

Organization outside Organizations

The book explores how various social settings are partially organized even when they do not form part of a formal organization. It also shows how even formal organizations may be only partially organized. Professors Göran Ahrne and Nils Brunsson first established the concept of partial organization in 2011 and in doing so opened up a groundbreaking new field of organizational analysis. An academic community has since developed around the concept, and Ahrne and Brunsson have edited this collection to reflect the current state of inquiry in this burgeoning subject and to set an agenda for future research. Its chapters explain how organization is a salient feature in many social settings, including markets, interfirm networks, social movements, criminal gangs, internet communication and family life. Organization theory is much more relevant for the understanding of social processes than previously assumed. This book provides a new understanding of many social phenomena and opens up new fields for organizational analysis.

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Organization outside Organizations

The Abundance of Partial
Organization in Social Life

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Contents

Preface	<i>page</i> ix
List of contributors	xi
INTRODUCTION	1
1 Organization Unbound	3
GÖRAN AHRNE AND NILS BRUNSSON	
PART 1 RULES, SANCTIONS, MEMBERSHIP	37
2 Standards between Partial and Complete Organization	39
ANDREAS RASCHE AND DAVID SEIDL	
3 Prizes and the Organization of Status	62
PETER EDLUND, JOSEF PALLAS, AND LINDA WEDLIN	
4 Membership or Contributorship? Managing the Inclusion of Individuals into Organizations	84
MICHAEL GROTHE-HAMMER	
PART 2 ORGANIZATION IN AND AROUND MARKETS	113
5 The Partial Organization of Markets	115
NILS BRUNSSON	
6 The Organization of Digital Marketplaces: Unmasking the Role of Internet Platforms in the Sharing Economy	131
STEFAN KIRCHNER AND ELKE SCHÜßLER	

vi CONTENTS

7	Organizing for Independence	155
	INGRID GUSTAFSSON AND KRISTINA TAMM HALLSTRÖM	
8	Queues: Tensions between Institution and Organization	177
	GÖRAN AHRNE, DANIEL CASTILLO, AND LAMBROS ROUMBANIS	
	PART 3 NETWORKS AND OTHER SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS	189
9	The Inter-Firm Network as Partial Organization?	191
	JÖRG SYDOW	
10	An Organized Network: World Economic Forum and the Partial Organizing of Global Agendas	212
	CHRISTINA GARSTEN AND ADRIENNE SÖRBOM	
11	Organizing Intimacy	235
	GÖRAN AHRNE	
12	How Is 'Organized Crime' Organized?	253
	GÖRAN AHRNE AND AMIR ROSTAMI	
13	Brotherhood as an Organized Social Relationship	271
	MIKAELA SUNDBERG	
	PART 4 SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND COLLECTIVE ACTION	291
14	The Dilemma of Organization in Social Movement Initiatives	293
	MIKKO LAAMANEN, SANNE BOR, AND FRANK DEN HOND	

15	Alternating between Partial and Complete Organization: The Case of Anonymous	318
	DENNIS SCHOENEBOEN AND LEONHARD DOBUSCH	
16	Collective Action through Social Media: Possibilities and Challenges of Partial Organizing	334
	NOOMI WEINRYB, CECILIA GULLBERG, AND JAAKKO TURUNEN	
	PART 5 THE PARTIAL ORGANIZATION OF FORMAL ORGANIZATIONS	357
17	Partial De-Organizing for Innovation and Strategic Renewal? A Study of an Industrial Innovation Programme	359
	FRANK DEN HOND, KATI JÄRVI, AND LIISA VÄLIKANGAS	
18	The Partial Organization of International Relations: International Organizations as Meta-Organizations	390
	GÖRAN AHRNE, NILS BRUNSSON, AND DIETER KERWER	
	CONCLUSION	419
19	More and Less Organization	421
	GÖRAN AHRNE AND NILS BRUNSSON	
	Index	442

Preface

Within the scientific field called organization studies, it is virtually taken for granted that formal organizations constitute the object of study: how formal organizations function internally and how they relate to the rest of the world – to their “environment”, to use a favourite metaphor from the field. What is more, it is a standard, implicit assumption that organization happens within formal organizations, whereas their environments, and thus society in general, is not organized. Consequently, organizational environments have been regarded as a terrain set aside for other social sciences: economics, sociology, political science, or social anthropology. In these disciplines, theories of organization have been neglected, crowded out, and seen as irrelevant or perhaps banal or disenchanting. With this book we want to demonstrate that there is much organization outside organizations, a fact that is highly relevant for social science in general. If the world is becoming increasingly organized, and the boundaries of formal organizations are no longer as sharp, science should be mirroring this circumstance. The distinction between what is and is not organized is a crucial one, and we believe that many social settings could be better understood if one recognizes how they are partially organized.

Scholars in the field of organization studies have long experience in the useful importing of concepts and theories from other disciplines, including theories about culture, institutions, and networks. We believe that the time has come for organization studies to be exporting. Many of the insights gained from a half-century of research on formal organizations can be used in understanding wider social phenomena. In a paper published in *Organization* in 2011, we suggested a specific conceptualization of organization that allows

X PREFACE

studies of organizing activities and how they may lead to the specific order that we call organization.

Since that paper was published, many studies using this perspective have been conducted. In this book, we and a number of colleagues report on some of them, ranging from inter-firm networks to families, from markets to social movements, from organized crime to international relations. And not only are organizational environments more or less organized, so also are formal organizations. In all, we see this book as an early step and hope that it will inspire others to study organization in even more social settings and to develop more detailed theories of how the social world is organized.

We are grateful for support we received for this project from many sources. Stockholm Centre for Organizational Research (Score) not only provided us with an excellent research setting, but also supported the project with financial resources and in other material ways. Mikaela Sundberg and Adrienne Sörbom, both at Score, arranged workshops and, together with other Score members, contributed with useful comments in an almost continuous discussion over several years. Nils Brunsson benefitted from a generous grant from Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (Grant No M2007-0244:1). And last but not least, Nina Colwill not only turned the text into proper English, but also raised many questions that forced us to clarify and develop our reasoning.

Stockholm and Uppsala March 2019
Göran Ahrne Nils Brunsson

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