



# On the Erosion of ‘Passionate Scholarship’

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Let me reflect for a short while on what several years of editorship at *Organization Studies* ‘taught’ me about the dynamics of the collective scientific enterprise in organization and management theory. In this farewell note, I will aggregate subjective impressions, everyday editorial experience and scholarly work to stimulate reflection about the possible ‘crisis’ of social sciences disciplines and the consequences of this crisis on organizational research. Nothing less. It is modestly intended to share thoughts, disappointments and hopes.

The dynamics of organization studies are characterized, as in all types of scientific fields, by the configuration and the binding of its boundaries. Therefore, it partly depends on what boundaries scholars wish to establish and, subsequently, on what they wish to substantially address, on what is deemed to be legitimate research. But that is obviously not the whole story. I would even suggest that it is not what triggers changes and dynamics in this field. Those dynamics are also strongly related to the behaviours of individual members and how these behaviours influence the nature, the content and the ‘style’ of research that is going to be published and acclaimed. And that is obviously not finalized: educational and research institutions exert more and more influence, through their managerial practices and policy decisions, on what is going to be submitted to journals. A point I wish to quickly highlight here is that the present compulsion for individuals to compete for jobs and status could well be now more influential than individual willingness 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 neglect and reject. The outcome of that tendency is that the field of organization studies is, I am afraid, 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 and institutional behaviour. I am not going to repeat a (relatively) well-known diagnosis, although certain things should be said several times. And we also need to convey some understanding of the situation of many scholars, especially junior scholars, facing the power relations now embedded in academic careers. That said, I will rather rapidly offer a direction to move away from what I see as an erosion of what I call in this short note ‘passionate scholarship’. Passionate scholarship refers to commitment to a personally meaningful and socially relevant topic, ‘close to the heart’ (Heinrich, 2010). It is the recognition that intrinsic interest in a topic might help to break through institutional and competitive pressures to study or not study certain issues.

## Topics: Political and Social Relevance Forgotten?

I will not talk about boundaries per se but about topics and behaviours, because I think that the problems with which organization studies are confronted revolve around the lack of political and

social relevance of much research conducted in the field. This short note is obviously more about the heart and passion that exists within the field of research. Therefore I will not talk about theoretical creativity in organizational research, which is surely strong, in particular because of the emerging quality of lateral thinking and the (still careful) comeback of qualitative research. My point is more about the discipline being ever more isolated from social needs and forces.

In an editorial in *Organization Studies* five years ago (Courpasson, Arellano-Gault, Brown, Lounsbury, 2008), we were insisting on 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 being 'listened to'. The question was: How can we be a socially and politically relevant discipline (journal)? In the context of this short piece, 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 organization studies, as a (any) scientific discipline, should pay attention to its social influence (so as to avoid being outstripped by what Pierre Bourdieu called 'journalistic theories' and the tantalizing power of everyday media), addressing issues which 'talk' to people, which influence people's lives. How and why people interact with and within institutions and organizations is of even greater importance today, at least because life in the workplace may well be more painful than ever,<sup>1</sup> and because new tensions within companies have been emerging for quite some years. See for instance how the work of managers today is caught in a tension between 'seizing' local power to defend certain threatened productive ethos, or remain the usual conservative and complying 'organizational man'; look at how people are often prevented from being 'who they are' in their organizations and how this is a matter of growing incompatibility between organizational imperatives and claims for individual and collective identity and integrity; note how the eternal issue of who governs is marked by growing struggles of legitimacy between organizational centres that are not politically sacred anymore, and peripheral powers that are pressurized to generate meaningless performance. Nothing very new here, but these are issues that we do not often see addressed in major organizational journals. The question is therefore: why are we not more at the forefront of pressing debates involving the futures of *people* in our societies, and of organizational members, as well as in different regions of the world where life is experienced as even more difficult than in the western world? Are these not the topics we are supposed to grasp and help people to better grasp?

If I just take a quick look at what topics our journal *Organization Studies* has received over the last four years for Special Issues,<sup>2</sup> it is stunning to see that the key words are mostly (still) 'performance', 'networks', 'knowledge', 'technology', all significant issues for sure; but very few are driven by 'power', 'work', 'community', 'solidarity', 'beliefs', 'culture' or more simply 'peopled' kinds of issues. To me, for instance, the contemporary alleged preoccupation with 'sustainability' or 'ethics' does not look further than 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', and also because authors are often told that publishable papers ought to be short, which leads to pruning down data... 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 in 2008 I pushed the topic of 'Social movements' for a Special Issue of *Organization Studies*, I heard that people were criticizing the fact that maybe 'that would not belong to organizational research per se'. What this 'per se' is remains to be seen, and maybe they were right. The same comments were made over the

*Organization Studies* Workshops on ‘Spaces of work’ (2012) and, even ‘worse’, ‘The everyday lives in/of cultures and communities’ in 2013, where ethnography and anthropological perspectives were centre stage. After all, what is interesting in community research, I have heard here and there, for organizations and their managers?

However, just to take a personal example, recent research conducted with colleagues on the entrepreneurial and political power of local communities in Argentina showed the fertility of certain domains of research (Marti, Courpasson, & Dubard-Barbosa, 2013): here we had a way to suggest the power of communities on entrepreneurial ventures; to address the question of physical/nonphysical 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 how powerlessness can be related to entrepreneurship and so forth. I suspect this could be a type of work and method of investigation, among others, that we could develop more in order to accomplish what some of our ‘giants’ would have asked us to accomplish. Certain ‘safe spaces’ should also be more developed, that is to say, small focused conferences that require submissions to genuinely engage with issues and that could therefore help to produce important papers and build communities, like the Special Issue on climate change published by *Organization Studies* (Wittneben, Okereke, Banerjee, & Levy, 2012), or the Special Issue on aging (Ainsworth, Cutcher, Hardy, & Thomas, forthcoming): the *Organization Studies* Workshop is one of these spaces, also the PROS conference, the Discourse conference, surely LAEMOS<sup>3</sup> etc... I suspect the role of a journal like *Organization Studies* could also be to link ‘mini-workshops’ to Special Issues so as to give materiality to those safe spaces. Indeed, while being relevant for people and societies is absolutely key for the discipline, there is always the danger of confusing relevance with practitioner engagement, which could simply breed a consulting mentality. Working on a socially important topic is an opportunity to build a broader community and challenge conventional thinking while attracting scholarship from outside organizational research. None of us is going to save the planet but we could talk more to different people about important issues. If we were to develop genuine engagement with social issues, we could also find alternative means to enable early career researchers to engage with complex topics, through the institutionalization of grant applications and performance appraisal. Put differently, the social relevance of issues could also be a criterion to be encouraged in career management. Researchers would then be able to tick some boxes – and earn some respect from their university – even if their research productivity slows down. Publishing less but better and more relevant ‘stuff’ could be a way to sow some seeds about what we might do in the future to develop a truly respected discipline.<sup>4</sup>

So why is that we do not achieve this ambition more often? I briefly suggest in the following paragraph that there might well be a ‘structural’ deficiency in our collective scientific enterprise that affects our behaviours.

## **Behaviours: The ‘Productivist’ Paradigm? An Editor’s Rapid View**

A culture of productivity is now prevalent in the field of organization studies, as in many other scientific fields.<sup>5</sup> That means several things: that the publishing process is more adversarial than cooperative (and that editors may well be more in the business of rejecting than of publishing papers, despite contradictory claims!). In other words, publishing is more a struggle against largely unidentified adversaries than a productive and cooperative game. A second element is that the field is overwhelmed by submissions and papers,<sup>6</sup> which is both indicative of a growing group of scholars exploring a broad and rich space of different and probably relevant problems *but* also symptomatic

of a shift in the behaviour of researchers, which might diminish the actual impact of their work as well as seriously impede the relevance of the collective scientific enterprise. A related problem is that due to excessive volume of papers to evaluate, we all (and particularly journal editors) run the risk of seeing the most innovative papers as ‘trouble makers’, because they are often time-consuming to read and understand, so they are the most likely to be sometimes misunderstood and somehow undervalued by our publishing factories. All this publishing process is also extremely time-consuming for scholars, which implies that good reviewers, for instance, are overworked because they are constantly asked to review and then they are unable to read thoroughly and respectfully all the submissions (or they do that at the expense of their own research, or they make choices depending on the status of the journal, and so on). All these behaviours are likely. The key point here is that working with or for journals might become (or has already become?) more of a burden as it is less and less likely to help in career advancement... and is not always well recognized by the scholarly community itself. The culture of productivity is indeed a byproduct of intense competition between research and educational institutions such as business schools. We all know too well the song of rankings and accreditations; some of us know the sceptical glance of colleagues or faculty deans when asked to join an editorial position: ‘go ahead, that is your problem!’

But meanwhile, as a result, our current system of scientific manufacturing creates more papers to review, with less committed and less timely reviewers, with a lower density of challenging ideas, as well as of ideas that are less significant for ‘the world’; in other words, for other worlds than the closest colleagues and networks. The *culture of ideas* is therefore vanishing: due to publishing pressures, people feel more and more pushed to submit *any* paper because rejection is not necessarily harmful: a new dynamic is created where work is routinely submitted *anyway*, sometimes in a real hurry (that is to say, even when clearly unfinished, including incomplete lists of references or variety of colours in the text), overburdening journals and editors. Here individual arbitrations surely play a role: authors’ visibility can indeed be maximized by small improvements enabled by journals’ insightful reviews; at the same time, thanks to this principle of productivity, potential papers to submit by a single author are multiplied, often in a logic of replication and repetition that also leads to ‘deviant’ behaviours such as self-plagiarism. But that adds some items in a resume and that is important because items are counted. Again, this is a counter-productive game: because volume does not always match quality and innovation, editors are more and more inclined to focus on flaws to purposively (although not willingly) narrow down the number 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.<sup>7</sup>

This process of deterioration in the quality and increase in the magnitude of production also tends 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 that I am lamenting, but the prevalence of a culture of individualistic achievements which is strengthened by absence of true fellowship and solidarity ties between scholars, less and less animated by the project of building a serious collective knowledge. Am I too pessimistic here?

## **Moving Further: Adopting Community as a Topic and as a Behaviour? 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 which shapes both academic behaviours and research topics is urgent, in order for the future of organization studies to be truly challenging and adapted to

the realities of our times. I argue that this move is also urgent to (re)develop '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 passion 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 through the productive ethos of scholars should be synonymous with a reflection on 'what can we do so that the educational and research institutions in which we work can 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 get closer to a 'community ideology' both in the desired and encouraged *behaviours* of scholars themselves; this community would obviously have to be stronger and tighter than simply connecting scholars through knowledge sharing and creation, and help develop research through solidarity ties among scholars confronted with the huge stakes facing societies and organizations. 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 rather than as a competitive space forcing individuals to see research as a means to gain a better classification than one's fellows.

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 allow leaders to 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 briefly reflect upon some conditions for a comeback of a culture of ideas in our field. While not overtly a critique of the current 'class of scholars' based on excessive useless or irrelevant 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 society at large. Today I feel as though there is a contradiction between these two terms in our field: for instance, a PhD student may have to pay more attention to the speed and 'rationality' of her publication plans than to her genuine interest in the subject that she will 'choose' to study for years. No doubt this type of career is not driven by passion and the intrinsic relevance of research topics. We know why. The stake is rather to create and sustain an occupational culture which will 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. Rather, again, we envisage a culture based on passionate scholarship, where emotion and true engagement with issues would fuel the intellectual spirit of scholarship to which Weber, among others, aspired. After all, this is what the 'giants' had in common: engagement (sometimes close to militancy) and emotional connection to their subjects of inquiry. Pierre Bourdieu talked about social sciences as being a '*combat sport*' enabling scholars to say 'no' to some social and political determinations, because doing research in social matters meant for him fighting against the obviousness of oppressive powers. Can we find a similar pathway for organizational research and say 'no' to some contemporary principles for judging research 'quality'?

*To End...*

To be honest, I hesitated before deciding to add a farewell editorial note after five years of editorship at *Organization Studies*. Another note? What for? I have received and read so many papers,

done so many ‘desk rejections’, accepted quite a few manuscripts, responded to numerous claims, grievances, criticisms, and received innumerable thanks and signs of recognition. A whole story could be told; whether in five years one has time to leave a trace or not, or to influence anything in a journal’s identity, is not the question. Let me just finish by mentioning a few things and, above all, thank all the people who have helped to retain the singularity of this journal in the landscape of publishing uniformity. Because a journal is mostly a human venture.

In such a venture, the job of editor of a big manufacturing machine is located between public relations and ‘customer satisfaction’, expertise on scholarship, running a factory, supervising a production line. I have always considered the job as being both a factory manager and the guardian of a relatively safe space of scholarship, where some ‘out of the box’ pieces would be always welcome and taken care of. Without patronizing, I have seen over the last years many scholars stepping back from ‘passionate scholarship’, as I explained above. Through this erosion, the collective enterprise has not necessarily been well served all the time; an individualistic and productivist working ethos has largely taken over. But that, hopefully, is not the end of the story.

I trust that Frank den Hond and Robin Holt, incoming editors of this beautiful journal, will continue to promote and encourage the values and principles that are likely to make organizational scholarship interesting for wide audiences, and that have been supported over time by the previous editors of *Organization Studies*: David Hickson, Stewart Clegg, John Child, Arndt Sorge, David Wilson, Haridimos Tsoukas. I hope that they will accept imperfection as being sometimes valuable, even desirable; that they will continue to encourage authors to be confident in our journal, to help them to move beyond certain accepted ‘limits’ or boundaries of what is often seen as ‘good’ or publishable scholarship.

Thanks to all the authors and reviewers for helping to keep the *Organization Studies* factory running at 120% over these five years.

Thanks to all ‘my’ co-editors and senior editors, not always on time, always constructive, detailed, thoughtful, competent and genuinely engaged in others’ scholarship. You made my life much easier and more interesting: David Arellano-Gault, Andrew Brown, Michael Lounsbury, Bobby Banerjee, Frank Barrett, Rossella Cappetta, Paul Carlile, Catherine Casey, T. K. Das, Frédéric Delmar, Frank den Hond, Roger Dunbar, Yiannis Gabriel, Elizabeth George, Eric Godelier, Ha Hoang, Robin Holt, Candace Jones, Matthew Jones, Alice Lam, Ann Langley, William McKinley, Anca Metiu, Guido Möllering, Kamal Munir, Catherine Paradeise, Trish Reay, Carl Rhodes, Georges Romme, Ayse Saka-Helmhout, David Seidl, Graham Sewell, Yehouda Shenhav, John Sillince, Jacky Swan, Ryad Titah, Georg von Krogh, Marvin Washington, Richard Whittington, John Weeks!

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Thanks to Sophia Tzagaraki. I have had numerous occasions to say that she is the best managing editor a journal can have. Now I am allowed to write it!

Good luck to *Organization Studies*!

## Notes

1. Note the statistics on suicide and drug addiction among workers and managers in France, for instance. Is that exclusively French? We could also note here that some of our business and management educational institutions look rather like this painful workplace, especially for early career researchers confronted by the oppression of rankings and the subsequent obligation to publish, whatever they publish.

2. Although Special Issues are defined at *Organization Studies* as editorial spaces where scholars are invited to ‘let things go’ and be passionate and creative!
3. <http://www.laemos.com>
4. Thank you to Cynthia Hardy for suggesting these reflections.
5. 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 debate in 2012 after a blogpost by Tim Gowers, a Cambridge mathematician who complained in the *Guardian* that he was upset that academic work sat behind the ‘paywalls’ of private publishing houses. The post attracted thousands of signatories committing themselves to refuse to peer review, submit papers or undertake editorial work for the publisher named.)
6. Just taking the example of *Organization Studies*, the number of submissions has more or less doubled in five years.
7. I have to admit that I have considered the increase in desk rejection rates at *Organization Studies* from around 30% in 2008 to 49% in 2013 as good news.

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