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► To cite this version:

Héloïse Berkowitz, Antoine Souchaud. Book Review: Organization outside organizations. The abundance of partial organization in social life. Organization, 2020, pp.135050842092851. 10.1177/1350508420928518 . hal-02874945

HAL Id: hal-02874945

<https://hal.science/hal-02874945v1>

Submitted on 19 Jun 2020

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Book review:

Organization outside organizations. The abundance of partial organization in social life

Göran Ahrne and Nils Brunsson

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 443 pages

By Héloïse Berkowitz (CNRS, TSM-Research) and Antoine Souchaud (Neoma Business School)

Accepted in *Organization*

Organization outside organizations is a call to reconquer spaces that organization scholars have abandoned to other disciplines, e.g. sociology, political sciences, anthropology, or to theoretical frameworks like institutionalism, due to the assumption that “organization” can only happen within formal organizations. This assumption, argue Ahrne and Brunsson, has helped assert and maintain an opposition between organizations and “their environment”, wherein other non-organized phenomena may exist, e.g. networks, institutions or markets (see Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016; Apelt et al., 2017).

In this edited volume, Ahrne, Brunsson and colleagues develop and systematically unpack the principles and implications of “partial organization”. The concept of partial organization, initially presented in a pioneering paper published in *Organization* (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011), offers a rich alternative to classic conceptual frameworks or theories. It does so by enabling scholars to think of what exists outside formal organizations, as a form of more or less complete organization in and of itself, and not only as networks or institutions.

Contemporary life, Ahrne and Brunsson argue, is the object of constant organization, that is, of decisions. Decisions are at the heart of organization the authors assert. Yet, most organization literature has focused on formal organization, like that of states, firms or associations, considering that formal organization’s environment would be intrinsically different in nature, and as such, *not* organized. However, networks, institutions and markets, but also resources and other phenomena like certification, standards, etc., can also be the object of decisions. Such decisions can be about who is allowed to contribute and how, who holds sanctioning power over whom, etc.

Ahrne and Brunsson define organization as a decided order, made up of five “organizational elements”: membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring and sanctions. Membership describes who is involved. Hierarchy defines who can take initiatives and who has decision-making power over other members. Rules determine expectations and more generally what the relationship involves. Monitoring characterizes the absence or presence and system used to assess members’ compliance with those rules. And finally, sanctions, whether rewards or punishments, refer to the presence or absence of mechanisms that can positively or negatively influence fulfillment of these expectations.

These five elements are constitutive of organizations, unlike institutions and networks. An institution is defined as a “stable, routine-reproduced pattern of behavior, combined with norms and conceptions that are taken for granted by larger or smaller groups of people” (p. 21). Networks, on the other hand, generally describe any social

interaction, but can be more precisely understood as “non-decided structures of relationship linking social actors” (p. 21). In both cases, institutions and networks constitute emerging orders, whereas organizations are decided orders that result from decisions and the communication of these decisions (Schoeneborn et al., 2014). Decided orders are controversial, and as such, they constitute *attempts*, i.e. making a decision may engender its very contestation. “By signaling their own contingency, decisions tend to dramatize uncertainty – uncertainty about their appropriateness and their chances of implementation” (p. 22).

Building on this premise, the book unravels the concept of partial organization and explores, through various cases and methodologies, important questions, including: under which conditions are certain organizational elements used? What are their effects? And, to what extent does partial organization succeed or fail in creating a decided order?

Standards, studied in chapter 2, probably constitutes one of the first applications of partial organization (see for instance Rasche, Bakker, & Moon, 2013) and one of the clearest cases where one organizational element – rules – has a strong organizing power on markets and organizations. Prizes, studied in chapter 3, also draw mostly on one organizational element, namely, sanctions. While Ahrne and Brunsson and other colleagues often consider that membership is the most central component of an organization, chapter 3 challenges the nature of and need for memberships, thanks to the notion of “contributorship” in organizations that are memberless but can still be “addressed” (see also Grothe-Hammer, 2019).

Another application of partial organization concerns the analysis of market organization (see also Ahrne, Aspers, & Brunsson, 2015; Brunsson & Jutterström, 2018), through the identification and articulation of categories of organizers, e.g. profiteers, buyers and sellers (chapter 5). Digital market places, like Lyft or Airbnb in chapter 6, act as profiteers who organize new markets to profit from them, thus challenging the very notion of the sharing economy. Similarly, certification and accreditation organizations play an increasingly important role (chapter 7) and raise complex issues of independence. In the context of market organization, independence therefore emerges as a construction through partial organization of organizations. Chapter 8 studies queues, or line-ups, as they expose the interdependence between institutions and organizations.

Inter-relations are the subject of chapter 9, which analyzes inter-firm networks as partial organization of more or less complete organizations, i.e. as governance systems that result from “reflexive structuration”. An original case focuses on the World Economic Forum (WEF) as an outsider in international relations, which combines both network and organization. The partial organization of the WEF appears both as an unintended consequence of the lack of state mandate, but also as a strategic choice to appear non-organized (chapter 10). Families, friendship and kinship can also be seen as partial combination of organizational elements: “there is a connection between the elements that can appear in a relationship and the emotional content of that relationship” (chapter 11, p249). Organized crime (chapter 12) and brotherhoods (chapter 13) highlight the specific questions that partial organization raises in terms of the salience and strength of the collective depending on the decided membership.

Partial organization also offers a lens through which to fruitfully analyze social movements. Partial organization indeed allows to move beyond the dilemma of organization in these collectives. Chapter 14 reveals the importance of certain tensions in social movements, for instance, between horizontal organizing and top-down regulation, and between horizontal organizing and oligarchy. Chapter 15 develops a processual and dynamic approach to partial organization through the case study of Anonymous, highlighting the temporality of organizational elements. Chapter 16 applies partial organization to understand how social media facilitates mass organization, and explores the potential substitutions of organizational elements: for instance, technological affordances may substitute for hierarchy.

The last section addresses partial organization in and around formal organization. In chapter 17, the authors investigate partial “de-organization” in a large industrial firm through the case of an industrial innovation program. Chapter 18 focuses on the partial organization of international organizations that take the form of meta-organizations or organizations that are made of other organizations (see Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). The authors highlight issues of actorhood and decision-making processes that are valid not only for partial organization but also more generally for meta-organizations.

This Ahrne and Brunsson’s book and the concept of partial organization not only bring an original perspective to already extensively studied phenomena like brotherhoods or business associations, they also help us understand changing organizational phenomena that traditional theories do not completely account for, such as social movements or digital markets. Ultimately, partial organization also enables scholars to think of very complex and new dimensions of social life, like memberless organizations or collective action through social media.

Further, we see particularly fertile potential for studying challenging or controversial phenomena like Blockchain, the dark web, fake news, etc. However, we also see a sort of “inception” risk. If outside organization and inside organization, more partial organization is to be found, then where does organization begin and where does it end? Has the conceptual frontier entirely disappeared? Is there a “new frontier” and how to find it? At stake for partial organization as a concept is not only its analytical power, but also its durability in the scientific community.

But beyond this worry, this book comes from a long list of inspiring works by the same authors, and constitutes another brick in what we could consider the Swedish School’s original, nonconformist, multifaceted theory of organization, led by Ahrne and Brunsson.

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