

“What’s the story?” Organizing as a mode of existence¹

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For Barbara Czarniawska

“To focus on sensemaking is to portray organizing as the experience of being thrown in an ongoing, unknowable, unpredictable streaming of experience in search of answers to the question ‘what’s the story’”.

(Weick et al. 2005)

As Weick and many others have excellently shown (Taylor 1993; Czarniawska 1997), one of the difficulties of grasping an organization is that it is impossible to detect its type of agency without defining the ways in which we *speak of* and *in* it. As soon as you speak *about* an organization, you lose the specific ways in which it would have appeared had you attempted to *participate* in its organizing by telling and retelling its story (Cooren 2001, 2010).

I am not alluding here to the classical and in my view largely spurious distinction between “theory” and “practice”, I am referring to a much more troublesome obstacle: Agencies are visible only if grasped in the right key. Such an obstacle is common to all agencies that do not resemble the “middle sized dry goods” which are supposed to populate the world of “common sense”.

I have shown elsewhere that the same difficulties arise when trying to speak of religious beings, political representation, legal reasoning, psychological entities and, of course, scientific objects themselves (Latour 2007, 2009, 2010). You may add the word “God” to a sermon a hundred times and yet fail to carry even the beginning of what it is to speak in a “religious” fashion (Latour 2011); you may complain about all the political issues of the time, and yet not even start to make the political enunciation move in such a way as to generate a Body Politic. Speaking religiously requires the present conversion of the speaker as well as those he or she addresses, a feat rarely seen, those days, when sermons are confused with the expression of vague certainties about some far away “elevated” matters, eyes piously turned to heaven. Speaking politically means that you are ready to abandon your own certainty about issues so as to produce the subtle alchemy between what you say – representation – and what you are told to do –

obedience – (the autonomy and tautology of political speech act) a feat utterly distinct from the lazy way in which we most often perform “issue-dropping” (as in name-dropping) and display all the outward emotions of indignation and protest (Latour 2003). I think that we could easily agree that the same is true in the matter of organizing: There is a huge, an abyssal difference between speaking about an organization and talking or acting organizationally.

The highly specific type of agency vanishes every time because it is being measured up against a type of information transfer that I have called “double click” and in comparisons with which it is always found wanting. One of the ways to overcome such an obstacle is to shift from an ostensive definition to an *adverbial* form and to accept speaking *religiously* (and not about religion), *politically* (and not about political issues), *legally* (and not about law), *psychologically* (and not about emotions or psyches), *scientifically* (and not about science). In every case, an inquiry into the type of agency is more fecund when taking it as an adverb. As soon as you fall back onto an ostensive definition – “what is” religion, law, psyche, science? – each of those agencies takes up a ghostly character which is due to double click’s ill adjusted demands: – “How much do you resemble the matters of fact of ‘common sense’? Answer: – “Not in the least! You tried to grasp us with the wrong handle...”

In this chapter, I wish to show that it might not be impossible to overcome the same pitfall when dealing with organizations. Instead of trying to define “what is” an organization and lose the agency, I wish to grasp it *along the ways* in which we speak *organizationally* (horrible word, I agree, but this is a little price to pay to try to hear its tune within the right key).

It is of course awkward to write a chapter in the organizing mode that is necessarily disengaged from the practical task of deciding upon some real state of affairs, but I will try nonetheless thanks to two tricks: I will speak not as a scholar but as the dean of my school, and I will do it as if I was giving a lecture about it which will allow me to designate the readers as the “you” assembled in the lecture hall and pressed for time because of what I will define as a *script*. Those two tricks will allow me to somewhat imitate the type of problems I wish to share with you in the little time “we have together”, thus giving us a chance to agree on what sort of agency will appear when we find ourselves in the sort of situation Weick has described: When we try, somewhat desperately, to answer the question “what’s the (organizational) story?”.

SPEAKING ABOUT ORGANIZATION OR SPEAKING TO ORGANIZE

So many scholars have linked organization and discourse analysis that I would feel very foolish in surveying once again the same ground if I did not want to insist on a peculiar trait of what, with François Cooren, we could call the “organizational speech act”. If the answer to the question “What’s the story?” is so complicated it’s because this is not a story in the usual sense of the word since its listeners are *its authors as well as its characters*. When we engage in organizing, we are simultaneously *above* the story and *under* it – but never *completely*, ...and never at exactly *the same time* and the same *capacity*. It’s such a strange situation that I will designate by the word “script”. Let me exemplify this definition with a typical example taken from my life as a dean.

This morning we are in a crisis and the board of directors has assembled to decide

what strategy to follow and which other dean to hire to hold the helm of our School more firmly. As one director has just argued, an administrator would certainly be more in our tradition, but it might also be more suitable this time to fall back, at last, on some sort of academic. “Fine”, one of us says, “but if we look back to Emile Boutmy’s original ‘blueprint’ for our institution, such a choice would mean that we forget that our founder always showed the utmost diffidence against straight academics”. And he adds: “It’s in the DNA of our institution to hire only hybrids and never to confide anything to scholars” —by which he means the professional profiles of “universitaire” who have brought French universities to their dire present state. He then proceeds to suggest the name of a hybrid character who is neither a straight professor nor an administrator, he is a sort of “*academix*”. It is at this moment that, following his gesture, we all turn to the bronze bust of Emile Boutmy, the founder of our school which sits on the mantel of the room chimney.

At this point, naturally, no one expects the energetic head on its pedestal to nod in approval or to react indignantly like the statue of Don Juan’s father whose iron grip drags the womanizer to Hell... We are all aware that the allusion to the “essence” of our school is not something that can be proven beyond any doubt: no one actually demands to “please unfold the blueprint” or to “decrypt the code of this DNA” for us. It is perfectly plausible to imagine that we would have all turned our heads toward the bust even if the speaker had made a completely opposite claim and had said that “because times have changed, now is the time to *depart* from Boutmy’s diffidence of academics and to hire at last a true *‘universitaire’*”.

We are all well aware that talking of “the DNA of the institution” – a biological metaphor – or of “a blueprint” – a technical metaphor borrowed from the world of engineers and architects – are only ways to designate the *continuity in time* of our school; that is, its series of *discontinuities* that we could call its heritage. And we all know that when we say that our school possesses an “essence” that should “dictate” our present choice, this essence is so little assured and commands our behavior with so little clarity and so weak a pressure that we simply don’t know what to do.

That’s exactly what Weick tried to capture by the notion of “sensemaking”. The “essence” will not carry us on any more than Boutmy’s ancestral head, with its late 19th century hairdo, will show the direction we should pursue. Essence, in other words, does not flow *from* Boutmy’s time to this very morning as some irrepressible river in the stream of which we would just have to swim, but, so to speak, *backward from* our crisis meeting *to* the bust of our founder. The best proof of this retrograde movement is that the three solutions (an administrator, a straight academic, a hybrid) could all as well be “attributed” to our founder’s approbation. The “essence” goes from the present moment back to the past, and then from the past to the present; it begins to be insured by our founder’s stamp of approval – but only *after* our decision has been settled.

But then why do we turn to the bust? Are we really serious? Of course, we smile slightly while doing this. It is simultaneously an automatism – we all turn our heads to follow the finger of our fellow director pointing at it – and somewhat of a theatrical gesture: Each of us smile in a different way – from outright irony to deference, with many nuances in between. And yet, it would be entirely false to say that “turning toward the founder’s effigy in a moment of crisis” is useless, entirely satirical or even clearly seen, as a mere retrograde movement from the present to the past, as I suggested a minute ago. Yes, we “attribute” to Boutmy our own decision; yes, we all say that “it is in the blueprint” and in the “DNA” of our school only “after” we have decided what to

draw from this heritage, and yet there is no question that we are really in search of an answer to the present crisis by going back to what our institution “really means” – yes, exactly: “What’s the story?”

The best proof that this is not an ironic or amusing moment is that we rarely do it and only when the continuity of our school or its overall “architectonic” or “architecture” is at stake. So, in fact – and contrary to what a superficial observer might think – there is something deadly serious in looking back to what our school means in order to decide *which past to inherit*. Not only that, but after having settled the matter, we are all satisfied that we have been faithful to an instruction that we *did not know* before was really part and parcel of what had been bequeathed to us. We now feel that, thanks to our decision, we prolong a history which remains (which we have situated...) “in the line” of this history and which would have met the founder’s approval – even though we know it would be ludicrous to check for such a continuity in this gentleman’s exact words.

What is binding us then? It would be totally false to say that we are not bound at all and that we can “freely” modify at will the genealogy, history and development of our school without any reference to what it is now, what it has been, and the reason why it was founded in the first place: an anti-university to resist French academic corporatism and archaism. But it would be just as silly to claim that its past and present reality is so assured that we just have to follow what it is at *time t*, to be certain of what it will be at *time t+1*.

The best proof that it is a highly peculiar type of situation is that we have assembled in the council room to decide how to carry on the *same* organization to *time t+1*. You don’t usually do that for stones, for mugs and for mats... There is such a *hiatus*, such a *gap* in between *time t-1*, *time t* (the reference point of the present) and *time t+1* (tomorrow) that we are meeting in order to carry the school one step further, *beyond* the gap, *beyond* the hiatus. It won’t go by itself. It won’t jump the gap by the force of its own *inertia*. Contrary to celestial bodies, there is no inertia at all in an organization. You stop carrying it on: it drops dead. As Garfinkel has shown so well, you have to *achieve* it, so that it goes to what he marvelously called “the next first time” – it repeats itself until the next time, which is always the first time (Garfinkel 2002). Repetition, in other words, is never repetitive (Butler 2009 [1878]).

This is what makes the life in our board of directors so hard: We simultaneously have the feeling that this school is as solid, weighty, obdurate, obstinate, as a hundred ton pyramid that sits on our weak shoulders paralyzing and stifling us; and that, at the same time, or in the next moment, it could dissipate like a flock of sparrows – we have to work hard to bring it together so that it could last for another span of time, the duration of which remains totally unpredictable (the next crisis could be tomorrow, tonight or in ten years) (Powers 1998).

If we have some difficulty in answering the question “what’s the story”, it’s thus because it is not all a story but a highly specific type of entity whose continuity does not resemble that of stones, mugs or mats more than it does novels or fables. One of its many peculiarities is that we are simultaneously under its enormous weight as well as above it so that it remains weightless in our hands. It has its own consistence, its own resilience, its own obdurate presence to which we can point with a gesture just as *ostensive* as when we point at stones, or mugs, or cats, or mats, and yet if we are no longer *performing* it, the whole organization will come to a halt.

This is why, in the thick of being an organizer, it is utterly impossible to

distinguish organization and *dis*organization. There is no way to make a distinction between being organized and being disorganized, or between being well-organized and badly organized – which has no meaning for those who are in the middle of it. The state of crisis where you catch up and patch up one crisis after the other is the *normal* state of affairs, as Weick’s quote at the beginning points out so well. They might not all lead to a crisis meeting in the council room and to soul searching inquiries as to what Emile Boutmy “really wanted.” But they are crises all the same, for a simple reason that is directly linked to one of the features of the scripts: they have *variable deadlines* so that, even in the best of times, at any given moment some may require you to shift from being now “under” them to being now “over” them, while at the same time you are still “under” many other scripts and are ready to “launch” still some other new ones coming to fruition at different times...

So even when everything works “according to plan”, chaos follows necessarily from the many “roles” you have to fulfill: playwright, actor, character, rewriter, shadow writer, props, accessories, stage, all at once. But this “normal” state of chaos is always compounded by the fact that since there is no such thing, as we shall see, as a super-organism, most if not all of the scripts will be at worst contradictory, and at best ambiguous or incomplete (remember Wittgenstein’s demonstration that it is impossible to make a rule completely explicit).

It would already be bad enough to have to answer many different scripts with different end points in different capacities; but in addition, you have to deal with incompatible instructions that are targeting many possibly opposite *personae* in you, some utterly implausible... The battle of Borodino described by Tolstoï in his masterpiece WAR AND PEACE is probably the most realistic description of the essence of any organization. Things can get worse, of course, but can they be any better? Now that I am also a dean (after having been somewhat of a recluse and irresponsible academic for forty years) I very much doubt it... (And this is not, I hasten to say, because I have fallen into a badly organized school)...

To put it in less dramatic terms and to take stock of the obvious fact that the field of battle is not always littered with dead bodies, we could say that to organize is always to *re-organize*. The little prefix “re” is there to remind us of the gap which is always yawning (or smiling) at us between *time t* and *time t+1* and that no momentum will ever allow us to cross without pain. There is the same difference between organizing and reorganizing as between “the first time” and “the next time”. A description should be careful to avoid the false transcendence of super-organism, but just as careful to avoid ignoring that tiny little transcendence, that little cleft through which any organization should, so to speak, *gain* its subsistence. To act organizationally (horrible word I know) is to situate oneself at this growth point: that’s where the obstacle lies over which the horse should learn to jump. Either you recognize it and you act as an organizer or you don’t and then you simply talk “about” an organization.

This is well known even in the analysis of a very menial job: constant adjustments have to be done for any course of action to be carried through to its completion; but it is exactly as true at the top (except of course organization has no “top” but only *rooms* in which the buck sometimes stops) where “constant adjustments” are now called, depending on the characters of the leaders, “innovation”, “flexibility”, “charisma”, “improvisation”, “arcane”, or “outright mess”... There might be no real difference between organization and disorganization – contradictory scripts come to maturity at any time and under any shape – but there is a huge difference between taking up again

the task of organizing and *ceasing* to do so: in this case the institution dissolves for good. No substance will come to its rescue. As to the essence, it will fade away. Whatever he said in his time, Emile Boutmy will be betrayed – that is, translated.

To sum up this first section, organizations possess an original *mode of existence* – a term that I use to point out the various types of agencies that circulate in the multiverse (James 1996 [1909]). When you use the ontology of one mode as a touchstone to evaluate the agency of another, it produces *category mistakes* as if you wanted nature to speak directly without the institutions of science or flowers being delivered directly through the wifi (Latour 2010)... Organizing might generate strange beasts but it is not a reason to exaggerate their strangeness...

THE WHOLE IS ALWAYS SMALLER THAN ITS PARTS

Using the example above, I now wish to show that clarifying some of those category mistakes might help us listen to the specific tune of organizations. I have to begin by pointing out that their originality does not depend on having to pay for, so to speak, their existence, through constant reinvention and retelling. The existence of a hiatus, of a gap, between two instants of time is not what is so strange in the organizational mode of existence. This is a general feature of all “actual occasions”, to use Whitehead’s terminology (1978 [1929]). To last in time requires additional work and cannot be just confided to some *sub-stance* which, as the etymology indicates, would “stand beneath” a given entity in order to insure its continuity, so to speak, for free and without extra trouble.

Even though common sense seems to impose the view that, when faced with any state of affairs, one should look for an essence, foundation or substance to explain what something is and why it lasts, it requires no immense ingenuity nor deep metaphysical insights to realize that there is never any thing deeper than what is in its actuality (never, that is, once James, Whitehead and Dewey have done the job!) (Debaise 2006). “Under”, “above”, “beneath”, “beyond” the actual occasions there is nothing that explains them or that would last longer than them. What lasts manages to do so on its own by *inheriting* from other occasions. For the continuity of its existence, each essence has to pay the price in the hard currency of change.

Although this point might seem too broad, it is important to make it general enough to cover all types of bodies, including biological entities to which organization are so often compared. All organisms are in the same boat; to subsist, none of them may rely on an already existing substance, program, structure or blueprint. Literally, *every body* has to overcome this hiatus between two moments of time: my school yes, to be sure, but also my own body, the cat on the mat, the mat too, and even the pavement on which they all lie at rest. Seen at the microscopic level, the slabs of stone are in a more permanent state of crisis than my school will ever be. They would need infinitely more jumps from one quantum state to the next in order to resist disintegration than my institution will ever need overhauls, coup d’états, palace revolutions, reengineering and downsizing so as to last a few more decades. As to biological bodies, it is enough to read Darwin to begin to measure the number of gaps one organism has to jump over in order to remain in existence a little bit longer.

Remember that when we turned toward Emile Boutmy’s bust, one of us alluded to “what dictates,” as he put it, “the DNA of our school.” A metaphor, I know – a rather crude borrowing from the highly contested field of molecular biology. But that’s just the

point: When we appeal to the “DNA of an institution”, we believe that we designate a sub-stance (a genetic blueprint) which is just as assured, stable, and predictive as that of the DNA directing the “programs” in the cells of organisms. What is fascinating, when one considers the biological literature, is on the contrary, how badly predictive the DNA blueprint is of which proteins will be encoded and which tertiary or even secondary structure they will fold into (Fox-Keller 2000). If there is a hiatus that every organism has to overcome to last a little bit longer, this is surely even truer of a swarm of selfish genes competing for their inheritance. This is why this expression of a “DNA blueprint” is so telling: it does exactly the opposite job for which it is intended since it permanently destroys any notion of a super-organism not only in the easy case of human organizations but *also* in the very case of biological organisms for which there is no question, nonetheless, that they “generate themselves”.

Essence is the consequence and not the cause of duration. Thus such a risky, fragile, provisional character is not what is so strange in an organization since all entities run the same risk and pay for their continuation in the same small change: namely, *alterations*. Or, to say it in still other words, *subsistence* is never caused by some underlying substance.

This being said, is it now possible to extract organization from the idea that they somehow form a “collective body” which would be more than the sum of its parts? So entrenched is this idea, that it seems silly to want to fight against it. And yet, I think we should follow Gabriel Tarde’s original insight and consider that the whole is always *smaller* than its parts and that this is why organizing is never provided with its right sort of agency (Tarde 1999 [1895], 2000 [1899]; Candea 2010). I know this is a difficult point because it is perilously close to the tired old clichés that some relations should exist between the “individual actors” and the “structure” or “system” “inside” which he or she “acts”.

And yet, I think it is important to show that from the point of view of organization practice, there is never an inside or an outside, there is never a small and a big, it is some entirely different puzzle that organizing has to solve, and to solve again and again. It is precisely at this point that we might finally distinguish organizing – as a mode of existence with a specific type of agency – and *organizations* as what is talked “about” when we *stop* organizing (using the apt distinction made by Czarniawska between “theories of organization” and “organization theory”). Organizations – the things – are the phantoms that appear when organizing – the mode – disappears. Hence the constant misunderstanding in organization studies between objects and processes (Weick 1995).

This misunderstanding might be lifted once we accept to foreground the curious “flip-flopping” of scripts that generates organization in their wake instead of asking the question of how we could reconcile “individual action” and the power of structures. The “deep” question raised by so much social theory – “How can we simultaneously be the authors and the children of the same overarching society?” – is just the question that should *not* be answered. The point for me here is that, contrary to the idea of a super-organism, we are never *simultaneously* under and above an organizational script. We are *never simultaneously* but always *sequentially* fabricators and fabricated, and we shift roles at specific *deadlines* that are themselves scripted. While being simultaneously authors and children of “the Body Politic” is an essential feature of the *political* existence, this is never the case in the organizational mode: we are “under” or “above” but *never at the same time*, and – especially important – *never in the same capacity*. As I will try to make clearer below,

organizations as things are *the spurious image* produced by conflating two types of agencies, the political and the organizational modes of existence. Everything happens as if social theory, because it could not differentiate the two, had tried to make sense of an artifact: the whole is apparently superior to its parts because of a *suspension* of organizing practices.

This is actually quite easy to show. When we live under the script we are the ones *to whom* the script delegates instructions to be carried out. This is often called “roles” by sociologists of a Goffmanian persuasion, except this is a misleading metaphor since, at the deadlines, the situation changes completely and we are suddenly made to be the ones who insert instructions *into* the script. When we assembled with the chairman to discuss this session (remember I am imitating the lecture mode here), we burned into the timetable that I would speak fifty minutes but we could have said sixty; now that we are both “under” the script, it is the timetable that is attributing *to me* a slot to which I should be faithful – except if, through a sort of grand Derridian gesture, I decide to speak for three hours... The theatrical notion of “roles” like the literary metaphor of “text” both run into the danger of missing exactly the turning point that is the specific feature of organization: we are the role followers at 10.30 but we were the playwrights at 10 and we will be it again at 11; we were the speech writers at 11 and we will become the *characters* in the speech at 11.30. And in addition, each of us is designated as characters in multiple contradictory stories, all of which come to an end at different deadlines and with different sanctions (Greimas 1976). What sort of theater is this? What kind of text is that?

You could argue that the difference is tiny between being simultaneously authors and children of some overarching order and being sequentially scriptwriters and *characters written* inside some organizational injunction. The impression that I am splitting hair at this point could be all the more correct, since in practice, I agree: we are never completely “under” nor completely “above” a script. No matter how “free” we might have been to change the schedule, the chairman and I were also under some other instructions that we also had to respect. Conversely, while you carry a course of action that has been written for you by a script – and thus when you live “under” the script that seems to be “above” your head – you nonetheless keep a floating attention to where it is leading you – you remain also “above” it. In other words, you are never “slavishly following an order” without some sense, however vague the “meaning of the whole goal”.

And it is true that this experience is common enough: Even when you are driving and following the sturdiest in-board GPS road instructor, you remain aware that the sweet female robot voice may lead you astray. To be sure, you are “under” its (or her) set of instructions – but something remains attentive to where it is leading you, thus you remain somewhat “above” her scripted trajectory even while you “follow” her. And yet, there is clearly a difference when, after having reached a part of town that is clearly not the one you intended, you decide to switch off the GPS and to go back to a good old street map or maybe, relying on an even older practice, you get out of your car to ask a passer-by for a fresh set of oral instructions... (November *et al.* 2010). You are clearly “above” the script there in a different sense than when you were simply double-checking that you were not “slavishly” following the automaton. The breakdown has obliged you to flip over much in the same way as our discussion in the council room has forced us to shift from being the unconscious followers of Emile Boutmy’s “blueprint” to the cautious redesigners of that very same (well, now slightly different) set of injunctions.

I hope I have made clearer why this flip-flopping has nothing to do with the right link to be made between “individual actors” and the “structure” of which they are a part. There is no individual to begin with but many different characters inscribed into many contradictory scripts with different deadlines (for instance the “same” dean might be expected to sit in four meetings at the same time); as to the structure it is never more than what has been inscribed in the script by various authors (the dean and his secretary meet over the schedule to try to clean their common agenda by rewriting it somewhat). This is precisely why, in organizing, the whole is always *smaller* than the parts – as long as we are in the act of organizing. It should be clear by now that I am trying to replace the individual versus system dichotomy by another *rhythmic* variation, the one between residing above or under a script.

No wonder it is so difficult to answer the question: “What’s the story?” With the traditional idea of individuals “inside” a bigger collective entity of some sort, the nature of the story, of the recipients and of the authors is entirely lost from view (Latour, 2005). Whatever the metaphor or the concepts put to work to follow organizations, they remain useless if they don’t manage to register this flip-flopping of positions distributed in time and varied in capacity. In my view, this flip-flopping is not well understood by saying that there exists a dialectical tension between tradition and innovation, order and disorder, actor and system, and so on. As soon as you lose the rhythmic pulsation of the scripts, the spurious afterimage of an organization as a whole “inside” which “we” as individuals try to act jumps at you.

This definition of organizations seems to me a good way to make sense of the mass of work which had been done in the field of organization studies to redescribe each of the notions that were connected with that of collective entities. It is now possible to follow the precise *tools* that allow the organization to shift from one sequence where we *insert* instructions into a script to the next sequence where we *follow* those same instructions all the way to still another sequence where, often in a state of crisis, we verify whether or not we will have satisfied the conditions.

If the study of organizations has been submitted to such a radical change in recent times, it is precisely because the attention has shifted from general arguments about institutions as super-organisms or individuals endowed with limited rationality (March and Simon 1993) to the practical tools allowing for those bizarre sequences of trajectories stitching together moments when actors are “above” and when actors are “under” scripts of many descriptions and incarnated in many different types of material. I am thinking of course of the transformation of organization into writing devices, or of the study of organizational speech and writing acts, or of the new attention to instruments, to accounting, to auditing (Hopwood and Miller 1994), or again of the social study of finances (Callon *et al.* 2007). In that sense, it has become clear from all these studies that we are never “in” an organization, no matter how “gigantic”: rather, organizational scripts *circulate* through a set of actors that are either attributed some tasks or are in a momentary state of crisis to re-instruct the scripts with new instructions for themselves or for others. In brief, “inside” and “outside”, “big” or “small” do not qualify the *envelop* of the organizational agency. Those adjectives do not grasp its peculiar ontology.

On the other hand, it is precisely because organizational studies have been thoroughly “*descaled*” that the specificity of organizations has begun to shine through. If IBM were to be considered as “bigger” than its constituents, Jim Taylor’s and François Cooren’s work on how to achieve bigness by speaking in a certain way would only deal

with a superficial and irrelevant feature of institutions (Cooren 2010). Same thing with Paolo Quattrone and Chris Mc Lean’s careful study of accounting instruments: if the organization were *already* big and *already* overarching, there would be no function whatsoever for all those trivial tools (Quattrone *et al.* 2010). And the same could be said of all the other discoveries made about the technologies of public or private management (Chandler 1990; Lascoumes and Le Galès 2002). It is because organizations are never “big” and that no one lives “in” them that the organizational work relies so much on the flip-flopping circulations of so many of those humble tools. The study of organization has really advanced once the phantasmagoria of size has been put aside – and this is why it has been, from the start, a tenet of Actor Network Theory that scaling up and down should remain in the hands of actors themselves (Callon and Latour 1981).

A SECULAR DEFINITION OF ORGANIZATION

Can we go a little further and begin to use this redefinition of the organization to shed some light on the reason why it is so often missed? It would be moot to speak of a category mistake if we could not begin to compare agencies – or, to use my vocabulary, their different modes of existence – in order to account for why it is that organizations look so different when seen from another vantage point. Why is it that the clear recognition of a trait specific to the organizational mode of existence is blurred into a mystery once it is metamorphosed into a dialectical miracle through which the “same persons” would simultaneously be the authors of organizations and those who are defined by the organizations as if there existed a system or a structure into which human actors fit? Since we are now aware that this vicious or virtuous circle renders organizations totally opaque, is it possible to detect where it comes from? Well, as I said above, my hunch is that living under and above a script is easily confused with another type of *circularity*: that of politics. Everything happens as if we had attempted to study a *chimera* – in the biological sense of the word – obtained by the unfortunate fusion of the *political* and of the *organizational* modes of existence.

The creation of a path that links the parts and the whole is a crucial feature of the political regime, what I have called, for this reason, the circle of representation and obedience (Latour 2003). “Are we one or many? Is the whole more than the sum of its parts? Should the whole really consist of its constituents?” Those are some of the essential questions for making the Body Politic continue its existence one more turn. Here too, I agree, there is a hiatus to be overcome – a gigantic gap that the whole of political philosophy has tried to fathom (Latour and Weibel 2005).

That the two processes can be distinguished may be exemplified by the small crisis that made us bow to the bust of Emile Boutmy. For once, this time it is not political at all: There is no question inside the board that we are a coherent bunch of co-directors, that we agree on who is the leader, and that we belong to the same ensemble. In brief, we know the assemblage that is designated when we say “we” – “we should”, “we don’t know”, “we have to decide” and so on. And yet, while the composition of the “we” is not in question, *we* have no idea what *we* should do! In other words, the political assemblage is not in crisis, while the organization is very much in trouble; proof enough that the two regimes can and should be distinguished. (Which does not mean, of course, that the organizational crisis, were it to last, would not begin to corrode the political ensemble just as well – but this is not the case now, the leadership is not in question, the

mereological question has been sufficiently stabilized).

But no matter how important, these questions have nothing to do with the gap over which the organizational regime has to learn how to jump. The confusion is clearly detectable by a shift from Greek to Latin: the political circle that was called “*autophuos*” by Plato in the GORGIAS (Latour 1999), has become “*sui generis*”. The two expressions are exactly similar except one means the political question of bringing the parts into a whole, while the other designates the mystifying invention of a social entity *above and beyond* its ingredients. While the first clarifies the political mode of existence, the second obfuscates the organizational regime! There is never any “*sui generis*” corporate body in an organization,; and that’s exactly where the difficulty lies. Organizations, in other words, remain always *immanent* to the instrumentarium that bring them to existence – this is why I call them *flat* (Latour 2005).

It is not because both regimes are concerned with complex questions of composition that they should be mixed up. By inventing the notion of a society on the one hand, and of individuals on the other, and then wondering how the two are related, we would make the detection of the paths through which organizations trace their zigzagging patterns very difficult. Our moral and political obsession for the composition of the whole would have blinded us to the type of composition that comes from submitting and being submitted to scripts. The shadow cast by the Body Politic has made monsters of organizations.

We may thus advance the suggestion that when Durkheim (and so many social scientists after him) had invented the notion of a “society” which is at once what is above us and what we have internalized, he tried to register the organizational mode of existence but had forgotten its peculiar rhythm: When we are “under” scripts, we are not individual actors but are trying to follow the many contradictory characters delegating us to do many different things at once; and when we are “above” scripts, we are simply rewriting highly localized instruments in order to reshuffle characters and deadlines. In other words, the real collective experience is never that of being an individual in a society (Dewey, 1927). Sociologists have taken the notion of organized actions for the whole of the collective (Thévenot 2006).

So how can we detect the oddity without additional mystery? First by putting aside the collective body artifact: An organization is not and will never be a super-organism, a whole superior to its parts, a corporate body, a moral entity made up of its many individual constituents. The addition of any concept of “society” to the inquiry will only blind us. Second, by accepting the metaphysical evidence that no entity lasts by having a substance on which to rely, a foundation on which to rest or an essence to carry it further in time. When, during another episode, our unquestioned leader makes a moving speech about the school that we have inherited and the new school that “we should be ready to deliver to the hands of our successors once our transitory bodies will have turned as much into dust as Emile Boutmy’s bones,” we know perfectly well that what is *passing* from our present team to the next is not like the baton of a relay race but rather like *the whole race* – stadium, television rights, car lots, illicit drugs and hotdogs included... What passes is not a stable fixture but a whole moving assemblages of disconnected parts.

There is nothing above us – the super-organism, there is nothing below us – the foundation, there is nothing before us – the “blueprint”, the “DNA”, there is nothing after us – the goal we pursue in the dark... and yet *there is an essence*: the School to which we are attached and whose precise trajectory we scrutinize with agonizing anxiety. This

is the oddity that we should consider without adding to it any other parasitical transcendence. There is no transcendence (the whole) except this tiny transcendence, namely this tiny gap we manage to overcome this morning in the council room. By contrast with its mystical version – the chimera of the political fused with the organizational whole, this is what I call the *secular* definition of organization.

In order to conclude this lecture (and to respect the script “under” which my chairman and I are still living so as to avoid receiving a string of more and more comminatory slips of papers, you know: “5 minutes”, “2 minutes”, “1 minute”, “STOP”, “dismissed!”...) I want first to come back to the point I made at the beginning: Types of agency appear only when taken in their right key, that is, the subtle but essential difference between talking *about* an organization and talking in an organizational *way* or, even better, *as* an organizer. I have reminded you that organizing shares with all other actual occasions the same general pattern. To use again Whitehead’s terms: what lasts (the essence of the school) is generated by what does *not* last (the constant work of taking it up again). That is just the paradox that is missed by supposing the existence of a macro actor. To use this marvelous English intransitive verb: organizations *obtain*.

Second, I have shifted attention from a dead alley – organizations as *sui generis* meta- or macro- entities “inside” which social theorists always try to put the little, puzzled, limited human actors as if they were another doll in another Russian doll – to a very different phenomenon: a fully “flattened” process of circulations of scripts. If you take the organization for a big animal, this instrumentarium is irrelevant. But if you know there is no “big” organization to begin with, then this instrumentarium is the only thing there is to trace and thus to track organizations.

Third, I have pointed out that whatever concepts we use to follow the tasks of organizing, it is essential to check whether they can register the strange flip-flopping that is their main feature: we live sequentially under and above those sets of inscriptions as if we were walking on a tight rope while being attached to it.

Well, where do we go from here? Time is now too short (and my chairman, with an eye fixed on his watch, is showing signs of growing impatience...) but it would surely be worthwhile to draw the felicitous and infelicitous conditions of this highly specific mode of existence (Austin’s term (Austin 1962) is especially useful here since, as François Cooren has argued, many of his examples actually come from organizational speech acts when they do not come from law). Even though these truth conditions will be wildly different from those in scientific, legal, religious, or political regimes, they are nevertheless extraordinarily precise: we seem to have an unlimited bag of tricks to detect how our organization should behave and be led. If in doubt, record in any office the conversations around the coffee pot...

To conclude, organizing is a much more ubiquitous phenomenon than what happens in corporations, ministries, or gangs. And yet, no matter how widespread it is, it remains a very specific one which generates a very peculiar range of agencies when contrasted with other modes of existence: agencies where we learn to live sequentially, from crisis to crisis, under and above scripts that are providing us with completely opposite personae. By taking organizing as a mode of existence, I hope to have somewhat clarified the answer to the question: “What’s the story?”

NOTES