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Chris Carter and Crawford Spence

For Social Reflexivity in Organization and Management Theory

Abstract

This chapter argues that while Organization and Management Theory (OMT) appears in good health it stands on the precipice of a crisis of its own making. This stems from an overly self-referential and narrow focus on theoretical contribution, at the expense of a broader set of societal commitments. Paradoxically, this is particularly the case if a researcher is putatively engaging with broader *societal issues*. The central thesis advanced in this chapter is that researchers should be more socially reflexive about what they are researching, why they are researching it, and for whom. As a corollary, the chapter calls for researchers to interrogate the research that they are undertaking critically and to work out the broader social significance of their work. The chapter unfolds with concise analyses of two branches of OMT: the sociology of the professions and institutional theory. The chapter highlights how research into the professions runs the danger of being captured by the objects of its research: as researchers busy themselves examining pre-existing concepts, rather than exploring the power struggles that take place in particular fields. The chapter argues for a re-framing of research into the professions. The chapter highlights the rise of institutional theory to its current position of dominance within OMT. Institutional theory's recent move to study 'Grand Challenges' is welcomed but also problematised. The chapter closes with reflections on a course of action for making OMT matter.

Keywords: Reflexivity, Bourdieu, Professions, Institutional Theory, Grand Challenges.

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For Social Reflexivity in Organization and Management Theory

Outlining the Terrain

In Organization and Management Theory (OMT), and the social sciences more broadly, we are afforded some latitude when it comes to choosing what to research. However, the tacit rules of the publishing game do exert an influence on the methodological choices of researchers. For example, in the current climate of academia, prominence is accorded to theoretical contribution at the expense of empirical novelty. In this respect, the exoticness, boldness or audaciousness of empirical objects is of secondary importance. A familiar admonishment we receive from a reviewer or editor runs something like this, ‘okay, this is a very interesting empirical story but what is it a case of?’, or ‘xyz journal is primarily a theory journal. We don’t see that you are making a contribution to theory’. Where there is interest in empirical work it is almost exclusively focused on the degree of rigor that goes into the construction of empirical objects: ‘why should we believe your account?’, or ‘I am sorry I don’t believe your data and I don’t think anything could convince me’. There appears to be little intrinsic interest in a particular research site or empirical phenomenon. All too often this most crucial operation of establishing why a research matters and what is at stake tends to be the “most completely ignored” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 224) by social scientists who, instead, jump straight into theoretical elaboration, such is the hierarchy that privileges theory over empirics across many of the contemporary social sciences.

Taking time over the construction of an appropriate research object does not simply require a pause before launching into research proper, but more likely is a “protracted and exacting task that is accomplished little by little through a whole series of small rectifications and amendments” (ibid: 228). In other words, it is something that is anathema to the culture of speed (Moten and Harney, 1999) that pervades much of modern day academia, where arguably the packaging of academic work is often overproduced, thus obfuscating the paucity of its contents (Berg and Seeber, 2016). It is of little surprise therefore that, reading the methods sections of some OMT papers, there is little sense that constructing research objects has been a painstaking process. This is partly a function of academic writing, whereby a methods section is a purposeful statement rather than a meditation on the inescapable messiness, false starts and serendipity that characterise the research process. Of course, while it is doubtful that people would want to read a eulogy of an endless series of dead-ends, the wider point here is that methodological presentation is highly stylized in current academic writing, which is suggestive of a more generalized devaluation of methodological reflexivity.

As will be seen below from our analysis of literature on the ‘professions’, pre-constructed thinking abounds. While taking ‘profession’, or the ‘precariat’ or ‘stay at home mothers’, for example, as units of analysis can be worthwhile endeavours, few studies simultaneously explore the prior classification work that has gone into making these units intelligible, taken-for-granted categories in their own right. Without doing so, researchers run the risk of regressing to the comfort of pre-constructed social units (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 230), essentially becoming captured by their own research objects. These research objects become performative in that they produce the very world they describe. In order to avoid this, Bourdieu encourages researchers to undertake a ‘sociology of sociology’ as a ‘necessity, not a luxury’ (ibid: 254), effectively inscribing reflexivity into their scientific habitus.

We argue below that such reflexivity is necessary, not merely as a deontological commitment, but also consequentially in order to ensure that knowledge building serves society in meaningful ways. Thus, beyond previous arguments in favour of reflexivity in

social science (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2010; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, others) we argue here for a specifically *social reflexivity* that privileges knowledge for society. In this vein, Edward Said (1994), in his *Reith Lectures*, asked the question: what social function does an intellectual play? In this spirit, we argue that organization and management theory should aim for the betterment of progressive society. As such, the variant of reflexivity that we seek to advance here is both deontologically robust and oriented towards engendering positive social outcomes – *social reflexivity*.

In the current climate of rankings, journal lists and performance measurement mania, society tends to become eclipsed or, more disconcertingly, is relegated to a source of data, the interpretation thereof useful for bolstering the hermetically sealed philosophical parlour games that characterise academic micro tribes (Alvesson et al, 2017). Everywhere we look, we see colleagues (and *nostra culpa* ourselves) harnessing wider social phenomena to the service of some theoretical elaboration for an academic journal that has high stakes for careers but seemingly little or no consequences for society. Alvesson and Sandberg (2014: 984) lament the sterility prevalent in ‘boxed in research’, instead, they call for, betraying a rather peculiar box fetish in the process, the pursuit of ‘box breaking research’. During the drafting of this article, one colleague told us that he was ‘making a career out of studying the poor and dispossessed’. While egregious, it spoke perhaps to an inconvenient truth where implicitly we often ask *what society can do to improve our knowledge?* rather than *how can our knowledge improve society?* For Edward Said (1994), the basic questions of intellectual endeavor are: (i) how does one speak the truth? (ii) what truth? (iii) for whom? (iv) and, where?

Taking the moral high ground in this fashion and extolling the wider social purpose of universities might seem increasingly quaint, a tad patronising, or even anachronistic (Collini, 2018). We are happy to run that risk here in the hope of disrupting in some small way the current rules of academic knowledge building. If we think of all of the energy, hard work and commitment that goes into the production of research, one has to ask whether colleagues have worked out what the broader contribution of their research is? If the researchers were paid and promoted for their efforts before the research produced being immediately buried and forgotten about, would society be worse off? ¹

We proceed via two branches of literature that are important parts of the canon of OMT. The first – the sociology of the professions - is a debate that has its genesis in the 1960s and has continued to the present day. The second – institutional theory – has shone brightly over the last two decades, developing considerably from its origins that rest, for some, in the 1970s and, for others, in the 1950s.

Classificatory violence in literature on the ‘professions’

Focusing on literature on the professions permits us to illustrate a more general problem with reflexivity that pervades social science. In one sense, Bourdieu is extremely dismissive of the very concept of profession, denigrating it as a “folk concept that has been smuggled uncritically into scientific language” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 242). His argument is that ‘profession’ is a term that certain occupations attach to themselves, rather than it being a proper social science category *per se*. The key point here is that professions should be viewed as political projects, groups of individuals who have collectively succeeded in writing the rules of the game in their own image and accumulating symbolic capital. Thus, for a group to claim the title profession and for this to gain traction more broadly in society is, in part, the result of successful lobbying and organizing. The profession is then imbued with higher order values, such as a moral vocation, which elevates it above the grubby realities of politicking

¹ This is reminiscent of JM Keynes’ solution to economic slumps: dig holes, fill them up and do it again!

and self-interest. Broadly, this is an act of organizational alchemy. Academics tend to view professions as ideal types with a set of generic criteria that can be used to evaluate whether certain groups stack up as more or less professional. This, we suggest, leads to researchers working inadvertently on behalf of so called professional groups rather than viewing the latter critically and questioning the role that they play in society. The question often turns on: is xyz occupation actually a profession? Rather than what symbolic work does labelling a group a profession perform?

This does not imply that the language of professionalism *per se* be rejected. Rather, viewing ‘professionalism’ – and the meaning thereof – as a key stake in struggles for status within specific fields (Schinkel and Noordegraaf, 2011), is a productive way of maintaining reflexivity in research into high status occupational groups. This is a more socially reflexive way of understanding such groups. But it is a ‘folk concept’ that has meaning within specific arena; in this reading, professionalism is relational and amounts to winning a struggle within a field. It is also processual in that these struggles are always on-going, never fully resolved. These insights do not generally inform the way in which researchers on the ‘professions’ have approached the matter, however, preferring instead to accept the contraband from self-proclaimed professionals before peddling it onto the rest of social science. Researchers, in effect, run the risk of becoming *organic intellectuals* for the professions that are the subject of their studies. This umbilical cord between the research and the profession under study is deeply problematic.

While we are being critical about the rather casual way in which researchers bandy about the labels of ‘profession’ and ‘professional’, at this point we should enter a plea of *nostra culpa*, having been guilty of precisely the same enterprise. It was in one of our early papers on the Big 4 accounting firms (Carter and Spence, 2014) that we were encouraged to more fully embrace the methodological precepts embedded within Bourdieu’s thought by a constructive but challenging reviewer. Initially, we were interested in the way in which individuals within Big 4 firms accumulated the necessary habitus and forms of capital in order to be consecrated as a Partner in those firms; this marked them ascending to the elite of the firm and, in turn, earning large amounts of economic capital. We were encouraged to go further than simply analysing this phenomenon from a sociological perspective, instead undertaking a ‘sociology of sociology’ vis-à-vis our own approach to the research problem at hand. This is perhaps rather grandiose language but it forced us to think about what a ‘successful professional’ actually means. This drew our attention to unpacking the historicity of what constitutes ‘success’ or ‘professional’ within the field of study: they of course meant different things at different epochs, itself an indication of the extent to which symbolic struggles characterize occupational fields.

Indeed, recent research shows that these concepts take on different meanings in different cultural contexts too (Spence et al, 2017). This leads us to suggest that professionalism be viewed as a form of symbolic capital that is *de-essentialised* and whose meaning is culturally contingent rather than pre-fabricated as an ideal type or corresponding to an institutional logic (a view that is increasingly prominent in professions literature). In this respect, our approach was consistent with Schinkel and Noordegraaf (2011) who suggest that one need not transcend the language of professionalism wholesale but use it as a means of elucidating what has come to be naturalised within certain occupational *milieux*.

Semi-Professions

If research on the ‘professions’ is guilty of conferring symbolic capital upon problematic social groups, nowhere is symbolic and classificatory violence more evident than in studies which purport to talk about ‘semi-professions’. As a concept, the ‘semi-professions’ was introduced to the sociological literature in the late 1960s, most memorably through a

collection edited by Etzioni (1969). The collection comprises essays on social work (Scott, 1969), nursing (Katz, 1969), primary / elementary school teaching (Lortie, 1969), the role of women in the workplace (Simpson and Simpson, 1969), and the limits of professionalization (Goode, 1969). The central arguments contended that semi-professions: (i) tend to be gendered and the preserve of women; (ii) exist within highly bureaucratized spheres, which engender clashes between bureaucratic and professional authority; (iii) struggle to establish their own knowledge bases; (iv) possess less autonomy than other professions. In this light, the semi-profession becomes a short-hand term for work largely carried out by women in expanding state bureaucracies.

The introduction of the category of semi-profession elicited a mixed response. Oleson (1970) offered a perceptive critique, 'Whether or not one wishes to agree that there is such a category of occupation as "the semi-professions" is a question which each reader will have to answer in terms of whether he or she regards it as important to define unambiguously the much discussed concept of "profession" or whether one takes the view that as a symbol the word profession is constantly changing in its every day and social science referents, hence process rather than a category ought to be scrutinized' (1970 p. 649).

The term semi-profession marked an attempt by sociologists to classify occupations that seemed to meet some but not all of the criteria required by their concept of a profession. The category was forged from the radical changes taking place in the world of work characterised by increasing numbers of women joining the labour force, an expansion of the middle class, and growing affluence. These occupations did not mirror long established professions but exhibited some differences and were hence known as 'semi-professions'. Of course, this is a deeply condescending category that draws a comparison between different occupational groups often operating in very different fields. For instance, the comparison between a school teacher – within the field of education – and a high street solicitor – within the field of law – is fairly tenuous: they are very different jobs in different sectors and commensuration is difficult. Labelling one a semi-profession and the other a full-profession is to establish a violent hierarchy between the two. For Hearn (1982), commenting on Simpson and Simpson (1969), it was fairly clear that the distinction 'is of course really a distinction that draws on sex' (Hearn, 1982: 185). To this we would add that they also provide a short-hand for social class.

Bolton and Muzio (2008) reproduce the earlier classificatory schema in their study of law, management and teaching. These three areas of activity are understood respectively as 'established', 'aspiring' and 'semi-professions' in accordance with the degree of autonomy afforded their members, the role or absence of professional institutes in regulating member behaviour, and the codification or otherwise of their knowledge bases. Bolton and Muzio (2008) argue:

'Teaching and other occupations such as nursing have been treated as semi-professions (Etzioni, 1969). While it presents many of the structural and organizational traits usually associated with check-list or trait-based approaches to professionalism (MacDonald, 1995), teaching has traditionally enjoyed less autonomy over its work, less control over its knowledge base and weaker forms of professional association and governance (not to mention fewer rewards and lower social status). Hence, teaching appears as an incomplete or subordinate professional project'. (ibid. 284).

Five decades after Etzioni's categorisation of semi-profession, it is remarkable the way in which the characterisation has endured more or less intact. Bolton and Muzio's argument that teaching, 'In line with other feminine professional projects, the powerful ideological image of

the teacher, most especially that of primary aged children, as a nurturing, maternal figure has ensured that teaching remains a semi-profession (Etzioni, 1969)' (Bolton and Muzio, 2008: 291-292).

Such thinking informs other studies of putatively semi-professional groups too. For instance, Witschge and Nygren (2009) refer to journalism as a 'semi profession', because journalists lack both the autonomy to define their own work schedule and the ability to ring-fence journalism work from non-journalists. Similarly, Morris et al (2016) classify project management as either a 'semi-profession' or 'emerging profession' because it lacks a coherent underlying body of knowledge, does not make explicit attempts to legitimise itself in public good terms, and does not adhere to an overarching ethical code. Whether established, or 'traditional' professions such as Law, Medicine or Accountancy match up to these criteria in satisfactory ways is, of course, a moot point. Certainly, in large accountancy firms work is organized largely around client demands (Spence and Carter, 2014). One suspects that the representation of these professions is little more than a simulacrum – a copy without an original. Nevertheless, Morris et al (2016) appear to be satisfied enough with their way of demarcating the professional from the semi or emerging professional.

Nurses, teachers and social workers have a particular chip on their shoulders when it comes to identity projects. Thus, Etzioni's (1969) uncharitable caricature of the very same groups as exemplars of his 'semi-profession' category is actually reproduced by members of these 'semi-professions'. That they now freely self-identify as such is indicative of the extent to which the dominated have become truly complicit in their own domination: this is what Bourdieu refers to as symbolic violence. For example, Daniskova (2014) suggests that teachers, while coveting professional status in one sense, should really be content with their lot as 'semi-professions' because the current tendency in teacher training is for the development of practical over theoretical skills, thereby undermining, once again, that all important theoretical body of knowledge that is widely accepted as necessary for the conferment of professional status. In the case of social work, Gitterman (2014) shows, historically, that whenever social work stands on the verge of accreting professional status, the social workers in question tend to jump disciplinary ship and start identifying as therapists or even psychiatrists, activities that have proven to be more symbolically and materially rewarding than social work. This is possible, argues Gitterman (2014), because of a longstanding debate in social work over whether the focus should be on the individual or his/her environment. In the case of nursing, Keeling and Templeman (2013) point towards dichotomies in the perceptions of nurses, who are torn between seeing themselves as either professionals *or* carers. This is curious, given that one of the key touchstones of many definitions of 'profession' is that of a public service ethos; in the case of nurses, this ethos is held up as evidence of non-professional status.

The problems with labelling groups as more or less professional seem clear enough, but many researchers appear to hide behind these labels as shorthand for the degrees of autonomy, codification of knowledge and extent of governance that characterise specific domains. In other words, the conceptual comfort of ideal types obfuscates what is essentially a political process. Indeed, the pseudo-scientific classification of archetypal professions itself confers significant esteem upon certain social groups. Not only have these groups succeeded in conquering state apparatuses the world over, but the way in which they are described by ostensibly critical outside observers suggests that professions have mounted a successful symbolic conquest of academia as well. This would all be of limited significance if doing so was not associated with the denigration of what are clearly socially valuable activities. For example, the triptych of established, aspiring and semi-professions leaves us in the perverse situation of characterising nurses – who deal *with* disease – as not quite fully professional, whereas commercial lawyers and accountants – who often act as if they themselves *are* a

disease – as fully paid up members of the professional class. This enchantment with specific social groups seems to eclipse an interest and commitment to society *per se*. It is not the case that such research is ‘neutral’, it actively reproduces stereotypes that serve some groups and work against others. In our view, this seems hard to justify and stems, at least in part, from a lack of reflexivity among researchers. Greater social reflexivity in this context would necessarily entail disenchantment with the muzak of professions as ideal types and see, instead, a series of occupational groups vying for status and recognition in politically charged fields.

Our argument is that these concepts – generated at a time where large numbers of new expert workers were joining the economy and when many females were entering the labour force for the first time – need to be approached with social reflexivity. They need not be avoided entirely so much as viewed with skepticism and continually deconstructed and challenged wherever they surface. Socially reflexive researchers would use the label ‘profession’ as an object of critique rather than as a simple descriptor of certain groups, as an outcome of status struggles rather than an ideal type.

Pax Institutionica

The problems outlined above in literature on the so-called professions are instructive because they are particular instances of a more generalized problem. If we zoom out from professions literature and take a view of OMT from a higher vantage point, similar problems are observed. We turn to Institutional Theory as a means of interrogating a conceptual formation that is most visible from 30,000ft. Over the course of the last three decades, Institutional Theory has established itself as *the perspective par excellence* in OMT. It is particularly prominent in North American Business Schools and occupies a central position within the Academy of Management², which is the prime vehicle for North American management scholarship. Not restricted to North America, institutional theory has become increasingly influential in Europe and now, for instance, many of the elite chairs are held by institutional theorists³. The rise of institutional theory is a story that needs to be told in its own right; it is a perspective that has travelled far beyond the early writings of Paul Dimaggio and Woody Powell (1983) on why organizations seem to resemble each other, or John Meyer and Brian Rowan’s (1977) insights of the role of ceremonialism in organizational life. It is still further removed from the ‘old institutionalism’ of Philip Selznick (1949; 1996) or Arthur Stinchcombe (1960). Institutional theory has spread onto teaching programmes such that any well tooled up MBA student can spot an institutional logic at fifty paces or pontificate between classes about the need to create an organizational hybrid! In our view the undoubted importance of institutional theory to contemporary OMT marks it out as requiring greater scrutiny. In other words, if institutional theory is important, what makes it important? Concomitantly, what responsibilities does this place on institutional theory and leading institutional theorists?

Ask not what Institutional Theory can do for society....

In what is now seen as a seminal study, Thornton and Ocasio (1999: 803) gesture to Haveman and Rao (1997) and build directly on ‘Friedland and Alford’s focus on institutional

² In the revision of this article one of the editors pointed out that the *Academy of Management* should not be seen as primarily North America as it has ‘internationalised’. This is a fair point but internationalisation should not be equated with an intellectual opening up or liberalisation. The *Academy of Management* has the hallmarks of a project of empire and institutional theory provides a convenient *lingua franca*.

³ At the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge University, elite chairs are now held by institutional theorists. This is a comparatively recent development.

logics as supra organizational patterns, both symbolic and material, that order reality and provide meaning to actions and structure conflicts'. Their study has become an intellectual anchor for institutional theory that has sought to engage with logics and can rightly be regarded as a classic. The study itself focused empirically on changes in the higher education publishing industry. This is revealing, for academic publishing seems to have been chosen for the purposes of exploring logics rather than as either an intrinsic interest in the empirical phenomenon under consideration or indeed its broader societal importance. That the article is well crafted, beautifully executed and has been profoundly influential is not in doubt. This is despite its empirical provenance that, to be frank, belongs to the realm of the bland, rather than engaging with issues that were more profound or consequential. Thornton and Ocasio (1999) were writing in the 1990s, a decade that saw the Soviet Union disintegrate, Yugoslavia descend into the horrors of murderous civil war and ethnic cleansing, genocide being perpetrated in Rwanda, free trade deals being signed in different parts of the world, the widespread diffusion of the internet – rather charmingly referred to as the 'information super highway' - the imposition of the Washington Consensus on many sub-Saharan countries, the Asian crash, changes were taking place in the banking system that were to have far reaching ramifications a decade later, and so on. In short there was a great deal of great significance taking place in the 1990s. It rather begs the question: why study higher education publishing?⁴

The Thornton and Ocasio article signals simultaneously the primacy of the concept over the empirics and the interests of a certain academic micro tribe over society. This is not restricted to OMT, of course; other social sciences have showcased theoretical insights from a comparatively peripheral and dull empirical setting to such effect. An example of this is Sweeney and Sweeney's (1978) flimsy analysis of babysitting in Washington D.C. in the 1970s that went on to have a huge impact on monetary theory.

Another charge to be levelled at institutional theorists is that they turn the basic function of social science upon its head: no longer do we need theory in order to understand the social world; rather, we need the social world in order to help advance institutional theory. It is the research world reversed. So, in building an empire, institutional theory loses sight of itself; self-awareness is sacrificed for domination. Recognition of this cannot be better expressed than by the institutionalists themselves: "institutional theory has, perhaps ironically, itself become hegemonic and has, as a result, lost its theoretical reflexivity" (Suddaby, 2015: 94).

Indeed, even when institutional theory does talk about society, it does so in rather anodyne and politically quietist terms. The new institutionalism privileged legitimacy, conformity and trying to understand why it is that organisations are alike. Thus, power, conflict and situations that generate winners and losers became unfamiliar themes and territory for institutionalists. In institutional theory's more daring moments there might be a discussion of a clash of logics, institutional complexity or the importance of emotion. But this is thin gruel. It has little or nothing to say about class politics or far reaching global inequality. Political economy is completely absent from its frames of reference.

It is for these reasons that authors can point to the conservative nature of institutional theory. Willmott (2015), for example, has recently offered a biting critique of institutional theory on epistemological grounds. We take Willmott's (2015) critique here seriously, particularly as it speaks closely to our own concerns around methodological reflexivity.

⁴ The editor of this article objected to this section of the paper on the basis that it was a tad unfair and that people study different empirical settings for a whole range of reasons. We disagree. Given the study's subsequent importance for the field it is a worthy object of critique. For us it takes us into the 'heart of blandness' of institutional theory.

Willmott (2015) suggests that institutional theory, while offering a refreshing alternative to neo-classical economics via its constructivist ontology, is severely “domesticated by a neo-positivist epistemology that tends to treat its objects of analysis as givens, rather than as media of domination” (105). Thus, there is no attempt to historicize rationalized myths or institutional logics. Not only does this give pride of place to the pre-constructed, it also serves to naturalize power relations. Interestingly, this criticism is accepted by Suddaby – a onetime institutional theory fellow traveller and member of the high command – who notes that “institutional theory has dismissed history in its epistemology” (Suddaby, 2015: 94).

The last four decades have, in many Western countries at least, seen unprecedented transfers of wealth from the moderately well-off and poor to wealthier sections of society. This was done in the name of neoliberalism, which was presented as necessary and ultimately unstoppable. Extant fractures in society arose in large part due to these changes. However, institutional theory remains largely silent about this wider context (Munir, 2015). This is a criticism largely accepted by proponents of institutional theory, who note that “terms like *exploitation, ideology, class, worker, and hegemony* disappear from use in institutional studies (replaced by consensus, empowerment, networks, and compliance)” (Hirsch and Lounsbury, 2015: 97). Clegg (2010) points towards how institutional theory has ‘developed’ while insulating itself from more perspectives in social science that are more troubled by the status quo.

Many of these criticisms are not new. As far back as 1996 Philip Selznick, doyen of old institutionalism, lamented the way in which self-identifying ‘new’ institutionalism was demarcating itself from ‘old’ institutionalism (Selznick, 1996). The transition from the one to the other was characterised by, among other things, a jettisoning of both politics and an interest in social policy outcomes. Other approaches to studying institutions in the social sciences have been more successful in dealing with serious social concerns in ways that are sensitive to history. For example, the various scholars working broadly within the field of historical institutionalism have explored different varieties of capitalism (Hall and Soskice, 2001), comparative political economy (Streeck, 2016) or the evolution of labour relations in advanced economies (Thelen, 2004). Such concerns seem far removed from the naturalization of power relations that have characterised the ‘new’ institutional sociology for the last 35 years. The central difficulty with the new institutionalism is its unwillingness to tackle issues of power and structural inequalities. It confines itself to comparatively bland or unconvincing issues.

A ‘Total Institution’

From the outset this is a misnomer, as ‘Total Institutions’ refer to physical places whose purpose is expressly articulated in a highly rational manner, e.g. prisons, monasteries, asylums, military barracks etc. (Goffman, 1961). Institutional theory is not like this as it constitutes more of an epistemic community rather than a physical congregation and does not have explicitly articulated functions or goals, as its open source development trajectory attests to. However, in many other ways institutional theory is a total institution in that its symbolic boundaries are rather totalizing and its inmates adhere to a symbolic order that outsiders would struggle to comprehend. Institutional theory is probably at its most useful when turned upon itself, being able to describe what is essentially a series of rationalized myths (logics, entrepreneurs, complexity) and explaining the increasingly isomorphic behaviour of its academic devotees. Indeed, institutional theory probably has its own institutional logic!

An academic is socialised and produced through various practices within a particular community (Becher & Trowler, 2001). These communities will exhibit very different norms, expectations and rules of the game. To use our favourite sociologist, Bourdieu, each of these

communities will possess a habitus. In this regard, an academic community that reaches out to act in the service of society rather than in the service of itself is predicated upon a particular politico-scientific habitus. For many academics in British business schools in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000's, part of becoming an academic was to be a member of a broader critical and political movement (Rowlinson and Hassard, 2011). In our case, one of the authors produced his PhD in the late 1990s and saw himself as part of the British social democratic tradition and very much part of the labour movement; the other author who produced his PhD in the early 2000s was part of the radical ecosocialist movement. In both cases, we thought – somewhat naively – that our work was as much a part of a political movement as it was part of an academic subject area. Of course, times and political persuasions change also, but our point is that for many their research was a vehicle for their politics. This is a crucial point: intellectual ideas and projects can, and arguably should, connect to broader political and social projects. While we were both on the left, finance academics or neo-classical economists in effect have contributed to the promulgation of neo-liberal ideas. In contrast, one surmises that institutional theorists generally entered academia for reasons other than a political project. It seems reasonable to assume that the political quietism of institutional theory is homologous with the political quietism of its advocates. Politics, of course, are inescapable, but institutional theory is more concerned about the institutional politics that play out within the *Academy of Management*.

Adherence to institutional theory is clearly a profitable career strategy for many. In today's over-traded, metricised academic milieu it makes sense that “exponents of institutional theory are seemingly content to occupy research silos where the highest aspiration is to accumulate “hits” in target journals” (Willmott, 2015: 107), particularly when the editors of those journals themselves fail to see anything outside of institutional theory as worthy of intellectual pursuit. In such an environment, doing institutional theory becomes a basic feature of anyone with even the most rudimentary *sens du jeu* in the academic field. Indeed, not doing institutional theory seems a bit daft. We know colleagues who are sufficiently ambitious and clued in, as they would see it, to conclude that their career is best served by dropping (what they see as) more politically radical and intellectually vibrant viewpoints and engaging in a full-blown love affair with institutional theory.

Less consciously, it seems to be the case that institutional theory has become so normalised that it is simply taken for granted that one needs to think in institutionalist terms. Being an institutionalist is therefore part of the doxa of the contemporary organization theorist. Of course, this does not explain the *illusio* – belief that the game is worth playing at all in these terms – that underpins such taken-for-grantedness.

Once a year, members of the High Command of institutional theory congregate at the Business School where one of us works. The sense of excitement on the day of their arrival is palpable. In metaphorical terms, a motorcade replete with police outriders and full security detail alight upon the Business School. The members of the High Command enter to the acclaim of the audience. Always well-mannered and in immaculate couture, the High Command cut impressive figures. When the very embodiments of the posh end of institutional theory deliver their nostrums on publishing, careers and life itself, the tone is almost exclusively focused on the mechanics of getting into ‘A’ journals. The audience lap it up – there is a fusion between the High Command and their community. It feels warm, it feels good. In other words: the event works. Listen to the High Command carefully, perhaps over drinks and canapés, and one can short-cut to the concepts *du jour* in institutional theory. At last year's meeting it was all about overcoming stigma, the year before it majored on emotion. But spare a thought for the *declassé* institutional logics, which have transmogrified from the ‘wonder of the age’ to being tired and very last decade. Some attendees might mention that they are studying logics. The response from the High Command is always polite

but the body language and pained expression are as if to say, ‘you poor ingenue, don’t you know that logics are so last decade’? In terms of *illusio*, both the High Command and their audience are entirely invested in the idea that ‘A’ journals are the prime objective of being an academic. Publishing in ‘A’ journals is a *sine qua non* of the institutionalists in part because work in such outlets is viewed as self-evidently better than that published in ‘B’ journals. It also creates a boundary between academics who publish in ‘A’ journals and those that do not; for the aspirational, these classificatory schema constitute them as fans or wannabes, while the High Command become celebrities.

We are lampooning workshops of this nature to make a point about ‘A’ journals and the central contours of institutional theory. Our satirical account of a writer’s workshop must be tempered by noting the productive lessons they contain for other sub-disciplines of OMT: (i) the institutionalists function well as a community, they support each other and clearly like one another! (ii) this includes a generosity of spirit that the High Command extend towards junior members of their community in terms of practical support and advice; (iii) this helps junior academics navigate the tricky currents of the early stages of an academic career. In short, it is an impressive event that provides serious development opportunities that other sub-disciplines would do well to emulate some of its practices.

Will a different institutional theory please stand up!

For institutional theory to incorporate *social reflexivity*, we suggest two prerequisites that institutionalists adhere to prior going about their own institutional work. Firstly, by historicizing its various research objects, whether these be rationalized myths, institutional logics, institutional workers or whatever, institutional theory can avoid the perils of the pre-constructed and prise itself free from enslavement by its own research objects. Secondly, by putting society first, and institutional theory second, the latter can crawl out from under its own shibboleths, secret codes, all-round insularity and – dare we say it – speak the truth to power (Said, 1994). Of course, it might simply be that institutionalists are not interested in these things, in which case adherence to institutional theory should increasingly be seen as a safe haven for politically quietist careerists who have little to say to wider society.

There is an increasingly audible drum beat sounding the need for institutional theory to occupy itself with grand challenges. This is perhaps a solution for the institutionalists, but it does rather beg the question: if institutional theory hasn’t been examining important issues for the last forty years, what on earth has it been doing?⁵ Yet it is noteworthy that institutional theory is framing itself in this fashion, as if to say after four decades of pretty boring work now we are ready for grand challenges! For a group of scholars who seem to lack basic political commitments or experience it is not clear that they are well disposed towards engagement with ‘grand challenges’. Moreover, what is not clear is the extent to which scholars have been using the knowledge generated in these studies to inform any political engagement with the phenomena under study.

A recent special issue of *Organization Studies* (2018, vol. 39, issue 9) explores the relationship between institutions and inequality, drawing attention to *inter alia* entrenched gender biases, income disparities and class-based differences. This opening up to issues of wider social and political import is, if belated, nonetheless welcome. Is this a damascene moment for Institutional Theory? A turning point where the investigation of the vicissitudes

⁵ This isn’t actually fair in all cases, as institutional scholars have studied institutional responses to AIDS (Maguire et al, 2001), child labour (Khan et al., 2007); climate change (Howard Grenville et. al, 2014; Lefsrud, L. and Meyer, R., 2012; Schüssler, E et. Al, 2014), exploitation (Hamman and Bertels, 2018); housing difficulties (Lawrence & Dover, 2015), inequality (Amis et al., 2017, Amis, 2018, David, 2017), philanthropy (Mair & Hehenberger, 2014) and refugees (Hardy & Phillips, 1999).

of global capitalism take precedence over more mundane fare? We certainly hope so. Amis et al (2018) are to be congratulated for engaging institutional theory with the broad issue of inequality, which is both a Grand Challenge and a damning indictment of contemporary society. However, on closer inspection, while a welcome start, the special issue raises questions as to the extent to which researchers engage with the extant literature in the social sciences on inequality, or whether issues of inequality are identified as if they have been uncovered for the first time and social stratification is presented as something of a *terra nullis*, constituting a new area for institutional researchers. This we argue is a central question for institutional theorists to grapple with as they engage with Grand Challenges. For instance, parts of the special issue reprise familiar territory: McCarthy and Moon (2018), for example, regale us with a story about unconscious biases that are ascribed to gender roles; similarly, Buchanan et al, (2018) dazzle us with the insight that perceptions of competence are not gender neutral.

These are hardly new insights. Rosa Luxemburg would be turning in her grave upon hearing that in 2018 the existence of gender bias is deemed a revelation. Feminist theory is premised on a critique of patriarchal power relations that naturalizes that which is socially constructed. Interestingly, some of the more compelling and innovative papers in the special issue seem to draw upon institutional theory in only the most tangential fashion, paying more attention instead to governmentality (Hayes et al, 2018) and social movements (Reinecke, 2018) literatures, merely dropping in the word ‘institutionalization’ here and there. Going further, Gray et al’s (2018) article on class and identity and Gist-Mackey’s (2018) article on unemployment neither draw upon nor feed into institutional theory at all! This suggests that it is not at all obvious that scholars of inequality need institutional theory to advance their understanding of stratification. Conversely, why institutional theory suddenly needs inequality is not clear. Overall, this recent institutional foray into ‘grand challenges’ makes sociological literature seem even more attractive than it was before.

As occasional recreational users (i.e. reviewers forced us to take it but we never really inhaled!) we acknowledge that there is much in institutional theory to admire. Its cheery and pragmatic approach to issues is a welcome contrast to the lofty pretentiousness or solemn asceticism of other scholarly communities, or the crass populism of some ‘close to practice’ business school professors. Institutional theory pragmatically fixes problems, moves on when ideas no longer seem to work, incorporates new ideas and writes itself into new areas. It is phantasmagoric as it moves from one concept to the next. It is less a grand theory of the past and more akin to an open source form of theorizing – a *linux* for the Business School world. It is this quality that makes institutional theory as suited to the zeitgeist as avocados on toast, body art and beards. A theory for hipster times perhaps. Yet, as in life, architecture or fashion, the great wheel of time will turn. Institutional theory’s very malleability that has been a source of great strength, could actually be its very great weakness. It is less a big tent and more a marquee, with a thin ideology and great vulnerability. It is the lack of ideological anchoring that is its great weakness. By this, we mean it is not clear what the essence of institutional theory is, or what institutional theory actually stands for, if indeed it stands for anything beyond personal advancement.

The Coming Crisis of Organization Theory

Society is at a watershed moment. Whether it is the ebbing away of trust in traditional institutions, the rise of populism, or the difficulties in proffering solutions to complex and apparently intractable problems, there can be little doubt that the decades to come will pose major challenges for societies. Held et al (2010) characterised society as living in the age of the hydra-headed crisis – whereupon society lurches from one crisis to the next. In the eight years since they published the report, it is difficult to disagree with their analysis. Other

equally credible social scientists are talking in apocalyptic terms about the end of society as we know it (Streeck, 2016). While it remains to be seen whether these commentators are peddling an overly pessimistic vista, their resonance with the zeitgeist is evident. This raises questions for OMT. Arguably, OMT in its current form has never directly confronted economic, social and climatic crisis. This is in contrast, for instance, with the Keynesian revolution in economics that stemmed from thinking through how to tackle an economic slump (Dillard, 1942; Gruchy, 1948). Questions of how and why people organize, how they can come together to solve intractable problems are timeless (Parker, 2018), they are also pressing. How organizations can ameliorate the social and material conditions of mankind, how they are able to promote what Harold Laski (1943), the legendary political scientist, called ‘positive freedoms’, which is far removed from the dismal spectacle of zero-hour contracts and exploitation of the most vulnerable in society, are central questions for our time.

The two parts of the canon of OMT profiled in this article seem hamstrung in their ability to engage with the major issues in society. The sociology of professions literature has successfully preserved debates from the 1970s in analytical formaldehyde, which are then trotted out to analyse occupational groups in the 2nd decade of the 21st century. This lack of reflexivity and an apparent willingness to be seduced into reproducing the claims of those under study seriously compromises the endeavour. If the sociology of the professions has remained something of an intellectual backwater ossified around a set of hoary shibboleths from the 1970s, institutional theory has positively boomed, soaring to lofty heights within the academy. It is now the main show in town in OMT and its leading exponents are the stand-out stars of the contemporary scene. Their strength comes in fashioning theoretical concepts from a range of empirical domains. The concepts become transcendental and move with ease across time and space. Rarely are they problematised, nor are they nested into a context that assesses what the concepts can do to serve society rather than the other way around. At the time of writing, institutional theory – that inveterate follower of fashion – has embraced the need to understand ‘grand challenges’. We welcome this development but question whether this can be effectively accomplished outside of the broader the structures of politics and broader social movements. It is not clear for whom the self-styled Grand Challengers are speaking, or what social function they are trying to fulfil (Said, 1994). If it is merely to score more ‘A’ journal hits - the crack cocaine of the Business School world – then some of us will fall by the wayside. If it is the beginning of a serious engagement with major societal issues (Amis et al, 2018) then this is to be welcomed, but a caveat must be sounded.

In 1970 Alvin Gouldner wrote of the coming crisis of sociology. This struck many as curious as sociology seemed to be at its zenith and set to challenge economics as the leading light within the social sciences. While in intellectual terms the practice of economics has become little more than a mathematical sideshow, it has retained enormous symbolic power. In contrast, sociology has never re-gained its promise of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It has retreated to a dismal disciplinary rump. Gouldner’s thesis was that sociology had been dominated by Talcott Parson’s structural functionalism. The effect, Gouldner argued, was to serve up sterile sociology stripped of values and political commitment. The key point here is that social science disciplines have had a tendency to fragment with, for example, economics ignoring society and sociology not taking economics seriously enough (Streeck, 2016). It is within this wider problematic in the social sciences that the current state of OMT should be made intelligible (Reed and Burrell, 2018). More recently, Streeck (2016) has argued that all branches of social science would benefit from heavy doses of political economy and an ontological perspective that views the economic sphere as socially constructed - all with the objective of helping prepare humanity for the long socio-economic interregnum that we are

entering into. The branches of OMT referred to above can be reoriented in these directions, we suggest, by incorporating social reflexivity into their fabric. Social reflexivity would not merely be an antidote to the staid, the formulaic and the conceptually insular, but a guiding principle that would wed academic micro-tribes to social and political concerns in ways that could help offer an explanation of society's challenges and outline some potential solutions that would progressively advance society. That is the promise of OMT that *must* be grasped.

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