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Title page

Towards a biosocial turn in management and organization research? Proposals for a paradigm shift

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Abstract:

In this essay, I draw on the concept of biosocial organizing to propose a biosocial turn in organization research. In recent years, *Organization* has seen an increase in articles and special issues on the organizational dimension of agriculture, food, and the environment as major challenges and opportunities for our scientific community and global societies. These contributions participated towards moving the critical thinking of *Organization* beyond traditional concepts in management such as sustainable development or corporate social and environmental responsibility, in which the environment, living entities, and nature are seen, at best, as contexts. However, the number of these works is still limited and the subject deserves further empirical and theoretical research. Much more is needed to promote the contribution of critical organization studies to these challenges, to account for the complexity of phenomena – such as climate change or biodiversity losses – from an organizational point of view, and to learn more about the impacts of studying these topics on new modes of organizing.

Main document

Organization research and more specifically critical management studies have taken environmental challenges into account since the 1970s. Yet ecological issues remain at the periphery of contemporary theory (Cunha et al., 2019), and human organizations are still the main contributors to the major environmental crisis our planet is facing. The call in 1995 by Purser et al. for the “greening” of organization theory failed to result in current challenges being fully addressed, and the concept of sustainable management has not led to a real paradigm shift in our scientific community. Although ecological issues have a long history in organization scholarship, only recently have we witnessed renewed attention to this topic, with an increase in publications on the impacts of organizations on the natural environment and their relations with it. Most often, however, ecological issues are considered only superficially (Demers and Gond, 2019). There is consequently an urge for a more radical perspective in organization research, to produce innovative knowledge for an ecological transition of human organizations. This essay advocates for a biosocial turn in management and organization studies (MOS), from a relational and pragmatic perspective.

Traditionally, organization studies has taken the subject of the environment (an anthropocentric abstraction from the totality of nature (Walker, 2005)) as a generic term, a context or a case among others for exploring organizational dynamics. One of the common concepts is “sustainability”. For example, in 1987 a journal, *Organization and Environment*, was created specifically to publish research on the implications of organizations regarding the sustainability of their environment in the three dimensions of sustainability: social, economic, and natural environment. In 1995, a debate arose in the *Academy of Management Journal* on how environmental and risk factors should be a part of product management (Shrivastava, 1995). Yet, despite their important contribution to the field, these attempts did not really question traditional research practices or their ontological and epistemological implications. Barnejee, for example, argued in 2003 that the sustainable development paradigm is based on an economic, not ecological, rationality, and embodies the same view of nature as classical economic thought. The same statement can be made for the paradigm under which corporate social responsibility approaches were developed. The inertia of sustainable development and innovation and of environmental management tends to slow down corporate change (Wright and Nyberg, 2015; Acquier and Rehn, 2019; Garland et al., 2013). When we take into consideration ecosystem cycles, electric vehicles, for instance, are neither sustainable nor virtuous in terms of environmental impact – contrary to what the media have depicted, and over and above the problem of abandoned batteries and recycling of batteries. Garland et al. (2013) analyse how companies such as Toyota “attract

mainstream consumers to the world's first mass-produced green car while sustaining other product categories that are ecologically inferior" (Garland et al., 2013: 699). This lack of ontological questioning and this narrow definition of the field, in what can be called a weak approach to ecological challenges, has an adverse effect when it comes to rapidly addressing environmental crisis.

Organization research, like most Western thought (West et al., 2020), remains heavily indebted to the modernist or 'substantialist' paradigm, anthropocentred/technocentred approaches, and a nature/culture separation (Banerjee and Arjaliès, 2021; Gherardi and Laasch, 2022; Simpson et al., 2021). Although every activity of every organization is affected and affects the non-human world, in most organization research the environment is outside, non-existent, invisible. But at a time "when the interactions between human, viral, animal, and technological bodies are becoming more and more intense" (Bennett, 2010: 108), there is mounting frustration with the disconnect between academic theorizing and the practical experience of individuals and organizations in facing climate and environmental challenges, which pervade all aspects of life.

More recently, the multiplication of attempts to bring more radical approaches to organization research illustrate the premises of what I call a biosocial turn. In this biosocial turn, bio-sociality is not a case study among others in management and organization studies, but a new theoretical, epistemological and ontological perspective that should cross through and bridge a large range of researches. *Organization* was a precursor in addressing these topics, advocating for a change of paradigm on several occasions and beyond previous attempts in which living entities were considered only as specific case studies. One of the first attempts to include animals in MOS was an article on pets in the *Journal of Business Research* (Holbrook and Woodside, 2008), which focused on relations between consumers and pets, without questioning the ontologies and epistemologies of animal-organization relations.

Over the past decade, *Organization* has published several special issues proposing critical approaches to nature-organization relations, advocating for epistemological and ontological changes in MOS. In 2013, the journal published a special issue on "Organizing in response to climate change" (Wright et al., 2013); in 2016, a special issue on animals and organizations (Labatut et al., 2016); in 2018, a special issue on Organizing in the Anthropocene (Wright et al., 2018), and in 2019, the first special issue of any organization studies journal on food systems (Böhm et al., 2020). In 2021, Vlasov et al. took the first steps towards a critical ecopsychology of organizations, defending an eco-centric ontology to analyse and embrace a degrowth transition. In 2020, in the journal *Organization Studies*, Ergene et al. proposed a radical paradigmatic shift to revise the field of sustainability in management and organization studies. Several scholars in other organization research journals called for an Earth-centric perspective and new

epistemological, ontological and methodological reflexion (Wright et al., 2018; Banerjee and Arjaliès, 2021; Roquebert and Debucquet, 2022).

Researches have shown the illusory nature of compromises and the limitation of dualist approaches opposing capitalism and the environment. Such perspective-seeking compromises are insufficient for capturing the revolution needed for organizing in the Anthropocene. Works with a critical view of organizations in the Anthropocene are still limited in number and deserve further empirical and theoretical research. There is a need to unify, build a community, institutionalize this biosocial turn in management and organization research, and question our ontological visions of nature that still limit our way of thinking about organizational phenomena. The critical perspective developed in the community of scholars in *Organization* is central to contribute to this challenge in the near future.

Mapping new ontological approaches for addressing nature-organization relations

We can identify various and sometimes overlapping approaches seeking to examine the ontological status of living entities and nature in organization studies. Three of them are briefly described here: post-humanism and new materialism, zoo-centrism, and ecocentrism.

A first radical ontological approach, inspired by Callon, Latour and Haraway since the 1980s and largely used in MOS, lies in post-humanism and the Actor Network Theory. Based on flat or monist ontologies, these approaches reject differences between categories such as human/non-human, nature/culture, and mind/matter, and agency is recognized as not being a human-only phenomenon. In post-humanist research, these multiplicities must be engaged relationally as the generative source of action and movement (Simpson et al., 2021), in a sympoeitic becoming with the world (Haraway, 2003). Post-humanities focus on the processes of change and becoming of the natural and social world, and develop “an ecology of the human and the non-human in which neither is distinguished from, or privileged over the other” (Fox and Alldred, 2018: p. 8). These approaches allow for a going from “life”, with essentialist dualism such as human/animal, to flows of becoming cutting across nature/culture (Fox and Alldred, 2018). As Braidotti argues, “the posthuman is both situated and partial – it does not define the new human condition, but offers a spectrum through which we can capture the complexity of ongoing processes of subject-formation” (Braidotti, 2019a: 36). However, a lot needs to be done to fully grasp how these approaches can pervade organization scholarship to facilitate the identification of the processes of becoming between organizations and living entities. The Others and non-humans addressed in organization research, in studies of agency using ANT, are seldom the living entities that Callon was dealing with in his seminal article on scallops (1986); instead, they are objects, machines or technologies (Bruni, 2005). Close to ANT is new materialism, another ontological approach from which insights can be drawn for a biosocial turn in organization scholarship. New materialism advocates for

a turn to matter, to the emergence drawing together natural and social worlds. The materialities considered in new materialist approaches include human bodies, other animate organisms, material things, spaces, places and the natural and built environment that these contain, and material forces, including gravity and time (Fox and Alldred, 2018). New materialism “de-privileges human agency, focusing instead upon how assemblages of the animate and inanimate together produce the world” (Fox and Alldred, 2015). New materialism encourages a more positive post-humanism, which can be the basis for an eco-philosophy (Braidotti, 2013; Fox and Alldred, 2018) that is still to be more widely developed in organization research.

A more recent and specific call in organization research is inspired by zoo-centrism, focusing on the role of animals in organizational settings. In philosophy, Peter Singer initiated this approach in 1975 with his book *Animal Liberation*, which led to the rise of animal studies as a new perspective in the humanities. Animal studies adopted a zoo-centric ontology considering human/animal relations through the lens of animals. More recently, animal studies have pervaded the field of organization studies, illustrated by the recent publication of a *Handbook* by Tallberg and Hamilton (eds) in 2022. This movement questions the place of animals in contemporary organizations and organizing practices. The *Handbook* gives valuable insights and proposals on how to include multispecies of life in organization studies. In this approach, where “the relation to the animal as the primary ethical relationship” (Tallberg and Hamilton, 2022: 11), more nuanced and complex analysis is necessary. The risk in animal-centred studies of organizations is that one’s perception may remain rooted in an anthropomorphic approach to nature, focusing only on certain parts of non-human life. For example, the focus on the death of animals, without considering other living entities (insects, plants, etc.) and the global life and death cycle might give a limited account of the dynamics of ecosystems and their complex relations with human organizations.

A third ontological approach considering a broader range of living entities and revising the role of nature in human organizations is ecocentrism. Catton and Dunlap (1978) proposed the concept of ecocentrism, calling for a paradigmatic shift in the way sociology views the role of nature in human society, and extending the social to the more-than-human world. It was not only a proposition in support of an environmental sociology, but also a new ecological paradigm. This “eco-centric” paradigm for management in the risk society context advocates “an ecologically centred conception of interorganizational relations and internal management activities” (Shrivastava, 1995: 118). The objective is the limitation of externalities and the environmental impact of organizational activities (Shrivastava, 1995), for example in preserving nature-centred spaces outside of human societies. Purser et al. (1995) positioned this eco-centric perspective as an approach radically different to corporate environmentalism and the environmental management paradigm. More generally, in

ecocentrism, every living entity has a value in and of itself, independent from any human activity. This anti-humanist and anti-speciest approach is criticized for sometimes conveying an idealized view of nature. It stays in the comfortable distinction and opposition between domestication and wilderness that rule our life (Ingold, 2002), and fails to fully grasp the generative and positive dynamics between the multiplicities of socio-ecosystems.

These different perspectives illustrate important steps into post-anthropocentrism, shifting humans away from the central focus of attention. However, they are sometimes criticized for their naïveté regarding human-nature relations. There is consequently a need, in the organization scholarship community, to provide an extensive account for the biological and ecological relations between organizations and non-human living entities.

Proposal for a biosocial turn: a relational and pragmatist perspective

I propose here to draw from these approaches to develop a biosocial view of organizations, where bio-sociality and biosocial organizing, following Rabinow (1996), are seen as practices, processes and institutions, and where organization research focuses not only on the organization but on biosocial organizing in every dimension of organizational life. Biosocial organizing relies on a processual and relational ontology (Ingold, 2004) of organization as a biosocial accomplishment, and provides a conceptual space in which to express the diversity of our organized relations to living entities and ecosystems (Labatut et al., 2016). There are significant gaps in our understandings of bio-sociality, particularly with respect to questions about how bio-sociality unfolds and how biosocial organizing is enacted. Biosocial organizing may be obvious when organizations are explicitly built on biological and eco-systemic relations (industries in the agricultural or environmental sectors for example). I argue here, however, that organizations are biosocial per se, embodied in ecosystems, and that “biosocial organizing” can be observed in any type of organization, even the most industrial ones, provided one adopts a systemic perspective. There is a crucial issue in making these biosocial organizing processes more visible in organization research, for all organizations are a multispecies crowd since human body can be more bacterian than human (Gherardi, 2019). Bio-sociality is a process, a practice informing aspects of organizational life in situ, in a milieu, with multiple interactions at different entangled levels in ecosystems. A comprehensive theory of bio-sociality not only transcends traditional boundaries that dualisms impose on our research and which are key problems in biosocial challenges (technologies/social; human/non-human; facts/values) (Labatut, 2019); it also draws on these dualities and tensions to account for the role of organizations in the Anthropocene. “It is by retaining the qualities of duality (not dualism) that the continuity of living process is preserved” (Simpson and den Hond, 2022:132).

To explore biosocial organizing and meet the need to go beyond interactions between humans and environment, organizations and nature, I advocate for a relational perspective (see also Ergene et al., 2021) inspired by pragmatism and new materialism.. This relational perspective calls for the exploration of intra-actions (Barad, 2008) and transactions (Simpson and den Hond, 2022), where individuals, objects and situations emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating (Gherardi, 2019), and where organizations and ecosystems are entangled in complex co-emergent kinship (Haraway, 2016). Exploring these intra-actions implies that we consider as part of the inquiry the biological and environmental processes involved in organizations, even when they are not visible at first sight.

A new agenda for the Organization community and beyond

Integrating biosocial intra-actions and transactions implies a revision of both ontological (as we have seen above) and epistemological dimensions of organization research (Ergene et al., 2021), to answer new research questions: what are the transactional social and biological processes that influence the emergence of outcomes and changes? How is biosocial organizing constituted? How, following Descola (2007), are several ontologies of nature mobilized among organizations' practices and actors, as systems of organizing relationships between humans and non-humans? Studying the everyday aspects of biosocial organizing and bio-sociality implies revising traditional methods in organization research. Gherardi points out the performative aspects of post-humanist methodologies "that produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently", and where "fieldwork therefore implies the capacity to resonate with other materialities" (Gherardi, 2019: 754). But a biosocial turn also demands that we contest the disciplinary boundaries between natural sciences and social sciences. It calls for an engagement in the day-to-day work with actors and scientists (biologist, geneticists, ecologist, etc.) involved in our Earth-related organizing activities. As Purser et al. pointed out in 1995 already, organization scholars need more than a popular or media understanding of the functioning of ecosystems, the relations between humans and animals, or the effects of climate change. Biological sciences are often considered only as part of the environmental crisis, as a syndrome of modernity, rather than a source of knowledge about nature, the environment and anthropogenic relations that could inform social and organizational sciences. How can we understand the process of change and becoming of the natural and social world without reconsidering the dichotomy between natural and social sciences? Organization scholars and social scientists would benefit from working with (and not only "on") natural sciences on a daily basis and in long-term partnerships. It would allow them to go beyond ontological and epistemological differences between disciplines, to explore the fact that "all matter is affective" (Gherardi, 2019), and to provide a reflexive analysis of technological and organizational changes (Ergene et al., 2021). This boundary work among disciplines, which I have been

practising every day for the past 15 years of working in a research unit with geneticists, agronomists and ecologists, would further our understanding of the mechanisms of how the natural and social worlds affect and are affected by their relations with each other. Organization research thus needs to embrace more diverse, realistic, sophisticated conceptualizations and understanding of the biophysical environment. Building upon a biosocial turn in organization and management research would imply the creation of a conceptual perspective that allows us to actively engage with emerging worlds (Braidotti, 2019b) and the unknown, long-term effects of climate change and biodiversity collapse. There is still a lot to be done before the full potential of this biosocial turn organization scholarship is accomplished.

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