

## Organization, Organizing, and Politics: Disciplinary Traditions and Possible Futures

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Mykonos, Greece

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### Conveners:

Damian O'Doherty (University of Liverpool Management School - UK)

Christian De Cock (Copenhagen Business School - Denmark)

Pablo Fernandez (IAE Business School - Argentina)

Gabrielle Durepos (Mount Saint Vincent University, Nova Scotia - Canada)

Maureen Scully (University of Massachusetts Boston - USA)

### Theme

Did anyone approach you, as an organization studies scholar, to help explain politics? To ask, for example, what brought Trump to power? From populist coups and 'black lives matter' to the 'me too' movement and environmental protest groups who want to learn 'how to blow up a pipeline' (Malm, 2021), everywhere we look politics is "all kicking off" (Mason, 2022). And yet surely, organization studies have some distinctive answers to the questions posed by these movements. It can certainly draw from a long tradition of work on politics in our discipline, including Weber's seminal and foundational 1919 essay 'Politics as vocation', where charisma and party organization, electoral boundaries and rules of campaigning, together with leadership and management, are woven into intricate explanation. Political questions inspired organization studies in its early days where we saw politics in what economists tried to de-politicise with their discourse of efficiency and naturalised 'laws' of the market. We also know that there is political controversy in the generation and distribution of economic surplus that happens via workplaces where management and worker confront one another. Work organizations are not just arenas where economic livelihood is contested but a space where the capacity to exercise politics through participatory citizenship skills is also generated – or quashed (Pateman, 1970). The market legitimating logics of meritocracy, equal access to economic opportunity, and labor mobility can be challenged and/or cemented in and through organizations, but also potentially serving as bulwarks against wider political dissent against the inequities of capitalism. And when dissent arises, it also happens through organizations, whether political parties, grassroots or social movements (Michels, 1915; Zald & Ash, 1966).

The world of organizations (Perrow, 1986) seemed to be a place to look for the forms, logics, and mechanisms that hold wider political orders in place (Elster, 1986) and we have a range of organization studies that could make this an explicit object of analysis from practice studies and processual theory through to studies of routinisation and convention making. Indeed, these political questions are deep in the origin story of why organizations are so compelling to study now across the social sciences. However, to name political factors and consequences in some strands of organization studies might still be seen as 'too political,' a damning epithet of a process of de-politicisation in our research which is now meant to be politically neutral, particularly in the business schools to which organization studies migrated from sociology and political science (Scott, 2004). Is organization not always-already political? Perhaps because the ideas of politics and organization are so deeply interconnected, we have lost sight of the need to explore the fundamentals of their mutual constitution. This mutual constitution is important because studying the 'political' in organization studies can often be reduced to the micro dynamics of 'politicking' – jockeying for advantage in competitive arenas – and divert away from broader societal dilemmas to do with participation, distribution, and the well-being of people and planet.

We want to explore and re-make these possible connections. This workshop invites papers that explore politics *in* organizations, politics *as* organizing and political organizations. We encourage papers that can help restore the links between organization and politics while creating new avenues of thought about organization, politics, and their relationship. We encourage submissions from the variety of traditions and intellectual heritage in organization studies and especially from those who are keen to put these traditions into dialogue and debate. Can there be a politics of organization if politics is seen as a disruption or interference in what is otherwise a rational allocation of resources under conditions of naturalised (and allegedly spontaneous) market exchange? Neo-institutional theory will doubtless have much to say where politics might be seen as a set of institutions and practices that variously constrain and enable organizational action, but can this tradition extend its questions to incorporate power and its various struggles? This has been debated quite intensively within exchanges between Munir (2015), Willmott (2011, 2015), Suddaby (2015), and Drori (2019) but we might complicate and extend this debate to ask how those practices that shape organizational action can also effect democracy and the wider understanding of public goods. To this end we would like to draw attention to recent papers in *Organization Studies* that have addressed some of these themes (e.g. De Coster & Zanoni, 2023; Husted, Moufahim & Fredriksson, 2022; Fotaki & Daskalaki, 2021; Acosta, Acquier & Gond, 2021; Tyllström & Murray 2021; Knight & Tsoukas 2019) and which might prove helpful in developing new papers.

In critical management and organization studies, politics is undoubtedly a preoccupation and in some ways a distinctive marker of critical studies. Here, politics typically gets folded into conversations about power (Fleming & Spicer, 2014), but some will worry this can become a little ideological and abstracted from the day-to-day visceral experiences of politics in action as experienced by members of organization. Responding to this there is much promise in the politics of 'affect' where critical scholars draw from feminist theory, subaltern studies, but also queer theory and the 'queer of colour' critique. In critical management studies, agonistic and post-foundational politics also promise ways of studying the empirical organization of politics and politics in organization in ways that go beyond dualistic logic and stable context (O'Doherty, 2015). Allied to these movements, feminist researchers (e.g., Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) have developed a very interesting 'politics of care' in recent years, whilst the politics behind the racialized origins and operations of capitalism are also being surfaced (Prasad, 2021). From the social studies of science and technology, on the other hand, we are reminded to extend our understanding of the range of political actors to include objects and the material realm, Langdon Winner's (1980) famous study of Robert Moses' low bridges, for example, or Murphy's (2006) more recent feminist inspired study of buildings and air-conditioning systems. Current and recent organization studies concerning practice, process, temporality, and the organization of place/space have much to contribute to these discussions.

The urgency of refreshing the links among politics, the political and organization, is pressing given the sudden and rapid changes taking place with the rise of nationalism, populism, and the realignments of geopolitics all tangled up with new surveillance, AI technology and climate change. The broad questions that inform the workshop are, how might we address politics in a way sensitive to the political significance and purpose of business organizations in wider politics and economy? This may pose a challenge for many scholars who are employed in business and management schools where an apolitical and technocratic approach prevails. And yet, wherever scholars of organization find themselves in the modern university we must all ask what can organization studies add to conversations about politics, and beyond what has been written in political science, sociology, international relations, social movements studies, and allied social sciences?

Workshop participants are invited to consider, but are not limited to, questions such as the following to spark ideas:

**Broad contexts:** Is there a global politics that observes features of organization to which specialists in organization studies can contribute? In what ways is politics 'organized' among state level institutions, political parties and private corporations? Is politics still organized by a 'modern world system', for example, as conceived in the writings of Immanuel Wallerstein (2004), or in the form of a 'world polity' as in the work of John Meyer (2009) and colleagues, or in relations of 'dependency' outlined in the approach of Gunder Frank (1979)? Can these classic concepts inform or be informed by organization studies? What forms of protest, around or via organizations, disrupt systems at this level?

**Multiple settings:** What comparisons can be drawn between different political systems and dominant forms of organization in different polities? How do the specific conditions of 'the global south' reshape organization studies, or demand novel forms of organizational study in and around wider questions of geopolitics? What are the links and relations between national representative politics and the politics that take place in management and work organizations? Do organization studies inform the rise of populist governments across nations and the apparent challenges to democracy, or how are organizations implicated in socialization or alienation of participants allied to these movements?

**Politics and identities:** What forms of organization are possible or must be invented to support new identity politics – if 'new identity politics' should be encouraged? How does a politics of allyship inform anti-racist mobilization? How do feminist political analyses enrich our understanding of political processes and disruptions? What is the role of a 'gay politics' in organization studies? How does queer theory, or trans theory inform contemporary movements? How do we think politics in polities defined by relations between humans and more-than-human forms of life - plants, animals, geology, etc.? What are the politics of nature (or what we used to call nature) that might demand a renewed understanding of organization?

**Urgent and emerging issues:** Has social media succeeded in creating new publics, opening new forms of identity politics and dark arts? If so, how might AI now begin to influence this? How can political organizations (unions, political parties) adapt to the digital age and navigate the challenges of social media, disinformation, data privacy, and diverse societies? Will environmental or public health emergencies generate new types of politics or ways of using politics to respond to crises? How can we put our expertise in organization studies to work in thinking through the politics of affect and new materialism?

**Forms and sites of organising:** How are corporate organizations involved in political lobbying and other activities of influence? How do private organizations shape government, political parties, and public policy? What is the role of the corporation, the family firm, the school system, the penitentiary, or the military, for example, in these political constellations? What can organization studies say about those politics 'black boxed' or disguised in apparently neutral rules, regulations and procedures of formal organization? How do technology and new technological developments affect political processes in and across organizations? These technologies might include various digital media, artificial intelligence, algorithms, and data management software.

Submission of abstracts: **December 1<sup>st</sup> 2023**

Acknowledgment of acceptance: **mid-January 2024**

Deadline for registration: **May 15<sup>th</sup> 2024**

Workshop date: **May 23-25<sup>th</sup> 2024**

Workshop venue: **Saint John Mykonos Beach Resort (<https://www.saintjohn.gr/>), Mykonos, Greece.**

**For information, please**

1. **contact** Sophia Tzagkaraki: [osofficer@gmail.com](mailto:osofficer@gmail.com)
2. **visit:** [www.os-workshop.com](http://www.os-workshop.com)

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