

Sociology of Organizations in the Twenty First Century

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Abstract

This review article analyses six texts within the sociology of organizations published in the early decades of the twenty first century with a view to exploring what they tell us about the key issues and developmental trajectories the former will follow as this century unfolds. It suggests that the sociology of organizations is in good intellectual shape and continues to speak to issues which are central to our lives today and tomorrow. However, it also indicates that intellectual rejuvenation through contestation must be sustained within the field – particularly in the face of pressures towards intellectual closure and conformity – if it is to retain its relevance at a time when instability and uncertainty seem to be pervasive.

Keywords

Sociology of organizations; management theory

Chris Grey, *Studying Organizations*, Fourth Edition, London, Sage, 2017; 168 includes index: ISBN 9 781473 953468

Gerard Hanlon, *The Dark Side of Management: A Secret History of Management Theory*, London, Routledge, 2016; 228 includes index: ISBN 978-1-138-80190-5

Gibson Burrell, *Styles of Organizing: The Will to Form*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, 281 includes index: ISBN 978-0-19-967162-5

John Padgett and Walter Powell, *The Emergence of Organizations and Markets*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2012; 583 includes index; ISBN 978-0-691-14887-8

Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam, *A Theory of Fields*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012; 238 includes index: ISBN 978-0-19-024145-2

Paul du Gay and Signe Vikkelso, *For Formal Organization: The Past in the Present and Future of Organization Theory*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017; 211 includes index: ISBN 978-0-19-870512-3

Introduction

This review article identifies and evaluates the major debates which have shaped the development of the sociology of organizations during the opening decades of the twenty first century. It does this by focusing on six texts which, in very different but interconnected ways, highlight both the substantive themes that have defined the research agenda in this sub-field of sociology and the theoretical frameworks through which they have been articulated and pursued. In many respects, sociological interest in and analysis of complex organizations has waned somewhat – as a distinctive sub-field of the discipline with a unique intellectual identity and mission – over the socio-historical period covered in this review article. Nonetheless, social scientific analysis of complex organizations, in all their manifold forms and diverse practices, is stronger than ever and continues to inform, both directly and indirectly, wider social, political and cultural debates about the core institutional mechanisms and processes shaping our world in the early decades of the twentieth century and beyond.

All six texts which have been selected to frame this review article have been published since the turn of the century, but they are aimed at very different audiences with very different intellectual and pedagogical objectives in view. Grey (2017) and Hanlon (2016) are aimed at a student market and attempt to inculcate a much more socio-politically nuanced and historically aware understanding of the field's internal intellectual dynamics and their external contextualization on the part of their target audience. Burrell (2013) is much more of an intellectual stock taking exercise but with a polemical cutting edge insofar as it identifies a 'will to form' and the 'stabilizing practices' through which it is to be realized as the leitmotif of organization theory's historical development as refracted through distinctive 'styles of organizing' ranging from elementary geometry to the Ford Motor company to Mexican Zapatistas. This is not a book for the novice, but it strives to expand our awareness of and receptiveness to different styles of organizing ranging promiscuously across time, space, place and values in search of underlying patterns and forms.

Fligstein and McAdam (2012), Padgett and Powell (2012) and du Gay and Vikkelso (2017) constitute a second sub-set of the key texts reviewed and assessed in this article. They are books with programmatic intent in that they prescribe a clear 'direction of travel' which twenty first century sociology of organizations ought to be following and the most reliable

means of intellectual transport for undertaking the journey. Each of them can be seen as a response to the increasing influence, not to say dominance, of neo-institutionalism in the sociology of organizations (DiMaggio and Powell 1991) as it transformed itself from an insurgent opposition to the, then, dominant positivist/functionalist paradigm (Donaldson 1985, 1996) into the new orthodoxy as the early decades of the twenty first century unfolded (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury 2012).

However, just as neo-institutionalization burnished its credentials to constitute the 'new orthodoxy' in the field, so its underlying weaknesses and limitations become more evident in relation to critiques alleging functionalist neo-evolutionism, cultural determinism and political conservatism. Increasingly, as Fligstein and McAdam suggest (2012: 28-9), it became clearer that 'institutional theory lacks a theory of agency, power and conflict'. This leads it to underestimate the role of power in the structuring of fields and to lack a theory of emergence or transformation focusing on the underlying tensions and ruptures in established institutional forms and the dynamic movements which they set in motion.

In turn, this ontological predilection and epistemological bias towards 'order' seems to make institutional theory an ideal 'intellectual carrier' for neoliberalism. Some analysts of neoliberalism have argued that it is premised on radical 'constructivist' ontological precepts in which social reality is seen as being infinitely malleable and open to fundamental transformation via 'opportunity generating crises' (Mirowski 2013). However, others have detected a much more deterministic set of philosophical predilections contained in an evolutionary drive towards order through underlying equilibrating mechanisms guaranteeing long-term survival (Burrell 2013). This is true to the extent that neo-institutionalism seems 'to define a range of legitimate policy techniques, mechanisms and instruments, thereby delimiting the very targets and goals of policy itself' (Hay 2001:197). Thus, the transition to a new, dominant policy paradigm - as entailed in the theory and practice of neoliberalism - is facilitated and legitimated by institutional theory as it restricts what is feasible to an underlying evolutionary logic narrowly delimiting the parameters within which policy change must be contained. This fealty to neo-evolutionary determinism 'naturalizes' or depoliticizes the shift to market deregulation, state decentralization and public service outsourcing as inevitable, non-negotiable consequences of an institutional logic in which political agents play no part because they are powerless to resist the determining impact of the structural and cultural forces over which they have little or no influence, much less control. They, literally,

have no agency – either individually or collectively - in the face of overwhelming evolutionary forces that drive towards predetermined policy solutions reproducing the institutional status quo, in however a modified form, so that ‘everything will be better[and] the rest will be as it was before’ (Lampedusa 2007: 25).

We will consider this transition in institutional theory from ‘insurgency’ to ‘orthodoxy’ and its implications for the sociology of organizations in the next section of this review article. This will lead us on to a discussion of how iconoclasts such as Burrell (2013), Hanlon (2016) and Grey (2017) curate emerging challenges to this new orthodoxy and to the opening-up of possible ‘alternative histories and trajectories’ that reject institutionalist closure and its innate conservatism. In the final section of the article, we will contrast du Gay and Vikkelso’s (2017) plea for a return to the certainties and verities of formalistic organizational theory and analysis with more recent calls for a sociology of organizations that directly engages with the wider ideological and political contestations in which the latter is unavoidably enmeshed (Reed and Burrell 2019; Burrell 2022) and their role in nurturing a ‘public sociology and organization theory’ (Clawson et al., 2007; Spicer 2014).

From Insurgency to Orthodoxy

Five years before the turn of the century, Scott (1995: 151) insisted that the revival of institutional theory across the social sciences in general and sociology held out the promise of moving away from the ‘overly parochial and pedestrian’ quality of much of the research and analysis conducted by their practitioners. Most of the latter ‘played it safe’ by studying ‘systems close to us in time and space’ through the application of mainstream theoretical frameworks and research methodologies anchored in functionalism and positivism. Neo-institutionalism, however, possessed the analytical capacity and methodological tools required to range far and wide historically, comparatively and politically in the search for verifiable propositions about diverse and complex organizational phenomena located at multiple levels of analysis across unfamiliar and exotic institutional landscapes. By rejecting the binary philosophical oppositions forced upon us by accepting either social realism or social constructionism (Scott 1995: 137) and disrupting the innate conservatism of established positivist/functionalist organization theory, new institutional theory offered

organizational analysts the opportunity to engage with an ambitious intellectual movement and project moving way beyond the confines of the status quo.

A mere decade and half or so later, Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury (2012) judged that Scott's promise had been redeemed; new institutional theory and research had succeeded in generating and institutionalizing an analytical framework constructed around the core concept of 'institutional logics' which integrated the material, symbolic and political aspects of institutional life at multiple levels of analysis across a wide range of institutional fields in diverse socio-historical contexts. By integrating a sustained research focus on the structural mechanisms which shape human agency and the organizational practices through which the latter could reshape the institutional contexts within which it was exercised, institutional theory had reached a level of intellectual maturity and disciplinary acceptance where its legitimacy as the new orthodoxy was assured.

However, some were much less sure about institutional theory having delivered on Scott's promise and thereby securing the level of institutionalized legitimacy and primacy within social science and sociology assumed by Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury. Even if this were the case, they were also beginning to question the intellectual price which institutional theory had paid as it putatively transitioned from a position of 'insurgency' to 'establishment' within the field in just over a decade. As we have already seen, Fligstein and McAdam (2012), although closely associated with the rise of new institutional theory to prominence, if not dominance, consistently alert us to inherent weaknesses within the latter and their serious doubts as to whether they can be repaired while remaining faithful to its core philosophical tenets and analytical predilections. If, new institutional theory is incapable of providing a viable theory of 'power, agency and conflict', then how can it possibly equip students of organization to describe, much less understand and explain, key features of organizational life in the twenty first century such as increased socio-economic inequality, political fragmentation and polarization, and the unchecked rise of interorganizational networks of corporate power fully exploiting the surveillance and control potentialities of new information and communication technologies (Zuboff 2019)?

Their answer to this question seems to be, 'it can't', and in their book they proffer a realist conceptualization and analysis of 'strategic action fields' geared to discovering 'deep structures that help explain disparate phenomena. Our main assertion is that there does exist a *deeper structure to social, economic and political life* such that collective strategic action has

similar roots and dynamics across otherwise different arenas in which those actions take place' (Fligstein and McAdam 2012: 193 emphases added). However, they explicitly reject a positivistic or rationalistic reading of the explanatory implications of this realist position in terms of universalistic forces or principles which are assumed to determine strategic actions and outcomes irrespective of socio-historical contexts and the challenges which they present to collective actors struggling to come to terms with their specificities and peculiarities. Instead, they become advocates for a twenty first century sociology of organizations which is theoretically and methodologically equipped to search for deeper concepts that can help us 'to incorporate both the general structure of a situation and its unique cultural/historical context into one's analysis (Fligstein and McAdam 2012: 193).

Padgett and Powell (2012), the latter one of the central figures in the rise of neo-institutionalism, also have substantial misgivings about the capacity of the latter to deliver a 'theory of organizations' equipped to understand and explain the emergence, reproduction and transformation of organizational forms in this century. Yet, they proceed from this position of critique in a very different direction to the realist sociology of strategic action fields advocated by Fligstein and McAdam (2012) in their promotion of 'a complexity theory-based conceptualization of 'emergence'' entailing a merger of social network analysis with autocatalysis models from biochemistry' (Padgett and Powell 2012:3). In this way, they become advocates for a complete conceptual overhaul and total theoretical re-engineering of the sociology of organizations to bring it as close as possible to the life sciences, such as systems biology and biochemistry, in which self-organizing and self-reproducing organizational forms are the central focus for analysis. Within the latter, it is the 'autocatalytic mechanisms' – that is, 'the positive loops or cycles of self-reinforcing transformations' (8) through which [organizational forms] are reproduced and survive as 'systemic interventions'' (9) – which become the centre of attention because they provide the means by which organizational forms, as configurations of relational practices, are transposed between different domains of activity. These various 'network folding mechanisms' are critical, for Padgett and Powell (2012:12) because they 'transfer organizational innovations across domains so that they evolve into organizational interventions that discover new purposes for old tools.'

As the authors readily admit, indeed insist, this commits them to an evolutionary-based model of change driven by the underlying 'hidden logics' that generate and sustain the

‘catalysed reproduction of new organizational forms’ (16) and in which organizational hybrids become detached from their emergent contexts and enter exchange relationships with other hybrid forms, particularly under ‘crisis conditions’. Power, agency and politics are subsumed within these systems theory-based ‘hidden logics’ and the evolutionary dynamics which they release so that they can be seen as secondary effects of primary forces and relations over which they have little or no control. While there is some recognition of the role played by organizational elites acting as ‘gatekeepers’ facilitating or retarding evolutionary dynamics, they are again relegated to a subsidiary position within the overall theoretical scheme. Power and agency remain properties of the system as a whole and lack any kind of structural identity or strategic role beyond that allocated to them by the ‘autocatalytic mechanisms’ determining which organizational forms will survive and be transposed across the different system domains.

With Padgett and Powell’s book, we have come a long way, intellectually and substantively, from the explanatory mission driving both old and new institutional theory throughout the twentieth century and their roots in Weberian sociology as it aspired to provide a better understanding of our collective fate under the ‘age of organization’ (Wolin 2004). Rather than offering a paradigm shifting book taking us forward into the twenty first century, it entails a regressive ‘back to the future’ prospectus in which we return to the positivistic scientism which dominated the sociology of organizations for much of the previous century.

A superficially similar ‘back to the future’ formulation of the field’s future trajectory is also advanced by du Gay and Vikkelso (2017), but their key intellectual reference point is not systems biology or biochemistry. Rather they advocate a return to classical organization theory and its analytical focus on formal organization as containing ‘the past in the present and future of organization theory’.

Alternative Histories and Trajectories

The second set of four texts, Burrell (2013), Hanlon (2016), Grey (2017) and du Gay and Vikkelso (2017), around which this review article is constructed articulate a very different understanding of the key challenges facing the sociology of organizations and the way they can be overcome to that advocated by either Fligstein and McAdam or Padgett and Powell. Rather than repairing the inherent analytical weaknesses of institutional theory or

metamorphosing the latter into a complexity theory-based life science of organizational forms, these four texts, each in their very different ways, promote alternative historical interpretations of organization theory's intellectual inheritance and what they mean for its future developmental trajectory.

Taking inspiration from Foucault's aspiration to identify 'the rules of *formation*' defining Western intellectuals' objects of study and 'to build their theories and to form their concepts' Burrell (2013; 3) undertakes a similar exploration of the 'deep epistemological structures' informing Organization Studies and calls for the latter to be riskier and more adventurous in its undertakings. As this exploration proceeds, Burrell finds himself focusing on 'the will to form' underpinning organization theory's mission to replace chaos with order through the basic 'pattern books' that organization theorists follow as they repeat the 'understandable, recognizable, and repetitive elements' (Burrell 2013: 11) through which recurring designs and formatting can be imposed on an ontologically 'formless' phenomenon. Making connections with architecture, engineering, knitting, and sewing, he suggests that 'pattern books are a way of understanding the will to form and the styles of organizing that emanate from this' (Burrell 2013: 12).

Subsequently, a wide range of pattern books are specified in all their seductive simplicity and confounding complexity in a series of three-dimensional geometric cubes or models of 'styles of organizing' combining lines, points and planes in ways that outline the basic parameters of providing core design solutions to recurring organizational problems. These geometric representations of alternative and alternating 'styles of organizing' open-up all sorts of possibilities for combining and recombining constituent elements of the latter in novel and innovative ways. So, for example, Burrell (2013: 'Conclusions') reminds us that there is nothing 'inevitable' or 'predetermined' about how various elements of a style – such as its politico-economic positioning, management approach and ethical sensibilities – come together to coalesce around certain stylistic genres or traditions which then inform how we 'organize organization'. In this respect, he draws attention to the very different but dialectically interrelated pattern booking of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia in the second half of the 1970s and Anglophile neoliberal political regimes in the 1980s as they both attempted to mount 'creatively destructive revolutions' eradicating any actual or potential opposition from countervailing power sources grounded in technocratic/professional expertise or liberal democratic political theory and practice' (Burrell 2013: 122-130).

By sensitizing us to the complex juxta positioning of the various ‘lines, points and planes’ contained in his cuboid geometric representations of the wide range of ‘pattern books’ shaping the processes and structures through which organization gets organized, Burrell (2013:243) is striving to ‘escape from the sclerotic narrowness of organization theory’s tendency to deal in footnotes [and] to construct a space that opens up, rather than closes down, debates’. He seeks to expand the conceptual space within which ‘organization’ is theorized by offering a very broadly based analysis of the ‘pattern books’ and ‘design envelopes’ that shape, but do not determine, our choices over preferred styles of organizing. Within the latter, ‘cross-cutting currents, producing hybrids of hybrids’ (Burrell 2012: 247) continually emerge, decline and re-emerge in complex cycles of creative destruction and change. ‘Organization’ becomes the key mediating concept which links together the multiple intellectual, historical, and political/ideological layering contained within any cuboid of pattern books and design envelopes.

Hanlon (2016) approaches organization theory’s ‘hidden history’ or ‘dark side’ in a rather different way to that developed by Burrell in that he abjures analytical complexity for detailed socio-historical reconstruction in which the ‘authoritarian heart’ located at the ideological core of organization and management theory is fully exposed in all its ugliness. For him, modern organization theory is ideologically driven by the need to create ‘new forms of subjectivity, authority, hierarchy and individual and collective ways of being, and hence new forms of political problem’ (Hanlon 2016: 5). Influenced by neo-Marxism and drawing extensively on Weber, Foucault, Pareto, and Gramsci, Hanlon’s focus on the domination structures and manipulative technologies through which capitalist order and control are secured reveals the physical, social and emotional violence inflicted on workers in the pursuit of sustained capital accumulation and profitability. Historically traversing nineteenth century craft-based carriage making in Amherst, New England, early/mid twentieth century mass production as exemplified by the Ford Highland Park plant, and the late twentieth century shift towards ‘spontaneous cooperation’ so beloved by Elton Mayo and advocates for the post-bureaucratic/network organization in which technocratic expertise and cultural management fuse to form a new, ‘post-capitalist control regime’, Hanlon identifies the economic, social and psychological appropriation which the latter strives to disguise in the cheap language of ‘community’, ‘commitment’ and ‘collaboration’. Yet, this exercise in what Burrell (2022) more recently labels ‘managerial and organizational camouflage’ cannot hide the realities which it strives to obscure and obfuscate – that is, the subordination of labour to

the dictates of capital accumulation and the subjugation of workers to its structural imperatives.

In his final chapter, Hanlon turns his attention to the status of organization and management theory as the ‘first neoliberal science’ as an ‘elite-led, institutional intervention to ensure competition from which springs the moral rejuvenation of the subject [because] people need to be constantly moulded and modulated to capitalist society’ (Hanlon 2016: 187).

Neoliberalism and management /organization theory are ideological and intellectual bedfellows in that they ‘emerged simultaneously and developed the same solutions to the crisis of the early twentieth century [as] they are in essence the same project’ (Hanlon 2016: 187). They necessarily entail elite-led and technocratically implemented institutional interventions emasculating any embryonic forms of direct democracy within the workplace, industry or society with modes of organizational regulation and control imposing ‘market realism’, class domination and state coordination.

Weber is seen as the key interlocuter in this onward march of twentieth century neo-liberalization insofar as his work legitimates pro-active state intervention restructuring society according to the logic of capitalist market relations and the discipline they universally impose on neo-liberal subjects in a society totally subsumed to capital (Hanlon 2016: 190). Collective solidarities and securities are superseded by individualized competitive relations in which ‘democracy’ is regarded as being synonymous with market choices and the freedoms they afford to rational decision makers single-mindedly pursuing their self-interests. While something of a ‘reluctant neoliberal’, Weber still aligns himself with neoliberal thought and policy because, as Schumpeter’s progenitor, he is more than prepared to temper his commitment to democracy because of his overriding fear of bureaucracy and his scepticism towards popular democracy as an unalloyed progressive force in the future. In this way, Hanlon, echoing Gouldner’s (1955) accusation of ‘metaphysical pathos’, insists that Weber’s political scepticism and cultural pessimism pervades modern organization and management theory in its favouring of elite leadership, active state intervention and expanding market competition over any residual interest in or commitment to more progressive forms of associative or deliberative democracy (Hirst 1994; O’Flynn 2022).

Grey’s book (2017) is of a rather different temper, tone and trajectory to that exhibited by either Burrell or Hanlon’s books. In many ways he has somewhat lower expectations than either of the latter insofar as he thinks that social science theory ‘is best understood as a way

in which people try to pursue particular agendas. Theory is a weapon used to bludgeon others into accepting practice. It almost never reveals that, but still it is true' (Grey 2017: 13). Given this, essentially pragmatist and interpretivist, taking-off point, then the rest of the book sets out to peel back the many layers of intellectual rationalization and obfuscation which obscure organization theory's practical intent and role. Along the way, Grey also seeks to promote a 'political' rather than an 'economic' understanding of organizations in which all knowledge is regarded as ineradicably 'political' because it is fundamentally about 'mobilizing ideas, arguments and explanations to try to make sense of practice, but also to influence practice' (Grey 2017: 14). For him, 'reality is not the realm of abstract ideas and practice is not the realm of cut the crap action' (Grey 2017: 13) as they are inextricably conjoined in a political process where understanding and justification, explanation and legitimation, become inseparable components of a shared endeavour.

Having historically located the intellectual roots of 'contemporary' organization theory in the 'classical' writing of Weber and Taylor in the opening two chapters, Grey moves on to the core of his argument in which the 'cultural turn' taken by the former from the 1980s onwards resets the baroque dance between practice and theory in ways which further obscure the underlying political processes indelibly shaping its movement and trajectory. Thus, a series of practical experiments with organizational change, empowering self-management and reinvigorated customer service are contrasted with a political reality of enhanced surveillance, insidious control and managerial myopia. Rather than a brave new world of post-bureaucratic organizations basking in the personal freedoms and entrepreneurial cultures released by boundaryless digital technologies, teamworking and networked 'communities of practice', Grey sees a 'treadmill of change' characterized by bureaucratic repetition, technocratic managerialism and declining public services. Driven by the ideology and dynamic of 'creative destruction' lying at the core of 'old capitalism', the 'new capitalism' of the late twentieth/early twenty first centuries looks very much like its historical and structural forbear. Recurring financial and economic crises, 'macho management', increasing inequality, cultural fragmentation and political polarization have combined to dash whatever hopes which were once held out for the latter's 'progressive dynamic' in which alternative organizational forms rooted in collective, collaborative and cohesive social relations could flourish. Although he has some residual hope that such forms might become more widespread in the future (Parker et al., 2007, 2013), Grey's outlook is one in which old-style capitalist dynamics and new-style technocratic managerialism come together in a reinvigorated

practice/theory baroque dance in which profitability, efficiency and control remain the dominant political leitmotifs and organizational outcomes.

Finally, we come to du Gay and Vikkelso's (2017) 'back to the future' scenario in which contemporary organization theory rediscovers its intellectual mojo and practical impact in 'classical theory' so easily derided and dismissed by supporters of process-dominated and change-obsessed theoretical approaches unmindful of the necessary constraints imposed by 'formal organization'. Instead of serving-up 'classical theory' as a filling but innutritious entrée to the main course of 'contemporary theory' and its dazzlingly tasty delights, du Gay and Vikkelso's book demands that we take the former seriously again by returning to its single-minded analytical focus on 'formal organization' as the core object of organization theory and the ontological, law-like verities it necessarily entails. In their view, 'formality' designates the ontological status of 'organization' as a particular phenomenon distinguishable from 'social organization in general' and following certain immutable rules and regularities which give the field of organizational analysis its theoretical identity and rationale. Various 'theoretical programmes' within contemporary organizations studies, such as new institutional theory, sensemaking theory, and agency theory have, in their different ways, tried to deny the ontological status and conceptual primacy of 'formal organization' in their headlong rush to embrace process-based understandings and explanations of 'organizational life'. However, in this Gadarene-like stampede towards the latter, these, increasingly influential if not dominant, theoretical programmes marginalize, indeed deny, the most significant features of formal organization and the structural regularities it reproduces as it develops as a distinctive and separable social form.

Yet, the authors are at pains to point out that they are not trying to revivify 'classical organization theory' as providing well-established solutions to contemporary organizational problems. Instead, they see themselves as advocating a 'classical stance' as signifying 'key aspects of the stance (approach, comportment) adopted by classic OT [because] it is not the *content* of classic OT per se we wish to emphasize, but rather the *approach* and *comportment* it exemplifies' (du Gay and Vikkelso 2017: 18 emphases in original). This approach and comportment re-affirm '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"), a dissatisfaction and devaluation of

explanation by postulate, and, not least, a focus on organizational effectiveness' (du Gay and Vikkelso 2017: 18).

Subsequently, the rest of the book unpacks what re-establishing our touch with the 'classic stance' means in terms of rediscovering its role and status as a 'practical science of organizing' focused on the forms, techniques and tasks which work best in 'the situation at hand'. The authors also see themselves as responding to the charge that 'contemporary OT has run out of steam' (du Gay and Vikkelso 2017: 22) by refurbishing its intellectual credentials and relevance as a practical science resisting populist critique and re-establishing its contribution to the major problems associated with contemporary practices of managing and organizing. In particular, they identify 'task' as a core concern for a contemporary organization theory which takes the 'classical stance' seriously because it is only by the organization intimately knowing its task can it begin to identify the mechanisms, processes and structures through which it can be achieved. This detailed, intimate knowledge about 'task' provides the 'compass' whereby organizations can reform their established ways of doing things in a well-informed and sensible manner. It is also critical in identifying where 'authority' lies within the organization by formally specifying the determinate relationships arising out of this task structure and the authorizing rules which they proscribe and legitimate. As the 'cornerstone of organization', formalized authority relations constitute the organization as a legal entity subject to rule-governed behaviour and the constitutional mechanisms through which it is legitimated and/or challenged as to the propriety, and indeed, legality, of the actions undertaken in its name. Only through these formalized relationships and mechanisms can the 'character and comportment' of contemporary organizations and the intellectual practices through which they are to be analysed be re-established and re-legitimated as constituting a 'distinctive way of life' which Weber would have recognized and commended

Looking Forward

Two, interrelated key questions emerge from the review of these texts offered in previous discussion above. First, is there a crisis in contemporary organization theory/sociology of organizations and, if there is, what are its key features and what, if anything, might be done

about it? Second, how might the underlying tensions between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ also previously identified be resolved or are they irresolvable?

Overall, there is little sign of an existential intellectual crisis within the sociology of organizations conveyed in the texts reviewed above. While consensus is in short supply, there is healthy debate and contestation about what the research priorities should be and how they should be expedited symptomatic of a field of study characterized by intellectual pluralism and the theoretical dynamism it generates (Reed and Burrell 2019). As Burrell (2022:38) suggests in his recent overview of the field’s current intellectual condition and prospects, it ‘may no longer be able so easily to view its objects of study as it once did, but with new methods, new concepts, and a new resolve to be investigative in a pointed way, it does have a future’. For him, the latter brings the sociology of organizations closer to an ‘investigative practice’ in which a better understanding of underlying power dynamics and relations lie at the intellectual and ethical core of the latter’s rationale and mission.

One way of resolving the ‘theory/practice tension or dilemma’ expressed in previous discussion is to promote a ‘public organization theory’ along similar lines to the ‘public sociology’ advocated by Burawoy (Clawson et al., 2007; Spicer 2014). This would entail a sociology of organizations which reaches beyond the university, is inherently interdisciplinary in its concerns and the ways in which it goes about pursuing them and is part of civil society in its intellectual and practical endeavours. While this ‘public turn’ has much to commend itself and seems very much in tune with Burrell’s call for an ‘investigative turn’ within the field, there are wider issues at stake here which may need to be considered as revealed in the review of the six books conducted in this article. It raises the key issue, which Burawoy was always sensitive to, of the relationship between ‘professional’ and ‘public sociology’ in that the latter would continue to depend on the former for its core intellectual inspiration and resources at a time when they may become subordinated to the political fads, fashions and favour of dominant political, economic and social elites. Here we are brought back to the perennial problem of the relationship between ‘participatory science’ and expert science’ in which contentious issues around power, legitimacy and authority are never far away (Eyal 2019). This is particularly the case if we remember Weber’s analysis of the endemic tensions between ‘science as a vocation’ and ‘politics as a vocation’ in a wider socio-political context in which the primary role of social scientists will continue to be one of ‘bringing home the bad news’ for powerful groups and society at large (Owen and Strong

2004). A renewed and reinvigorated sociology of organizations would do well to bear this injunction in mind when it engages with civil society and the ‘warring gods’ which it necessarily contains in a world where fundamental values and interests continue to collide.

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