HOW TO ESCAPE MODERNITY? :
AN ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY TAKE ON ORGANIZATIONAL FORMING

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ABSTRACT

The topic of <u>organizational form</u> has been gaining increased attention. Often portrayed as 'new times' driving the need for new forms, what is more evident in the literature is that the need for new ways of looking at form has yet to be addressed. The problem that "new organizational form" presents is precisely located in the inability of the field to think in other than "form" itself. By problematizing the focus on "form," I take issue with the largely ahistorical and aprocessual character of much organizational theorizing and with the privilege obtained by modernist paradigmatic approaches in such theorizing. With this as my point of departure, I argue for knowing the organizational as an ongoing process – i.e., "forming" over knowing "organizational form" by way of classification – and ask: How to arrive at processual knowing that might escape the modernist thirst for classification? Addressing this question, I make a case for abandoning modernity in favor of adopting a way of thinking, a metatheoretical framing, that facilitates conversing differently about what we currently call "organizational form." In elaborating on this framing, I explore the tenets underpinning conventional thinking about these issues, with a view to exposing their limitations and clarifying the grounds on which an alternative approach might be possible. As such, the aim of this paper is a contribution at the conceptual level towards a more processual and historically informed theory of the organizational that brings us out of the limitations imposed by extant theorizing on the topic.

Keywords: actor-network theory; amodern; classification; history; organizational form; organizational theory; process.

ORGANIZATIONAL FORM – IS IT AN ISSUE?

I am going to tell a short story in the coming three pages or so about how I came to study organizational form(ing). From my time working in various management positions in the corporate world (business analyst, executive assistant to the commercial director, head of internal communications and head of customer service), and then through my MBA, organizational form was always an issue to be considered. At work, people would talk of the organization as a bureaucracy and bemoan the (seeming) rigidity of the form. Then, during the MBA, enlightenment came in the guise of other forms, such as the virtual organization, the re-engineered organization, the professional organization and the adhocracy, which provided alternatives to bureaucracy. Yet, having worked 'within' an organization, I was aware that organization was not static, that things changed. I was also aware that change was much talked about by managers and academics, but I was not seeing change in any of the academic writing about form. How could this be? How could we talk about change, but still portray the organization as static form?

It was during the early part of my doctoral program that I encountered a more fluid way of talking about organization as an active process whereby people constructed the organizational, thus allowing for organiz*ing*. But seeing organiz*ing* somehow rendered the organizational less real because the organizational was always becoming; it never seemed to solidify.

My attention was drawn once again to organizational form around the time of my comprehensive exam and on reading more I could see that this area of research was receiving increasing attention. However, aside from seeing form as something real that I could classify or as something that is constructed, I could not see a way to capture what I was seeing as both real and constructed. This went against what I was seeing. I could see that form had real

consequences, but I could also see that it was not simply a given, emerging out of nothing. Frustratingly, I pondered as to whether I had any way out of this impasse.

Equally, throughout the early stages of the doctoral program, I became engaged in an ongoing conversation about modernity by way of postmodernism, which allowed me to question more conventional approaches to doing knowledge. My journey through postmodernity was illuminating, but, in the end, it left me with another problem: it offered me no ground on which to stand, other than critical deconstruction. I was still at an impasse.

It was then that I was introduced to Latour's (1993) argument that 'we have never been modern.' Bit by bit, I could see this was providing me with the argument I needed to look at organizational form*ing* afresh. Through Latour's writing, I was able to ask why it is that we think the way we do about organizational form. His approach, actor-network theory (ANT), provided me with a lens through which to critique modernity. It allowed me to see that in order to theorize form, modernity needed to break form down into discrete bits and pieces in order to put it into a box, i.e., classify form. For example, through the ANT lens, I could see that constructing bureaucracy in organization theory required dissecting it into many bits, such as, a stable environment; a hierarchical structure; authority that is centralized, command-and-control, directed by top-management; workers that are dependent, controlled, trained to follow orders, costs to be minimized; operations that are vertically integrated, employ standardization and has its own workforce; work that is organized according to task specialization; boundaries that are fixed and static; communication that is vertical, formally passing through the hierarchy; and so on. And all of these bits are put into a box called 'bureaucracy,' pure and simple, the inherent assumption being that bureaucracy, as form, arrives already formed and never changes, for if it does it must be something else, still another form. At the same time, I could see that the messy

work of breaking bureaucracy down into pieces, and then re-building it through these very pieces, was hidden from view. This messiness never saw the light of day; it was completely ignored.

Thus, in breaking form down into discrete bits, modern organization theory seems to close off any possibility for form*ing* and, in leaving us with pure form, I was also seeing that the way form is theorized pushes history and process to the side, which, intuitively, did not make sense either. Rather, it raised a number of questions: does history end once we have classified?; does form*ing* continue to happen once we have classified?; what about a way to theorize form*ing*? The question then became, how to understand form*ing* over form? And, would actor-network theory help me with this task?

The ANT lens allowed me to see what was going on, to reflect on what I was seeing happening in any of the organizations in which I have worked or with which I have had dealings. It allowed me to see the messiness that was involved in the process of form*ing*, to see all the things that were mixing together in constructing form to make it real. And it allowed me to see how it is that we, as organization theorists, purify all this mixing through the workings of doing organizational theory or any other form of knowing, so that eventually we can talk about 'form'.

And so it is that, whereas at the start of my journey I was seeing discrete entities and ways to classify them, now I see lots of mixing and lots of mess going into constructing 'form.' In other words, I now see both form*ing* and the possibility for form in organization theory beyond a modernist way of understanding. Thus, that's the gist of my story, but in the pages that follow I will tell it again in a conference paper *form*.

ORGANIZATIONAL FORM – INCREASING ATTENTION

The topic of organizational form has gained increased attention in the scholarly literature over the past couple of decades or so. Scholars have identified the emergence and evolution of new organizational forms as a critical issue to be addressed and, though research on the topic is considered embryonic, it is attracting increasing attention (e.g., Aldrich & Mueller, 1982; Ashcraft, 2001, 2006; Astley, 1985; Child & McGrath, 2001; Contractor, Wasserman & Faust, 2006; Daft & Lewin, 1993; DiMaggio, 2001; Fombrum, 1988; Foss, 2002; Graetz & Smith, 2006; Hawley, 1988; Lewin & Volberda, 1999; McKendrick & Carroll, 2001; McSweeney, 2006; Meyer, 1990; Pettigrew & Fenton, 2000; Pettigrew et al, 2003; Romanelli, 1989, 1991; Tushman & Romanelli, 1985; Whitley, 2006). The increased interest and relevance of this topic is often portrayed as 'new times' driving the need for new forms, however, what is more evident in the literature is that the need for new ways of looking at organizational form has yet to be addressed.

Most new theories that have been put forward continue to view form as something already formed, as an essence, with the attention focused on what constitutes form. While there are issues with how the field addresses "new" organizational forms, there are also issues regarding how the field has treated "old" organizational forms up to now. Indeed, in parallel with the calls for new ways of looking at form to address what is emerging into the future, there are concerns being raised about the lack of historically informed approaches for studying the organizational. Calls for new ways of looking at new organizational forms notwithstanding, we would be shortsighted if we were to overlook the fact that our existing organizational theories also fail to address how what we have come to identify as a given organizational form has been achieved in practice.

I echo Child and McGrath's (2001) suggestion that the time is ripe for reflection on theory in an effort to understand the topic of organizational form, but this reflection should not simply be limited to how we understand the topic from this point on. It should also entail questioning how we have come to understand organizational form through the approaches that currently exist. In order to do this, it is important to review and understand the current literature on "organizational form" and the story it tells, such that we can ascertain the limitations to current thinking. This leads us to calls to develop more historically informed theory, which implicitly raises metatheoretical questions about the approaches to understanding organizational form just discussed. I address these questions, first, by proposing that the organizational theory literature in its quest for "form" requires to be periodized as a modernist endeavor that seldom reflects on its own creations, and, second, by exploring the limitations of *modern* thinking generally, I posit the need for a new framework that will facilitate both problematizing and studying "organizational form" in a manner that moves beyond thinking in terms of boundaries and essences towards a more processual way of thinking. I argue for abandoning modernity in favor of adopting a way of thinking, a metatheoretical framing, that facilitates conversing differently about what we currently call 'organizational form.' In elaborating on this framing, I explore the tenets underpinning conventional thinking about these issues, with a view to exposing their limitations and clarifying the grounds on which an alternative approach might be possible. As such, the aim of this paper is a contribution at the conceptual level towards a more processual and historically informed theory of the organizational that brings us out of the limitations imposed by extant theorizing on the topic.

A BREAK WITH, OR A CONTINUATION OF, THE PAST?

Predicated on the tenets embedded in the ideal-type Weberian bureaucracy, the focus of both organizational theory scholars and practitioners during the past several years has largely been on issues of boundary-setting, stability and continuity and thus it would appear that proponents of "new forms" would address precisely the opposite of these characteristics. And so it is that, in line with the rise of interest in postmodernity for organizational analysis (Parker, 1992) and a belief in the epochal extinction of the bureaucratic form (McSweeney, 2006), there are organizational scholars who contend that the postmodern organization has emerged, claiming that it looks sufficiently different to the modern, bureaucratic form to warrant consideration as new (e.g., Clegg, 1990; Clegg & Hardy, 1996; Heckscher & Donnellon, 1994). Clegg's (1990) contention rests on three observations: that the postmodern form is decentralized, designed according to a distributed model and displaces hierarchy as the only means to achieve coordination and control.

The postmodern organization relies on "both 'hard' technological networks and 'soft' relational networking competence in and between organizations" (Clegg & Hardy, 1996: 11). While hierarchy is not eliminated entirely, it loses its preeminent status through becoming but one way out of many others to manage coordination and control efforts. Hence, what Heckscher and Donnellon (1994) and Clegg and Hardy (1996) see is a qualitatively different organization to that which went before. Yet, these proponents of the existence of "new forms" are also focused on defining the boundaries, as well as the characteristics, that would guarantee their stability and continuity. That is, in order to offer "new forms" as alternatives to bureaucracy, this literature puts much emphasis on articulating an identity for the "new."

However, there are also those who argue that new forms are closer to a continuation of the past, despite some fundamental modifications, contending that the "theories may themselves need to become more textured and dialectical" (Child & McGrath, 2001: 1144) to overcome the restrictions imposed by perfect alignment, congruence and certainty and so accommodate the tensions inherent in paradox, incongruence and uncertainty. For instance, some recent research (e.g., Ashcraft, 2001, 2006; Bigley & Roberts, 2001; Maravelias, 2003) is coming around to offering a more textured understanding of form, more deeply informing and refining existing theory in the process, thereby illustrating "how nonmainstream ideas can often usefully extend and enrich concepts developed in the core body of work in our field" (Child & McGrath, 2001: 1143).

Child and McGrath (2001: 1139) suggest that one of the main differences between conventional and newer thinking about the topic is that change is taken as a given in the newer thinking. However, this ignores the prior thinking of, for example, Burns and Stalker (1961) and their notion of the organic organizational form, which was very much premised on change being the norm. Equally, Child and McGrath's (2001) suggestion that change is a given in newer thinking also ignores views that question such a given (e.g., Alvesson & Thompson, 2004; Courpasson & Reed, 2004; du Gay, 1994, 2000, 2003; Harris, 2006; Höpfl, 2006; Kallinikos, 2003, 2004; McSweeney, 2006; Reed, 2003a), in addition to undermining their call for theorizing that is more 'textured and dialectical.'

This raises the question as to whether we are necessarily witnessing the emergence of new organizational forms or whether it is more a case of nuanced versions of the bureaucratic archetype. It further raises an interesting observation to the effect that, though organizations may consciously seek to abandon or not adopt bureaucratic principles, it is not entirely possible to

move beyond them. For example, challenging the view that bureaucracy is being replaced lock, stock and barrel by new forms, Ashcraft's (2001, 2006) work depicts a hybrid, which she refers to as organized dissonance, where members of the organization are unable to abandon bureaucratic principles while at the same time seeking to consciously move beyond such principles.

Indeed, as suggested by the findings of a number of scholars, bureaucratic principles are alive and well, even in so-called new organizational forms (e.g., Ashcraft, 2001, 2006; Bigley & Roberts, 2001; Briand & Bellemare, 2006; Clegg & Courpasson, 2004; Hodgson, 2004; Josserand, Teo & Clegg, 2006; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004; Maravelias, 2003; Martin, Knopoff and Beckman, 1998; McSweeney, 2006; Räisänen & Linde, 2004; Robertson & Swan, 2004). Taking issue with the hype of post-bureaucratic thinking built on a "discourse of endings" (Courpasson & Reed, 2004: 5) and "the tyranny of the epochal" (du Gay 2003: 663), even "science fiction" (Gerlach & Hamilton, 2000), that has focused on revolutionary change and radical discontinuity, a theoretical counter-movement has been building that questions these epochal claims and calls for a more nuanced reading of the evidence (e.g., Alvesson & Thompson, 2004; Courpasson & Reed, 2004; du Gay, 1994, 2000, 2003; Harris, 2006; Höpfl, 2006; Kallinikos, 2003, 2004; McSweeney, 2006; Reed, 2003a) reflective of what "organizations make visible or render invisible" (Thorne, 2005: 580).

This counter-movement challenges the story of bureaucracy's complete demise, which is seen as premised on redundancy of form when faced with "the vicissitudes of contemporary 'environmental change'" (du Gay, 1994: 126), while at the same time noting that many features of the so-called post-bureaucratic organization remain under-theorized and under-researched (Alvesson & Thompson, 2004; Courpasson & Reed, 2004; Gerlach & Hamilton, 2000; Harris &

Höpfl, 2006; Kallinikos, 2003, 2004; Thorne, 2005). As Reed (2003a: 13) states, "there is a very real need to re-assert the fundamental technical, political and ethical virtues of Weberian-style bureaucratic organization which are in danger of being washed away in a naïve and disingenuous technological romanticism and historical determinism." Taking issue with the persistent and widely shared "oversimplified and stylized images of the bureaucratic form of organization" held by the "fad-driven mainstream management discipline" (Kallinikos, 2004: 14) that claims its demise, Kallinikos (2004:13) presents a more nuanced view of the continuing "historically unique adaptive capacity of bureaucracy." Likewise, for Maravelias (2003: 548), to the extent that it can be said to exist, the post-bureaucratic form "marks an extension rather than a break with basic bureaucratic principles."

However, calls for either a break with the past or a continuation of the past implicitly lead to questions regarding how well we have been served by existing theory and approaches to understanding form. Clearly, the very concept of form is at the heart of organization studies (Fulk & DeSanctis, 1995; Rao, 1998; Rindova & Kotha, 2001), and a stream of research, informed by an array of theoretical perspectives, has emerged to deal with how new forms emerge and become embedded in the organizational landscape (Foss, 2002; McKendrick & Carroll, 2001; Romanelli, 1991). However, despite the abundance of arguments throughout the years, and the emergence of new theoretical perspectives, the existing literature highlights problems that still need to be tackled if new forms are to be identified.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS – CONTINUING TO SEE
THE 'NEW' WITH 'OLD' LENSES

In overall terms, therefore, there is an obvious concern within the existing literature that new forms continue to appear and that scholars, as yet, have been unable to theorize, grasp or account for them adequately (e.g., Child and McGrath, 2001; Fligstein & Freeland, 1995; Galunic & Eisenhardt, 2001; Romanelli, 1991). Additionally, there are concerns over how best to define the concept of form (e.g., McKendrick & Carroll, 2001; Pólos, Hannan & Carroll, 2002; Romanelli, 1991) and with developing meaningful classification systems (e.g., DeSanctis & Fulk, 1999; Galunic & Eisenhardt, 2001; Romanelli, 1991). However, rather than heed the persistent calls for new theory grounded in the empirical examination of new forms, researchers continue to use existing theoretical frameworks --- contingency theory, institutional theory, population ecology, transaction cost economics --- and seek to align their studies and findings accordingly.

All of these theoretical perspectives, which operate at the macro organizational level, treat form as an essence, as a durable, tangible and relatively undeniable structure, which exists as an empirical entity. Taken as a given 'out there,' each approach equates form with, and classifies form as, a set of essential and identifiable characteristics that constitutes the organizational, the particular mix of characteristics serving to distinguish one form from another. Central to each approach, therefore, is the development of classification schemes and the construction and maintenance of boundaries, not just to render forms distinct and identifiable, but also to distinguish each theoretical view from the others. Table 1 overleaf provides a summary of the key questions addressed by each approach and the means by which it engages in partitioning and classification of organizational forms.

Theoretical Perspective	Key Questions	Form Partitioning and Classification
Structural Contingency	What form best achieves environment-structure fit to maximize performance and success?	Based on organization contingencies (strategy, size, task uncertainty) to fit structure with environment
Institutional	Why do so many organizations look alike? How do organizations attain legitimacy? How are constitutive beliefs introduced from broader institutional contexts to furnish new organizational forms with legitimacy and taken-for-granted features and routines?	Based on stages (pre, semi, full) and comparative dimensions (processes, characteristics of adopters, impetus for diffusion, theorization activity, variance in implementation, structure failure rate) of institutionalization
Ecological	Why are there so many or so few organizations? How do social, political and economic conditions influence the relative abundance and diversity of organizational forms? Do successful organizations have a particular form?	Based on demographic (age dependence, size dependence), ecological (niche-width dynamics, population dynamics, density dependence, community interdependence) and environmental (institutional, technological) factors
Transaction Cost	Why do organizations exist? How do hierarchies come into existence? What forms do organizations adopt under various circumstances?	Based on transaction contingencies (bounded rationality, opportunism, small numbers bargaining, complexity linked with uncertainty and asset specificity) and bundling of transactions to minimize cost of completing transactions or of governing transactions

Table 1 – Theoretical approaches to organizational form.

In terms of identifying new forms, all of these theoretical approaches are limited to seeing form as determined by "an autonomous and inexorable logic of structural causality" (Reed, 2003b: 294), such as fit with environment, institutional norms, market strategies or exchange conditions (Nickerson & Zenger, 2002). Thus it is that new forms can only be seen as emerging in accordance with the dictates of given, pre-existing and constraining sets of contingencies. Even "new forms," such as interorganizational networks and virtual organizations, that seem to defy "form" and classification fall within this theoretical grasp. Though positioned as qualitatively different to that which went before, theorists cope with these new forms through focusing on defining the boundaries, as well as the characteristics, that guarantee their uniqueness, stability and continuity. That is, in order to offer "new forms" as alternatives to bureaucracy, theorists put much emphasis on articulating a fairly fixed identity for the "new."

Further, the mainstream continues to look for the 'new' with 'old' lenses, that is, from Weber's "ideal type" bureaucracy forward, extant organization theories, be they in appearance ahistorical or historical, have focused on creating classifications. For instance, under structural contingency theory, form is often conflated with structure and theorists posit that there is no single organizational structure that is highly effective for all organizations (Donaldson, 1996). Institutional theorists focus their attention on questions related to how the institutional environment shapes form (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Population ecology theorists ask why so many or so few kinds of organizations exist (Hannan & Freeman, 1977, 1989). Transaction cost economics theorists frame the question of organizational form in terms of the efficiency of governance structure (Williamson, 1985, 1991). Each of these theoretical perspectives represents different ways of partitioning and categorizing knowledge of and about form, as if history had ended once its theoretical aims (for knowing organizational form) were fulfilled. Thus, does history end once we have classified?

PERIODIZING "THE ORGANIZATIONAL"

According to Ruef (2000), the historical emergence of new organizational forms is of crucial importance to a number of major organizational theories, including structural contingency, institutional, population ecology and transaction cost economics. Changes in form follow on from changes in the environment, institutional norms, market strategies or exchange conditions (Nickerson & Zenger, 2002). However, the claims to history made by these theories, if at all, subordinate history as contributing to confirming and refining general (i.e., scientistic) theories, and/or to a methodological contribution, i.e., as an aid in selecting variables and in generating hypotheses within a theoretical context. However, what has not been acknowledged

is history-as-process, that is, how the appearance of boundaries and classification is made possible by hiding process and foregrounding essence. In other words, form has been the focus of research interest, with little or no attention given to the ongoing work of forming, to the creation/maintenance/destruction of boundaries or to the construction of classification systems themselves.

Arguably, given the largely ahistorical character of dominant organization theories that emerged throughout the past century (Booth & Rowlinson, 2006; Burrell, 1997; Clark & Rowlinson, 2004; Jacques, 1996, 2006; Kieser, 1989, 1994; Rowlinson & Procter, 1999; Üsdiken & Kieser, 2004; Zald, 1990, 1993, 1996, 2002), pursuing calls to develop more historically informed theory implicitly raises metatheoretical questions about the approaches to understanding organizational form just discussed. To address these questions, I propose, first, that the organizational theory literature in its quest for "form" requires to be periodized as a modernist endeavor that seldom reflects on its own creations, and, second, by re-inserting history into this argument, I suggest an approach to move out of some of its current limitations.

Thus far, much of our theorizing on, and knowledge of, the organizational comes from within a modernist framework (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996, 2004). Contained within modernist thinking is also the notion of 'progress.' As a noun, 'progress' suggests "1. forward or onward movement towards a destination. 2. development towards a better, more complete, or more modern condition," while as a verb it implies to "move or develop towards a destination or an improved or advanced condition" (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 1999). This modernist belief in systematic progress centers on the assumption of an inevitable movement toward objective truth: by means of reason and observation, the nature of the objective world is revealed through language; others then review, explore and extend what has become known; the results of this

work then become available for others to contribute incrementally to accumulating knowledge, and so on. Through such systematic progress, scientists gain increasingly complex knowledge about the nature of the world, become competent in making ever more accurate predictions, and ultimately arrive at a position where they can create utopian societies (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996).

By the same token, modernity both suggests a past that is less modern and also evokes a future that will be more modern, signaling a present that will become less modern with the passing of time. Though modernity may be defined in as many ways as there are people who seek to define it, these definitions all point to the passing of time: to the designation of a new regime; to an acceleration, a break, a transformation in time; to an irreversible time arrow; to a contrast, by definition, with some antiquated and stable past that has been vanquished. Modernity is thus doubly asymmetrical (Latour, 1993) in that it both signals a rupture in the passage of time and creates a duality in pitting itself against its 'other,' premodernity.

It is easy to see this logic operating within the literature on organizational form. Bureaucracy is considered to have reached the end of its useful life thanks to the march of progress, which now demands a new form or new forms for new times, for the advanced condition in which we now live. Modern knowledge-making, in accepting the existence of these new forms outside their representation, thus seeks to discover and characterize them, whether emerging or fully-formed, rendering them stable and knowable pure forms in the process, as demonstrated in this literature's quest for classification.

Reinserting History into "The Organizational"

While there have been calls to develop more historically informed organizational theory, in turn facilitating a more process oriented and more contingent/less deterministic approach, this

does not mean breaking with modernity, for mainstream modernist history is no less

foundational, rational, essentialist, logocentric or concerned with the notion of progress. With

faith in reason, the modernist historian's unquestioned task has been to dig into the past, to

investigate it, to discover a past reality and reconstruct it scientifically, to find the "one line

running through history" (Ankersmit, 1989: 153). Claiming authority for historical knowledge

(White, 1995), the goal has been "uniformization of the past" through integration, synthesis and

totality (Ankersmit, 1989: 153). Critiques of history in this fashion have, nonetheless,

increasingly appeared (e.g., Lukacs, 2002), including those such as Üsdiken and Kieser (2004)

who argue that use of history in organization studies are not all the same and can be demarcated

according to three positions – supplementarist, integrationist and reorientationist, albeit with

variations within each – consistent with how history is treated in relation to the social scientistic

perspective that has come to dominate the field.

　　　The supplementarist position. Theorizing within the supplementarist position ranges

from the timeless to limiting the value of history to add context for developing or testing

generalizable theories (Kieser, 1994; Üsdiken & Kieser, 2004; Zald, 1990, 1993). As a useful

check for ideas (Goldman, 1994), therefore, history becomes, substantively, an object of

theoretical frames seeking to analyze and explain past events (Lawrence, 1984) and/or

methodologically, an object of theory development and hypothesis generation (Goodman &

Kruger, 1988). Claiming, for example, that organizational ecology and institutional theory

already incorporate history into their analyses, Goldman (1994: 623) goes on to assert that

assimilating history into organization theory is only possible if it is acknowledged that "insofar

as theory refers to principles of organization that transcend time and space, historical and

comparative (that is international and/or multicultural) data can test the generalizability and utility of a theory."

With the exception of contingency theories, and their largely cross-sectional (in contrast to longitudinal) research focus, other organizational theories– transaction cost, institutional and ecological theories – each accommodate a historical take that could be considered supplementarist. However, such an accommodation is limited for, as Baum (1996: 107) notes, "no theory can be general, precise, and realistic at the same time." Hence, with realism (and precision) as the trade-off for generality, history becomes subordinated to contributing to the theory-driven scientistic enterprise substantively, i.e., through its potential for confirming and refining general theories, and/or methodologically, i.e., as an aid in selecting variables and in generating hypotheses within a theoretical context.

The integrationist position. In a criticism that can also be applied to mainstream organizational theory in general, Kieser (1994: 612) notes that sociologists, in favoring grand theories that bother little with historical details that disconfirm their theories, would be seen by many historians "as people who state the obvious in an abstract jargon, lack any sense of differences in culture or time, squeeze phenomena into rigid categories and, to top it all, declare these activities as 'scientific'." Given the inferior position they accord history, Kieser (1994) calls for the abandonment of models that are conceptualized separately from that which is to be explained, in favor of analyses that are more interpretive and inductive, i.e., integrationist. For those of an integrationist position, the concern is with activating the potential of history to enrich organization studies through both employing and challenging its social scientistic counterpart: "Ultimately, the issue is how do we *combine* a positivistic programme of theoretical and empirical cumulation with the enriching possibilities of the humanities" (Zald, 1993: 516,

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emphasis in original). In similar vein, Kieser (1994: 619) proffers that "[h]istorical analyses do not replace existing organization theory; they enrich our understanding of present-day organizations by reconstructing the human acts which created them in the course of history."

Thus, an integrationist position recognizes that current organizational forms have been shaped by past events and that their course of development has been influenced by the broader context. More specifically, an integrationist position entails interest in "processes of organisational change, development of organisational forms and variations across societal settings, path dependencies and continuities in organisational ideas and practices" (Üsdiken & Kieser, 2004: 323).

The reorientationist position. The reorientationist position regarding history "involves moving organisation studies away from its social scientistic aspirations based on the natural sciences model" (Üsdiken & Kieser, 2004: 324). Clark and Rowlinson (2004) suggest that the growing calls for more history in organization studies, and for approaching it differently, represent calls for an "historic turn" (McDonald, 1996) – i.e., approaching history as past, process and context; challenging the field's dominant scientistic rhetoric through a move away from the view that organization studies should comprise a branch of the science of society; and reflecting on the place of historical narrative in organization studies to acknowledge the intrinsic ambiguity in the term "history" itself, which refers to both the totality of, for example, past organizational forming and to the narrative constructed to account for such forming – and open the way for varied forms of historical writing informed by theory.

Problematizing Modernity

While differing views on organizational form have emerged, they very much involve a particular way of understanding, in line with what Cooper and Law (1995: 263) refer to as a

'distal theory of organizations.' They have emerged from a macro organization theory perspective concerned with the creation and maintenance of boundaries, with categorization and classification and with the very notion of 'form' itself. The view from the existing literature, coming as it does from a largely determinist and positivist perspective, limits understanding through establishing the world as external to cognition, collective action or experience, rendering organizations as "hard, tangible and relatively immutable structures" (Burrell & Morgan, 1979: 4), completely determined by their environment and knowable through a search for "regularities and causal relationships" (Burrell & Morgan, 1979: 5).

Consistent with this way of understanding, the perpetually dynamic is placed into a field of stasis and stabilized for the purpose of scientific study (Burrell, 1996), such that organizations appear as static entities capable of being partitioned out and classified. Current ways of understanding also both lock into, and are locked in, such dichotomous thinking as micro/macro, inside/outside and new/old. The notion of 'form' itself, being a noun, conjures up the sense of something that is always-already 'formed,' of something that has shape, of something static, of a mode of existence or manifestation. Hence, to study form, as understood in this light, is to study something that already 'has form' or has essence.

In short, the same theories, tools, and ways of understanding, which were developed to analyze notions of the organizational at a particular time, namely bureaucracy, and in a particular way, namely 'ideal types' arrived at through social 'science,' are being deployed in attempts at generating knowledge about the organizational in 'new times.' Concurrently, theories, definitions and classification systems are used in the literature, and espoused as definitive means for studying form, even though their use is the subject of ongoing debate over how to theorize, define and classify form. Essentially, then, in being obsessed with classification, which is the

only way they assume it is possible to know "organization," dominant organizational theories continue to privilege "form" over "forming."

Further, this debate is being carried on amongst the 'experts' who do knowledge and in whom expertise is seen to reside, such that it is they who are the arbiters of what counts as knowledge of and about form. It is through such institutional expertise that existing arrangements are both reproduced and sustained, which in turn both reproduce and sustain the dominant way of thinking (Calás & Smircich, 2003). As such, continuing the conversation along current lines means that we would continue to grapple with the same issues in an attempt to grasp what is 'out there,' within what would remain "a limited way for understanding and acting on the everydayness of others' situations" (Calás & Smircich, 2003: 48).

"Can we think any other way" (Calás & Smircich, 2003: 49), such that we do not become enmeshed in, and continue to reproduce, the problems we encounter when thinking in a modern way? The issue is not just that historical contingency is hidden in mainstream organization theories, but also that there is no way to acknowledge how the "hiding is done" and with what consequences. Here is where actor-network theory comes in to not only illustrate that organizational forming is going on all along, but also show how it is made unrecognizable by our modes of theorizing. This leads me to begin outlining the contours to an alternative way of thinking and knowing, encapsulated in the thesis that 'we have never been modern' (Latour, 1993).

HAVE WE EVER BEEN MODERN?

Latour (1993) offers another analysis of "the modern condition." In his view, modernity involves the creation and maintenance of two distinct ontological zones (see Figure 1 overleaf),

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with all that is nonhuman ascribed to nature and all that is human ascribed to culture. Accordingly, the work of scientists is focused on one zone or the other, treating the world according to either the authority of the natural sciences, on the one hand, or that of the social sciences, on the other. In either case, the work of scientists is to explain, to purify, the world they see in their terms. Those coming from the perspective of nature, the realists, seek to naturalize society by integrating it into nature, while those coming from the perspective of culture, the constructivists, seek to socialize nature through digestion by society (Latour, 1993).

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Figure 1: Modernity according to Latour (adapted from Latour, 1993: 11).

Hence, looked at through the lens of the natural sciences, all that has to do with organization is governed by natural laws. Looked at through the lens of the social sciences, it is we humans who create organization according to our own free will. Accordingly, organization is either transcendental, having an existence 'out there,' or it is immanent, having an existence 'in here,' and great effort is expended in ensuring that both views remain ontologically pure – e.g., paradigm "wars." Nature deals with things-in-themselves, while culture deals with humans-amongst-themselves, such that people and things, humans and nonhumans are kept separate.

At the same time, and without apparent contradiction, modernity treats nature as immanent in the sense that its laws are mobilizable, humanizable and socializable, in essence, knowable, through manipulation by the modern knowledge-making apparatus (e.g., laboratories, questionnaires, experiments, statistical analyses, research organizations, scientific institutions). Accordingly, the laws of nature can now be discovered, such that organization can be known, albeit they still remain transcendent. Similarly, culture is simultaneously treated as transcendent in the sense that it has its own laws and outlasts us, with conventional ways of knowledge-making "stak[ing] out the limits to the freedom of social groups, and transform[ing] human

relations into durable objects that no one has made" (Latour, 1993: 37). Hence, our freedom to create organization according to our own will is circumscribed by the laws of society, albeit these laws are our own creation.

Escaping Modernity?

Viewed from this perspective, modernity provides no means of escape from 'old' ways of thinking and knowing and so provides no useful avenue for articulating and studying the organizational differently, for modernity is part and parcel of the way organizations have been conceptualized and studied. Thus, how can we articulate and study the organizational differently? I argue that one way around this impasse is to imagine, as Latour (1993) has done, that we have never been modern. His amodern (or nonmodern) thesis rests on exposing, and then tying together, the practices that underpin modern ways of thinking and knowing. By making these operations visible, he provides a way to reconsider our understanding about "organization."

Purification, Translation and Networks

As already discussed, having created two separate ontological zones, modernity's focus remains on maintaining that separation. As such, to be modern is to be concerned with maintaining the established purity of nature on the one hand, and of society on the other: to be modern requires engaging in the practice of *purification*. Such practice, in turn, requires *categorization and classification*, with things-in-themselves assigned to nature and humans-in-themselves assigned to society.

Thus it is that through purifying *forms* can be identified. They can been classified and categorized according to an abstract set of features (e.g., environment, structure, authority-control, decision-making, workers, operations, core/non-core, communication, culture, etc.),

such that they are rendered static, permanent, timeless, universal and, above all, knowable. In being purified, they become ideal-types against which to measure and verify that which pertains to them. But the question is, in order to purify, what has the knowledge-making enterprise left out? Thus, to focus on the practice of purification is only part of the story, for there is another practice, that of translation, on which modernity depends for its existence and yet which modernity denies at the same time.

Concurrent with purifying the messy world in which we live, modernity engages in translation (see Figure 2 overleaf). Here, far from separating humans from nonhumans, their contacts are amplified, mixing together humans and nonhumans, without bracketing anything and without excluding any combination, in the process creating hybrids of nature and culture in the form of networks of humans and nonhumans. Different from the practice of purification, which involves separation, the practice of translation involves the threading together of any or all of these actors into a network that makes sense. It entails interconnecting these heterogeneous elements and viewing them as performing relationally, as interacting to produce what we contingently call organizational form, with one actor seeking to redefine the meaning of the other actors, enrolling them into a position, such that its interests also become theirs.

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Figure 2: Latour's amodernity (adapted from Latour, 1993: 11).

What results from the practice of translation are hybrids, networks that are both contingent and emergent. They are contingent in that their relations are never fixed for all time, such that the actor-networks could come asunder should the interests of any actors diverge. Similarly, they are emergent in that they do not appear ready formed, as pure essences that always-already existed.

However, this very practice, the practice of translation, is denied any visibility or acknowledgement within modern thinking. While the flexibility and fluidity afforded by the modern way of thinking is facilitated by the work of translation, for it is here that humans and nonhumans are threaded together to form a network that realizes the everyday, it is not until this network of associations achieves some degree of relative stability that it becomes amenable to purification, and thereby that it becomes visible for classification. Purification reclaims the network from the hybrid ontology of its formation, and renders translation invisible in the process. Thus, purification obtains in the case of organizational form when we no longer think of the diverse materials that go into its performance, but, instead, simply see it as a thing in and of itself. Purification is successful when the threads that bind these heterogeneous materials relationally fall out of view and are simply taken for granted.

Translation and Purification – Exposing Modernity's Dichotomy

In summary, both practices, translation and purification, are vital to constituting the world we live in, with one dependent on the other. Without the practices of translation, those of purification would be without meaning, for we would be dealing with nothing but pure forms with no possibility of these forms being combined to arrive at some new form. Likewise, without the practices of purification, those of translation would be hindered, restricted or discarded, for without pure forms we would have nothing to thread together to create new forms.

However, with its emphasis on knowing through purification, modernity takes hybrid networks formed through translation and cuts them into "as many segments as there are pure disciplines" (Latour, 1993: 3), severing the ties that link nature and society. For example, in our case dealing with the organizational, we deal with the topic through the lenses of economics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, communication, computer science, business, and so on.

We go even further within each discipline, segmenting further as, for example, in the case of business where we use the lenses of marketing, organization studies, finance, accounting, management science, and so on.

And we go yet further, as with organization studies, for example, with the focus breaking into strategy, organizational theory, organizational behavior, international management, human resource management, and so on. And we could go yet further again, if we were to look at the various theories within organizational theory, for example, as was done in the previous section. Thus, the network of threads and links that go into constructing the organizational become severed to form neat compartments such that what we notice of the organizational is only behavior, only employees, only social context, only products, only consumers, only transactions, only contracts, only balance sheets, only technology, only computer modeling, and so on.

Through this separation, even though imbroglios of humans and nonhumans are multiplying and proliferating, the distinct ontological zones remain steadfastly separated and delimited from each other as if the world were divided into such neat categories, into which anything and everything could be easily slotted. Being truly modern, therefore, requires that we regard the practices of purification and translation as separate, while at the same time subscribing to the work of purification and denying that of translation. To do otherwise, to attend to both at the same time and to acknowledge the proliferation of hybrids, is to question our modernity and to make us "retrospectively aware that the two sets of practices have always already been at work in the historical period that is ending" (Latour, 1993: 11).

It is through recognizing the work of translation that Latour (1993) unveils modernity as but one half of a configuration that denies its other. It is through recognizing, and legitimizing, the practices of translation as necessary to those of purification, and through recognizing both,

together, as a distinct, coherent and mutually reinforcing configuration, that it is possible to recognize that we have never been truly modern. As I discuss next, this argument has important implications for the study of "organizational forms."

A DIFFERENT WAY OF THINKING

As we have seen, modernity initially emerges from the conjoined creation of humans-culture and nonhumans-nature, and then masks its own creation through treating each source separately. Meanwhile culture-nature hybrids, though denied, continue to proliferate. However, it is precisely this very ability to separate humans and nonhumans, while at the same time denying the creation of hybrids, that weakens modernity and bolsters Latour's amodern thesis. In proposing such a thesis, Latour seeks to retain modernity's ontological zones and its practices of purification and translation, only this time both practices are to be considered as operating simultaneously, and not separately.

For instance, if we look at how bureaucracy is talked about in the literature we see that it is comprised of various purifications: a stable environment; a hierarchical structure; authority that is centralized, command-and-control, directed by top-management; workers that are dependent, controlled, trained to follow orders, costs to be minimized; operations that are vertically integrated, employ standardization and has its own workforce; work that is organized according to task specialization; boundaries that are fixed and static; communication that is vertical, formally passing through the hierarchy; and so on. These various categories for classifying bureaucracy are themselves purifications. Centralization, for example, is premised on authority, decision-making and control residing in top management, with the latter comprising people, positions, titles, offices, subordinates, expertise, reports, and so on. But, what is missing

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from here? The assumption is that bureaucracy is always the same and never deviates from comprising all of the actors noted. However, this overlooks that the slightest change to the list of actors associating with bureaucracy translates the latter into a hybrid. For example, is a bureaucracy that outsources some of its tasks to a service provider in a low-cost country, using information and communications technologies to create a seamless operation, still a bureaucracy or is it something else? To all intents and purposes, while all else has remained the same, the bureaucracy's fixed and static boundaries have changed and it no longer does everything in-house employing its own workforce: the bureaucracy actor-network has been translated. As such, we are not dealing with a bureaucracy, as classified, but with a hybrid that is neither a bureaucracy nor a virtual organization. It is something other for which there is no name.

It is in this light that the "proliferation of hybrids thus denies the success of purification and, therefore the possibility of having ever been modern" (Calás & Smircich, 2003: 51). Hence, the double separation between humans and nonhumans, on the one hand, and between the work of purification and that of translation, on the other, needs to be reconstructed (Latour, 1993). In making visible the work of translation, therefore, any analysis would be rethreading the many bits and pieces that go into making the organizational, thereby regaining the complexity of the ties that bind the organizational together.

Following Latour, then, I adopt a metatheoretical position, my ontological starting point, that considers that the networks that weave the organizational together do exist and that our modern ways of knowing have provided us with but a partial, essentialized, and static understanding of what we currently conceive as organizational form.

Rethinking "History as Progress" – From Modern to Amodern Temporality

Modernity's sense of time passing comes through always seeking to break with or abolish the past and leave it behind. The moderns separate themselves from their past through "Copernican revolutions, epistemological breaks, epistemic ruptures so radical that nothing of the past survives in them" (Latour, 1993: 68). In so doing, they sense time as an irreversible arrow, as progress. This experience of time as a revolution, always having to start over again, can be seen in the treatment of organizational form in the literature. For example, Miles, Snow, Mathews, Miles and Coleman (1997) contend that a particular organizational form has been a feature of each major period in business history. In the period since the Industrial Revolution, they suggest, the United States has moved through the machine age, with its hierarchical, vertically integrated organization form, to the information age, and its network form, and is now at the threshold of the knowledge age, with what they call the cellular organizational form.

For Latour (1993: 72), modern temporality is "outlined by a series of radical breaks, revolutions, which constitute so many irreversible ratchets that prevent us from ever going backward." Given this conception of the passage of time, and in conjunction with calendar time, modernity's irreversible arrow presents but two options in ordering time: forward for progress, or backward toward stagnation/regression. The moderns treat the return of the past as archaism, for to treat it otherwise would be to undermine the temporal ordering and the sense of time passing: the arrow of time is unambiguous, such that moving forward requires breaking with the past, while moving backward requires breaking with the modernizing effort. Latour (1993) suggests that modern temporality has little effect on the passage of time. He argues that the past not only remains but also returns, with the practice of translation mixing up humans and nonhumans of different times. A good example of temporality is the debate of recent years within the

organizational literature surrounding bureaucracy, as already discussed. There are those who suggest that bureaucracy is outmoded, a thing of the past, and that post-bureaucracy has taken its place. However, there are others who see bureaucracy continuing, such that, in Latour's terms, the past is mixed with the present to create hybrids that become purified, for example, Ashcraft's (2001, 2006) 'feminist bureaucracy.'

When consideration is given to the work of translation and to hybridization, modernity's essences are exposed as being no more modern than they are revolutionary, for they are seen as blends of different periods, ontologies and genres. Modernity's temporal order becomes disturbed such that "a historical period will give the impression of a great hotchpotch" (Latour, 1993: 73). Rather than an irreversible, ordered, continuous and progressive flow, time becomes reversible, turbulent and more akin to a whirlpool than a linear flow, such that "every contemporary assembly is polytemporal" (Latour, 1993: 74).

For modern temporality to function, "the impression of an ordered front of entities sharing the same contemporary time has to remain credible" (Latour, 1993: 73). Counter-examples and exceptions cannot be allowed to proliferate for this would undermine the temporal order and render talk of stagnation, regression, and archaism impossible. There could be no break with the past. In recognizing the work of translation and the proliferation of hybrids, modern temporality falters and becomes untenable for it is anything but homogeneous.

Latour (1993) sees time as a contingent outcome of the relational performance among entities, not as a general framework. He suggests that it is necessary to pass from the temporal ground on which modernity (and its antimodern and postmodern critics) operates to another, which incorporates seeing that temporality, in and of itself, has nothing temporal about it. Modern temporality is but a contingent effect, the result of a performance that, through

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purification, "reassembled, hooked together, systematized the cohort of contemporary elements to hold it together and thus to eliminate those that do not belong to the system" (Latour, 1993: 74-75). Purification has always operated, classifying essences as belonging to different times, but "*[i]t is the sorting that makes the times, not the times that make the sorting*" (Latour, 1993: 76, emphasis in original).

 For instance, if we take as our analytical starting point the year an organizational form becomes generally accepted, we can trace the process of sedimentation through time, such that the year the form became generally accepted "is formed of as many segments as there have been years since" (Latour, 1999: 172). This process of sedimentation is unending, with each year contributing to, including challenging or revising, the actor-network that has grown from that initial point of general acceptance. For Latour (1999: 172), the issue is one of "treating extension in time as rigorously as extension in space. To be everywhere in space or always in time, work has to be done, connections made, retrofitting accepted."

From an amodern perspective, therefore, there is no break with the past, rather it is "revisited, repeated, surrounded, protected, recombined, reinterpreted and reshuffled" (Latour, 1993: 75), such that the past permeates the present. Labels such as "archaic" or "advanced" are unnecessary as amodern temporality recognizes that the work of translation brings together heterogeneous actors from all times; it recognizes polytemporality.

CONCLUSION

So what? After having reflected on the topic of 'organizational form*ing*', what have we gained? Where does this leave us? To answer these questions, I go back to my starting point. Taking the view that "[w]here new organizational forms come from is one of the central

questions of organizational theory" (Rao, 1998: 912) and has been since Weber's (1946, 1947) formulation of the ideal-type bureaucracy, my project has sought to address some of the concerns with extant ways of theorizing the organizational. As already noted, the literature has identified emergence and evolution of new organizational forms as a critical issue to be addressed, often presenting the issue as being driven by 'new times,' yet what is more evident in the literature is that the need for new ways of looking at organizational form, be it 'old' or 'new,' has yet to be addressed. It has also raised concerns about the largely ahistorical and aprocessual character of much organizational theorizing, and lamented the dearth of empirical work that is historical and processual in character.

Thus, "Can we think any other way" (Calás & Smircich, 2003: 49), such that we do not become enmeshed in, and continue to reproduce, the problems we encounter when thinking in a modern way? This question led me to begin outlining the contours to an alternative way of thinking and knowing, encapsulated in the thesis that 'we have never been modern' (Latour, 1993), moving on to explore a possible approach for studying organizational forming that would take into account both the difficulties of leaving the modernist way of thinking and researching this topic and, at the same time, permit to reflexively understand how this works from an (a)modern perspective. In so doing, I have sought to demonstrate the inner workings of modernity when it comes to studying the organizational. It is in the demonstration of these "inner workings" that an amodern studying of organizational forming becomes possible. The contributions of Latour's (1993) amodern thesis and actor-network theory demonstrate the possibilities to look beyond the limitations of extant theory, while still addressing the concerns in the literature with regard to process, history and new ways of theorizing and studying organizational form(ing).

Of particular interest to this discussion is the re-articulation of organizational form*ing* as a constructivist endeavor (Latour, 2002) and the intellectual contribution an actor-network approach offers by way of viewing organizational form(*ing*) as a materially heterogeneous relational performance. Thus, this approach illustrates the possibilities to adopt a reorientationist position (Üsdiken & Kieser, 2004) and open the way for another form of historical and processual writing informed by ANT: approaching history and process as a materially heterogeneous relational performance; challenging the field's dominant scientistic rhetoric through a move away from the view that organization studies should comprise a branch of the science of society; and reflecting on the place of historical narrative in organization studies to acknowledge the intrinsic ambiguity in the term "history" itself, which refers to both the totality of, for example, past organizational forming and to the narrative constructed to account for such forming. Through ANT, therefore, writing process and history means adopting a material semiotics and a reflexive stance. As Callon (1991: 154) notes, an "actor has a variable geometry and is indissociable from the networks that define it and that it, along with others, helps define. So it is that history becomes a necessary part of the analysis." And it is in following the actor-networks as they co-evolve and irreversibilize that we may more clearly see the "complexity of historical becoming" (Touraine, 1988: 11). Equally, ANT affords the possibility to explore how it is that the organizational is actually produced, without having to assume from the outset that which we are looking to study (Cooper & Law, 1995).

I posit that ANT, as a theoretical and analytical approach, holds promise in addressing the drawbacks of existent processual approaches, maintaining an opening toward organizational forming in organizational theorizing and research.

An integral facet of modernist thinking is that it makes "invisible, unthinkable, unrepresentable" (Latour, 1993: 34) the work of translation that constructs hybrids. Modernity functions simultaneously on translation and on its denial, on permitting "*the expanded proliferation of the hybrids whose existence, whose very possibility, it denies*" (Latour, 1993: 34; emphasis in original). As such, working within an amodern framework allows for overcoming modernity's deficiency in favoring essence and purification, i.e., 'organizational form,' over relational materiality, performativity, translation and hybridization, i.e., 'organizational form*ing*,' and this paper has sought to outline such possibility.

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