Abstract: In processual approaches to the sociology of organizations, there are prevalent assumptions differentiating ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ process research. In this paper, we challenge this assumption and suggest a novel, non-dualistic hybrid approach that is methodologically strong-weak. This approach integrates both flux (becoming) and its temporary material instantiations (being), addressing tensions between slow-moving and mid-range elements of process. We argue that both strong and weak process views can contribute to understanding organizing. We explore how their dualism can be overcome methodologically through the combination of time horizons, incorporating substantialist and flux views, as well as proximal and distal perspectives. Using a strong-weak dualism creates an unnecessary theoretical and methodological divide between process as flow and process as material instantiation. We advance three hybrid approaches which we call reifying, liquefying, and embedding. Our contribution consists of strategies to overcome strong-weak dualism for conceptualizing organizations in a sociologically dynamic and holistic manner.

1 Introduction

Dualistic thinking is not an exclusive organizational phenomenon but runs through human identity and can be seen as a way of viewing the world: man and wife, good and evil, black and...
white, poor and rich, concrete and abstract, day and night, love and hate, life and death, Eros and Thanatos.

(Janssens and Steyaert 1999, p. 121)

Phenomena conceived as abstract entities are viewed as tangible and real, much like the examples provided by Janssens and Steyaert (1999). This viewpoint has led some scholars, like Barrett and Srivastva (1991), to describe abstract phenomena as unchanging and rigid structures; for organizations, this entails seeing them as tangible structural entities that can be systematically studied and defined. Theories and methodological approaches deemed appropriate thus aim to identify clearly and preserve the characteristics of these organizations. Just as a museum might preserve and label specimens, so might organization sociology, as is evident in the early works of the Aston School (Hinings et al. 1967; Pugh and Hickson 1976), that stressed the importance of establishing and preserving definitional features of organizations.

Realizing that structures are not sociologically immutable, later adherents of the Aston School modified their view of organizations, seeing them as relatively stable and static entities that, periodically, at times of crisis, will structurally adjust to regain fit with their environment in a series of temporally distinct and specific punctuations that occur when design and context no longer coincide (Donaldson 1987). Structural adjustment to regain fit bolts a weak process perspective on to a chassis of structural-functional sociology that remains intact. We refer to this perspective as one that takes a sociologically weak view of process as an event that is something subsidiary to underlying structural continuities. As weak process, it acknowledges that structures may change as a result of a decision to change them. The underlying structural variables may be re-arranged but they will persist in shaping process. As weak process theory, this view displays “abstraction, a logic of objectivity and proceduralization” (Cunliffe 2022, p. 1). Weak process perspectives define organizations as stable physical entities (“things”) whose being is becoming accelerated by digital transformations (Furr, Ozcan, and Eisenhardt 2022). Weak process theory maps objective properties for which, once mapped, new nouns can be coined, such as digitocracy (Ballesteros 2020), which will doubtless render specimen types for future taxonomic work.

An approach that is an alternative to the first perspective’s focus on structural and relatively static aspects of organizations, values the evolving nature of organizational processes and the storytelling associated with these. As this approach is discussed by Hernes (2007) and Langley et al. (2013), it portrays organizations as evolving and living, emphasizing “becoming or evolving over time” (Abdallah et al. 2018, p. 91), which we refer to as a strong process perspective. A strong process-oriented perspective narrates the evolving nature of specific instances of organizing. Cunliffe (2022) argues that this approach both reflects real-life experiences and
captures the imaginative aspects of organizational life. Strong process theory will assert accounts of both narrative process as well as theoretical structure. The strong process view is epitomized in management and organization studies by using gerunds, emphasizing notions such as organizing (Weick 1979), rather than the stability implied by the noun, organization. Both gerunds and nouns have their place in different approaches, as Van de Ven and Poole (2005) note, with process not being inherently superior to variance research: they represent different conceptions of realities and methods, departing from ontological premises that portray organizations in different ways, as either more akin to structures that change or liquid processes that flow and evolve continuously. In process scholarship, there are different views of strong versus weak process (Cloutier and Langley 2020).

We will discuss the advantages of overcoming binary views and explain that while the noun organization may remain constant, the verb, organizing, is always doing something, and its doings, practices and processes can change the nature of the type specimen. Though “process” is primarily used to indicate movement and flux, it also refers to “a sequence of individual and collective events, actions, and activities unfolding over time and in context” (Pettigrew 1997, p. 338), a term encompassing a wide array of phenomena that can be analyzed with both weak and strong process views (Langley and Tsoukas 2016), distinctions between which carry methodological implications.

As an example of these methodological implications, the sociology of organizations initially revolved around reflections on bureaucracy that would now be considered archaic (Merton et al. 1952; Weber 1978), due to the complex history of practices and processes that have transpired since their original formulation. The type specimen no longer encapsulates the form’s spatial and temporal development. Hence, researchers find Weberian auspices for the field of organization theory of diminishing significance for the many changes that have elapsed between the ascendancy of Prussian bureaucracy and the rise of the gig economy (Newlands 2021). Increasingly, research in organizations takes a processual approach (e.g. Simpson and den Hond 2022), using qualitative methods that stress a process perspective (Demir and Lychnell 2014).

We contribute to process research, by asking what is the point of the dichotomy between abstract and contextualized accounts, between weak and strong process perspectives? Instead of choosing either, we advance a non-dualistic approach. In this view, both strong and weak perspectives contribute to explaining organizing and organization. They do so via the combination of different time-space conceptions and substantialist and fluxing views, as well as proximal and distal perspectives. The tensions between these dualities open space for methodological innovation, combining dominant established methods with new approaches, the latter geared towards strong process research (Nair, Burt, and Chia 2013). The dichotomy of
strong–weak process introduces a theoretical and methodological chasm between process understood as flow and process experienced as a material instantiation. The alternative ontology of process that we propose will strive to overcome the dualism of abstracted processes and singular events (MacKay, Chia, and Nair 2021). Hence, the research question is whether strong–weak process dualism can be theoretically and methodologically overcome?

The argument will explore strong and weak process views as entangled and avoid habitual time-space binaries (Holt and Johnsen 2019). We will compose a duality that exists in a state of tension, that can be assessed through methodological hybrids. With this goal in mind, we organize the article around two main sections. First, we discuss the building blocks of process research, contrasting strong and weak views of process. In line with a non-dualistic approach, we advance three hybrid methodological approaches to overcome dualism. Of these, two hybrids are anchored in the important sociological concepts of reification and liquidity, exploring ontological and epistemological shifts. The third offers a phenomenological hybrid that considers the researchers’ being in the process, framing, narrating, outlining ‘interpretative sociology’ (Weber 1978). With these methodological hybrids, we aim to overcome analytically convenient and often used but simplifying binaries (Hargrave 2021). We contribute a synthesis of process views that does not negate their differences, in line with a logic of duality. Discussion of philosophical-methodological underpinnings of process research is significant (e.g. how to capture movement in academic research outputs, such as papers, models) but largely absent from the literature, in spite of the existence of important technical discussions, such as Langley’s (1999) work on how to theorize with process data. The present paper can be read as an invitation to organizational sociology scholars to discuss the methodological implications of conceptual choices and reconsider the existence of an unnecessary cleavage between strong and weak versions of organizational process.

2 Process Research: Strong and Weak Versions

There is a long history of process approaches to human thought, at least since the Greeks (for an overview of how this informs organizational thought, see Hernes 2007). For this paper, we contrast “weak” and “strong” versions. Process refers to the initiation, continuation and termination of activities (Tsoukas and Chia 2002). Ontologically, through a lens of becoming (dynamic process), organizations as “things” must be seen via a focus on continuous change. The thinghood of those organizations we construct and name as something recognizable, as a brand, a ministry, a sports team, or any other type of organization, is not preserved in metaphorically analytic aspic. If any organization (of whatever provenance) is to
remain recognizable as that thing it is, as Lampedusa (1986) wrote, “things will have to change” because nothing ever remains the same. Growth and decay are inevitably conjoined trajectories.

The process view, by accentuating relationships in complex totalities (Benson 1977; Hargrave 2021), explores the ontology of complex social systems’ stability and contradiction hastening change in the face of events. These contradictions are characterized by rich connectivity and interdependence amongst constituent parts at different levels (Ashmos and Huber 1987; Klag and Langley 2023), framing the unfolding of temporal dynamics. Events may often seem to be singular in their occurrence, yet as Clemente, Durand, and Roulet (2017, p. 22) state, “Events stem from conflicts and contradictions in the long-lasting structural components, as well as affecting them in return”. One of two core dimensions, an ontology of time and temporal dynamics, frames analysis of organizations as processes that begin, unfold and terminate in time. What is temporally important are the definitional attributes of weak and strong process versions, the differences between which we clarify in Table 1.

---

1 The other being space and spatial dynamics, which are addressed in detail elsewhere (see Berti, Simpson, and Clegg 2018; Clegg and Kornberger 2006; Kornberger and Clegg 2004), rather than in this essay.

---

Table 1: Contrasting process views.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Weak</th>
<th>Strong</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ontological views</td>
<td>A world of entities</td>
<td>A world of flux, or process as all-there-is Entities are instantiations of processes, constantly in the making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epistemological stance</td>
<td>Entities possess relatively stable qualities</td>
<td>Entities are instantiations of processes, constantly in the making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research interests</td>
<td>How phenomenal objects and the sense that their subjects make of them is maintained in practice</td>
<td>How phenomena are instantiated as such over time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
<td>Situations are an interweaving of actors and actants, linking institutions with their histories, connecting past and present objectives, changes, and emergent contradictions, giving structure to process</td>
<td>Situations are temporary and flowing manifestations of becoming, in which all is flow and liquid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>The temporal occurrence of significant events</td>
<td>Time is chronos and kairos, categorical fact and psychological duration, “the happening of what happens”, the fusions of experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space</td>
<td>Is materially real in its constraining and enabling properties</td>
<td>Space is experienced subjectively in terms of its affordances</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.1 The Weak Version of Process Research in a Sociology of Organizations: A World of Entities

Different sorts of entities exist, including material, biological and symbolic entities. In a weak process view, the world is made up of entities, some of which are organizations (Davis and DeWitt 2022), while others are actors, such as managers. In this representation, entities are relatively stable and hence identifiable and recognizable. As such, managers manage them by acting on these recognizable and identified characteristics. A process view is interested in how those things taken to be phenomenal objects, known in the sense that subjects make of them, are maintained in practice. Giving primacy to entities that are the subjects and objects of processes is a characteristic of weak process research (Johns 2024). In a process-entity ontology, things and correlative causal mechanisms making up the world are transformed and translated. Ontologically, socially constructed things take primacy: it is what is taken for granted as being present that is fundamental. Process, interweaving actors and actants, links institutions’ histories, connecting past and present objectives, changes, and emergent contradictions.

In its weak version, process research focuses on the “temporal occurrence of significant events” (Van de Ven and Poole 2005, p. 1389). The divisibility and differentiation of time is assumed (McGrath and Kelly 1986). While time may be objectively divisible not every moment is alike, with some points representing critically eventful moments that can only be defined in their criticality after the fact of their occurrence. In the process, not every time division is equal; there will come a point when, in retrospect, sequences of events can be explained, the mid-point of a specific period can be said to have been reached, a highpoint “punctuation” of the old “equilibrium” before the emergence of one that is new (drawing on Gersick 1991). In a weak process view, temporal dynamics are studied in a linear mode, as bridges between stages or episodes, with the arrow of time moving from time 1 to time 2. In practice, this can consist of comparing one entity in time 1 and in time 2, normally assuming something relevant happened between these moments, such as change management initiatives. Attention to time is required for such explicit comparison, looking at the organizational entity as relatively stable, phenomenally preserved over time but changing as an a result of specific interventions and contingencies. Time is divisible into ‘before’ and ‘after’ some event or events that cause phenomenal change. Time passing references a sequence of changes that the entity is undergoing.

Some mechanisms of change are endogenous, such as biological causes; others are exogenous, such as environmental jolts (Meyer 1982) or coevolutionary dynamics (Volberda and Lewin 2003). It is necessary to consider the role of what is normally collapsed into the label “environment”. In a weak process view, forces/stimuli that
cause change in a phenomenon between T1 and T2 are identified. Typically, these are mechanisms that “unfreeze” (Weick and Quinn 1999) phenomenal being as it is. Such mechanisms may include a management-led change initiative (Kotter 2012), a change in competition (Vuori and Huy 2016), the arrival of a new disruptive technology (Adner 2002) or an external shock (Meyer 1982). Despite containing “vestiges of stage-based thinking” (Tsoukas 2015, p. 11), these mechanisms offer important insights for a process view of organization. What is important in this view is to capture the stages in the process, their linear sequencing, in a way that corresponds to the (representational) actuality of that observed. In this version, there is a consideration of time and change but the process mainly consists in a discrete sequence of phases.

Godard (1963) captured a stage conception of sequencing metaphorically when he scripted, in Le Petit Soldat, the aphorism that “Photography is truth. And cinema is truth 24 times a second”. Of course, it is a truth framed by the director’s gaze, the scriptwriters’ craft, the actors’ art, the set designers’ flair, and so on through all those credits at the end of a movie. Truth’s construction requires a great deal of artifice and the creation of an ecology of standing conditions that requires considerable attention to many details. The dramaturgical metaphor needs extension; it is not only the audience, the other actors and the immediate props that comprise staging but the whole “illusion” (Bourdieu and Waquant 1992), constituting a shared reality.

As in early cartoons, using traditional animation, where a sense of movement was represented by rapidly flicking through hand-drawn painting on celluloid of the same character in different moments of sequential stasis, in weak sociological process theory movement is captured linearly through changes from one moment of scrutiny to another. The illusion of movement is created through the path dependencies sequencing organization theories, such as stage-gate models of new product development (Cooper 1990), life cycle views of organizations (Van de Ven and Poole 1995) or eight-step models of change (Kotter 2012), all conceptualizing change in a linear and sequential way. In these models, time refers to staged evolution. Where an organization may go is shaped by the path it has travelled before (Farjoun and Fiss 2022). Historical institutionalism (such as in Thelen 2004) examines how the formation of common rules, norms and practices constitute path dependencies. Such path dependencies are best considered not as determinist, technologically or otherwise, so much as resulting from the ways in which actor networks’ articulations are positioned strategically and fixed, for a time, in relationships (Clegg 2023). Nonetheless, in time, all things must pass as organizational processes are animated by a variety of mechanisms that cause entities to change, which directs us towards a strong process approach, which we will next explain.
2.2 Strong Process Research in a Sociology of Organizations: Process as all There Is

In a strong process perspective, process is all-there-is (Sandberg, Loacker, and Alvesson 2015). In such logic, organizations are constantly becoming constituted, re-constituted, reproduced and transformed (organizing). They are circuits of power in which arranging the standing conditions is a struggle to secure stability in a world of events and change (Clegg 2023). For scholars in this tradition, an atomized, entity-based, view of reality is limiting. In a strong process view, an ontology of becoming represents the world as continuous unfolding, as flux rather than as finalized or even a temporarily stabilized process. The organizational world is, in a word, ‘liquid’ (Bauman 2024; Clegg 2024). The notion that things exist per se is contestable; things are temporary and flowing manifestations of becoming (Hargrave 2021). As Hegel pointed out, all life is living and dying at the same time (Hegel 1812; more contemporaneously, we can note that in the dialectic, that which is not actively creating, that ‘not being born, is busy dying’; Dylan 1965). Dialectics represents the world as the ceaseless interplay of opposing tendencies (Clegg, Cunha, and Cunha 2002; Farjoun 2021a; Raisch, Van de Ven and Hargrave 2018). Contradictions inevitably emerge in social totalities (Benson 1977) in which diverse actors follow distinct interests, as both Marx (1976) and Weber (1978) stressed. Systems’ dynamism involves an interplay of what Ashmos and Huber (1987) refer to as reproduction/maintenance and deviation/change, depending on organizational learning capacity, which Clegg (2023) refers to simply as reproduction/transformation, in response to events.

In a strong process ontology, time is not reduced or reducible to chronologically divisible horology. It is insufficient from this perspective to approach processes as objective, divisible and unique. Time is chronos and kairos, fact and psychological duration, “the happening of what happens” (Guerlac 2015, p. 31). To understand organizing, scholars may use diverse knowledges to incorporate multiple scales of time and space, exploring how scales affect other scales; for example, how short-term real time responses affect the long run but also how the long-term may potentially affects the short-term, for instance, when scenario planning becomes performative (de Geus 1988). Ontologically, time scales depend on highly differentiated ways of knowing, temporally embedded in diverse practices (Dille, Soderlund, and Clegg 2018). Time scales are thus dependent on knowing-in-practice; in consequence, objective divisibility becomes a function of knowing, which differs both from knowledge as an objective phenomenon as well as from that thing that knowledge names; knowing is personal (Polanyi 2012; see also Hadjimichael, Pyrko, and Tsoukas 2023), albeit inscribed in intersubjectively customary ways of being in the world.
In strong process approaches, time is not linear, an arrow moving towards the future. There are fast and slow effects, with some causes expressing their consequences with a delay or at a distance (Williams, Whiteman, and Kennedy 2021), rather than immediately or locally (Willer 2003). On the other hand, present structures reflect past decisions, in some cases, centuries old, as Lampedusa (1986) was acutely aware: “Lampedusa’s sense of history is double: there are events, but these events are somehow illusory, superficial, and behind them, below them, the deep habits of power, subordination, and corruption” (Jones 2003), providing an apt lodestar for sceptical organization sociologists.

In strong process, time can be approached in ways unconstrained by Newtonian assumptions. For example, reacting to fast changes often means that organizations respond to effects rather than to causes (Williams, Whiteman, and Kennedy 2021). Instead of representing time as an objective monotonic measure, a strong process approach treats time as expressed in different scales (fast-slow, short term-long term). For this reason, what looks like change may in fact be a façade for stability, while stability may dialectically produce novel syntheses that do not repudiate the past but rather incorporate it into solutions that transcend a given order (Farjoun 2021a). Strong process may promote scholarly time travels with analysis reaching backwards into the past, diving deep into a future or alternating between past, present and future (Cunha 2004; Hernes 2022). Notions that revisit the past to create a future, such as restoration (Miller, Gomes, and Lehman 2019), express this possibility. The assumption that time is a chronological progression imprints organization theory with a distinctively teleological mark. Such a teleological trait limits understanding of how layers of past organizing still haunt present day organization, as traces of the past are sedimented in the structures beneath the surface of things (Clegg 1981). In this sense, the organization may be viewed as a palimpsest over which multiple layers of meaning are inscribed over time (Cunha et al. 2015). Excavating layers expands understanding of time and of organizing.

Ideal typically, change matters in combination rather than in isolation (Farjoun 2021a), with actor network relations energizing processes. Deep structures are laid down by past actor networks, sedimented in time, meaning that it is unlikely that “change agents”, seeking to build change on this sedimentation, will be able to change as much as they might think (Tureta, Américo, and Clegg 2021). Agents may be “instantiations” of deep structures over which they possess limited agency (Silva and Hirschheim 2007). Here it is the dynamism contained and liberated by the actor network system that is of interest for researchers. Different forms of energy are released by actors and actants. The pacing and rhythm of a system’s unfolding depend on how organizations and their stakeholders interact (Roulet and Bothello 2022) and on the paths travelled before.
Strong process generative mechanisms regard changes precipitated by an identifiable episode/decision as a result of past dynamics, often emerging over long periods. A given occurrence (e.g. the introduction of an honour code in a US business school) that seems to be caused by some specific event (i.e. the appointment of a new Dean), may in fact result from the entanglement of many factors whose co-occurrence over time transformed a potentiality into an actuality (Gehman, Trevino, and Garud 2013). The existence of unintended consequences is a well-known organizational process (MacKay and Chia 2013; Merton 1936) for which many explanations are, perhaps, insufficiently processual.

3 Strong and Weak Process Approaches as Dualism in a Sociology of Organizations

There is a significant dualism between strong and weak process approaches. Both approaches to understanding organizations differ in how they perceive change and stability, space and time. In the weak process version, organizations are seen as entities with recognizable identities, retaining their essence over time, despite variable changes. For example, while contingency theory acknowledges structural adjustments to maintain fit, the organization's essential dimensions are preserved, even as relationships between structural properties change (Donaldson 1987). The strong process view, on the other hand, emphasizes the ever-changing, plural, and contradictory nature of meanings within organizations. Organizational identity, which is considered stable in the weak processual approach (Albert and Whetten 1985), can also shift in meaning over time (Anning-Dorson 2017; Lewrick et al. 2015). The paradox of the ship of Theseus illustrates this difference: while a weak process view focuses on the ship itself as the figure, the strong process view highlights change as the background. Even when actors attempt to maintain a steady state through balancing opposites (Smith and Lewis 2022), they encounter a system’s inherent capacity for change due to tensions and contradictions. Efforts to stabilize the organization are met with forces that disrupt equilibrium, causing balance and transformation to coexist. The strong process view emphasizes change and polyphony (Kornberger, Clegg, and Carter 2006) while the weak process view focuses on recognizable, enduring aspects of organizations and how innovation effects these.

Instead of accepting that the weak or the strong version of process theory is superior, we theorize their relationship in terms implied in Braudel’s hourglass metaphor (see Clemente, Durand, and Roulet 2017): slow moving elements and mid-range moving events are mutually constituting; they compose a duality, two sides of the same coin. Instead of imposing one time horizon, scholars may hybridize situationally specific temporal perspectives (see Lovell’s [2015] treatment of the
distinct temporal perspectives in the Opium Wars and their contemporary effects). Acceptance of the transcendence of categories and dualisms (structures vs. events) and the embeddedness of the entities constituted in their respective contexts is required. To advance this possibility, we next present strategies to overcome dualism by integrating strong and weak versions of process.

4 Hybrid Approaches to Overcome Dualism in a Sociology of Organizations

The strong and weak versions of process should, in principle, have ontological and epistemological alignment, i.e. the nature of reality and our perceptions and ways to acquire knowledge of reality should be in tandem. In this section we discuss methodologically hybrid strategies to explore process as weak-strong, articulating being (stable entities) and becoming (dynamic processes) from a duality perspective (Farjoun 2010). Strong and weak views of process, despite their differences, are taken as two elements of one duality defined as the “twofold character of an object of study without separation” (Farjoun 2010, p. 203). In a duality, no element prevails. As Van de Ven and Poole (2005) have observed, there sometimes seems to exist, among the defenders of a strong process view, an idea that their version is truer to the meaning of organization than the weak version – a problematic assumption from the point of view of the coexistence of philosophical heterogeneity in management and organization studies (Coelho and Lima 2021; Johnson et al. 2006). In line with these authors, we will not ‘rank’ the truth-value of theories. Theories are ways of accounting for the world that are variably coherent in their identity, rather than existing in correspondence to something exterior that can authenticate that identity. Despite differences that are real and significant between these two approaches, there are also shared conceptual building blocks discussed above.

Of course, duality is a well-worn path in broader sociological theorizing, one charted predominantly by Giddens (1979; 1984; see also Den Hond et al. 2012; Chatterjee, Kunwar, and den Hond 2019). It is a path that is not without major critiques by Archer (1982, 1995), Mouzelis (1991), Parker (2000), Sewell (1992), Thrift (1985), and Urry (1982). Giddens’ most positive critic, one who build on the duality of structuration theory, is Stones (2005). He develops the abstract ontology of the duality of structure and agency in Giddens’ work by arguing for an ontology that relates to specific social processes and events in particular times and places. There are reasons to consider that we may benefit from hybridizing rather than dividing strong and weak views. To do so we can build on Stones’ bridging of the micro and macro. In terms of actors’ knowing, temporality is a continuous flow that must be managed
strategically; things present may be connected to things past as well as to things that may be future. Analytically, we can approach this epistemologically by cutting the flow into stages that assume divisibility (e.g. input-process-output), as in Zeno's paradox (Cruz 2021; Sainsbury 2009). Time, as lived experience, is change, the experience of coming to be and the passing away of identities assumed. Up to that finality, all change is immanent and lived; converting it into a fact observed from the outside perturbs its very nature, turning it into something different. It is easier to analyse a reality assumed to be stable than to think about it as an unfolding process. Hence individuals – and organizations – strive to build stable identities (Hatch and Schultz 2002).

There is an element of irony in studying strong process: at some moment, pragmatically, the becoming will have to be stopped and the organizing reified in representation, reportage and reconnaissance that is strategically or analytically inclined. The process may be captured in a model, a diagram, a theory written in a paper or in that most reified of organizational products, a strategy. Such objects are necessarily fixed, whereas the processes represented are not. In other words, we use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social facts is all there is</th>
<th>Reifying (strong–weak)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(weak–weak)</td>
<td>Approach: becoming is being</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Liquefying (weak–strong)</th>
<th>Process is all there is (strong–strong)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

| Embedding |
|-----------|----------------------------------|

Table 2: Strong and weak process and hybrids (in parentheses ontology and epistemology).
static means to capture dynamic objects. Even the use of the gerund is a feeble approximation to that which is unfolding (De Cock and Sharp 2007).

Finally, there is the scale of knowing: the cognitive means to represent the passage of large time scales may be inaccessible to many actors. Scholarly collaboration with disciplines that approach time in different ways, such as history (Maclean, Harvey, and Clegg 2016; 2021) and anthropology (Demarest and Victor 2022), enables better understanding of large time intervals (Bansal, Kim, and Wood 2018; Heikkurinen et al. 2019). To help overcome these difficulties we make the case for the articulation of strong–weak methodological hybrids and advance three hybrid exemplars, depicted in Table 2. The typology is organized around two conceptual axes, namely those of ontology and epistemology. In two cases, ontological and epistemological realms are aligned around strong or weak versions of reality. To these we add two hybrid approaches, in which strong perspectives are mixed with weak. In other words, structural and processual views see the involvement of both structures and processes, being and becoming, in the process of organizing.

We invite sociological scholars to deliberately engage with a methodological experiment with an epistemological fallacy, i.e. the confusion between epistemology and ontology (Bhaskar 1975; Schad and Bansal 2018), as a means to purposefully create nuanced understandings of the intertwinement of structure and process, exploring the unfolding of being in the potentiality of becoming (Berti et al. 2021). These hybrids shift figure and ground in rendering saliency. In one case, we suggest contemplating an ontology of being from an epistemology of becoming, exploring things from the perspective of ongoingness, a hybrid we call, following Bauman (2024), liquefying. A second hybrid provides an invitation to approach an ontology of becoming via the consideration of how things emerge, i.e. the material instantiation of process, a strategy we call reifying. Onto-epistemological shifts challenge the boundaries between strong and weak views, promoting rich forms of synthesis. In a sense, they reflect our daily practices, as “a fluxing and ever-changing reality (...) is eminently unliveable” (Mackay, Chia and Nair 2021, p. 1347, italics in the original). We superimpose a third type on the two hybrids, focussed explicitly on the knowing of the researcher as bodily immersed in the sociomaterial world where research takes place. For each hybrid we explain its logic, illustrate it with existing work, and consider practical research challenges each raises.

4.1 Liquefying: Accentuating Strong in Weak

Our first hybrid, liquefying, following Bauman’s (2013) notion of liquidity, emphasizes the changing order of reality, accentuating the fluid, fluxing nature of things. We contrast it with a second (reifying) hybrid approach, which assumes that what
appears as being is a product of effortful becoming (being is becoming). The becoming of the world is represented as a space in which there are places and of flows (Lim 2014). In this case, for example, in a reversal, charismatic leaders are placed in a distal omnibus context (Johns 2024), not as figures that make history but as figures created by history, leaders as instruments of history rather than history as a creation of great leaders (Cunha, Rego, and Clegg 2011).

Liquefying may also be used to explore the ongoing dynamics of supposedly solid material instantiations. Illustratively, work on routine dynamics is showing how solid, lasting entities such as institutions, regimes or routines, can be understood as less solid, entities in permanent reconstruction, via a strong process lens. Weak views, with their emphasis on being, project an image of solidity differing from a more dynamic view based on becoming. Even accepting the prevalence of entities, researchers may create fresh knowledge by questioning solidity, for example, by exploring how solid matters, such as enduring autocracies suddenly crash, as in the case of the Arab Spring (Kallio and Häkli 2017), or how well tested routines are constantly refashioned through improvisation as a pervasive form of adaptation (Dewey 1922). Through liquefying, scholars may explain how, as Marx and Engels (1976) suggested in The Communist Manifesto, “everything solid melts into air”, how solidity is permanently scaffolded (Farjoun 2021b) and why agency is often context-induced, rather than located in the presumed agent. As Welch et al. (2022, p. 13) observed “context (...) has agency”, and this agency needs to be given more consideration.2

Liquefying also shows how times past, recent and distant, are constantly being produced and re-produced in a present that, even in its moment of being eclipsed, draws on the past to remake its future, an observation for which Opatska et al.’s (2023) research in Ukraine is particularly apposite. In this hybrid, distant and recent pasts are intertwined, in order to explore how the shadow of the longue durée (temporal structures) affects recently observed events; again, the agency of contemporary agents may be strongly linked with long processual flows that may be difficult even for the participants to understand. Even effects from 16th century decisions may be retained in present-day social and economic structures, even after they have been formally abolished. That is the case of the forced labour system called mita, institutionalized by the Spanish government of Peru in Bolivia in 1573 and abolished in 1812 (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012; Dell 2010) or the slavery regime (Farjoun 2021b) and why agency is often context-induced, rather than located in the presumed agent. As Welch et al. (2022, p. 13) observed “context (...) has agency”, and this agency needs to be given more consideration.2

Liquefying also shows how times past, recent and distant, are constantly being produced and re-produced in a present that, even in its moment of being eclipsed, draws on the past to remake its future, an observation for which Opatska et al.’s (2023) research in Ukraine is particularly apposite. In this hybrid, distant and recent pasts are intertwined, in order to explore how the shadow of the longue durée (temporal structures) affects recently observed events; again, the agency of contemporary agents may be strongly linked with long processual flows that may be difficult even for the participants to understand. Even effects from 16th century decisions may be retained in present-day social and economic structures, even after they have been formally abolished. That is the case of the forced labour system called mita, institutionalized by the Spanish government of Peru in Bolivia in 1573 and abolished in 1812 (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012; Dell 2010) or the slavery regime

2 The case of Mohammed Bouazizi is illustrative: Bouazizi’s role as the change agent who triggered the events leading to the Arab spring was the product of a network of actors (political activists, citizens in different parts of Tunisia) and actants (mobile phone, social media, the streets, coffee houses) that were fundamental in the process unfolding in the way it did. It is not necessary to downplay the role of Bouazizi in the process to highlight the importance of dynamics involving a multitude of participating elements.
employed on Southern US plantations from 1619 to its formal cessation in 1863, a system that still has significant effects on contemporary differences in political attitudes across counties in the American South (Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen 2016). This hybrid thus plays with the echoes of past processes in the material instantiations of the present.

An organizational illustration is how, in the distant past of the 18th century, in the putting-out trade in the textile production that seeded the English industrial revolution, productive work was outsourced to cottage industry. In order to have a central market in which to buy and sell textiles, cloth halls were built. Cloth halls centralized the market for the trade in hand woven textiles produced in the pre-industrial economy of the West Riding of Yorkshire, from the Middle Ages through to the early nineteenth century. The Piece Hall in Halifax, the heartland of the woollen cloth trade, was such a venue in which merchants could sell the pieces they collected from domestic industry situated in Pennine villages. Dating from 1779, ‘pieces’ of cloth (a 30-yard length of woven woollen fabric produced on a handloom) were collected from the domestic weavers and traded in the Piece Hall. By the nineteenth century, however, the industry had moved from domestic work that the merchant’s put-out, to factories in which workers were employed in mass production (Marglin 1974).

The reason why an organizationally specific location became the production hub of an industrial revolution, depending on the account, is either mainly to be found in the extension of merchant control (Marglin 1974) or, as Scott and Davis (2007, pp. 126–127) argue, task interdependence: ‘the extent to which the items or elements upon which work is performed or the work processes themselves are interrelated so that changes in the state of one element affect the state of the others’ (Scott and Davis 2007: 126–127). It is argued that, especially when interdependence is sequential or reciprocal (Thompson 2003), it is necessary for workers to be physically proximate to perform bodily embedded tasks. Marglin (1974) would add, especially so when they are assembled under the surveillance and control of a master that employs them under the watchful eye of factory ‘veillance’ (Zorina et al. 2021) so as to harvest the surplus value that is being exploited.

Changes in spatial relations can also be considered. The contemporary assumptions that led to internal organizational spatial relations premised on open-plan offices, hot desking and close working in small meeting rooms, are increasingly questionable. These questions of distance have achieved heightened acuity when the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic closed down many sites of economic activity and rules of social distancing were imposed. Elias (1982) argues that longer and more complex chains of interdependence between people lead to greater self-regulation because of enhanced proximity and visibility (Clegg and van Iterson 2013). Making organizing more flexible and fluid in a virtual world of working from home, or
elsewhere than an office, transfers regulation from the discipline of the organization to the discipline of the self. Having been through recent experiences characterized by lockdowns and social distancing during the pandemic of COVID-19, the lack of proximity and spatial awareness of the others with whom one interacts is not just a matter of distance, as in supply chains but also of contiguity; hence, possibilities are opened for increasingly less self-regulated behaviour to occur. The recent past, improvised in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the long past, nurtured in the co-location in the modern firm, interact in the present, in attempts to (re)define the future of work.

**Methodological challenges.** This hybrid might create original ways of exploring organization as process, strong and weak, by organizational sociology. Scholars using such an approach to place short-term material instantiations in their historical context, endow organizational scholarship with historical sensitivity able to question whether the present is exceptional (McNamara, Vaaler, and Devers 2003). Historical sensitivity may, in turn, assist in avoidance of theorizing only about effects that are recent, irrespective of their explanatory power. Returning to the hourglass metaphor may help in reversing the slow-moving and mid-range approaches which, in turn, can help avoid methodological focus on short-term explanations.

As an example, a refreshing complement to existing research, accentuating the role of a historical person, is available. The example, provided by Moasa et al. (2023), analyses how the life of Vlad Dracula has been used to nurture a romance of leadership throughout the multiple changes in Romanian history. Using this hybrid, researchers may explore how the socio-political factors of a specific time and place create conditions for the emergence of rulers, such as the historical Dracula. In a different space and time, Trump can also be studied as a product of particular circumstances rather than as a story of the emergence of some charismatic “big man” (Tourish 2023). The extended case method (Nguyen and Tull 2022) can also integrate micro and macro factors, focusing on becoming, while downplaying the importance of being. ‘Extending’ here refers to extending up, from the consideration of ethnographic detail to the larger distal elements affecting current events. Experience sampling (Uy, Foo, and Aguinis 2010), via repeatedly measuring naturalistic episode experiences, can also be an approach for exploring how processes unfold in the short run as experienced by those who lived them, such as managers.

### 4.2 Reifying: Accentuating Weak in Strong

An ontology of becoming emphasizes reality as constant flux (Tsoukas and Chia 2002). Yet, even in a world of becoming, as it is said, matter matters (becoming manifests as being). Process creates its material instantiations: “‘things’ of all sorts
are (re)produced in ongoing fashion” (Kuhn, Ashcraft, and Cooren 2017, p. 43). This hybrid underlines the recursiveness of strong–weak, the power of material things in shaping process as well as the potentiality of process in emanating material instantiations that shape the further development of the process via non-linear processes. Therefore, the reifying hybrid, even though giving ontological priority to flux, acknowledges the importance of the material instantiations of process and alerts to the role on ongoing processes in the manifestation of things as indicators of process. This hybrid aims to apprehend how process manifests materially in ‘social facts’ (Durkheim 1982), interpreted relationally, as Worrell (2018) suggests they should be. For example, in a strong process view, historians such as Braudel have examined the longue durée (Braudel 1958, 1995). The longue durée explains events in the context of the very settings that produce them and that are influenced by them – as captured in the hourglass analogy (Clemente, Durand, and Roulet 2017). What is sometimes called “big history”, the exploration of the past in several time scales, including large scales (Christian 1991), celebrates this view of the past as present in the present. Big history approaches events between the Big Bang and current processes as parts of a single narrative (Aunger 2007). Material remains of the past help shape the present.

A hybrid view, although acknowledging the importance of process as flux and becoming, explores how processes originate material instantiations that may redirect historical trajectories but that often reinforce paths of process. This hybrid may be useful to explain how change sometimes ends up reinforcing the status quo, as when a revolution produces regime change that reinforces the status quo, as in the history of France’s first republic from 1792 to 1804. In world history revolutionaries of the past can often become midwives to the dictators of the future. Studying the emergence of charismatic leaders and their role in the continuity of the very systems they aimed to replace may benefit from this hybrid approach, which aims to highlight the role of beings in the unfolding of the world. The world is viewed as a palimpsest (Cunha et al. 2015) in which current reality is written over past layers. The discrete events are contextualized in a more distal omnibus (Johns 2024). The hybrid may also be used to explore how some by-products of long historical times, apparently finely honed cultural dispositions, such as manners, are reified as an outcome of the ‘civilizing process’ (Elias 1969). They might appear superficial, spontaneous and effortless but they are deeply acculturated practices. Practices, such as improvisation, have been associated with specific nations (Cunha 2005); what is known in New Zealand as ‘Kiwi ingenuity’ is a case in point (Downs and Bridges 2014; Toy, Simpson, and Taylor 2023), as are the organizational improvisations of the Ukraine war effort (Opatska, Johansen, and Gordon 2023), practices finding institutional rather than spontaneous, purely processual, expression.
Methodological challenges. To develop complex views of the longue durée of time with a developed sensitivity to present events and their material instantiations, researchers may explore how ‘things’ (decisions, projects, initiatives) are an outcome of historical processes. This can be done explicitly not only through the use of phenomenology and ethnography (Buroway 1982) but also by using interviews and questionnaires (Miller and Friessen 1982), exploring the genealogy of current events. The study of the appointment of a new dean as historically anchored in a number of events that are not apparently related to this particular decision may illustrate the logic of reification, how long processes originate material instantiations that give them thing-like properties. Recent studies of historical processes also exemplify this approach (Tunarosa, Lê, and Pradies 2024; Kilminster 2004; Kilminster et al. 2023; Mennell 1985), an approach that Mennell (1985) termed retrodiction, where sociological inference leads to the search for historical evidence. Another possibility consists in adopting prospective case studies (Bitektine 2008) such that time is apprehended in non-linear ways. In this case, people will be invited to reflect by moving back and forth between past, present and future to explore how processes create their own desired and unexpected manifestations. Mennell’s (2017) account of how he became an Elisian sociologist is a good example. More prosaically, organizational participants, as practical theorists, may prospectively imagine some future (Pitsis et al. 2003) and subsequently, as organizing unfolds, spontaneous processes such as improvisation or serendipity, that may be difficult to capture via retrospective methods, can be followed up as events that materialized, irrespective of the motivations and intentions of the participants.

4.3 Embedding

Vaill defined process wisdom as “the feelings of moving through situations and problems and yet somehow acting ‘wisely’ in relation to them” (Vaill 1998, p. 25, italics in the original). Process organizational research has been approached mostly from the outside through researchers exploring how processes happen. Process wisdom invites a different approach: instead of knowing about processes, researchers may also learn in the process as bodily participants, refusing a transcendental position from the researcher (Marston, Jones, and Woodward 2005), via reflexive probing in situ, constituting sociomaterially situated knowing (Nair, Burt, and Chia 2013). In other words, doing this aims to obtain awareness of the temporal lens of the participant, as Reinecke and Ansari (2017) put it.

Studying process without considering one’s context risks decontextualization (Welch et al. 2022). A case in point is Eldridge’s (1977) review of Pugh and Hickson (1976), in which he contrasted the acontextual nature of their approach to the social
reality of organization in Birmingham and the West Midlands, compared to that of Rex and Moore (1967), also in Birmingham and conducted at much the same time. The specificity of place, and awareness of the historical processes transforming place, are as evident in the latter as they are missing in the former. Both studies occurred in the same place and time but only one of them shows this fact; *Organizational Structure in its Context*, makes no connection with the place researched.

Researchers gain from being embedded, immersed in practices (Chia and Mackay 2023) instead of being distant observers of a phenomenon, as was the case in De Rond’s (2017) fieldwork in a Coalition field hospital in Afghanistan during the war with the Taliban. For this reason, using personal experience as members of a given community may be perceived as positive rather than problematic, when this process of zooming-in on local knowledge is counterweighted with zooming-out, such as insider-outsider research teams. Exploring process may in fact imply “deep immersion and analytic reflexivity”, as noted by Jarzabkowski, Bednarek, and Lê (2018, p. 187), as well as the capacity to consider broader patterns – hence the value of zooming in-zooming out lens switching.

**Illustration.** To nurture process wisdom, scholars may shadow managers as they move through situations (Czarniawska-Joerges 2007). Mintzberg’s (1975) now classical study of the manager’s job provides an illustration, albeit at a diarised distance. Even though the work became known for the multiple roles that managers perform, it redirected the conversation on managerial work by locating it in diary accounts of what work was done. In a different scenario, moving ethnographically through the process, as in the case of Erickson’s (2018) study, helps to understand with vivid, first-hand, local evidence, how the predicted evolution of a pandemic outbreak in the West Coast of Africa did not unfold as the algorithm anticipated. Being in the process offers unique vantage points of process observation.

**Methodological challenges.** Being embedded/immersed in a phenomenon raises questions, namely that of proximity: how can one be an observer of a process that one lives through as an insider? The tension between being close and being distant can be used productively to articulate strong and weak process views. This challenge may be tackled through composing research teams with outsider-insider characteristics (Louis and Bartunek 1992), in which the tension between being proximate and distant is assumed and embraced rather than avoided. Methodologically, the need to zoom in and to zoom out has been acknowledged (Schad and Bansal 2018) as a means to compose more rigorous views. The competence is the capability to observe phenomena from different process dimensions with different methodological tools, such as big data and local, situated experience (Jones and Bartunek 2021). Despite recent enchantment with big data, the advantages of being on the ground cannot be ignored. The articulation of scales and methods, such as first-hand direct knowledge
(Erickson 2018; Mills 2018) and macro patterns (Airoldi 2021) seem to offer particularly promising prospects for articulating strong and weak views of processes.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

In approaches that view organizations as ongoing processes (e.g. Abdallah et al. 2018; Hernes 2007; Langley et al. 2013), distinctions are made between robust and less rigorous process research. It is often assumed that decontextualized research is more scientific (Johns 2024). We question this belief and propose a way of looking at process that blends the strengths and weaknesses of both strong and weak views, moving beyond the traditional dualistic perspective of process as strong or weak. We contribute to process research through the presentation of three methodological hybrids of liquefying, reifying and embedding. These are approaches that simultaneously engage with strong and weak views of process. They are useful for studying organizing in a dynamic and holistic manner, in time and space, emphasizing the importance of understanding time, history, context, location. Through these hybrids, researchers may better explain the dynamism of organizational phenomena. Our hybrids highlight the need for diverse methods, collaboration between different communities, and the ability to zoom in and out of phenomena to uncover deeper insights of organization as process.

The hybrids are not mutually exclusive. They can be synthesized to discuss and explain different dimensions of process and its material instantiations. Prospective theorizing, for example, can combine approaches to co-create, rather than just describe, possible futures (Pavez, Godwin, and Spreitzer 2021). Hybrids may also help develop process sensitivity about thresholds, the moments in which “mattering” happens and processes gain new qualities. Important contributions have been advanced by work on punctuated equilibrium (Gersick 1991) but process research may significantly enrich our knowledge of how transformative moments happen and how flows (Farjoun and Fiss 2022) and salient events or episodes (Hussenot and Missonier 2016) offer different representations of a single complex and textured reality.

The process view has made important contributions to our understanding of organizations, both in terms of novel theorizing as well as in terms of retheorizing (Köhler et al. 2023). We have discussed the need to methodologically synthesize strong and weak process modalities in methodological hybrids to guide researchers in relating to process. Doing this may support our understanding of flows as well as their material instantiations as events and episodes. Future work may explore some of the ideas discussed here to investigate how strong and weak views prevail in different organizations or hierarchical levels.
Research funding: This work was funded by Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (UID/ECO/00124/2019, UIDB/00124/2020 and Social Sciences DataLab, PINFRA/22209/2016), POR Lisboa and POR Norte (Social Sciences DataLab, PINFRA/22209/2016).

References


Tourish, D. 2023. “It is time to use the F word about Trump: Fascism, populism and the rebirth of history.” *Leadership*, in press.


