

## SOCIOLOGY OF ORGANISATION, HONOURABLE AND DEFERENTIAL

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### ABSTRACT

In this essay, we draw the attention of scholars contributing to the broad field of organisation studies, especially that part of it that constitutes the sociology of organisations, to a problem regarding the maintenance of social order in practical intellectual life as a university employee. We direct our readers' attention to the performance-related practices governing Business and Management scholars that are currently contributing to the most acute expression of this problem because they elaborate powerful individuating forces that undermine the existing social order, without putting forward any normative or positive commitment to what a different social order might be that would or should replace what was previously there. Our core concern is that this destructive tendency undermines the sociology of organisation as a legitimate form of social inquiry and ultimately undermines the capacity of organisational scholars to understand and improve social affairs.

**Keywords:** paradigms, social order, knowledge, discipline, performativity

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## INTRODUCTION

In the past, order has been achieved through the strength of the disciplines; thus, for sociologists of organisation, there was a tradition establishing a core curriculum that provided a social ordering that organised knowledge. Codified, this ordering clustered around the significance of various sociological paradigms in organisational analysis that provided grounds upon which legitimate knowledge and expertise could be built (Burrell and Morgan 1979; Hassard and Wolfram Cox 2013). Working within paradigms and adhering to traditions of ordering evokes a disciplinary field in which paradigms can on rare occasion be crossed or mixed but that are, for the most part, upheld and elaborated.

Disciplinary fields have social origins and as time passes are not immune to social change; where once the analysis of organisations was a largely sociological disciplinary endeavour, increasingly its habitus is that of the business school. Being in the business school has become a central feature of the training and employment relations of many contributors to contemporary organisational debates. As such, these employees are increasingly governed by audit cultures that attend more to grant getting and “impact” performance than to mastery of a foundational discipline and its paradigms. The latter is hardly metricised in a context in which disciplinary classification and framing is in decline; the former is highly so. Thus, accompanying efforts to improve the technologies of performance metrics (e.g. Baum 2011; Perkmann, et al. 2011), impel critically oriented scholars to investigate their performative nature (e.g. Gond, et al. 2016; Spicer, et al. 2016); however, over-emphasising valuation without any consideration of other social dynamics is leading critical scholarship astray.

In particular, we are concerned about how critically oriented scholars now routinely neglect the problem of how disciplinary social order is maintained, assuming that all questions of order are functionalist attempts to constrain freedoms and all constraints on freedom are bad.

Doing so chimes with a world of journal publishing that is less disciplinarily classified in terms of the historic domains that framed professional work, such as sociology, and more oriented to hybrid, interdisciplinary and practice-related fields, such as management. The resultant neglect of problems to do with disciplinary social order is coupled with prevailing field-level preferences for crossing, rather than upholding paradigms, in pursuit of ‘innovation’, thereby intensifying the very problem being neglected.

The disruption and chaos that paradigm crossing and constant paradigmatic change implies, presents an attractive proposition for hyper-individualised researchers keenly alert to changing funding priorities and areas, who proceed as though communication of their responses to these quickly shifting interests is the only significant matter of concern, treating communication exclusively as a technical problem disassociated from long-standing traditions of scholarship. Facing the possibility of losing any control over the academic profession, some critical scholars have gone so far as to suggest that academics should therefore make more of their public presence as intellectuals (Dallyn, et al. 2015). The problem with this manifesto is that it further individualises the solution by putting the onus on the person, shifting our attention even further away from the problems of knowledge, scientific collectives and social order.

Presently, the status of intellectuals and their claims are being broadly undermined (Nichols 2017). Under these conditions disciplinary knowledge in general, and paradigm thinking in particular, are at a distinct disadvantage. They both denote a certain type of expertise that may not be in accord with contemporary policy priorities. Rather than ditch the relationship between knowledge claims and social order in the organisation of the disciplinary field, reliant on the capacity of sociological paradigms to remain relevant, we argue that understanding the importance of social order is an imperative for the ongoing rejuvenation

and long-term survival of the sociology of organisation. We begin by sketching some terms for understanding this sociological problem and try to open the door for a new approach to the sociology of organisations that will maintain a significant role for paradigm thinking albeit in modified form.

### **PARADIGMS, DISCIPLINE AND THE QUESTION OF SOCIAL ORDER**

When handling intellectually significant concepts, such as that of “the paradigm”, it behoves us to consider how their history *as* ideas bears down on their use. Kuhn’s foundational work on paradigms emerged at a time when historians of science were concerned with the context of scientific discovery. From this point of view, the idea that incommensurable scientific worldviews bring about revolutions makes Kuhn’s work significant; he provides a master narrative for change that reinforced the centrality of justification organised around a solid core of accepted ‘truths’. Kuhn’s focus differentiated his work from that of philosophers of science who focused instead on the context of justification (Zammito 2004). The latter, which we can think of as the legitimation of scientific claims to knowledge, has been the preserve of positivism since at least the early nineteenth century when the sociologist Auguste Comte introduced this label to develop a joint theory of knowledge and progress.

In the writing of contemporary philosophers of science, such as Popper (1962), a concern with the basis for the legitimation of scientific claims to knowledge provided a powerful moral philosophy of science. Kuhn’s radical accomplishment was to dissolve the distinction between the context of justification and discovery entirely. Though many of Quine’s commitments are still at work in Kuhn’s ideas, including acknowledgment of holism, naturalism, fallibilism as well as the difference between types of propositions, he departs from Quine by committing to rhetoric rather than logic. The influence of Wittgenstein on Kuhn’s thinking is significant here. What binds the scientific community together in language

use is not a commitment to a logic but is instead a commitment to “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing” (Wittgenstein 1953: 32), a form of language game that Kuhn calls a paradigm. So too, the similarities between Fleck’s conception of science and Kuhn’s ‘normal science’ (see: Harwood 1986: 177).

In Kuhn’s hands discovery involves slow cognitive shifts that organisational scholars would think of as occurring at the field level rather than being rapid and sharp shifts between different logics. So “the question of why a particular paradigm should prove stronger than the rest turns into a question about the strength of the institutions in which it is grounded” (Douglas and Ney 1998: 30). At the same time, change is to be identified methodologically at the level of practice, which is what makes his thesis so appealing to scholars who might otherwise be disinterested in field-level effects. Methodologically, for science studies, Kuhn does to epochs in our own culture what Geertz does to other cultures for anthropology.<sup>1</sup> At the core of the practice of paradigms is the central sociological problem of how individuals can achieve collective goals in a field of intellectual pursuit and how those individuals who might sense and experience the world in radically different ways can establish shared knowledge. A paradigm requires elements of normative, coercive and regulatory institutional support (Scott 1995, 2008), in order to be reproduced.

Sociologist of science, Barry Barnes (2003) laments that the question of social order is one that remains underexplored with regard to the natural sciences. If we understand traditionally organised academic scientists in the way that Weber understood status groups, “wherein the particular mutual deference that members accord only to each other, the special honour of status... redounds to the collective good of the group” (Barnes 2003: 132), then we can see that social order is maintained through internal normative coordination, mutually appreciable cognition and regulatory exclusion of outsiders from activities. Collective autonomy for the

status group arises from this dynamic, and Barnes (2007) identifies how sociologist Robert Merton was right to emphasize and study this special kind of honour; in so doing Merton was able to see that honour mediates social relations in a manner that aligns and coordinates action and cognition, what is done and what is thinkable. Consequently, evaluative decisions regulating this kind of alignment and coordination can neither be wholly contained within the norms of the models and exemplars themselves, nor generated outside of the status group. The status group collectively decides the priority that attaches to individual differences generated from within the status group, whether these become matters of ‘innovation’ or ‘deviance’.

Barnes, in reading Kuhn as an extension of Weber, Parsons and Merton, produces a Kuhn that, as he advises, Kuhn would have difficulty recognizing. In particular, he stresses research as a practical social accomplishment: Kuhn, he argues, “offers us a glimpse of how the mutual deference that is a part of our basic nature as social animals has been essential at every level in the constitution of the most magnificent of all our technical accomplishments” (Barnes 2003: 133). A scientific community, by this account, has “the properties of a status group [that] operates in such a way that it self-repairs and self-constitutes” (Barnes 1992: 266). Any such work of repair and constitution is irremediably social. As such, the capacity to self-repair and self-constitute is subject to erosion by both individually oriented, metrics driven appraisals of academic performance, as well as by the ongoing erosion of the legitimacy of expert claims as a social phenomenon. When the collective judgements of the community of scholars constituting a paradigm weigh less in the balance than these metrics, the power of the paradigm is weakened.

The discipline of sociology, argues Barnes, has been reluctant to explain actions and how they cohere in terms of status groups. Rather than focusing on normative integration in recent

years the focus dominating sociological discussions has been more on the distinctions of creativity, knowledgeability and individual autonomy as the driving forces of innovation and scientific revolution. As a consequence, the topic of order, together with those of deference and honour, has been diminished in importance. In a world in which disruption is prized over order, in which the disorganising of existing fields seems more significant than their social organisation in practice, the implications of these shifts are particularly challenging for sociologists of organisation (Parker and Jary 1995). Yet, as we have intimated, the question of social order is taking on a new form in the so-called “post-truth” society, in which people distrust and even attack those systems that rely overtly on honour: the classic case concerns the realm of the expert and the respect that expertise commands (see Mance 2016 for a notable instance).

As disorganisation increasingly takes hold as the cause as well as the solution to some of our most important public concerns, sociologists of organisation have to confront this problem directly. Barnes concludes that the recent lack of tolerance for honour systems is especially acute for status groups that enjoy a certain level of autonomy, such as professionals, technical experts and, of course, academics. Weber recognized long ago that people who are members of such groups were accustomed to being “secure in their own dignity” (Barnes 2003: 136). In Bauman’s (1987) terms, they were adept at the role of legislator, defining the way things were. Bauman foresaw this, presciently, well before the age of the Internet, and argued that the balance of power was shifting from ‘Legislators’ to ‘Interpreters’. With the rise of interpretative communities, secure in what today we might term their respective ‘bubbles’, the honorific and deferential projection and acceptance of status is eroded in favour of performativity that plays to the crowd, not the elites of the profession and their command of expertise. The increasing pluralism of interpretive communities diminishes the ability to

legislate amongst them in terms of worth and value, especially as these are apprehended within the bubbles of 'like' minded individuals.

Elite legislation does not disappear but finds that, *sans* the respect and deference of old, it must now compete with interpreters' accounts of phenomena that the interpreters proffer and favour over those that would be legislated for them. The fields of play are becoming many and mighty crowded. And here comes the important point, "[w]e remain as ready as ever to reward them [elite experts] well for their services but we increasingly insist on the rewards being monetary rather than honorific and deferential. Monetary reward denies or even inverts status relations, and erodes expert autonomy rather than reinforcing it, as deference does" (Barnes 2003: 136). Using this discussion of social order as a starting point, we can now turn specifically to the sociology of organisations. The structure of Barnes' explanation of the problem with regard to science would seem to be equally applicable to the sociological study of organisation, though the specifics do differ in important ways.

### **ORGANISATIONAL ANALYSIS IS OPEN FOR BUSINESS**

The introduction of individuating forces into universities – through business models aimed at measuring and improving academic productivity – has led to a growing interest by scholars in organisation studies to push disciplinary rectitude to the outer limits and introduce quickly shifting, contemporary, 'popular' knowledge claims to the fore. Ignoring the institutional peculiarities of business schools and pretending that their modes of knowledge production can be treated *as though* they are the same as those in the social sciences, amplifies the individuating forces we discussed above. The subjectification of institutional business inside the counsels of the business school is overwhelmingly represented by the relatively rich, powerful and elite framing relevancies and interests.



Earlier generations of scholars would have been initially schooled in the discipline, in sociology, psychology or economics, perhaps at a later stage of employment applying these disciplines to the interests of a business school, with substantial reserves of intellectual capital to draw on to mediate the subjective framing of institutional business that occurred in elite counsels. Today, however, much sociologically-inclined organisational scholarship now originates in the business school milieu rather than migrating there subsequently after nurture in the professional discipline; lacking such nurture it frequently disavows claims to ordered discipline as a form of action (see discussion by O'Doherty, et al. 2013). In the place of disciplinary sociology, more specifically the place that the formal organisation occupied as an abstract theoretical object forming the basis for a delimited object of inquiry (for critiques see: du Gay and Lopdrup-Hjorth 2016; du Gay and Vikkelsø 2017), we find instead a variety of suggestions for *how to re-describe problems* (e.g. Spicer, et al. 2016), rather than a sustained programme of ordered and ordering scholarship, as Burrell and Morgan had envisioned. Drawing on the arguments introduced in the previous section, what might we say was there before and what are we facing now?

In a footnote in the chapter that develops the four-paradigm typology, Burrell & Morgan (1979) were explicit that they wished to expand the scope of Kuhn's use of the term paradigm, though they never articulated precisely what this expanded scope would involve. In their words, "social theory can be conveniently understood in terms of the co-existence of four distinct and rival paradigms defined by very basic and meta-theoretical assumptions in relation to the nature of science and society" (Burrell and Morgan 1979: 36, fn. 1). In essence, they crosscut the order/conflict axis of the "two sociologies" (Dawe 1970) with that of the actor/system to produce their paradigmatic typology. We can now suggest, with some confidence, that this expansion was an attempt both to establish and to expand bases for social order in organisational analysis. By replacing a focus on paradigm contestation as an

historical process with a view of it as a contemporary tournament they allowed for a plurality of ways to be an organisational scholar, with their specific codes of deference and honour, all of which drew their legitimacy from diverse currents within the broader status group itself rather than from one more narrowly prescriptive tendency within the dominant fraction of that group. The dominant fraction, to be clear, was positivism, with its tribal rituals, signs and significations.

The similarities with the terms that Barnes develops in his reading of Kuhn's work should not go unremarked. More specifically, by developing the idea that being "located in a particular paradigm is to view the world in a particular way" and that the four articulated paradigms "taken together provide a map for negotiating the subject area", further providing "a convenient way of locating one's own personal frame of reference with regard to social theory, and thus a means of understanding why certain theories and perspectives may have more personal appeal than others". Burrell & Morgan (1979: 24) provided a grammar for an overarching disciplinary system of honour and deference both more inclusive and pluralist than the prevailing hegemony of the late 1970s in which narrow strains of positivism dominated.

Recent shifts in higher education that individualize academic performance (Sahlin and Eriksson-Zetterquist 2016), find particularly acute forms of expression in the business school (Parker 2014), inverting the relationship between the pluralities of core-margin and stability-change on which paradigm thinking relies. The system of paradigmatic status and honour accruing from a collective, albeit collectively fragmented, form of academic practice is increasingly being replaced with a stress on novelty, discontinuity and innovation for its own sake, defined in response to terms that are increasingly stipulated outside of the disciplines, their relevancies and systematic codes. To find a tenable position in which paradigmatic

thinking might flourish under these changed conditions is increasingly difficult. Indeed, one of the accomplishments of Kuhn's work was to bring humility to the idea of scientific progress (see also: Shapin 2010). Justification resides in the legitimacy given by a community of *relevant* experts. The key problem, again, is what Barnes refers to as deference and honour pitted against the clamour of the crowd and the immediacy of the market.

To explain why this happens we could focus, exclusively, on mounting pressures which expect researchers to produce accounts that justify their relation to popular business practices, invoking both crowd and market (e.g. following Strathern 2000), accounts whose popular retailing means that they attract the attention of business' institutional elites. "[K]nowledge production is subject to ruination" (Navaro-Yashin 2009: 7), in the most acute ways, under this concern with immediacy and faddism. However, we might also find explanatory purchase, by returning to Weber's agonistic relationship between status groups and market-oriented groups, which would explain managerialist attacks at various higher university levels on "status monopolies" established by the professoriate. Weber's prediction would be that once the status monopolies of the professoriate are diminished, the institutional elites of management will attempt to establish their "capitalist monopolies" (see also Swedberg 2000: 379). Both of these dynamics, expressed in audit culture and in attacks on the claims to frame problems appropriately on the part of the professoriate, are evident in business schools.<sup>2</sup> The sociology of organisations has largely been translated to the business school as management and organisation studies in those many places, mostly outside the United States, where it was not already deeply institutionalized.

The form of action taken by business school academics is compatible with a kind of methodological individualism in which each individual thinker is assumed to be freely choosing from within a cornucopia of already available concepts and signs. In mainstream

organisational scholarship, this finds expression in the permanent orientation toward the “newness” of signs within heavily institutionalized concepts. It can be observed, for example, in rituals such as the increasingly popular “paper development workshop” where the focus is almost exclusively on textual technologies rather than what is being communicated and why. Relevance, treated as a technical-communication problem, translating practice to theory, operates similarly to concerns with rigour, treated as a technical-methodological translation of research questions into methodological protocols.

Critical scholars are not immune to these contemporary pressures. Implicitly the idea of critique follows Marx’s (1958: 363) assumption that “[n]o social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions have matured in the womb of the old society itself”. Consequently, and similarly to mainstream scholarship, this form of action also seeks a kind of “newness” that uses concepts in an effort to proliferate paradigms and signs in order to reorganise the categories which furnish them through importation of novelty from other fields, such as philosophy and the humanities, often imperfectly understood. It is no surprise then, that the figure of the *bricoleur* is so popular among these scholars. Unlike the mainstream organisational researcher whose claims to distinction rest on technical interests, critical scholars rest their claims on art and craft that represents real but under-acknowledged interests.

The attack on social order is also perpetuated at the level of critique itself. According to Hassard (1993: 117-119), the chief theoretical position of modernism is one of “systemic modernism”, which mechanises social order in such a way that knowledge facilitates social control combined with “critical modernism”, which stands against the “programmatic absolutism” of systemic modernism. The latter offers a critique of knowledge as a mode of

social control, favouring an interest in emancipation. Its attempt to “recapture the spirit of enlightened rationalism” (Rhodes, 2000, p. 19), has served multiple generations of critical management scholars well and continues to provide an important counter-narrative to the exercise of brute managerial control. Yet, at the level of social order, to which we have attempted to direct the sociology of organisation’s attention, this kind of critique may be facilitating the very systemic relationships of control against which it rails.

As we have argued, the moral imperative to reject existing forms of social order and control as bad and mechanical leads to some deeply troubling and unanticipated consequences. The self-constituting and self-reparatory rituals of the status group espousing these oppositions in the name of repressed interests that they, as enlightened elites, can fathom, has been eclipsed by the market orientation of metricised business school organisational practices: for instance, it is well observed that critical scholars have profited greatly from the rankings conducted in these terms. Much as the Owl of Minerva, which begins its flight only at dusk, their wings have taken flight as the shades of night are gathering.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a kind of hermeneutic investigation of “everydayness” that many have derived from Division I of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982, pp. xvii-xviii). It is also where Kuhn’s approach differs radically from institutional theory, the dominant approach for studying field-level dynamics in organisation studies. For exceptions, see Friedland & Alford Friedland (1991), and, more recently, Logue, Clegg & Gray (2016).

<sup>2</sup> In turn these dynamics are further exacerbated by the tournament for competitive grants sponsored by the state and its priorities for national investment, usually framed in largely instrumental terms.

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