

The Future(s) of organization studies. About the erosion of “passionate scholarship”¹.

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The future(s) of organization studies are characterized, like in all types of scientific fields, by the nature and the binding of its boundaries. It should be a matter of what boundaries scholars wish to establish and subsequently, a matter of what they wish to substantially address. Unfortunately (or not...) it is also strongly related to the behaviors of individual members working within these boundaries and how these behaviors influence the nature, the content and the “style” of research that is going to be published and acclaimed. The point I wish to highlight is that current individual compulsion to compete for jobs and status is now stronger than individual endeavors to tackle difficult ideas and subjects, partly because difficult ideas lead to writing complicated papers that journals do not have time to handle and are therefore inclined to reject. The outcome of that tendency is that the field of organization studies is replete with low influence and low “idea-intensive” scholarship. I suggest that it is both a matter of topics and underlying ideologies, and a matter of individual behavior. I rapidly offer a direction to move away from what I see as an erosion of what I call “passionate scholarship”.

1. Topics: Political and Social relevance forgotten?

I will not talk about boundaries *per se* but about topics and behaviors, because I think that the problems that organization studies are confronted to revolve around lack of political and social relevance of many research conducted in the field. Therefore I will neither talk about theoretical creativity in OMT, which is surely strong in particular because of the emerging quality of lateral thinking and the [careful] comeback of qualitative research. My point is more about the discipline being more and more isolated from social needs and forces.

In the editorial signature that I published together with my fellow lead editors of OS in 2008 (Courpasson & al. 2008), we were insisting upon the need to establish a scholarship strongly aware of the “giant” ideas that have, after all, created the field, and to pay particular attention to be “listened to”. The question was: How to be a socially and politically relevant discipline? In the context of this

¹ This short note is the loose aggregation of subjective impressions, editorial experience and scholarly work. Please forgive approximations and excessive self-citations at this stage!

short note, I will simply repeat something that some colleagues may feel mundane and useless; but I think this something relates to the lack of awareness in which we are caught that OS, as a [any] scientific discipline, should pay attention to its social influence (so as to avoid to be outstripped by what Pierre Bourdieu was calling “journalistic theories” and the tantalizing power of everyday medias): addressing issues which are “talking” to people, which are influencing peoples’ lives and how they interact with and within institutions and organizations is of greater importance today, at least because life in the workplace is more painful than ever²; look how the work of managers is caught in a tension between “seizing” local power or remain the usual conservative and complying “organizational man”; look at how people are prevented from being “who they are” in the organizations and how this is a matter of growing incompatibility between organizational imperatives and claims for individual and collective identity and integrity. Nothing very new here, but these are issues that we do not see often in major organizational journals. The question is why are we not more at the forefront of pressing debates involving the futures of *people* in our societies, as well as in different regions of the world where life may be seen as even more difficult? Is that not what we are supposed to grasp and help people better grasping?

If I just take a quick look at what topics OS (the journal) has received over the last 4 years for Special Issues³, it is stunning to see that the key words are “performance”, “networks”, “knowledge”, “technology” ; very few are driven by “power”, “work”, “community”, “beliefs”, “culture” or “people” kinds of issues. To me, the alleged preoccupation for “sustainability” or “ethics” does not look more beyond finding connections with maintaining organizational performance, which is surely fine but does not help organization studies to forecast a socially significant and influential future. Often, papers lack flesh (despite recent claims for the development of true “qualitative research”), data do not talk because they are “cold”; recent useful claims to see organizations and institutions as “inhabited” tend to remain in the strict domain of studying interactions and small units effects, which is important but which does not say much for instance about the actual spaces that are currently reconstructed by people at work (and outside work!) through specific forms of agency and resistance. When I pushed the topic of *Social Movements* in 2008 for a Special Issue of OS, many people were criticizing the fact that maybe “that would not belong to OMT *per se*”. Same comments for the forthcoming OS Workshops on *Spaces of Work*, or even worse, “*Anthropological perspectives and the cultures in organizations*” in 2013...

However, just to take a personal example, recent research conducted with colleagues at EM Lyon on the entrepreneurial and political power of local communities in Argentina showed us the incredible fertility of certain domains of research⁴: here we had a way to suggest the power of communities on entrepreneurial ventures; to address the question of physical/non physical spaces in the shaping of patterns of social action; to discuss the emergence of democratic claims in poor rural regions; to start talking about the power of powerlessness and so forth. I suspect this is the type of work that we

² Note the statistics of suicides and drug addiction related to work in France for instance. Is that exclusively French?

³ Editorial spaces where scholars are invited to “let things go” and be passionate and creative.

⁴ Marti, Courpasson and Dubard Barbosa (2011) Living in the Fishbowl. Generating an entrepreneurial culture in a local community in Argentina. *Journal of Business Venturing*, doi.10.1016/j.jbusvent.2011.09.001.

should develop⁵ in order to accomplish what some of our “giants” would have asked us to accomplish.

So why is that we do not achieve this ambition? I rapidly suggest in the following paragraph that there might well be a “structural” deficiency of our collective scientific enterprise that affects our behaviors.

2. Behaviors: the “productivist” paradigm? An editor’s rapid view⁶.

A culture of productivity is now prevalent in the field of organization studies. That means several things: that the publishing process is more adversarial than cooperative (and that editors are more in the business of rejecting than of publishing papers!); that the field is overwhelmed by submissions and papers which is both indicative of a large group of researchers exploring a huge space of different problems BUT also symptomatic of a dramatic shift in the behavior of researchers which might stunt the actual impact of their work and retard evolution of the collective scientific enterprise; that due to excessive volume of papers to evaluate, we run the risk of seeing the most innovative papers really suffering because they are time-consuming to read and understand, so they are the most likely to be either completely misunderstood or underappreciated by an increasingly error-prone system of publishing; all this publishing process is also time consuming for scholars so good reviewers for instance are overworked and unable to read thoroughly and respectfully all the submissions (or they do that at the expense of their own research). So the key point here is that service might become (or has already become?) more of a burden all the more as it is less and less likely to help in career advancement... The culture of productivity is indeed a byproduct of intense competition between research and educational institutions like business schools. We all know too well the song of rankings and accreditations.

As a result, our current system of scientific production creates more units to review with a lower density of new ideas, as well as of ideas that are less significant for “the world”, in other words, for other worlds than our “OMT world”. The culture of ideas is vanishing: due to publishing pressures, people feel more emboldened to submit *any* paper because rejection is not necessarily harmful: a new dynamic is created where work is routinely submitted (even when clearly unfinished), overburdening journals and preventing the collective scientific enterprise to develop (while authors’ visibility can be maximized by incremental improvements, enabled by the culture of productivity, that multiply the potential papers to submit by a single author). Again, volume does not always match quality and innovation: editors are more and more inclined to focus on flaws to purposely narrow down the amount of papers under review and obviously in this “negativist” cycle, innovative papers can be sacrificed by the necessity of correlating the “quality” of a journal and a high [desk] rejection rate.

⁵ Again sorry if that comment may seem to be “self-laudatory”, that is not its intention!

⁶ It is worth noting that journals and publishers are constantly criticized these days for exercising undue power over scholarship, so I admit that it is a trendy criticism (see for instance the recent debate after the blogpost by Tim Gowers, a Cambridge mathematician who expressed in the Guardian his being upset that academic work sat behind the “paywalls” of private publishing houses. The post has attracted so far 9000 signatories committing themselves to refuse to either peer review, submit or undertake editorial work for Elsevier. ..

This process of deterioration in the quality and increase in the magnitude of production also leads to “weaken” the core supervision of editors who rely more and more on the supposedly increasing professionalism and willingness to serve of growing pools of reviewers. Here it is not only the loss of an “idea-based” culture which is lamented, but the prevalence of a culture of individualistic achievements which is strengthened by absence of true fellowship and solidary ties between scholars, less and less animated by the project of building a serious collective knowledge. Am I too pessimistic here?

3. Moving further: adopting community as a topic and as a behavior? A “New Class” of scholars?

The reader will have understood that this modest note aims to suggest that moving away from the underlying hegemonic market ideology as shaping both academic behaviors and research topics is urgent for the future of organization studies to be truly challenging and adapted to the realities of our times. It is also urgent for [re]developing “passionate scholarship”, that is to say, a discipline in which scholars of all ages and backgrounds share not only knowledge, but also certain values and emotions based on their conviction to talk about and work on crucial issues for the future of real people at work, as well as for the future of the organizational society. Beyond the apparent naivety of this mundane claim, my guess is that paying attention to the future of organization studies should be synonymous of a reflection on “what can we do for the organizations to be enhancing places congenial to individual desires to live interesting ventures together, to work together in a spirit of collective achievement?” Put differently, the point to be discussed is how and whether organizational scholarship is likely to getting closer to a community ideology both in the desired and encouraged *behaviors* of scholars themselves (a community which would be stronger and tighter than simply connecting scholars through knowledge sharing and creation, but through solidary ties in front of the huge stakes facing societies and organizations) and in the very *content* of our work. In other words, the scholarly community could be thought of as an organized space which would function similarly to other kinds of human based associations.

Community is a form of social action and relationship that connects people because they need to be together to achieve something significant. A community can let leaders emerge but it requires people to be aware that collective achievements are more powerful than individual ventures and egoistically seeking reputation. Being a scholar would therefore mean that what I do, what I write, what I teach, has an impact on what my fellow members do, write and teach. I take the idea of the New Class (Gouldner 1979) to quickly reflect upon some conditions of a comeback to a culture of ideas in our field. While not overtly a critique of the current “class of scholars” based on excessive production, pushing tacit claims based on the moral superiority of future scholarship could help develop a paradigm of virtuous and legitimate authority that would entail both strong technical scholarly skills AND concerns for the society at large. Today I feel like there would be a contradiction between these two terms in our field: for instance, a Phd student has to pay more attention to the swiftness and “rationality” of her publication plans, than to her genuine interest in the subject that s/he will “choose” to study for years. The stake is to create and sustain an occupational culture which would neither be the caricature of the devoted orthodoxy to market and economics ideologies, nor another caricature of a radical critical heterodoxy that would import theories from any field, as long

as it enhances a form of theoretical creativity. A culture based on passionate scholarship, where emotion and true engagement with issues would fuel the intellectual spirit of scholarship that Weber, among others, was aspiring to. After all, this is what the “giants” had in common: engagement (sometimes close to militancy) and emotional connections to their subjects of inquiry. Pierre Bourdieu was talking about sociology as being a “*combat sport*” because doing sociology meant for him fighting against the obvious facts of oppressive powers. Could we find a similar standard to raise for organization studies?