Editorial

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A Platform for Debating the Role of Organization in, for, and Throughout Society

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1 Welcome to JOSO

Writing this introductory essay for the journal on which we have worked for so many years entails some problems, not just emotionally (because we worked so hard on it), but more generally where this format is concerned. Of course, an introduction needs to set forth the tasks and relevant phenomena to be addressed in the journal. And we should be responsible for crafting it. Moreover, together with a group of diverse scholars, many of them strongly connected to the Research Committee 17 “Sociology of Organizations” of the International Sociological Association (ISA RC 17), we already defined a scope for the Journal of Organizational Sociology (JOSO). At the same time, we see a strong need to resist defining narrowly what a sociology of organization supposedly is, a question that immediately comes up when reading JOSO’s title. What we certainly can say is that, for us, organizational sociology entails taking organization seriously as a specific phenomenon or as a specific concept that is more than just a mere synonym for social order in general. Apart from that though, we will not provide a definition, because we want to embrace the different definitions that are out there and see such definitions rather as reflecting something that is in flux and continually recreated. Therefore, you, the (future) contributors to JOSO, are at the center of defining this sub-field of sociology in rather practical terms!

In recent years, there has been much discussion about the state and identity of “organizational sociology”, involving ourselves, ISA RC 17, and many other colleagues (Besio, du Gay, and Serrano Velarde 2020; Godwyn 2022; Gorman 2014;...
Grothe-Hammer and Kohl 2020; King 2022; Reed 2023). This self-reflection has had a strong influence on developing and shaping our journal, and we see the following three facets of the debate as particularly relevant:

1. **The relation between organizational sociology and the discipline of sociology.** Although arguably not the first entry on the list of contributions reflecting on organizational sociology, a highly recognized panel session about the question “Does Organizational Sociology Have a Future?” at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association (ASA) in 2014 and a subsequent virtual panel on “the future of organizational sociology” (Gorman 2014) sparked much discussion in the international as well as national communities of organizational sociology. Sessions on “Disappearing organization? Reshaping the sociology of organizations” at the World Congress of Sociology in 2018 and a special issue in *Current Sociology* with the same title are among some of the further contributions to the debate (Besio, du Gay, and Serrano Velarde 2020). Recent years have moreover brought us a myriad of new handbooks, textbooks, and other reference works on organizational sociology – in many different languages (Adler 2009; Adler et al. 2014; Apelt et al. 2020; Ballé 2021; Godwyn 2022; Jaime and Lucio 2018; Marín 2013; Misset 2017; Pichierri 2014). Additionally, the prestigious book series “Research in the Sociology of Organizations”, which is sponsored by the ASA Section on Organizations, Occupations and Work, significantly increased its publication frequency a couple of years ago. This comes along with several interconnected debates, e.g. on the role of organizational sociology in addressing classical topics of sociology, such as social inequalities (Ray 2019; Stephenson et al. 2020; Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt 2019; Wooten and Couloute 2017), how societies deal with fundamental transformations, e.g. digitalization (Kette and Tacke 2022), sustainable transitions (Moseñe et al. 2013), globalization and cosmopolitan cultures (Lauer 2022), and crisis (Bergeron et al. 2020; Bode, Jungmann, and Serrano Velarde 2023). Others see a need to revisit the long-standing diagnosis of an organization society (Arnold, Hasse, and Mormann 2021; Bartley, Soener, and Gershenson 2019; Haveman 2022; see the contributions in Arnold, Hasse, and Mormann 2022; Borraz 2022). Moreover, there are a myriad of works that showcase the relevance of organizational sociology by leveraging its insights to analyze pressing social phenomena, such as standardization (Loconto and Arnold 2022), social movements (Ho 2018; Pimentel and Grothe-Hammer 2022; Schneiberg and Lounsbury 2017); healthcare (Trotter 2020); the transformation of corporate elites (Mizruchi 2013); the re-organization of welfare-regimes (Bode 2006); religious organizing (Sundberg 2020); and the growing influence of digital platforms (Ametowobla and Kirchner 2023; Rachlitz 2023).
The relation between organizational sociology and organization studies and critical management studies (Clegg and Pina e Cunha 2019). Analogous to the debate about the relevance and usefulness of organizational sociology in sociology, there has also been much debate on its role in the field of organization studies. Organization studies are usually described as an inter- or multidisciplinary field with sociology being one of its parent disciplines (Scott 2020). However, in recent decades a growing divide between both has been observed (Adler et al. 2014). Despite sociology’s crucial relevance for the emergence and institutionalization of organization studies as a distinctive field of research, it is nowadays often described as being pushed to the margins. Considering though that many of the current dominating paradigms in organization theory in fact stem from sociology (Grothe-Hammer and Kohl 2020), an important question has been whether and how the sociological input to organization studies should be maintained. Prominent voices in organization studies have pointed to a striking lack of theoretical innovation in the field (Ahrne, Brunsson, and Seidl 2016; Davis 2015a; Tourish 2020), and as Ringel (forthcoming) points out, organization studies will remain dependent on importing knowledge from sociology. A subtheme on “Doing organizational sociology in organization studies” at the EGOS Colloquium in 2022 and an upcoming Volume on “Sociological Thinking in Contemporary Organizational Scholarship” (Clegg, Grothe-Hammer, and Serrano Velarde forthcoming) in the prestigious book series “Research in the Sociology of Organizations” are markers of this debate.

The debate on revisiting, dissolving or maintaining formal organization as the “core object”. We can observe two opposed developments in recent years. On the one hand, scholars have pointed out that organization studies have become strangely disinterested in their own core subject, i.e. organization (Ahrne, Brunsson, and Seidl 2016; du Gay 2020). On the other hand, in a kind of counter-movement, many have revived the classic question of “what is organization” and come up with new approaches to understand and theorize organization. Scholars have proposed to conceptualize organization as fluid (Schreyögg and Sydow 2010), as process (Czarniawska 2014; Hernes 2014), or as partial (Ahrne and Brunsson 2011), or even to shift the notion from organization to “organizationality” (Dobusch and Schoeneborn 2015; Grothe-Hammer 2019). As a consequence, there are ongoing debates on both how to deal with post-bureaucratic organizational forms (Clegg, Harris, and Höpfl 2011) and how to “rehabilitate” the classic formal organization (du Gay and Vikkelsø 2016). These debates cannot be disconnected from societal transformations fueling the tendency to revise recent organizational forms and concepts of organizations, e.g. trends towards projectification (Baur, Besio,
and Norkus 2018; Sydow and Windeler 2020), decentering the workplace (Klemsdal and Clegg 2022), the continuous imperative of innovation and recreation (Fligstein 2021; Serrano 2010; Windeler and Jungmann 2022) or the unstable organizing of liquid modernity (Bauman 2023). An important line of inspiration might be abstract social theories (see Adler et al. 2014; Jungmann, Grothe-Hammer, and Andersen forthcoming), rediscovering and updating the classics (e.g. Bartley, Soener, and Gershenson 2019; Grothe-Hammer 2020; Jungmann forthcoming; van Krieken 2018), taking new conceptual sources into account (e.g. Gherardi 2019), or discovering concepts for new organizational forms from empirical studies, be they ethnographic (O’Doherty 2017), historical (March, Schulz, and Zhou 2000), or comparative translations of organizational forms in different parts of the world (Zhou 2021).

These three themes and the debates revolving around them, have been driving the development of JOSO. We felt the need to complement this important intellectual process with a more practical endeavor – a continual platform for debate in organizational sociology at a global level. Such a site of debate, so the idea within our group emerged, could provide answers to these questions from patterns in recent works and in a more bottom-up fashion.

2 Why?

Although this is our motivation behind the journal, the most obvious question we had to answer in convincing a publisher that this is worthwhile and still have to answer in finding contributors and readers, is: why? Why do we need this journal? Isn’t there lots of sociology in the existing outlets in organization studies? Isn’t there a lot of organizational research going on in the existing sociology journals? Our answer here is “yes … but”. We fully agree that there is much excellent sociological research published in journals devoted to organization studies. And we are fully aware that there is much outstanding organizational research published in sociology outlets (see Grothe-Hammer and Kohl 2020; King 2022). And as a result, we heard this question a couple of times: why do we need a journal for organizational sociology? For us though, the answer is simple: exactly because organizational sociology is sitting between two chairs (Lammers 1981; Ringel forthcoming; Thoenig 1998) – organization studies on the one hand and sociology on the other – scholars who in fact do their work in this area, sometimes have issues connecting to either of the two disciplines. As many have observed, organization studies have over the decades developed their own publishing norms and discourses. They have fairly standardized paper formats, their own language,
their own expectations about “incremental theory development” (Bort and Schiller-Merkens 2011; Tourish 2020), and last but not least a significant bias for business-related themes (Augier, March, and Sullivan 2005). Scholars who, in one way or the other, work “too sociologically” have had their issues with these field-specific norms. But publishing organizational research in sociology journals obviously also comes with its own challenges – albeit different ones. Although in sociology one usually is not faced with publication norms which are nearly as standardized as in organization studies, organization-related research so far has needed to be published either in a generalist sociology journal or in a specialized sub-field differing from organizational sociology. The result is another form of adaptation, i.e. scholars needed to write their papers predominantly for other sociologists but not for the organizational researchers among the sociologists. We want to stress that this description of challenges is not to say that scholars of organizational sociology would not know how to publish in organization studies and sociology journals. The issue is rather that many of them would often prefer to target their work differently, i.e. publishing a sociological paper for an audience of organizational researchers or an organizational paper for an audience of sociologists. The new Journal of Organizational Sociology (JOSO) is supposed to be the outlet for these scholars.

3 A Journal for Whom?

Although we experienced mostly support when developing our journal, some scholars seem to wonder if our intention has been to “put up boundaries” between organization studies and organizational sociology. However, these said boundaries are already there. Many have pointed out time after time that the field of organization studies has in fact become a subdivision of business studies – “business school organization studies” as Augier, March, and Sullivan (2005) called it – and that other disciplines such as organizational sociology have been pushed to the margins (Ringel forthcoming). In sociology, on the other hand, researchers are all the time confronted with organizations in almost all their fields of study – be it, e.g. hospitals in medical sociology, care homes in the sociology of aging, or schools in the sociology of education. However, they barely connect to a field of organization studies that has become so detached from sociological work that it’s largely inaccessible – a “mystery house” as Davis (2015b) puts it. As a result, many in sociology in fact do study organizations but do not do organization studies.

Our intention is thus the exact opposite of putting up boundaries. Instead we want to establish a forum across the boundary that is already there – to reconnect the study of organizations in sociology with organization studies. JOSO intends to
be at the intersection, to turn the “sitting between chairs” into an actual coupling. Since its inception, organization studies have been drawing on sociology for inspiration and the other way around – sociologists studying organizations referred to the richness of interdisciplinary organization theory and research. Therefore, JOSO is intended to be a journal not only for sociologists but for anyone doing sociology with a focus on organization(s). We cannot stress enough that we do not care if someone submitting an article is a sociologist or not – whether by affiliation or education – as long as their organizational research is de facto sociological. We signal this intention with the staffing of our board, and with the articles in this first issue. As we write in our aims and scope: Submissions featuring mainstream perspectives in organizational sociology are as welcome as articles that advance or apply alternative sociological perspectives. In addition, submissions featuring psychological, managerial, educational, or other theories and themes are welcome, as long as they make a distinctive sociological argument and contribute to sociological debates with specific reference to questions of organizational structure, dynamics, processes, practices, interaction or culture.

We want to bring together the best of both worlds, i.e. the vast plurality of styles, theories, and themes from sociology, and the interest and understanding of organizations from organization studies. We aim to advance the sociological understanding of organization(s), inquiring into their ever-changing internal workings and their relations with each other, as well as examining how organization(s) and society shape each other. It is intended to be a worldwide forum for scholarly debate that encompasses everything pertaining to the nexus between organization and society.

The journal understands society in a broad sense, spanning face-to-face settings, intimate relationships, friendships, and families, fields, markets, and networks, social classes and inequalities, as well as social domains such as politics, civil society, media, culture, religion, science, sports, economy, social work, arts, kinship, ecology, health, love, and so on. The uniqueness of the Journal of Organizational Sociology is its dual focus on (1) the sociology of organizations, but also on (2) the organizational aspects of forms of social life more generally. The journal thus is intended to explore the full spectrum of the organizational dimensions of sociology. It will cover the full range of sociological theory traditions and writing styles; no tradition in sociology or organizational theory is favored above another.

The four papers in this first issue of JOSO signal this broad understanding of society and organizational sociology. Organizational sociology might start with a fundamental perspective on the social, as in the paper “Organisation as Reflexive Structuration” by Günther Ortmann, Jörg Sydow and Arnold Windeler with reference to Anthony Giddens’ works in social theory, and seek inspiration for understanding organization in recent society there. Contrariwise, organizational sociology might
start with ethnographic field-work in a non-Western case and challenge many of the (Western) reader’s scientific assumptions about agency in and for organizations, as in the study “Relational Agency as a Dialectic of Belonging and Not Belonging Within the Social Ecology of Plantation Life in Sri Lanka” conducted by Ann L. Cunliffe and Geetha Karunanayake. Moreover, an organizational lens can be helpful in explaining how different nation-states have reacted to a large-scale social crisis, as, for example in Olivier Borraz, and Bengt Jacobsson’s comparative analysis “Organizing Expertise During a Crisis. France and Sweden in the Fight Against Covid-19”. At the same time, organizational sociology might just as well explain why an individual terrorist was not stopped by the police, even if he had been recognized as a potential thread for a long time, as presented in Henrik Dosdall’s and Theresa Löckmann’s in-depth study “Exploring Terrorism Prevention: An Organizational Perspective on Police Investigations”. Taken together, these texts provide us with an impression how rich organizational sociology is in understanding and explaining multiple social phenomena of our times.

4 Special Thanks!

The first ideas for developing a journal dedicated to organizational sociology date back to the year 2016 and several scholars have been discussing and exploring possibilities over the years since then. In January 2021 finally, a group of scholars – many of whom are active members of ISA RC 17 – consisting of Göran Ahrne, Dzifa Ametowobla, Nadine Arnold, Cristina Besio, Stewart Clegg, Thiago Duarte Pimentel, Paul du Gay, Raimund Hasse, Robert van Krieken, Mikaela Sundberg, Arnold Windeler, and us, began to develop a proposal and strategy for the journal. The group developed a full proposal document and decided to connect the journal with ISA RC 17. First of all, we want to thank this group for their enthusiasm and mindful suggestions! After talks with different publishers, the journal proposal development group and the RC17 board decided to go with De Gruyter. We would like to thank the whole team at De Gruyter, especially Darren Green who worked for long with us on developing the Journal and Ulrike Kitzing, our Journal Manager, who has always been engaged in helping us with practical issues. Finally, we would like to thank two institutions which provided the necessary funding for this endeavor: the Department of Sociology and Political Science at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, Norway, and the Stiftung Universität Luzern, Switzerland. Finally, we received valuable suggestions from seven anonymous reviewers on the initial proposal.

Now that this work is done, it is up to us – the authors, reviewers, editors, and readers – to perform what organizational sociology is, will be, and should be.
References


