

Sub-Theme EGOS 2019

Formal Organization Today: Reconnecting with the Classics

Short Description

The goal of this sub-theme is to stimulate an appraisal of formal organizations as both an empirical phenomenon as well as a source of theoretical problematics. The growth of our field and the tendency of scholars to focus on new phenomena has distanced us from the core ‘classic’ ideas and concepts in organizational scholarship. By better appreciating the connection between current themes and formal organizational dynamics — e.g., bureaucracy, staff-line relations, work formalization, coordination — we can enrich current debates. We invite scholars working on themes related to ‘formal organization’ or exploring questions linked to earlier organizational researcher. For example, these may include the relationship between bureaucracy and emerging organizational forms; the intersection between occupational dynamics and the organizational order; and the extent fundamental organization issues, such as coordination and control, endure in structures that are alternative to the big corporation (e.g., open-source projects, gig economy).

Full Description

Concepts and discussions on classic organizational authors currently seem to be relegated to the pages of manuals and history books (Adler, 2009). In particular, formal organizational dynamics (e.g., bureaucracy, staff-line relations, work formalization) occupy a secondary role in the current literature (du Gay & Vikkelsø, 2016). Most contemporary studies explore societal matters, work interactions, and new organizational forms, while leaving formal organizational aspects — which were once core in our discipline — in the background. In part, this state of affairs is due to the development of the field which has been enriched by new themes and approaches (Lounsbury & Beckman, 2015). Yet, we also suffer from a ‘novelty bias’ and at times do not pause to explore how new ideas fit within the canons of our discipline (Barley, 2015).

The goal of this sub-theme is to stimulate an appraisal for our fundamental object of inquiry: formal organizations. In light of the theme of EGOS 2019, we believe that we can “enlighten the future” by (re)connecting with the classics (Blau & Scott, 1962; March & Simon, 1958). For example, bureaucracy is still central in the modern workplace (Adler 2012; Walton, 2005). Yet we know little about how technical and social innovations are re-shaping it, and its relationship with emerging organizational forms (Bernstein, Bunch, & Canner, 2016; Turco, 2016). Similarly, although we might be living in an age of experts, there is still much to be learned about the interplay between formal organizational mechanisms, informal/emergent dynamics and professional/knowledge work (Bechky & Chung, 2017; Brivot, 2011; Langfred & Rockmann, 2016; McEvily, Soda, & Tortoriello, 2014). Also, we know that some companies today only with a few dozen workers are able to occupy an economic position which was once reserved to corporate giants (Davis, 2016). Yet this does not mean that vertical firms — and the challenges associated with them — have disappeared. Finally, despite many changes in society, coordination and control (classic organizational themes) remain a key concern for both online and offline work (Dahlander & O'Mahony, 2014; Huisling, 2014).

This subtheme thus seeks to stimulate scholars to explore formal organizations both as an empirical phenomenon, as well as a source of theoretical problematics. In particular, papers may address issues related (but not limited) to the following topics:

- How do bureaucratic structures appear today in contemporary organizations? What is their connection to the social and technical aspects of the modern workplace?
- What is the relationship between traditional organizational forms (bureaucracy) and new organizational forms?
- Which aspects of 'classic' organization design are still relevant? How can we examine organization structures in light of new methodological approaches?
- How do organizational dynamics and occupational dynamics influence each other?
- Are staff-line relations still a source of issues within organizations? In what ways?
- How do formalization and control mechanisms shape work practices today? Do Tayloristic regimes still endure?
- How can we make better sense of the interplay between formal and emergent mechanisms in the coordination and control of work?
- What is the relationship of the contemporary gig economy with earlier 'alternative' work and employment arrangements?
- Are there any classic authors who have been 'forgotten' and that could shed light on current organizational and management phenomena?

High-quality, novel contributions in both early and later stages of development are warmly invited.

Convenors

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Pedro Monteiro is an early-career fellow at the Institute of Advanced Study at Warwick University and research fellow at the IKON research unit at Warwick Business School. He is an ethnographer of work and organizations and his research agenda focuses on bureaucracy/formal organizational structures and their implications for cross-expertise collaboration, learning, innovation, and knowledge work.

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