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ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIOLOGY AND ORGANIZATION STUDIES: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

Organizational sociology and organization studies have a long history together, while also sharing a proclivity to self-diagnose crises. Instead of taking these assessments at face value, this paper treats them as an object of study, asking what conditions have fueled them. In the case of organizational sociology, there are indications of a connection between rising levels of discontent and community building: self-identified organizational sociologists have progressively withdrawn from general debates in the discipline and turned their attention to organization studies, which, they suspect, has seen dramatic levels of growth at their expense. Organization studies, on the other hand, are still haunted by “a Faustian bargain”: leaning heavily on the authority of the social sciences, business school faculty were able to facilitate the emergence of a scholarly field of practice dedicated to the study of organizations, which they control. However, in doing so, they also set organization studies on a path of continued dependence on knowledge produced elsewhere: notably, by university disciplines such as sociology.

Keywords: Business schools; expertise; organization studies; sociology; scholarly practice

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past 100 years, the academic study of organizations has become a popular endeavor in the social sciences and several interdisciplinary fields of study, some largely oblivious of their neighbors, others connected by common interests, intellectual spillovers, and networks of mutual exchange. Organizational sociology (OrgSoc hereafter), a subdiscipline of sociology, and organization studies (OS hereafter), an interdisciplinary field of study, arguably belong in the second category (Haveman, 2022): not only are their epistemic cultures closely entwined, but they also share a proclivity to self-diagnose crises – which is the main topic of interest in this paper. Instead of participating in these debates, I intend to approach them from a sociology of knowledge perspective and treat self-diagnosed crises in OrgSoc and OS as objects of inquiry. Specifically, I am interested in the conditions that have fueled and sustained them.

Starting with sociology, it seems that those with a vested interest in the subdiscipline OrgSoc are struck by a growing “sense of depression” (Besio et al., 2020, p. 411). Take a session held at the Annual Conference of the American Sociological Association (ASA) in 2014 as an example. Its premise: OrgSoc is facing a profound and perhaps even existential crisis. The participants, therefore, were asked to discuss if we are currently witnessing “the end of ‘organizational sociology’ as we know it.” Another vivid example can be found in a paper titled “The decline of organizational sociology? An empirical analysis of research trends in leading journals across half a century,” which ponders the question: “Is organizational sociology becoming obsolete?” (Grothe-Hammer & Kohl, 2020, p. 420). The basic storyline around which OrgSoc has coalesced goes like this: “Centrifugal forces” (Thoenig, 1998, p. 307) have been pulling apart the foundations of OrgSoc, which is not only on the verge of extinction in terms of its relevance “outside of the discipline” (Besio et al., 2020, p. 412), but also “no longer appears to have any specific location [...] within sociology itself” (du Gay, 2020, p. 460).

When discussing the “external conditions” (Holmwood, 2010, p. 640) that have caused the downward spiral of OrgSoc, sociologists often blame OS. They argue that although sociology has “played a central role in shaping many aspects of this wide-ranging field” (Scott, 2004, p. 4), OS, by differentiating “itself from other fields and from the social science disciplines” (Augier et al., 2005, p. 87) has appropriated significant resources that are now missing elsewhere. Business schools are said to have played a key role in this process: instilled with a sudden appetite for academic credibility in the 1960s and 1970s, they vigorously supported their faculty in demarcating fields of study and making them their own. The OrgSoc community, meanwhile, feeling itself to be an increasingly marginalized group in the larger realm of organizational scholarship, occasionally pays a visit to what it sees as territory that has been lost. Organizational sociologists participate in conferences such as the annual colloquium, hosted by the European Group of Organization Science (EGOS), and sometimes even get to publish an article in one of the esteemed journals such as *Administrative Science Quarterly* (ASQ), *Organization Science* (OrgSc), the *Academy of Management Journal*

(AMJ), or *Organization Studies* (OrgStudies). But, rest assured, these visits are just temporary. Organizational sociologists have concluded, for better or worse, that the scientific study of organizations is now dominated by business school faculty.

In a surprising twist, the apparent victor, far from thumping its chest, is also consumed by doubts and equally prone to indulge in self-diagnosed crises, albeit of a different kind. As early as 1959, two influential reports on the general state of management education – one commissioned by the Ford Foundation, the other by the Carnegie Foundation – concluded that, despite their lavish resources, business schools lacked quality: “the central problem confronting this branch of higher education,” one of the reports concluded, “is that academic standards need to be materially increased” (Pierson, 1959, p. ix). Decades later, after much money spent and countless reforms implemented, business school faculty still face a “crisis of confidence” (Harley, 2019, p. 286). Reporting conditions such as an “impostor syndrome” (Bothello & Roulet, 2019, p. 854), they experience a creeping feeling that their authority is always in danger of being revealed as nothing but “surface bluster” (Starkey & Tiratsoo, 2007, p. 35). The title of a recently published book, *Management Studies in Crisis: Fraud, Deception and Meaningless Research* (Tourish, 2019), vividly captures this anxiety. Unlike in OrgSoc, where the default position is that an otherwise healthy field (OrgSoc) has fallen prey to a powerful opponent (OS), problems are not externalized but perceived as being internal in origin.

OS scholars frequently express worries about their dependence on imports from university disciplines such as economics, psychology, and sociology (Agarwal & Hoetker, 2007; Holmwood, 2010; Lockett & McWilliams, 2005). They concede that the knowledge provided by university disciplines is a valuable source of inspiration. Sociology, for example, was “foundational in shaping [OS] in its earliest years” and continues “to be an important influence” (Adler, 2009, p. 5). But we are told, by being too reliant “on borrowed concepts and theories from neighboring disciplines,” OS has incurred a “balance of trade deficit” (Whetten et al., 2009, pp. 537–538) which ultimately hurts the field. The university disciplines “often discount the scientific rigor of management research” and consider “the business school [...] a necessary evil to subsidize other faculties, rather than a legitimate source of knowledge and scientific creation” (Bothello & Roulet, 2019, p. 857).

To understand why OrgSoc is struck by a “sense of depression” and why OS remains an “ungainly giant,” my analysis proceeds in two steps. First, I trace the transformation of OrgSoc and OS into bounded fields of practice or “settlements” (Abbott, 1988, 2001). On that basis, OS does control vast resources, while OrgSoc struggles to keep afloat. But the story becomes more complicated when, in a second step, the perspective is extended from how actors create and enforce the boundaries of settlements to the assemblage of bundles of tasks and problems into networks of expertise (Eyal, 2013). As we will see, the very foundations of OS expertise have been assembled using bits and pieces from several university disciplines, among them sociology. This is why the field is naturally drawn to, and continues to depend on, knowledge created elsewhere, no matter how settled it might be.

CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

The conceptual tools used to analyze OrgSoc and OS are drawn from the sociology of professions and the sociology of expertise. The former, as outlined by Andrew Abbott, focuses on struggles between occupational groups to be the designated experts for specific bundles of tasks and problems. Building on and extending Abbott's view, Gil Eyal turns his attention to how bundles of tasks and problems are assembled into areas of expertise. I briefly discuss both positions in this section.

Calling for a "history of tasks and problems," [Abbott \(1988, p. 314\)](#) foregrounds the processes by which occupational groups fashion links between themselves and bundles of tasks and problems. These processes are referred to as *jurisdictional claims*, which, to be successful, must be rooted in knowledge that reaches a sufficient level of *abstraction*. Jurisdictional claims can result in stable jurisdictions "anchored by formal and informal social structure" ([Abbott, 1988, p. 20](#)). Under these conditions, occupational groups, once they become the designated professionals, work on their own terms and decide who may or may not join them. The sociology of professions, Abbott argues, is well advised to take into account that there is always a larger context to any given "case." He refers to this context as the interdependent *system of professions*, where jurisdictional disputes and struggles abound and the gains of one professional group inevitably come at another's expense.

[Abbott \(2001\)](#) more recently adapted his sociology of professions for the study of science. The goal again is to trace how groups define and lay claim to bundles of tasks and problems, or, in this case, "bodies of potential academic work" ([Abbott, 2001, p. 137](#)). Fields of scholarly practice or *disciplinary settlements* develop an internal system of credentials, a distinct culture, and stable relations with their audience or multiple audiences; they are delineated as intellectual domains, though less clearly than professional jurisdictions; and they occupy positions in a larger *system of disciplines*, where they constantly vie for advantage. Moves made by the members of one settlement have a direct impact on the boundaries of other settlements: "No discipline gains or loses authority in an area without displacing or enticing other disciplines" ([Abbott, 2001](#)).

Abbott is mainly interested in disciplines (e.g., sociology, biology, economics, medicine). But he also recognizes the large number of problem-driven fields of research or *studies* (e.g., gender studies, area studies, social studies of science, or OS) that have emerged throughout the 20th century. Despite their popularity, he questions the ability of *studies* to truly challenge the dominant role of traditional disciplines. First, *studies* cannot reach the same levels of institutionalization as disciplines, which, organized in departments, are deeply entrenched in the academic labor market. Second, due to their problem orientation, *studies* are, as [Abbott \(2001, p. 135\)](#) puts it, "insufficiently abstract," which is why they depend "on specialized disciplines to generate new theories and methods. Interdisciplinarity presupposes disciplines." In sum, modern science has "a structure of flexibly stable disciplines, surrounded by a perpetual hazy buzz of interdisciplinarity" ([Abbott, 2001, p. 136](#)).

Eyal (2013, p. 872) distinguishes the “question of jurisdiction” from the “question of expertise, namely, what arrangements must be in place for a task to be accomplished.” Taking a relational view, he defines *expertise* as “a network connecting together not only the putative experts but also other actors [...], devices and instruments, concepts, and institutional and spatial arrangements” (Eyal, 2013). This has several consequences for the study of experts and professional work. Of these, two are particularly interesting for our purposes:

- Because experts and their jurisdictional claims are just one element in a larger network, attention is drawn to that network itself: rather than simply taking bundles of tasks and problems for granted, studies should explore the practices and conditions that allow these bundles to be assembled in the first place.
- Deviating from the common postulate that authority is a function of monopoly, Eyal argues that successful jurisdictional claims depend on a certain degree of leniency or *generosity*. Networks of expertise remain small if the putative experts wield too much control over roles, standards, goals, etc. They can only grow once the perspectives of others are taken into account. This means that “a network of expertise [...] becomes more powerful and influential by virtue of its capacity to craft and package its concepts, its discourse, its modes of seeing, doing, and judging” in such a way that “they can be grafted onto what others are doing, thus linking them to the network and eliciting their cooperation” (Eyal, 2013, pp. 875–876).

Now that this section has (a) shown that jurisdictional claims over a bundle of tasks and problems are a defining marker of expert work, (b) conceptualized academic fields as settlements within a larger system of disciplines and *studies*, and (c) extended the scope of analysis from experts to networks of expertise, we can turn our attention to OrgSoc and OS. Each field is discussed in turn.

FROM “ACCIDENTAL OUTCOMES” TO “ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIOLOGY IN A NARROW SENSE”

Landmark publications by towering figures such as Max Weber and Robert Michels notwithstanding, “organizations did not exist as a distinct field of sociological inquiry” (Scott, 1998, p. 8) before World War II. Sociologists occasionally studied organizations, but, conceptually, their interests lay elsewhere, for example, in modernity’s iron cage (Weber) or the subversion of democratic procedures (Michels). Using a distinction made by Krause (2021), we may say that organizations constituted a *material research object*, a site of empirical investigation, without being elevated to the status of an *epistemic target*. “The sociological study of organizations is,” in this sense, “much longer standing than organizational sociology as a more or less institutionalized subdiscipline” (Lammers, 1981a, p. 268).

It was only after the war and in the United States that a larger number of social scientists – many of them immigrants from Europe¹ and driven by genuinely academic interests – tried to grasp organizations conceptually (Augier et al., 2005;

March, 2007). Over the next decades, several university disciplines – political science, social psychology, anthropology, economics, sociology – generated “siloes” stocks of knowledge and were motivated by different (and to some degree incommensurable) epistemic targets. Although these scholars did not necessarily ignore their colleagues in other departments, they were mainly concerned with the questions emerging within and not across disciplinary boundaries.

Sociologists like Robert K. Merton, Alvin Gouldner, Philip Selznick, Peter M. Blau, and Michel Crozier made vital contributions to debates in sociology and, in addition, received recognition beyond disciplinary confines. While it is true that it was more and more common to theorize “organizations as a distinctive social phenomenon” (Grothe-Hammer & Kohl, 2020, p. 421), the sociologists in question for the most part followed the path laid down by the classics like Weber and Michels: organizations were not an epistemic target by virtue of their existence but in many ways still just a means to achieve another goal – “understanding modernity” (Parker, 2000, p. 141). These authors, then, showed an interest in organizations because of the larger questions they were asking, which, occasionally, drew them toward organizational phenomena, empirically and conceptually. Having no identity attached to the study of organizations, they would usually not align “their efforts with just one speciality or even with any speciality at all” (Lammers, 1981a, p. 279).

During the 1960s, sociology as a discipline saw rising levels of internal divisions of labor, which also changed how sociologists studied organizations. A new class of younger (and predominantly US-American) sociologists ceased to approach organizations in the disinterested manner of their predecessors. Now self-identifying as *organizational sociologists*, they showed great dedication to institutionalizing OrgSoc as a subdiscipline, pitted against other subdisciplines such as industrial sociology (Lammers, 1981a, 1981b). An early indication of this changing attitude is the foundation of the section on Organizations and Occupations in the ASA in 1969 (ASA, 1970), later renamed the Section on Organizations, Occupations, and Work (OOW). The OOW would grow significantly in the decades to come, and, as the following quote reveals, made community building one of its priorities:

A variety of membership suggestions for potential activities – the publishing of a journal or a newsletter, the sponsorship of regional workshops, the development of mechanisms for recognizing distinguished work of younger scholars – are currently being debated and explored. (ASA, 1971, p. 366)

The OOW “sought to fill the void between Annual Meetings of the ASA” (ASA, 1972, p. 32) by acting as a facilitator of regular interaction between its members at in-person meetings but also via the section’s newsletter: “As more of our members develop the habit of corresponding with (our secretary, Marie Haug) or other officers, we can expect the Newsletter to grow in usefulness” (ASA, 1972). Recognition by sociological peers was another goal that the OOW clearly embraced: “Our most visible activity remains ‘Section Day’ at the ASA meeting,” which, the reader is told, could be used “to focus on research needs or opportunities rather than the reading of research papers” (ASA, 1972). Finally, the section also raised the issue of funding:

the membership continues to request that the Section sponsor regional workshops, or dissertation prizes, or other activities. In recognition of the fact that these cost money and that our current Section dues go entirely to ASA for services provided to us, we are conducting a referendum about the possibility of an increase in Section dues. (ASA, 1972)

In the decades that followed, the OOW consolidated itself as the main hub for OrgSoc in the United States. It would organize events such as conference sessions or workshops, issue a newsletter that was sent to members regularly, and publish an influential book series, *Research in the Sociology of Organizations* (RSO), that continues today. The OOW has indeed contributed to building a community of self-identified organizational sociologists. At the same time, the section's name itself reveals that there are certain limits within sociology to constituting a sub-discipline around the epistemic target "organization" that is distinct from other epistemic targets such as "work" or "occupation."

At the international level, OrgSoc was able to achieve marginal levels of institutionalization within the larger realm of sociology (Hiller & Pohlmann, 2015). Founded in 1957, Research Committee 17: Sociology of Organizations (RC17) represents OrgSoc in the International Sociological Association. RC17 preceded the OOW by a decade, but, with a membership base that barely reaches triple digits, is not nearly as influential. The European Sociological Association does not have a section or committee dedicated to OrgSoc. There are 13 national OrgSoc associations (ISA, 2023) with varying degrees of institutionalization: In some countries, such as Great Britain (Holmwood, 2010; Parker, 2000; Rowlinson & Hassard, 2011), OrgSoc is all but extinct, whereas it has succeeded in retaining a stable foundation in others such as Germany (Hiller & Pohlmann, 2015).

It is not easy to assess whether OrgSoc is a settlement in Abbot's sense. On a long "march toward sophistication" (Suchman, 2014), a community of sociologists has worked hard to make "organizations" an epistemic target worthy of being a subdiscipline. Compared to their predecessors, self-identified organizational sociologists have shown less interest in general sociological debates cutting across subdisciplinary boundaries. Despite successful community building and its stabilization as an identity project, OrgSoc has only been partially embedded into sociology in a structural sense. For one thing, tenured positions solely dedicated to the sociological study of organizations are scarce, even in countries such as Germany where OrgSoc is said to have a strong foothold (Hiller & Pohlmann, 2015). Moreover, the influence of OrgSoc on national and international sociology associations is moderate at best, which also holds true for general debates in sociology and sociological publishing.

Organizational sociologists give the impression that they are fighting what seems like a war on two fronts: in sociology, where OrgSoc has "been increasingly positioned as a more and more marginal subdiscipline" (Parker, 2000, p. 126), and with business school faculty, who are perceived as an even bigger threat. Those who subscribe to this view paint "a gloomy future for the sociology of organizations" and worry that they will be "overtaken [...] by the research performance of business schools" (Besio et al., 2020, p. 412). Scott (2020, p. 444), for example, argues that sociology "has been very productive in spawning new disciplinary fields" (such as OS) but suffers from its inherent "weakness of monopolistic claims." Fields like OS, he continues, have profited from this weakness and been

able to “establish themselves as separate subdisciplines or ‘studies’.” Echoing this sentiment, [Holmwood \(2010, p. 646\)](#) points out that “it is not only individuals and frameworks, concepts and methodologies that migrate, but also entire subfields,” which “are then reproduced within the ‘applied’ subject area.” Sociology’s “bread and butter,” he concludes, “is vulnerable to be taken off our plates to become a full meal in an importer subject” ([Holmwood, 2010, p. 648](#)).

It appears that “sociologists” and “business school faculty” are considered stable categories. Simply put, according to these narratives, people *are* sociologists or business school faculty – by virtue of training, self-identification, or a little of both. Organizational sociologists might retain their identity after crossing disciplinary boundaries, as implied by the title of a subtheme at the annual [EGOS Colloquium in 2022](#) (“Doing sociology in organization studies”). Yet, we are reminded that these qualities, though stable, should not be mistaken for being completely immutable. According to the following quote from a blog post, organizational sociologists who have joined the ranks of business school faculty are liable to feel more and more pressure to adapt:

In business schools [...] sociologists constitute a rather small component of the larger interdisciplinary field of management or organization studies [...]. Business-school based sociologists, too, have moved away from the traditional topics and themes of organizational sociology. ([Gorman, 2014](#))

The blog post further illustrates the sense of homelessness that may afflict self-identified organizational sociologists. In the following quote, the author ponders the difficulties she experienced when she wanted to update a syllabus for a graduate course on organizational sociology:

I found myself puzzled about what to include. On the one hand, there were active research conversations that seemed to be taking place almost entirely among management faculty and in management journals – and thus arguably outside the disciplinary boundaries of sociology [...]. On the other hand, there was no shortage of sociological research involving organizations in some way, but most of it seemed better classified under (and was often clearly intended to speak to) another subfield of the discipline [...]. Work that could be uniquely identified as “organizational sociology” seemed to have largely disappeared. ([Gorman, 2014](#))

What is noteworthy about this streak in OrgSoc discourse is that it rallies around a framing that bears resemblance to Abbott’s view of settlements: groups of actors (organizational sociologists and business school faculty) compete over the prerogative to study organizations, with gains made by one group inevitably coming at their competitor’s expense. Other accounts pursue a different line of reasoning, one that has more in common with [Eyal’s \(2013\)](#) definition of expertise. Instead of actors, jurisdictions, and resources, their focus lies mainly on the structure of sociological knowledge about organizations. An early review article concludes that “organizational sociology has been and remains an important asset for general sociology and for a variety of sociological sister specialties” ([Lammers, 1981b, p. 361](#)). Published a few years later, another article mentions that “the areas of organization and stratification crosscut most of the empirical subfields of sociology and are amenable to theoretical analysis into a compact and coherent body of principles” ([Collins, 1986, p. 1346](#)). And, more

recently, studies have found that articles published in sociology journals consistently apply theoretical frameworks that either conceptualize organizations or are sensitive to organizational phenomena (Grothe-Hammer & Kohl, 2020; Jacobs, 2007).

The bottom line for this second view is that, as a discipline, sociology generally accepts that organizations are key to a better understanding of society. There is reason to believe that OrgSoc has been so successful that it now must succumb to what Merton (1988, p. 622) calls “obliteration by integration,” which he defines as “the obliteration of the sources of ideas, methods, or findings by their being anonymously incorporated in current canonical knowledge.” In this spirit, Thoenig (1998) concedes that OrgSoc has made valuable contributions to the sociological tool kit and proved to be a great asset in furthering our knowledge of “basic societal mechanisms or processes, such as trust, power, capitalism, institutions, social exchange, stratification, action, order.” Somewhat provocatively, he ponders whether we have already discovered everything we need to know about organizations, which, he continues, might be the reason why OrgSoc “can no longer be identified as a bounded and specialized knowledge-production programme” (Thoenig, 1998, p. 314). Suchman (2014, p. 42) makes a related point when he argues that decades of research have revealed that “organizations are not as distinctive as one might naively expect.” He has no doubt that organizations *could be* key pieces in sociological puzzles, but we are well advised to consider that “the study of organizations is [...] not as indispensable [*sic.*] for understanding teams, industries, politics and beliefs as we, in our more grandiose moments, might claim” (Suchman, 2014).

Each of these views draws attention to different aspects. The first view suggests that OrgSoc was established as a sociological subdiscipline, but remains, in Abbott’s terms, a weak settlement; after initial periods of growth, it is bound to lose its “bread and butter” to a hyper-muscular opponent – OS. The second view foregrounds sociological knowledge about organizations – a broader and fuzzier category than “organizational sociology in a narrow sense” (Grothe-Hammer & Kohl, 2020, p. 421) – which appears to have left its mark on sociology and beyond. Either way, it has become clear that to fully grasp developments in OrgSoc, we must explore its relationship with OS.

FROM PROFESSIONALIZATION TO SCIENTIZATION: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BUSINESS SCHOOL

The history of OS is inextricably entwined with the changing nature of business schools, the place where “most organization studies are now conducted [...] and from which organization studies is now inseparable” (Grey, 2010, pp. 677–678). This section traces the delegitimization of an organizational template that we may refer to as the *profession-oriented business school*, which lasted from the late 19th century until the 1950s, and subsequent reforms in the 1960s and 1970s, which led to the institutionalization of the *science-oriented business school*.

From the 19th century until the mid-20th century, the core mission of (US-American) business schools, and eventually their key source of legitimacy, was to facilitate the professionalization of management, which implied an orientation toward (managerial) practice (Khurana, 2007).² Take the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. In 1881, industrialist Joseph Wharton donated a large sum of money to the University of Pennsylvania for the purpose of founding a business school where students could receive an education that was steeped in scientific principles, but for a very specific reason: to make them better managers (Sass, 1982). Seeking to elevate management into the sacred status of a profession by providing what they saw as vitally needed higher education, these profession-oriented business schools were determined to foster ties between higher education and the business community, arguably their most important stakeholder in that period. Faculty was, therefore, chosen mainly on the basis of practical experience and encouraged to continue offering consulting services even after being granted tenure. As a result, business schools held a “subordinate position in the academic pantheon” (Starkey & Tiratsoo, 2007, p. 13), which, however, they did not mind. To be treated “as the equals of other ‘professional faculties’” (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2015, p. 280) had little value for them because they did not seek recognition within the academy; their attention lay elsewhere.

Overall, business school faculty created knowledge according to four core premises: (1) The *object of study* was a specific type of organization, the corporation, and conceived of as a “closed-rational system” (Scott, 1998, p. 108); (2) the *goal* was to “discover those procedures that would produce the maximum output with the minimum input of energies and resources” (Scott, 1998, p. 38), resulting in countless accounts “of how management could maximise productivity and thus profits” (Tourish, 2019, p. 9); (3) *formal hierarchies*, the preferred style of organizational governance, would unite “all control of the labour process in the hands of [management]” and furthermore ensure “that a worker had no more knowledge or skill than was needed to perform the particular task” (Tourish, 2019, p. 12); (4) knowledge production predominantly reflected the *interests of management* and was, as such, inherently biased – workers needed to be dealt with but, since their concerns were interpreted as “an irrational pathology that required treatment,” they were not thought of as having a legitimate voice of their own; meanwhile, it was unthinkable “that managers might sometimes act irrationally” (Tourish, 2019, p. 17).

The profession-oriented model of business schools encountered a surge in public criticism in the 1950s, followed by that model’s gradual replacement. A crucial factor was undoubtedly an influx of new students in the wake of economic growth and the GI Bill, which poured large sums of money into higher education and especially the business school sector. This turned out to be a blessing and a curse. Business schools gained in resources, personnel, and numbers, but at the same time, the stakes were raised. Facing heightened scrutiny by prospective students, politicians, funding bodies, and journalists, their growth and expansion also “imperiled [their] meager academic legitimacy” (Khurana, 2007, p. 235). A purported cure was soon found and promoted vigorously throughout the 1950s by a coalition of scholars, deans, university presidents,

politicians, government agencies, philanthropic organizations, and journalists: “scientification” (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2015, p. 280). The Ford Foundation was at the center of this movement. Its direct involvement, while spanning only a brief period from the 1950s until the early 1960s, was of critical importance (Augier & March, 2011; Khurana, 2007; Starkey & Tiratsoo, 2007).

The reformers exerted influence through direct engagement, whereby they exposed business school faculty to the standards of research and teaching that hailed from traditional university departments. The following quote illustrates the magnitude and comprehensive nature of the investments undertaken by the Ford Foundation:

In total, the foundation spent over \$35 million in its programs to improve business schools and management education [...]. The major categories of grants included \$12 million that went to general institutional support, \$8 million to research support, \$6 million to doctoral and faculty fellowships, and \$4 million to workshops and seminars designed to improve the teaching and research in specific areas [...]. Altogether, 1,500 faculty members from nearly 300 different institutions participated. Thirty-eight (64 percent) of the workshops were organized by one of the top eight schools using faculty drawn primarily from those schools. (Augier & March, 2011, pp. 111–112)

The reformers also promoted their vision of scientification in the public domain to create a favorable climate for change. An article by James D. Thompson – a sociologist by training – illustrates the main thrust of these calls for action. Published in the first issue of *ASQ*, the article is a devastating account of knowledge production at business schools:

Much of our literature is lore, spelling out how a procedure or technique is carried out in current practice or proclaiming that “this is the way” to do it. This material contains rather bold and often implicit assumptions about the relationships between the procedure or technique under consideration and other things which take place within the organization [...]. The pressure for immediately applicable research results must be removed from a large part of our research. It is this pressure which, in part, leads to the formulation of common-sense hypotheses framed at low levels of abstraction, without regard for general theory. (Thompson, 1956, pp. 105, 110)

Business schools were usually benchmarked against universities, with traditional disciplines serving as role models. The following quote by Thomas Carroll, head of the Ford Foundation’s influential program on Economic Development and Administration, is a typical expression of this sentiment: “Certain influential business educators regard social psychology, cultural anthropology, sociology, mathematics, and statistics, as well as economics, as the business analogues of the medical students’ anatomy, biochemistry, pathology, and physiology” (Carroll, 1958, p. 6).

Standing out in the avalanche of critical assessments are two reports, one commissioned by the Carnegie Foundation (Pierson, 1959), the other by the Ford Foundation (Gordon & Howell, 1959), both described as “key events in the records of business school history” (Augier & March, 2011, p. 113). The authors of the report issued by the Ford Foundation – which is usually seen as having had the biggest impact on public debates – make their case in no uncertain terms:

Collegiate business education is [...] a restless and uncertain giant in the halls of higher education [...], gnawed by doubt and harassed by the barbs of unfriendly critics [...]. It is aware of its ungainly size and views apprehensively the prospect of still further growth. (Gordon & Howell, 1959, p. 4)

As they turned to “the halls of higher education,” reformers such as the authors of the Ford Foundation’s report adopted the habit of discrediting the profession-oriented business school: what had thus far been perceived as the noble goal of transforming management into a legitimate profession was now called “(t)he vocational approach,” which, according to the report, “has all too often characterized these schools in the past” and must be “considered inadequate” (Gordon & Howell, 1959, p. v). Business schools, the report concludes, should truly embrace the scientific ideal, both in their research and teaching:

While there is need for improvement in all the dimensions of quality, the primary needs are quite clear. They are to create in the business schools a more stimulating intellectual atmosphere, to bring the less progressive faculty members up to date with the latest scientific literature and business practice in their own and related fields, and to generate the capacity and desire to ask more probing questions and to engage in more significant research. In this sort of environment, academic standards will necessarily be high, the achievement of more effective teaching should not be difficult, and the ability of the business schools to serve the business community and society at large will be enormously increased. (Gordon & Howell, 1959, p. 357)

Exposed to public criticism of this kind throughout the 1950s, business school faculty gradually saw their past in a different light and were more inclined to reconsider the value of the professionalization project. For instance, in the 1960s, Herbert Simon (1967), who migrated from a university department to a business school early on in his career, was already being skeptical of efforts “to get as close to the actual practice and environment of business as possible” (pp. 6–7). Later in his career, he would famously characterize profession-oriented business schools as “a wasteland of vocationalism” (Simon, 1991, p. 138). Many share this view. For example, Dennis Tourish (2019), in a recently published book, laments that knowledge “lacked theoretical or methodological sophistication and was as likely to be wrong as it was to be right” (p. 8).

Under the impression of a changing discursive landscape, business schools initiated lasting reforms in the 1960s and 1970s (Khurana, 2007). Increasingly caring about “respectability and approval on their campuses” (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002, p. 92), science-oriented business schools turned to new hiring practices, implemented scientific standards in research and teaching, and reassessed their traditional forms of evaluation.

(1) To be perceived as “serious academic institutions” (Augier et al., 2005, p. 90), business schools first and foremost needed credible personnel, which is why, in the pursuit of respectability, they pressured “less progressive faculty members” (Gordon & Howell, 1959, p. 357) to adapt by, for instance, obtaining a PhD. Alternatively, those labeled “less progressive” were gradually replaced with scholars from university departments. Hiring from the social sciences (economics, sociology, philosophy, political science, anthropology) became so widespread that university departments were forced to fight for their talent. Yet, business schools

often had the upper hand simply because they could offer “high pay compared with that in faculties of arts and sciences” (Khurana, 2007, p. 307; Rowlinson & Hassard 2011; Scott, 2004).³ Stockpiling their ranks with graduates from traditional university departments further increased “the scholarly pretensions of many business schools” (Augier & March, 2011, p. 180) – and their faculty, who felt that they “deserved to be accorded higher status, and especially a greater degree of recognition from their peers” (Starkey & Tiratsoo, 2007, p. 130).

(2) Business schools also chose a new approach to research and teaching. Facing higher “expectations with respect to academic research” (Augier & March, 2011, p. 179), faculty were endowed with “generous research budgets” and “relatively light teaching loads” (Khurana, 2007, p. 307). Vocational courses and case-study teaching, hallmarks of traditional business education, lost relevance and new study programs touted “research-based teaching.” While it would be an overstatement to say that business schools abandoned their traditional ways of teaching, they did come under increased pressure to offer a larger share of courses focusing on “scientifically valid procedures” (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2015, p. 280).

(3) Business schools adopted evaluation procedures that valorized research articles published in peer-reviewed journals. As Starkey and Tiratsoo (2007, pp. 130, 132) put it, faculty “now wrote what they termed ‘papers’, which, like those in natural science journals, featured specialist language and a rigidly prescribed format.” Thanks to the promise of “academic respectability” (Starkey & Tiratsoo, 2007), research articles quickly came into fashion and the number of specialized academic journals exploded (Agarwal & Hoetker, 2007; Khurana, 2007). Some of the traditional journals, like the *Sloan Management Review* (published since 1959), tried to maintain a balance between this new vision of scientific rigor and relevance for the management profession, but the majority turned to (natural) scientific forms of scholarly publishing, particularly those that would eventually be designated the “few primary outlets” (Augier et al., 2005, p. 87) such as *AMJ* and *ASQ* (Strang & Siler, 2017). This sudden appetite for research articles targeting an expert audience was intimately connected to institutional reforms of the criteria for hiring faculty and awarding tenure, which “began to attach greater weight to the number of publications in leading journals and the number of times an individual’s work was cited by other academics” (Khurana, 2007, p. 307).

The changes described in this section are neither uniform or universal. Not all business schools in the United States have committed to the same level of “scientification.” Arguably, the so-called elite institutions have been the most prolific reformers, but the further we move down the hierarchy, the more traces of “practical relevance” we still find. In a similar vein, the global diffusion of the science-oriented business school is a complex process with considerable variations in the template’s national implementation. While acknowledging these variations, I would maintain that the science-oriented business school has effectively become the dominant model in contemporary higher education and continues to crowd out competing models.

OS AS A SETTLEMENT

The spread of the science-oriented business school coincided with, and brought about changes in, multiple fields of scholarly practice such as economics, finance, organizational psychology – and what would be known as OS. Emerging in the 1970s, OS became a settled field of scholarly practice with “its own community, its own institutions, its own standards, and its own language” (Augier et al., 2005, p. 93). Having established jurisdiction by enforcing several “mechanisms of control,” business school faculty define “what is included and taken as legitimate and proper and what is excluded and deemed to be improper and illegitimate” (Westwood & Clegg, 2003, p. 13) in OS. A review of the research literature, essays, editorials, and other material reveals the following mechanisms: (1) fostering relationships (with key stakeholders), (2) valorizing research articles (published in a specific set of journals), and (3) monopolizing influential positions.⁴

(1) *Fostering relationships.* Compared to most university departments, business schools have access to a wealth of resources that they use to secure the lion’s share of tenured positions dedicated to the academic study of organizations for themselves. This puts disciplines such as sociology, which compete for the same resources, at a clear disadvantage. Moreover, the tenured positions that sociology awards to those who are specialized in organizations usually have more than one epistemic target (“Gender and Organization,” “Organization and Work”). All of this makes OS a far more reliable provider of “financial and occupational bases for organization studies” (March, 2007, p. 17; see also Hinings, 2010) than sociology.

To obtain funds on such a scale, business schools seek to convince different stakeholders that OS is useful and should be under their purview. University administrators have been identified as key stakeholders because they “control the immediately crucial resources of faculty lines” (Abbott, 1988, p. 141). Perceiving business schools as the proverbial “cash cow” (Bothello & Roulet, 2019, p. 857), administrators see investing in them as “a particularly attractive option” (Starkey & Tiratsoo, 2007, p. 32). Regulators and regulatory agencies are also stakeholders. In higher education systems with merit-based evaluation procedures, such as the REF in Great Britain, business schools and their faculty seem well versed in funneling the stream of resources their own way, thus putting university disciplines such as sociology at a disadvantage (Holmwood, 2010). Other stakeholders that business schools (though not necessarily business school faculty) try to sway are prospective students and their parents. Although the day-to-day life of OS scholarship is primarily driven by research and publishing, business schools cunningly lure clients in by touting their strengths in teaching, as evidenced by the “copious material on courses, virtual tours round state-of-the-art teaching and learning facilities, and panegyrics about the alleged benefits of this or that qualification” (Starkey & Tiratsoo, 2007, p. 115).

(2) *Valorizing research articles.* Once the research article had been defined as “an important currency of standing” (Augier & March, 2011, p. 180) in the 1970s, it eventually became *the* yardstick for quality in OS. Virtually all journals – at least, those that “count” – nowadays subscribe to similar criteria: a “good article” should comply with a highly standardized format (Strang & Siler, 2017), contain

sufficient references to the OS literature (Agarwal & Hoetker, 2007; Augier et al., 2005), make ritualistic claims to a theoretical contribution – the “stylized holy grail” (McGrath, 2007, p. 1371) of OS – and be written in English, “the language of ‘top’ quality scholarship” (Boussebaa & Tienari, 2021, p. 62). Business schools impose rigid “tenure and promotion mechanisms” (Grey, 2010, p. 684) on their faculty who live and die by being able to publish research articles in “top journals.” Any other type of scholarly activity – editing volumes or anthologies, writing books, advocacy, teaching, or simply being a “good local” by taking on administrative tasks – is of no practical use to one’s career.

While, to a degree, most higher education institutions, disciplines, and fields of study are subject to change of the above kind, business schools have certainly taken a position at the forefront. Resembling the higher education institutions that Paradeise and Thoenig (2015) call “Wannabes,” they treat academic work as a game. The preparation of faculty is “a substantive concern” (Starkey & Tiratsoo, 2007, p. 118) and starts early on. PhD students are kept “busy writing their first journal articles” (Grey, 2010, p. 684), which, they learn, are the one and only “currency on the job market” (Bothello & Roulet, 2019, p. 856). To this end, they receive “formalized research training” (Grey, 2010, p. 684) tailored to their needs, have a steady supply of workshops on themes such as “how to get published in an A+ journal,” amass “best practice” PowerPoint slides, are taught important acronyms signaling membership, and profit from close guidance by advisors who are usually themselves seasoned OS experts and privy to the “tricks of the trade.” By contrast, scholars who work at sociology departments do not enjoy the same privileges when it comes to their initiation into OS, which is why they have to deal with a tilted table from the beginning. In addition, by belonging to other academic settlements, they are bound to address scholarly debates, use theories, apply methods, and ask research questions in ways that might put them at a disadvantage in OS.

We should note that publishing research articles is as much “a demanding form of identity work” (Boussebaa & Tienari, 2021, p. 63) as it is about strategic action, meaning that being published in a “top journal” also attests one’s belonging in the OS settlement and is thereby “enmeshed within the making of modern business schools as legitimate academic entities” (Grey, 2010, p. 684). This sheds new light on the findings of studies on citation patterns (Lockett & McWilliams, 2005; Vogel, 2012). Business school faculty have “constructed a history [...], a set of loosely connected stories” (Augier et al., 2005, p. 87) signifying that OS knowledge production is more than just derivative. By increasingly referring to each other’s work and by constructing narratives that downplay the importance of university disciplines, OS scholars define theirs as a field that is “*not* organizational sociology, or industrial relations and so on [...]. It is precisely by neglecting its prehistory that organization studies can come into being” (Parker, 2000, p. 140 – italics in original).

On closer inspection, business school faculty show such dedication to what they see as scientific rigor that they often lose sight of another major requirement for fields of study: building a productive relationship with stakeholders outside of academia who are provided with “extensive applied knowledge” (Abbott,

2001, p. 140). Not only is relevance less of a concern than in the first half of the 20th century (Bothello & Roulet, 2019; Hambrick, 1994), but business school faculty worry that their community's style of writing is obscure even by academic standards: "only a handful of devotees can understand most of our ideas, and fewer still can find any application for them" (Tourish, 2019, p. 8; see also Grey & Sinclair, 2006). It seems that the administrative staff of business schools work tirelessly to navigate the obscurity of OS publishing and to maintain the impression there is a real-world benefit to be had from the extensive funding of tenure track positions with a focus on organizations.

(3) *Monopolizing influential positions.* Business school faculty have assumed control over influential positions in the field, so that they act as gatekeepers and fulfill elementary self-governing functions. Specifically, they monopolize positions (3a) on executive boards of associations and (3b) on the editorial boards of "top journals."

(3a) Professional associations are important tools in the governance of academic settlements for several reasons (Heilbron, 2014). They might be used as levers for collective action, critical interventions, and the diffusion of standards, but they also present opportunities to celebrate and affirm shared identities. Prestigious conferences organized by professional associations are sites where junior and senior scholars ceremonially present themselves as worthy members of the community (Westwood & Clegg, 2003, p. 14). In this sense, March (2007, p. 10) interprets EGOS "as a broad association of scholars" who are united by their belief in what he refers to as "the myth of organization studies."

Some professional associations were always dominated by business school faculty but eventually turned to scientific credibility in the 1970s, often at the expense of practical relevance (Hambrick, 1994). A well-known example is the Academy of Management (AOM), which, according to its own website, "has evolved from an organization of 10 members to an organization of over 18,000 members from nearly 120 countries" (AOM, 2022). In other cases, professional associations that previously had a mixed membership base gradually limited access to scholars working at university departments. EGOS, for instance, was "inspired and set up by sociologists, not scholars in management" (Greenwood et al., 2010, p. 653). As one founding member details:

originally our idea was to constitute some kind of association to promote the mutual exchange of information and insights between, and eventually joint research efforts by, sociologists engaged in organizational research across Europe. At our first meeting in Paris, which later on turned out to have been the originating assembly of EGOS, it was in my recollection Jean-Claude Thoenig who insisted that we should not deter those who had no training in sociology, but who, nevertheless, were approaching the subject from other social science points of view. Therefore, the S of EGOS came to stand for "studies" rather than "sociology." (Lammers, 1998, p. 884)

Yet, over time, the executive board gradually closed its ranks. Stacked with business school faculty, it shifted the position of EGOS in academia, so that it eventually became a part of the OS settlement (Hiller & Pohlmann, 2015, pp. 57–58).

Business school faculty have access to privileged information, for instance, which conferences must be attended, and they know how to write abstracts

in compliance with the field's conventions. Junior faculty can count on their advisors – who also happen to be part of the group dominating OS – to act as co-authors, which lowers the threshold for inclusion substantially compared to their peers from university departments, whose advisors are more likely to be oriented toward other settlements, such as sociology.

(3b) Like professional associations, OS journals either have always been dominated by business school faculty or were eventually absorbed into the settlement. The *AMJ*, seen as one of the leading outlets in OS, has attracted the attention of business school faculty since it came into existence. *OrgStudies*, on the other hand, founded in 1980 by EGOS, was in large part conceived by sociologists from different European countries and, in its early years, emphasized inclusiveness (Lammers, 1998). The following quote from the first editorial exemplifies this sentiment:

Since one of the demands which spurred the launching of Organization Studies was for a journal that would be flexible in content and style, open to a diversity of paradigms, and to any and all of the disciplines which contribute to organization theory, we hesitate to define its scope more than is already done by the dedication on the cover and the aims stated on the inside front cover. To define which ideas are “in” is also to define those which are “out.” To define who is “in” is also to define who is “out.” (Hickson et al., 1980, p. 2)

But the make-up of the journal's editorial board has changed dramatically over the decades. With the share of business school faculty growing, the journal was gradually pulled into the OS settlement, just like EGOS. Today *OrgStudies* subscribes to the same standards as any other journal within the boundaries of the OS settlement. Relatedly, a study of *ASQ* reveals a steady increase in articles by business school faculty since the journal's first launch (Strang & Siler, 2017). The trajectory of *RSO* is probably the most intriguing case in point. Nominally still issued by the OOW section in the *ASA*, most volumes published in the series are edited by scholars working at business schools and comply with the standards and norms of the OS settlement.

Journal editors are powerful gatekeepers, even more so in settlements such as OS where the research article is the gold standard. As Pfeffer (2007, p. 1339) observes, editors in OS (and quite likely elsewhere too) “have a tendency to engage in coproduction, to ‘help’ an author write the paper they want to see or the paper they might have written had they done the particular study.” By virtue of affiliation with OS, then, editors presumably act on behalf of the settlement and, in doing so partake in reproducing its norms and values. While perhaps seeing themselves as neutral arbiters, editors have been described as enforcers of “the dominant and orthodox position within OS” and acting “almost as holders of the citadels of publishing power, to the extent that they have control and manipulation of key journal publication processes” (Westwood & Clegg, 2003, pp. 13–14). Besides presiding over the legitimacy of theories, concepts, methodologies, topics, or research questions, editors enshrine English as the settlement's *lingua franca* – to the extent that most OS scholars decide against publishing their work in any other language. Unsurprisingly, the editorial boards of the “top journals” are dominated by scholars who work for, or are affiliated with, business schools in

English-speaking countries and who themselves publish only or mainly in English (Meyer & Boxenbaum, 2010).

In sum, business schools and their faculty sustain jurisdiction over OS by fostering relationships with key stakeholders, valorizing research articles, and monopolizing influential positions. These activities appear to be mutually reinforcing: being subject to initiation rituals early on in their careers and supported by powerful gatekeepers, business school faculty are likely to dominate the “top journals” in OS, which, in turn, ensures that tenure track positions are awarded to scholars from among their ranks.

OS AS A NETWORK OF EXPERTISE

After analyzing OS as a settled field of scholarly practice in Abbott’s sense, this section explores its characteristics as a network of expertise, thereby drawing attention to a recurring theme: the chronic dependance on “borrowing” (Whetten et al., 2009, p. 538) analytical tools. I specifically discuss why OS, a matured and bounded settlement, has not put an end to intellectual “imports,” a practice that has the potential to damage its reputation and credibility, as we are often told by those on the inside. I am going to argue that what is perceived as excessive “borrowing” is intimately connected to the epistemic configuration of OS expertise.

To get a better sense of the practice of “borrowing,” we must go back to when OS was yoked together as a network of expertise. Instilled with a taste for the kind of basic research that is decoupled from external concerns such as the professionalization project, business school faculty entered uncharted territory in the 1960s. Craving, or feeling expected to crave, ownership over a respectable academic field, they found themselves unable to build on the work of their predecessors, who, according to the new paradigm of the science-oriented business school, were much too practice oriented. For this reason, they turned to “linking” (Whetten et al., 2009) with university disciplines such as economics, social psychology, and sociology, which presented them with the opportunity “to gain legitimacy and a relevant resource base” (Agarwal & Hoetker, 2007, p. 1305).

It seems that not much has changed: until today, “a primary source of novelty in organization studies has been importation from outside” (March, 2007, p. 16), which creates considerable unrest in OS as many wonder why such “strong ties between the applied study of organizations and the core social science disciplines” (Whetten et al., 2009, p. 538) continue to exist – a question asked by none other than business school faculty themselves. Using the analogy of the “Faustian bargain,” Agarwal and Hoetker (2007, p. 1304) worry that OS has been committed to an “evolutionary path” (p. 1305) of continuously importing “different cognitive frameworks and capabilities,” each containing “core research questions of interest, underlying assumptions, and conceptualizations of organizations” (p. 1307). In analytical terms, by linking with multiple university disciplines, business school faculty have shown “generosity” (in the sense of Eyal, 2013), as they allowed different epistemic cultures to be grafted onto OS expertise. This means

that irrespective of who holds jurisdiction over the OS settlement, as a form of expertise, it inevitably gravitates toward theories, concepts, methodologies, methods, and research themes conceived outside its realm.

We should note that “borrowing” is far from unusual in the academic system. It is common for settlements to lean on the output of others, which they repackage or reinvent and subsequently present as being of their own making (Abbott, 2001). But in one respect, OS is indeed exceptional: the dominant group of experts is inherently drawn toward questioning its heavy engagement in “borrowing” which it sees as an indication of a lack of scientific maturity and the inability to produce knowledge on one’s own terms. Thus, while every settlement “borrows,” only some, OS in particular, are prone to critical self-examination. We may suspect that the high level of unease in OS is related to the epistemic configuration of its expertise, which, as already mentioned, is a patchwork of elements from multiple university disciplines. For the purposes of this article, the analysis of OS expertise is limited to what Lammers (1981b, p. 362) has called the sociological “touch”: a number of principles that were grafted onto OS expertise and continue to influence knowledge production in the field.

There is considerable evidence for a sociological “touch.” *Sociological theories and concepts* are key elements of OS. This holds true for the formative years, as illustrated by the abundance of references to the likes of Max Weber or by the title of Gibson Burrell and Gareth Morgan’s seminal textbook published in 1979 (*Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis*), which has been described as “one of the most referenced works in organization theory” (Hassard & Wolfram Cox, 2013, p. 1701). But sociological theories and concepts have also played a crucial role more recently. Taking stock, Lounsbury and Beckman (2015, p. 288) discuss five areas “where there are flourishing and generative developments” in OS: institutional logics, categorization, networks, performance feedback, and strategy-as-practice. Except for performance feedback, theorizing in these areas is firmly rooted in sociological thinking. OS also imports its fair share of *sociological methodologies and methods* (Buchanan & Bryman, 2009). Grounded theory, for example, has become a standard reference in qualitative research; the same holds true for network analysis in quantitative research. Lastly, *research themes* often originate in sociology. Case in point: countless studies on quantification, rankings, and valuation, all of which stand on the shoulders of sociological publications (e.g., Espeland & Sauder, 2007; Lamont, 2012).

Conventional approaches to measuring impact have only limited utility in this case. The problem with the most popular method, citation analysis, is that “not all published works that have actually guided an author’s research are necessarily included in bibliographies” (Vogel, 2012, p. 1022). In other words, it is likely for sociology to exert influence over OS without necessarily receiving its share of citations. In turn, “authors may reference publications that they have not, in fact, drawn on” (Vogel, 2012), most likely because they feel that they must pay tribute to esteemed colleagues: increasingly self-referential citation networks in OS could therefore be mistaken for manifestations of rising levels of independence in knowledge production. This means that citation network analyses, while arguably shedding light on the boundedness of settlements, should not be taken

at face value in the study of expertise. Rather, the task at hand is to trace the flow of *sociological bits and pieces* to OS expertise, however altered, doctored, modified, hidden, insufficient, transformed, or disfigured they might appear from the organizational sociologist's point of view. With this in mind, we now turn to four ways in which sociology has touched OS according to [Lammers \(1981b\)](#) – and, we might add, continues to do so.

(1) Sociological knowledge production is rooted in the idea of contributing to a deeper understanding of stability and change in modern societies. This is why sociologists gravitate toward contextualizing even the most mundane research objects (taking an elevator, crossing the street, organizing a party, etc.) by approaching them with more general questions in mind – at least in principle. [Lammers \(1981b\)](#) argues that sociologists who study organizations have done so in precisely this spirit: by analyzing organizations not as if they existed in a social vacuum but as “part and parcel of society,” sociology has contributed “more than any other discipline” to our knowledge about “the interrelations between organizations and their societal surroundings” (p. 363).

This principle evidently left its mark on OS in the early days: “diverse theoretical developments followed one another in rapid succession during the 1960s and 1970s,” each emphasizing “the richness of the environment and [...] its importance for organizational structures and processes” ([Scott, 2004](#), p. 7). The population ecology approach and institutional theory are prime examples. Popular ecology, dating back to an article published in the *American Journal of Sociology* (*AJS*) ([Hannan & Freeman, 1977](#)), has received a great deal of attention in OS ([Barley, 2016](#)). Institutional theory, nowadays a hallmark of OS expertise and referred to in countless publications ([Vogel, 2012](#)), also dates to an article published in the *AJS* ([Meyer & Rowan, 1977](#)). Another foundational contribution to institutional theory ([DiMaggio & Powell, 1983](#)) is the most-cited paper ever to be published in the *American Sociological Review* (*ASR*), which also speaks to the relevance of organizational phenomena in sociology ([Jacobs, 2005](#)).

Clearly, OS has always been drawn toward conceptualizations of organizations as open systems that are “embedded in [...] the environments in which they operate” ([Scott, 1998](#), p. 28). This might explain why “the study of organizations is scarcely imaginable without the aid of [...] sociological theory” ([Whetten et al., 2009](#), p. 539). The sociological attitude of approaching research objects by asking general questions related to stability and change in modern society is likely one of the drivers of critical self-examinations to the effect that OS “today focuses too little on the big issues of our own times” ([Adler, 2009](#), p. 5) and should “look outward and ask how organizations are altering our society” ([Barley, 2016](#), p. 7).

(2) Another principle of sociological inquiry is that epistemic targets (class, occupation, network, family, and so forth) are conceptualized as having a “life of their own” rather than being the product of conscious design. Because sociologists take it for granted that their epistemic targets emerge organically, they are natural skeptics (though not necessarily opponents) of interventions. After all, something that has “a life of its own” is likely to be complex, meaning that we can never fully anticipate what will happen if we try to change it. Aware that purposeful action breeds unintended consequences, sociologists are liable to approach

organizations as “recalcitrant tools” that are basically “unmanageable,” which is why they prioritize “such processes as goal displacement, oligarchic tendencies, the partly unintended consequences of vested interests, and of power struggles between dominant elites” (Lammers, 1981b, pp. 362–363).

In the 1970s, a growing number of business school faculty began to question what their predecessors held as self-evident: that they should provide “deep knowledge about organizations for improving managerial practice” (Khurana, 2007, p. 312). Casting doubts on the possibility of improvement by reform, these scholars withdrew their commitment to the “normative structure” of organizations and turned to the “behavioral structure” (Scott, 1998, pp. 17–18). What is more, by extending the scope of analysis from corporations to organizations in general, they soon discovered topics other than profitmaking (Khurana, 2007). The theme of the 38th EGOS Colloquium, “Organizing: The Beauty of Imperfection,” encapsulates how contemporary OS is taking it for granted that the object of study has a life of its own and escapes managerial stewardship:

The 38th EGOS Colloquium’s theme engages with the dynamic and complex nature of organizing by questioning idealized images of ‘perfection’ as being rooted in order, efficiency, symmetry, and predictability. Rarely, if ever, do our theories and methods, or the contexts and organizations we study, conform to such idealized images. (EGOS, 2022)

(3) The third principle of sociological inquiry that found its way into OS expertise is what might be called “a gaze below the surface.” Concepts such as frame of reference, symbol, institution, social construction, communication, or practice all hold the promise of revealing to us the subtle fabric of everyday life, that which cannot be seen straight away but is, in actual fact, of the essence for the analysis of social order. Clearly adopting this principle, classical sociological studies on organizational phenomena saw the formal structure as little more than “a decorative canopy” (Scott, 1998, p. 26) and laid their focus on “cultural aspects and determinants of organizational forms and processes” (Lammers, 1981b, p. 364) instead.

Organizational culture is arguably one of the first successful manifestations of this principle in OS scholarship. Parker (2000, p. 127) describes how “the explosion of interest was phenomenal. Academic management journals fell over each other to have a special issue on symbolism or culture.” Constructivism is another good example. Besides their epistemological implications, constructivist theories also promote a critical attitude that eventually took hold in business schools (Khurana, 2007). Over the years, OS expertise broadened its analytical scope and developed an interest in such diverse themes as discourses, symbols, communication, and, recently, sociomateriality. This inevitably draws attention away from the formal structure and managerial concerns, which worries not only those among business school faculty who still hold practical relevance in high esteem. For instance, an article published in *Current Sociology* discusses a decision made by the editors of *OrgStudies* to add a section titled “X and Organization Studies” dedicated to unexplored areas of organizational life. “[T]he idea, explicitly articulated in the ‘X and Organization Studies’ call [...], and implicit in much

contemporary scholarship in organization studies,” the author complains, is “that one can get a better purchase on the intelligibility of matters organizational by looking beyond ‘formal organization’” (du Gay, 2020, pp. 460, 462).

(4) A last principle is that there seems to be a “normative aspect of sociological inquiry” (Abbott, 2018, p. 159). Although it would be a mistake to think of sociology as a discipline that is inherently normative (Turner, 2016), we cannot ignore that many sociologists subscribe to what is essentially a progressive political agenda. Some are explicitly normative, which they highlight by making heavy use of adjectives like “critical,” while in other cases the norm is implied (Stinchcombe, 1984) and remains in the (moral) background (Abend, 2014). Either way, there is no shortage of sociologists inclined to side with those who suffer from inequality and injustice, which has also always been a major concern for sociologists who study organizations: “in many of the best sociological studies of organizations there lurks a concern with social or human problems which are generated or aggravated by organizations” (Lammers, 1981b, p. 365). These studies, Lammers (1981b) continues, were “seldom undertaken with an eye towards helping management,” which set their authors apart from those working at a profession-oriented business school.

Infused with the sociological habit of championing the powerless and underprivileged, OS scholarship nowadays recognizes inequality as an important issue while, on the other hand, ostentatiously neglecting leadership-related themes. As Khurana (2007, p. 357) explains, leadership has become such a marginal issue that “[e]ven established scholars who study the subject later in their careers risk academic marginalization and cynical accusations of having ‘sold out.’” But more than simply neglecting the needs and concerns of management, OS might actually have become openly antagonistic to it. Research on rankings is an intriguing example: following the path laid out by sociologists (Espeland & Sauder, 2007), many studies in OS seem determined to shine the light on the negative consequences of rankings but have little to say about how organizations could improve their positions. All of this is remarkable insofar as, despite the abundance of grandiose gestures and references to “global challenges,” “social responsibility,” “ethics,” and so on in mission statements, leaflets, or on websites, the main purpose of business schools is still to prepare students for leadership positions, mostly in for-profit organizations.

CRISES REVISITED

This paper started with a simple observation: both OrgSoc and OS have a penchant for self-diagnosed crises, albeit for different reasons. Organizational sociologists, worried about losing influence and seeing their livelihood endangered, are struck by a “sense of depression” (Besio et al., 2020, p. 411). They lay the blame for this development on the growth of OS, nowadays a matured and bounded field of scholarly study that is dominated by business school faculty. The latter, however, far from bursting with self-confidence, continuously indulge in soul-searching and seem concerned about being perceived as “ungainly” (Gordon &

Howell, 1959, p. 4). I have approached these assessments as objects of study by asking what conditions fuel and sustain them. To answer this question, I have analyzed OrgSoc and OS as settlements, in Abbott's (1988, 2001) sense, and networks of expertise, in Eyal's (2013).

OrgSoc has, as we have seen, "become increasingly sophisticated over the years" (Suchman, 2014) and, thanks to extensive community building, been able to render organizations an epistemic target worthy of sociological attention (Krause, 2021). But, at the same time, it has only reached marginal levels of structural embeddedness in the discipline of sociology. There is then a mismatch between the spread of OrgSoc as a scholarly identity, one that numerous sociologists find attractive, and the (in)ability of the OrgSoc community to accumulate sufficient resources and gain influence. According to organizational sociologists, their subdiscipline is in a dire state because of the rampant growth of OS since the 1970s, a claim for which an analysis that conceptualizes academic fields as settlements shows some support.

Over the past decades, business school faculty have been able to draw a boundary around OS by limiting access to:

- tenured positions dedicated to the academic study of organizations,
- "top journals" such as the *ASQ*, *AMJ*, or *OS*, and
- and associations such as AOM or EGOS.

Under these conditions, organizational sociologists, apparently, can either start "navigating the business school job market" (Bariola, 2020) and effectively relinquish their affiliation with sociology or attempt cross-border skirmishes to tip the scales in their favor (for instance, by claiming or retaking a "top journal"). Neither option seems particularly promising. The first amounts to a mass exodus from sociology, which could have adverse effects on the discipline's intellectual output. The second, a kind of boundary work that might be summarized as "getting back what's ours," is futile because of the firm jurisdictional control that business school faculty hold over OS. But more than that, it draws organizational sociologists away from debates in the discipline of sociology. As a result, OrgSoc ends up "less interesting to non-organizational sociologists" (Suchman, 2014) and "less relevant to the broader discipline of which it is a part" (King, 2017, p. 132).⁵

The analysis of OrgSoc and OS as settlements has certainly helped us understand the conditions that fuel self-diagnosed crises in OrgSoc. The widespread unease in OS, on the other hand, forces us to extend the analytical scope: from experts and boundary work to networks of expertise. Criticized as being "ungainly" and an "uncertain giant" (Gordon & Howell, 1959, p. 4) in the 1950s, business schools began abandoning the project of transforming management into a profession and pushed faculty toward treating knowledge production in similar terms to those that operate in university departments: as something that is done for its own sake. In order to assemble scientized forms of expertise such as OS, business school faculty turned to the established university disciplines. This process has been described as "a Faustian bargain" (Agarwal & Hoetker, 2007,

p. 1304): by drawing on the disciplines' authority, business school faculty tacitly accepted that several existing epistemic cultures were grafted onto OS expertise. This set OS on a path of extensively borrowing theories, concepts, methodologies, methods, and research themes, irrespective of how vigorously business school faculty police its boundaries.

As a matter of fact, some version of a "trade deficit" (Whetten et al., 2009, p. 538) between disciplines and *studies* can be expected and is, to a degree, an organic feature of modern science (Abbott, 2001). But for at least two reasons, we may suspect that OS will continue to practice borrowing in a way that stirs controversy and raises doubts internally.

First, unlike *studies*, which are comfortable with their client orientation, OS embraces an ideal of scientific rigor that undermines the notion of utility or practical relevance (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Hambrick, 1994; Khurana, 2007). The most obvious manifestation of this sentiment are the hiring criteria for tenure track positions in OS, which, above all, favor research articles published in a limited number of "top journals." In stark contrast, the "utilitarian morality" (Augier & March, 2011, p. 223) deeply engrained in business schools still pushes faculty to be aware that, at least in principle, they should also be "useful" and "relevant" to managers. This inevitably creates tensions and, we may suspect, impinges on the production of scientific knowledge. Furthermore, entrapped in a complicated relationship with their employers and anxious about being perceived by their academic peers as lacking "scientific rigor," OS scholars presumably do not make the most of their unique access to corporations and managers (Khurana, 2007).

Second, the valorization of the research article (published in a "top journal") undermines the potential for innovation within OS. Research articles, it is said, engender incremental novelty (Barley, 2016; Pfeffer, 2007); meanwhile, books and book chapters offer space for experimental styles of writing, bolder claims, and more extensive discussions. Unlike sociology, which still sees value in books (Jacobs & Habinek, 2023), OS is only beholden to the research article, which deprives its members of other means of science communication. Moreover, the universal demand that all research articles should make a theoretical contribution – an obscure feature of OS publishing – fuels "a great deal of faux theorizing" (Tourish, 2020, p. 100). Finally, journals in OS coalesce around a format that strips research articles of the space necessary to develop rich empirical narratives or to flesh out intellectually stimulating conceptualizations. A study by Strang and Siler (2017) on *ASQ* found that articles typically have extensive sections on literature, theory, methods, data, and discussion – all at the expense of the author's original contribution, which has to be "squeezed in."

If OS is likely to remain dependent on "borrowing," then what exactly do the sociological bits and pieces in its epistemic configuration have in common? A shared feature of the examples given in the previous section is that they are for the most part not framed as contributions to "organizational sociology in a narrow sense" (Grothe-Hammer & Kohl, 2020, p. 421) or OS for that matter. Instead, we might think of them as carrying on the tradition of classical sociologists, whose insights on organizations were "accidental

outcomes” (Scott, 2020, p. 447). Bruno Latour is one of the most intriguing cases of a sociologist who has had an accidental, yet significant impact on OS:

I believe that it is precisely because Bruno Latour never intended to conduct organization studies that his work made us see beyond the iron cage of our own discipline. Interested in science and technology, he saw beyond the ossified structures of formal organizations, ignored the micro and macro hierarchies, and depicted a flat world, where connections between hybrid entities are constantly built and stabilized. (Czarniawska, 2014, p. 102)

This adds another layer to the self-proclaimed crisis in OrgSoc. Not only does OS fail to recognize self-identified organizational sociologists as potential *trading partners* who are owed something in return (a chance to get published in “top journals” or access to influential positions). But, almost adding insult to injury, OS frequently “borrows” from general sociology rather than “organizational sociology in a narrow sense” (Grothe-Hammer & Kohl, 2020, p. 421). If anything, sociology is an *unintentional donor* to OS expertise, not a trading partner.

In closing, I want to invoke an article by Jean-Claude Thoenig (1998) titled “How far is a sociology of organizations still needed?” published more than 20 years ago. Those among us who allege that there is such a need and who wish to save OrgSoc from extinction could draw inspiration from the undertone of Thoenig’s article. The goals would then be threefold: first, to maintain a solid foundation in sociology so as to expose OrgSoc to the discipline’s gravitational pulls and pushes; second, to disengage from skirmishes with business school faculty, which, besides being futile, also absorb time and energy that could be used toward more productive goals; and, finally, to never stop asking the question “why should I study organizations?” (Suchman, 2014), which ensures that OrgSoc does not become a bloodless version of itself.

NOTES

1. See Heilbron et al. (2008) for the impact of migration on scientific knowledge production.
2. Drumming up basic levels of support for business schools in the 19th century to admit them into the category of “higher education institutions” while also convincing future managers that they would benefit from becoming “college men” was, in fact, a complex process (Abend, 2014, chapter 5).
3. The existence of events with titles such as “Sociology PhDs Navigating the Business School Job Market” (Bariola, 2020) speaks volumes.
4. The reader should keep in mind that these mechanisms are not necessarily a matter of conscious choice or deliberation but more likely a by-product of social practice.
5. There are notable exceptions such as recent calls for ties to be renewed between OrgSoc and the larger discipline (Arnold et al., 2021).

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