated role as a handmaiden of the corporate elite, dispensing knowledge which is generated predominantly in one part of the planet for use by those charged with running 'our corporate state'. Nor is our role to further growth in some metric, often chosen by outside agencies, nor is it to revel in widespread ignorance of, and even contempt for, those who think differently. Instead of providing the policy strategies and programme recipes through which the interests of the corporate state elite can be satiated and advanced, we offer a conception of organization studies as making a significant contribution to nurturing a 'discordant democracy' (Wolin 2004:606) grounded in the organizational realities (absurdities?) faced by those who both administer and are administered by the corporate state. It is an organization studies **of** the quotidian. It is an organization studies **for** understanding a process of ruinous decline.

Of course, what we argue for will be seen by many as a hindrance to the progressive scientization of the field and its practice. Any ghosts of the past that prevent the standardization, replication and codification of knowledge that are the *sine qua non* of 'proper sciences' must be exorcised through bell, book and candle We believe that instead of looking at and for linguistic homogeneity, completing overarching constructions and securing forms of building within both Organization Theory, and Organized Society, perhaps we need to consider the destruction and ruination of contemporary social structures and processes (Bauman, 1989; Butler, 2010; Kiefer 2010: Dillon and Reid, 2009; Bloomfield et al 2017).

In this vein, our piece of provocation has sought to invoke crisis-free ruination as salvation for the historic project of Organization Studies. Rather than accept the need for a vaulted cathedral in which we all pray to the same deity in the same way and at the same time, seeing up-to-date natural science as offering a monotheistic solution to our problems, we suggest

that members of the discipline should be iconoclastic - especially of the *cathedra* itself. Rather than accept that a haunted mystery house is problematic and far too twisted for good order and quality control, we see the emphasis on history as crucial to our endeavours, more now than ever. Instead of looking to 'good order' in both our *explanandum* and *explanans*, we advocate the study of ruination as that which we need to understand, and the ruination of 'organization-studies-as-usual' as a route to our *explanans*. Ruination does not mean an absence of order. It is not predicated upon any internal crisis. The organization of the destruction of Organization Theory can be carried out in ways which are non-terrifying, rational and planned as well as indiscriminate, ferocious and spontaneous. But the state of Organization Theory in 2017 suggests that it is through the destruction of Organization Studies that Organization Studies will be saved.

FIGURES (3)

Images of Cathedral, Mystery House and Tower of Babel Ruination

Figure 1:   The Cathedral Imaginary

Figure 2: The Winchester Mystery House

Figure 3: Gustav Dure's depiction of the ruination of the Tower of Babel

Table (1)

Table 1: Positivism and Post-Positivism compared

POSITIVISM	POST-POSTIVISM
Physics	Life Sciences
Cause and Effect	Autocatalysis
Deterministic	Evolutionary
Functional Theory	Complexity Theory
Contingency	Teleology

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