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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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
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
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.

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contributed with useful comments in an almost continuous
discussion over several years. Nils Brunsson benefitted from a
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into proper English, but also raised many questions that forced us to
clarify and develop our reasoning.

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